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# LIBERATING ARMY

*Azerbaijani soldiers going to defend Karabakh. 1992*

**T**he first Armed Forces Day following the victory in the Patriotic War is being celebrated in Azerbaijan this year with special enthusiasm and a sense of national pride.

The foundation of the national armed forces was laid 103 years ago. On June 26, 1918, a relevant decision was passed by the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR).

The present-day Azerbaijani army is the successor of the national troops established in the past and it furthers Azerbaijan's glorious military traditions dating back to the historical period that marked the inception of powerful empires and states. The nation's forefathers defended the freedom and independence of the home country in 1918-1920, fought Hitler's fascism heroically in the battles of World War II in 1941-1945 and countered Armenian fascism in the First Karabakh War.

The emergence and formation of the Azerbaijani army occurred simultaneously with the inception of national statehood that took place in fierce battles for the values of freedom, independence, inviolability of borders and good neighborliness. The ADR national army was created in the South Caucasus amid the fighting of World War I. The fighting raged on two opposite front-

lines, i.e. the western one, countering the Armenian aggression, and against the Dashnak-Bolshevik armed forces in the eastern direction (Baku). At the same time, Azerbaijan faced a serious threat of invasion by Denikin's White Guard from the north and the Caspian Sea and a Soviet incursion after the White Army's crushing defeat by the Red Army.

It is worth mentioning that Armenian territorial claims against Azerbaijan have persisted since Armenia's statehood started to be discerned in the region in 1918. This was the case even after the handover to it of the city of Erivan (Irevan in Azerbaijani), the capital of the Erivan Khanate, by the ADR government, along with the Russian governorate, i.e. the present-day Armenia.

Armenia's ethnic and territorial expansion had spread to Nakhchivan, Zangazur and Karabakh by that time. Furthering the mass killings, expulsion of local residents and the capture of Azerbaijani territory by Armenian armed detachments, the government of the Republic of Armenia was pursuing a policy aimed at achieving international recognition of this land's alleged affiliation with Armenia. However, despite the critical situation, the resolve of the Azerbaijani soldiers and civil militia in 1918-1920 and the support of Turkish troops led by

Nuri Pasha allowed Azerbaijan to defend its territorial integrity.

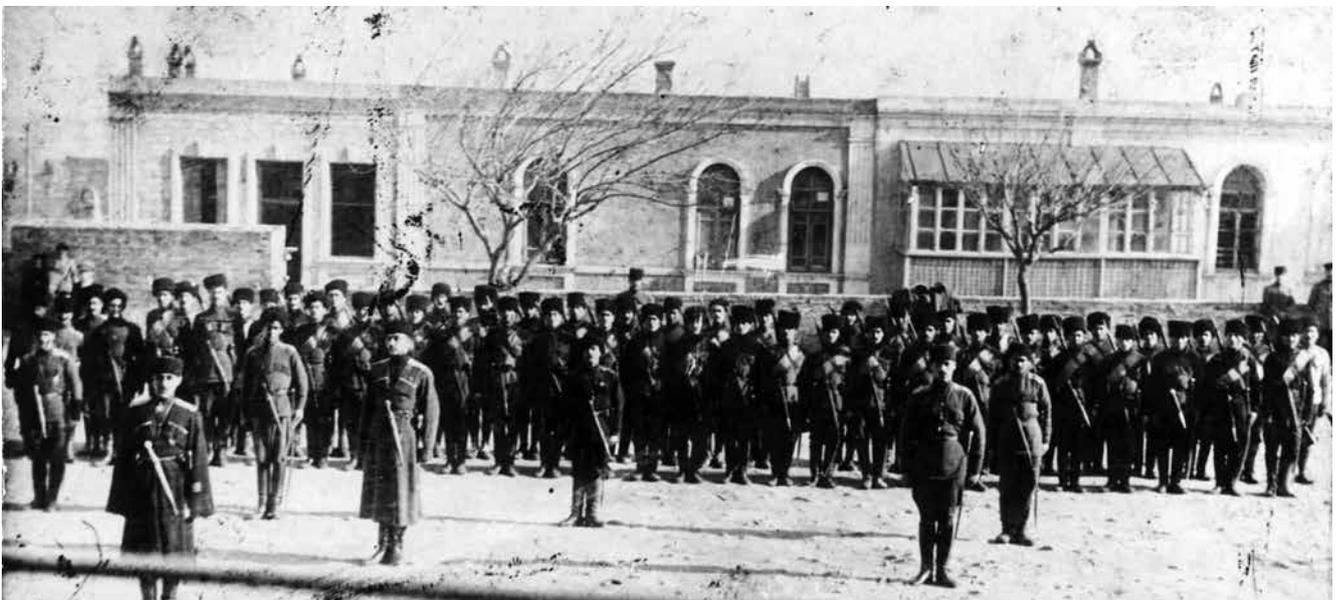
Following the ADR's fall in April 1920 and the establishment of Soviet rule, which brought an end to Azerbaijan's independence, Armenians managed to put forward their repeated unfounded claims in 1923 on annexation of Karabakh to Armenia, having taken advantage of their leverage in the central authorities in Moscow and Transcaucasian Bolshevik bodies. However, they succeeded only in gaining the status of an autonomous province within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (Azerbaijan SSR). Nevertheless, the hostile schemes of senior Armenian Bolshevik nationalists aimed against the Azerbaijani people showed no signs of abating in the Soviet times. In 1948-1953, a total of 150,000 Azerbaijanis were evicted from their historical places of residence in Armenia. Meanwhile, the number of Armenians residing in Azerbaijan, to the contrary, increased during the Soviet time period. Following the onset of "perestroika and glasnost" ("rebuilding and openness") in the USSR, over 60 years of peaceful co-existence in the conditions of Soviet internationalism were again followed by Armenian territorial claims against Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO).

