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KHOJALY REVISITED

"Before Khojaly, the Azerbaijanis thought they were joking with us, they thought that the Armenians were people who could not raise their hands against the civilian population. We were able to break that [stereotype]. And that's what happened."

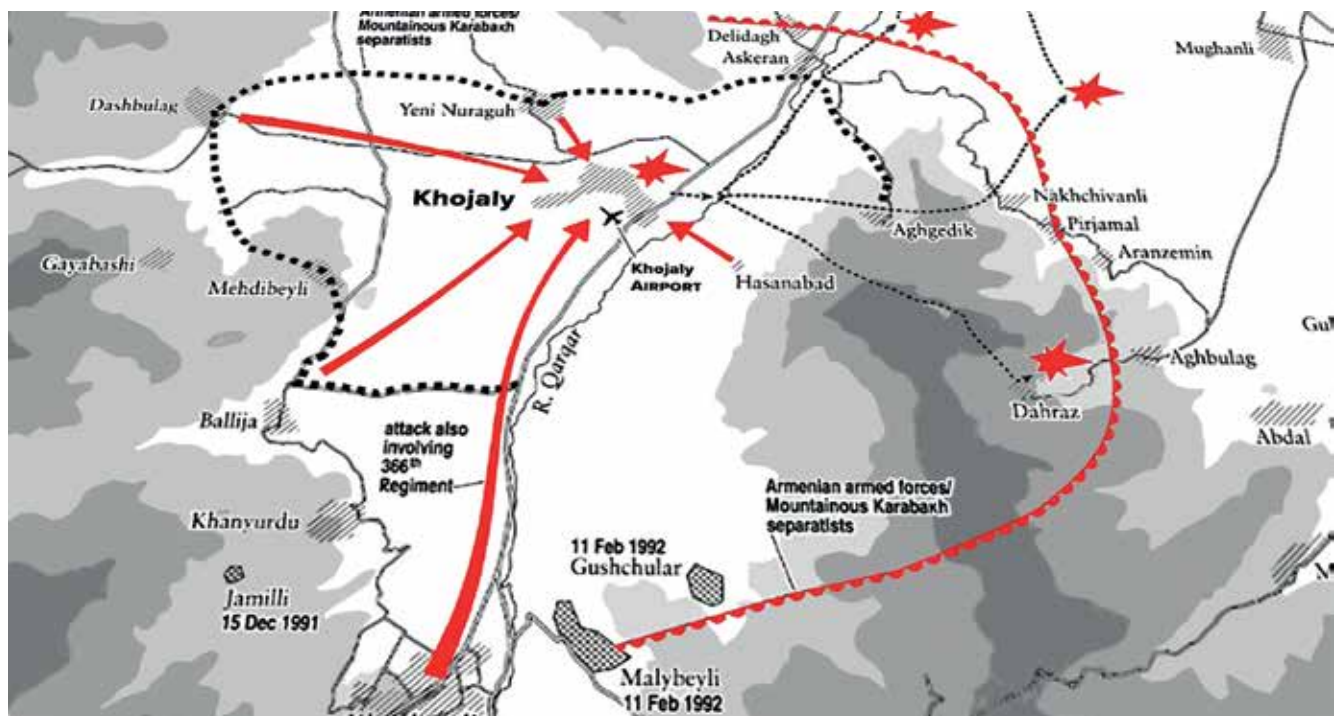
Serzh Sargsyan, former President of Armenia (1)

"As the minister of defense, I state we have reformulated the "Territories for peace" approach to "New war-new territories" approach."

Davit Tonoyan, Minister of Defense, Armenia. 30.3.20 (2)

"We are defending ourselves. We do not lay claim to anyone else's lands, Azerbaijani armed forces have no targets on anyone else's lands, in the territory of Armenia. But we will defend ourselves on our own land and liberate our occupied lands from occupiers."

Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan. 27.9.20 (3)



Memorial for victims of Khojaly in Baku

Noon, Saturday 10 October 2020. The start of a ceasefire agreed between Armenia and Azerbaijan; a break in the resumed war over occupied Azerbaijani lands in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. The purpose is to allow the collection and exchange of bodies and prisoners, and the evacuation of civilians from the conflict zone.