On June 14, 1988, the Supreme Council of the Armenian SSR issued a ruling on NKAO's "inclusion" into the Armenian SSR. On July 17, the USSR Supreme Soviet (Council) dismissed the decision as illegitimate. However, on December 1, 1989, the same body of the Ar-



*Artilleryman of the ADR army. 1918*

menian SSR passed another decision "On reunification of the Armenian SSR and Nagorno-Karabakh." It was



*ADR army parade in Ganja. 1919*

*Azerbaijani army during hostilities. Karabakh, 1993*



announced amid deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia to Azerbaijan as part of a mass expulsion led by the state bodies of the Armenian SSR. More than 200,000 Azerbaijanis were evicted amid pogroms, killings and arsons committed in homes as part of another such deportation carried out in the 20th century. Although Azerbaijanis accounted for most of the population of the Erivan Governorate at the dawn of the century, not a single Azerbaijani remained in Armenia at the end of the century.

In late 1991, the conflict escalated into an Armenian military aggression against Azerbaijan. Using the concentration of military forces on the main routes and thus gaining numerical superiority over the poorly armed local militia, Armenian armed detachments, equipped with armored vehicles of the Soviet 366th motor rifle regiment, captured cities and villages, committing acts of terror, killing scores of people and ousting the local Azerbaijani population from Nagorno-Karabakh.

The response of the latest leadership of Soviet Azerbaijan and the national democratic government of independent Azerbaijan that succeeded it turned out

to be inconsistent with the scale of the historical tasks of state and military building and defense, in the face of threats posed to the country. It was responding reflexively to the ongoing developments. Meanwhile, the Armenian side was proactive and precisely aware of its objectives, acting preemptively. Therefore, Armenia had combat-ready armed units and a centralized command by the time Azerbaijan started building its army.

Despite the setbacks that occurred in the first half of 1992 and the loss of Shusha and Lachin, the newly created units of the Azerbaijani armed forces and local territorial self-defense units joined effort under a single command and gathered strength, launching a large-scale offensive in June 1992. In four months, the Azerbaijani troops managed to liberate half of the former NKAO's territory from the invaders. However, then government of the country missed the chance to consolidate the military success in the diplomatic, political and legal realm. In June 1993, another internal political crisis and a change of power took place in Azerbaijan. In these challenging conditions, Heydar Aliyev assumed leadership in the country.

*President Heydar Aliyev inspecting the state of the troops on the front line. 1994*

Meanwhile, Armenia launched a large-scale attack by that time, having taken advantage of the actual collapse of the command and logistics of the armed forces caused by the political situation in Azerbaijan. It managed to expand the area of its territorial occupation, promptly invading five more administrative districts adjacent to the former NKAO populated by over 600,000 Azerbaijanis who immediately became displaced persons.

Backed by world powers, Armenia had no intent to fulfill the four UN Security Council resolutions urging an immediate pullout of Armenian forces from Kalbajar and other surrounding occupied districts passed in this period, which was later admitted by former president Kocharyan.