2am, Sunday 11 October 2020. Fourteen hours into the ceasefire, Scud missiles crash into a residential apartment block in Ganja, Azerbaijan's second city, some 100 km from the occupied zone of conflict. Nine bodies are pulled from the rubble, one of the initial survivors dies later.

This was the second of (so far) three early morning weekend attacks on Ganja, but it was the one that triggered anger and frustration - and directed my thoughts back to the Khojaly massacre of 1992.

Perhaps it was the news that three children had lost both parents in the night-time attack, or perhaps just the sight of people scrambling in hope over the devastation. An act of wanton slaughter of civilians, whose only military purpose can have been to spread terror; by any definition a war crime.

As I write, 21 citizens of Barda city - also well outside the conflict zone - have just lost their lives in barrages



over two days by 9M525 Smerch - Cluster Munitions, specifically designed to kill personnel, in this case also solely civilian personnel.

The images of people dealing with this horror inevitably take me back to the people of Khojaly and all they endured at the beginning of this 'resumed war'...

A step back. Arriving in Azerbaijan twenty years ago,



From the film - A survivor of the massacre arrives in Aghdam



I knew hardly anything about Baku, let alone a town way over in the Lesser Caucasus, 350 km to the west, but it was not long before I heard the name Khojaly, that town in Nagorno-Karabakh.

By late February 1992, Khojaly had already been under siege for some four months as invading Armenian forces gradually surrounded the town. Electricity, gas, heating oil and water supplies, phone lines - all had been cut off. For some time, the only way in and out had been by helicopter, and even that was cut off days before the night of 25/26 February. The shelling began that night, as usual, at about 11pm. And most of the townsfolk went into whatever shelter they had: cellars, anywhere. Some of the men, an ad-hoc group of town

guards, took their hunting rifles to try to prevent any advance into the town.

It was soon clear that this night was going to be different: the shelling intensified and approaching lights turned out to be mounted on tanks. Word went back to the cellars that the oncoming forces were irresistible and people should flee. The only safe way was to go down through the town, wade across the River Qarqar, go up into the forested mountains and head for the nearest Azerbaijani-held city, Aghdam - a hard, meandering trek of about 20 km. The freezing Qarqar took its toll of shoes and clothing and there was little respite on the snow-covered slopes. Some succumbed to the cold and frostbite. The rest struggled on through the night.

As dawn approached, they emerged from the forest onto flatter, open land. And this provided the waiting Armenian gunmen with a perfect view of their prey. That night's tally was 613: men, women and children of Khojaly. Some survived to be taken hostage, others survived the firing squad by hiding in the forest for days, only to fall to the cold. Some made it to Aghdam and futures forever clouded by memories and longing for the missing and their homeland.



From the film - Occupiers drive past Yasemen Hasanova's mother

Memorial for victims of Khojaly in Mexico City

As I write (29 October), I see images from yesterday's slaughter of ordinary civilian townfolk in Barda; I recall the images I have seen of the slaughter of ordinary civilian townfolk of Khojaly and wonder, what is it for?

Every year, on 26 February Azerbaijan commemorates Khojaly, and so I learned the basics of what had happened, but still did not grasp the full weight of what the survivors carried with them.

But a turn from teaching to journalism offered the chance to meet and interview people who are now officially classified as Internally Displaced People (IDPs - not refugees, because they are still within their own country's borders), I saw it as a chance to get a much closer understanding of the people and the event. Genuine contact at first hand does tend to get past the myths and stereotypes.

It is nearly ten years since Fiona, a Scottish colleague, and I went to a former Soviet sanatorium near the Caspian Sea to listen to the stories of ten survivors. It was nearly nineteen years after the massacre they had endured, but I remember how their stories tumbled from them, still impossible to contain. I remember, too clearly, the tears of our translator as she struggled to



Memorial for victims of Khojaly in The Hague





relate what she had just heard. Some of those tears fell when one woman told of only discovering what had happened to her mother sixteen years later, ending with: *I never imagined that any daughter could thank God that her mother was dead... I thank God she died there, instead of being tortured by the Armenians.*

The impact of those interviews was such that the original idea of a magazine article eventually produced a book (4) that became the basis of anniversary presentations around Europe of the Khojaly people's fate and demands for Armenia's withdrawal from the lands of Azerbaijan it occupies.

The latter demand actually echoed those made by none other than the UN Security Council in four resolutions (#822, #853, #874, #884) agreed in 1993 (5). You may be forgiven for being unaware of that fact.

The UN has made no attempt to persuade Armenia to comply with those demands and nowadays seems very keen to forget all about them. So does the Minsk Group, established by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 1992 to: *spearhead the OSCE's efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.* (6) The fact that the Minsk Group consists of three co-chairs, from France, Russia and the USA, may be a clue as to why there is no pressure on Armenia to comply. Check for yourselves which countries have the three largest Armenian diasporas (aka voters).

Reports of the current, September-October 2020, fighting also scarcely mention those resolutions. It ap-

pears to be an inconvenient fact for western influencers that Armenia is the trespasser on Azerbaijani territory.

Why so? Well, I mentioned earlier that genuine contact tends to undermine stereotypes, and the South Caucasus is just so far away, so the stereotypes prevail. Although this conflict is in no sense a religious one, Azerbaijanis are mainly Muslims, and Armenians are mainly Christians. I heard from an international reporter who was in Aghdam in February 1992 of the problems he had in convincing editors that, yes, Azerbaijanis had been massacred by Armenians and no, he hadn't got it the wrong way round.

Is it not strange that the western media took days to check that detail of the Khojaly massacre, but somehow miss the point that the origin of the conflict was the invasion by Armenia of Azerbaijani land? After all, this was a conflict that deprived 30,000 people of their lives and about one million Azerbaijanis (one in seven of the population then) of their property, homes and lands. You may understand why Armenian claims to be the peaceful victims of a new 'genocide' fail to impress those outside that bubble.

Even after twenty years away from my western homeland, I inevitably feel a connection with and responsibility for the actions of those who represent the culture of my origins; this brings me a fair amount of frustration and despair. Despite the impression received from much reporting, Armenia is not under any attack. All the fighting is taking place on Azerbaijani soil. It is

also true that attacks have been made on cities and villages well outside the occupied area, and these have been on civilians who have no other involvement in the conflict except as receivers of shells fired at them from either Nagorno-Karabakh or Armenia. The deliberate targeting of civilians is defined as a war crime; former Armenian President Sargsyan clarified that that was the policy for Khojaly, and plenty of international diplomats and journalists have seen for themselves what happened to the people of Ganja and Barda. Expressions of sympathy are gratefully received, but you might think that action to prevent further state terrorism would be more welcome.

For my generation (old) and my nationality, the BBC has often been held up as the 'go to' organisation for reliable news. So I read their reports on the fighting, but this causes hackles to rise - as a former English teacher, journalist and also as someone happy to be living among the people of Azerbaijan and thoroughly enjoying a fascinating culture. Take the article (7) (12 October 2020) that followed the first major attack on Ganja, when missiles destroyed residential apartment blocks in Azerbaijan's second city, roughly 100km distant from the Armenian-occupied zone of conflict. The leading news for the BBC that day was:

Officials in the disputed region report clashes in Hadrut,

By "officials" is presumably meant members of the group in *de facto* control, at the time of writing, of Nagorno-Karabakh but who are unrecognised by any UN-affiliated state, including Armenia. We read their views first, as usual.

"disputed" - there is no dispute that under international law, Nagorno-Karabakh is part of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

"Hadrut" - An Azerbaijani town illegally occupied by Armenia; claimed to have a population of 4,000 people. "Clashes" (no further detail) there reported by "officials" are a greater priority than missiles on civilians in Ganja (population 330,000) well outside the conflict zone.

The enclave is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but is controlled by ethnic Armenians.

"**enclave** - a portion of territory surrounded by a larger territory whose inhabitants are culturally or ethnically distinct." (Concise Oxford English Dictionary).

Nagorno-Karabakh was not and is not an enclave.



It has been multi-ethnic throughout its history. Since all the Azerbaijani population was either killed or forcibly expelled in the 1990s, Nagorno-Karabakh has been monoethnic, but it is still not surrounded by inhabitants who are ethnically distinct. To the west and south are other Armenian-occupied Azerbaijani regions, then there is Armenia. To describe it as an enclave is factually incorrect and gives an entirely false impression of the geography, demographics, history and culture of the region. What do you think? Is this lazy journalism, or dishonest journalism?

Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a six-year war over Nagorno-Karabakh, which ended in 1994 with a ceasefire but no peace treaty.

Unhelpful; the obvious unanswered question is, why was there a war? The answer: because Armenia invaded Azerbaijani lands, is surely necessary context.

Further information: it was not a six-year war; it is (at the time of writing) a thirty-two-year war. The 1994 Bishkek agreement was a ceasefire. A ceasefire does not end a war.

The article then gets to a description of the attack on Ganja, with a denial of responsibility from Armenia, and at least a video of the wreckage, before returning to reports of attacks (no details) on occupied Stepanakert (Khankendi) and, again, fighting in Hadrut.

Finishing off, it is back to the regular pattern, with Armenian claim followed by Azerbaijani response (twice), then we read about Nikol Pashinyan, Prime Minister of occupying Armenia raising the trigger word 'genocide' and finally a reminder of shelling in Stepanakert, in case we had forgotten. This is 'balance'?

This treatment reminds me of the reactions to the Khojaly massacre. Journalists on site generally responded with humanity and empathy to the survivors



Valeh Huseynov

straggling, some barefoot, into Aghdam, most exhausted after trudging through the night and traumatised beyond belief by seeing loved ones and neighbours gunned down. Those journalists then had to combat the stereotypes on the other end of phone lines that crossed the continent and ocean and plead for understanding. How much has changed?

Then we turn to the response by the world's powers that be to the invasion and the massacre. The UN's efforts, literally paper-thin, have already been mentioned: the gesture of four resolutions apparently sufficient to salve consciences: something had been done. Then there is the OSCE. There was a spell a few years ago when it was my job to report on developments in the conflict, this included keeping tabs on the OSCE's Minsk Group. You remember them - the ambassadors from France, Russia and the USA who have been 'spearheading' efforts to find a peaceful solution - 'spearheading', that is, for twenty-eight years now. Mine was not the most onerous of tasks. As soon as I heard they were convening to a nice venue somewhere in Europe or the USA, I'd copy and paste their last communique in readiness for the report on their next meeting; there would be little change, almost none on the ground. Perhaps I feel too much responsibility for this West-based organisation, but it did appear that their actual job was to keep the lid on a boiling pot until the IDPs died and everyone forgot the horrors of the early 1990s. Obviously, they failed, but perhaps Europe's hotels benefited from their business, and regular changes to the group's personnel did provide travel opportunities to numbers of no doubt deserving diplomats. For the IDPs, especially the Khojaly survivors, the Minsk Group brought, and meant, nothing.

Any foreigner in the South Caucasus soon becomes aware of people's attachment to their land. Even hardened cosmopolitan Bakuvians will return sometimes

to their villages of family origin. But one region draws special attachment. There is obviously something in the high altitudes of Nagorno (mountainous) Karabakh that inspired Azerbaijanis to produce high culture. That relatively small region is revered for its composers, poets, folk and opera singers, playwrights, musicians, actors, directors and weavers of magically coloured carpets. And after helping with short films focusing on the history and culture of Karabakh and the seven surrounding occupied regions, I was asked last autumn to script one on Khojaly. Obviously, there was serious assistance with the history, but it was a chance to catch up with survivors in their new communities built around the country. There were new acquaintances, there were still tears, still a longing to return, but also still resilience. The latter quality especially from a man who had trekked the forest that night with his wife of a few months only for her to be shot from his side. He was captured, held hostage and as he was known to be a guitarist, Valeh Huseynov's hands were held to a gas flame and his fingers broken under a boot. Naturally his guitar work had to be heard in the film, the resilience of creativity. (8)

Also during filming, I made my second visit to the front line between occupying forces and the rest of Azerbaijan. The bleakness of trenches and bullet-riddled gates to walled gardens. The promise held by mountains in the distance, beyond which lay the beauty and fertility that former carers of the land had described to me many times. My visit to a different section of the line a few years earlier had given me sight in the distance of the stark remains of Aghdam, a once-thriving city that a French photographer of Khojaly survivors told me was, in 1993: *Green, I remember it being so green*. The bleakness of those visits made me wonder what Armenia had gained by occupying those lands. Why let a thriving city fall into total ruin?

Construction or destruction? This question had arisen earlier. In April 2016, there were four days of clashes across the front line in the southern region of Jabrayil. Armenian forces were pushed off a hill that overlooked the village of Jojug Marjanli, thus it became safe to enter, but returning villagers saw only ruins. By June 2017, there were fifty houses and a school there. By the following September one hundred more houses were under construction. On 28 September this year, the village was shelled once more; fourteen-year old Hilal Haziyevev was hospitalised with head wounds. Construction or destruction?

Film produced by The Virtual Karabakh ICT Centre

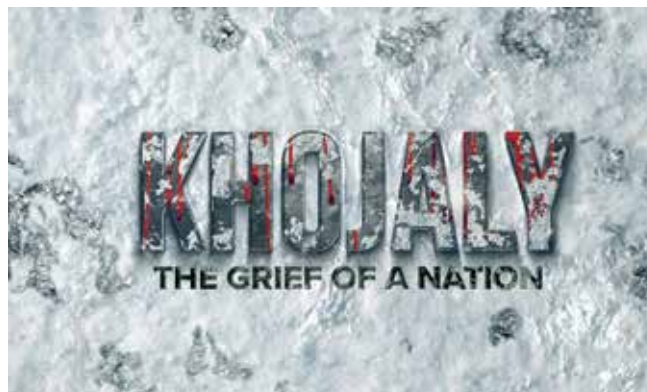
Shortly after President Ilham Aliyev's visit to view the rebuilding of Jojug Marjanli in June 2017, I was in the nearby town of Horadiz, to report on the first of a series of carpet factories established round the country. Seventy women were weaving Karabakh carpets, happy to be in a social environment that brought them an income and helped to maintain the traditions of these wonderful artefacts. I also learned that during the original invasion, Horadiz had been occupied for nine months; the Armenian military were then forced back again, leaving ruins behind them. That explained the new-build feel of the town, but also the sadness and extra value of the few, isolated historical remains.

Within days of the recent return of lands in the Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Zengilan and Gubadli regions to Azerbaijani control, the Azerenergy company announced it was drafting designs for the installation of electricity substations and power lines there.

On 21 October President Aliyev described to the Japanese newspaper Nikkei how Armenia's occupation had denied it involvement in the major oil, gas and railway projects that Georgia had thus benefited from, but that,

...if they put an end to occupation, Azerbaijan can implement different social and economic projects in Nagorno-Karabakh... Today when we liberate the territories, [we] definitely will help those people, those Armenians who live in Nagorno-Karabakh and of course Azerbaijanis who will return to rebuild this area. (9)

The Azerbaijan I live in now is barely recognisable from the one I entered in 2000; I still remember the darkness of the drive in from the airport. The infrastructure has developed beyond my 2000 imagining and the evidence I have seen leaves little doubt that the same would happen in occupied territories restored to Azerbaijani control. But, of course, it is the people that make a country, and it is impossible not to be touched by contact with the survivors of Khojaly. Those injured and bereaved by the recent targeting of civilians in Ganja, Barda, Terter and other towns and villages add to further incomprehension of an Armenian state following Minister Tonoyan's policy of: *New war-new territories*. Call me naïve, but I prefer construction to destruction, and I can only wish an end to such a policy. Of course, I wish the Khojaly people well in their search for peace and reconstruction of their lives and society, and hope to meet them again in their native land.



Final Update

On 10 November, a tripartite statement by the presidents of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia came into force; this involved a ceasefire, with the line of contact remaining between the opposing forces and dates fixed for Armenian forces to withdraw from the Kelbajar, Lachin and Aghdam regions. Azerbaijan had already regained control of the Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Zengilan and Gubadly regions, as well as the iconic city of Shusha in Nagorno-Karabakh, regarded as a cradle of Azerbaijani culture. 1,960 Russian peacekeepers were to supervise the ceasefire and the return of refugees and IDPs to Nagorno-Karabakh.

As Azerbaijan forces had advanced they found that formerly inhabited areas of the latter four regions were largely derelict wastelands of ruins. As Armenians pulled out of Kelbajar, they burned down houses, cut trees and removed cultural and historical artefacts. As we end this article, work to re-establish basic infrastructure is already underway in the liberated areas. 🌟

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