On November 2, 1993, Heydar Aliyev called on the Azerbaijani people to rise to the defense of their motherland. This appeal, which drew an immediate public response, was widely referred to in the armed forces as the "Aliyev call".

The return of Heydar Aliyev to power assured the military command and army officers, including the author

of these lines, that the prominent statesman and general, who was experienced in state and military building and had outstanding organizational skills, would cope with the challenging situation in the country's defense system. The special attitude of Azerbaijani officers toward Heydar Aliyev is worth mentioning as well. In fact, the foundation of the Azerbaijani armed forces' officer corps of the 1990s was laid personally by Heydar Aliyev in the Soviet period of his activity.

The Military Lyceum named after Jamshid Nakhchivanski was established in Baku in 1971 at Heydar Aliyev's initiative. It was called the special military school at the time. The school employed the best faculty members and educators of the republic. Its graduates were admitted to Baku Higher Combined Arms Command School (presently the Azerbaijan Higher Military School named after Heydar Aliyev) after passing interviews and without having to take tests, since they already had pertinent basic training. In 1984, a special annual program on out-of-competition admission of national personnel from Azerbaijan to the USSR's higher military educational institutions was adopted for the first time on the

*Exercises of the Azerbaijani army. This is how the army of a new type was created. The 2000s*



initiative of Heydar Aliyev. Three applicants each majoring in all military specialties gained the opportunity to begin their studies in one of over 150 such schools. The exams were taken by a visiting commission in the building of the J. Nakhchivanski Military Lyceum in Baku.

These efforts made military education much more accessible for young Azerbaijanis and shaped up the capacities of officer staff for the future national army. The author of this article is a graduate of the J. Nakhchivanski military school, as well as one of the graduates of higher military schools who served in the Soviet army and later in the national armed forces since the early days of their inception. It was the Soviet-era national officer personnel that made up the basis of Azerbaijan's armed forces during their rebuilding in the early 1990s.

A military draft was carried out in a short time in November 1993 as a result of the "Aliyev call", along with replenishment of existing military units on the frontline and the formation of new ones, the creation and training of a military reserve, strengthening discipline and lawfulness, increasing the combat morale of the armed forces, improving the command and military logistics, etc.

In early 1994, the Azerbaijani armed forces embarked on an offensive in Karabakh, making headway in the south-eastern direction. However, they made no advances in the snow-covered mountainous regions of Kalbajar in the north-west. Meanwhile, the Armenian military command, taking advantage of the situation,

used the consolidated platoon comprised of 6,000 servicemen and supplied with hundreds of armored vehicles, artillery units and combat aviation to launch an attack in the Terter-Aghdam northern direction. The Armenian forces were trying to seize the city of Terter and "finalize" the so-called "security belt" around the unrecognized "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic", threatening to gain access to Azerbaijan's strategic communications. According to the Armenian military and political leadership's plan, this was expected to prompt Azerbaijan to conclude a peace deal under the terms that would be beneficial for Armenia.

As a result of heavy and brutal fighting that raged for about a month, the Azerbaijani armed forces managed to defend Terter, having displayed exemplary endurance and valor, and put an end to the strategic plans of the Armenian invaders. The Armenian forces sustained their biggest loss throughout the war and had to discontinue their assault. The fighting over Terter in 1994 became the most large-scale and deadliest battle in the history of the First Karabakh War.

Amid a situation whereby the parties to the conflict ran out of resources and prospects for further full-scale hostilities, the Bishkek ceasefire agreement was signed on May 12, 1994.

This time period ushered in a new stage of a military build-up and strengthening of Azerbaijan's defense capabilities, which laid groundwork for the present-day

*Attack aircraft Su-25 of the military aviation of Azerbaijan*

Azerbaijani Armed Forces. The development strategy for the Azerbaijani military was stipulated primarily by the actual state of war with Armenia and based on achieving qualitative and quantitative advantage that would be sufficient for successful fulfillment of the task facing the national army, i.e. a crushing defeat of the invader and liberation of the occupied territories.

The growth of Azerbaijan's military power was fueled by the increasing economic potential of the country in the first decade of the 21st century. The Ministry of Defense Industry was established in 2005 in accordance with President Ilham Aliyev's decree. This period saw the launch of production and licensed assembly of high-tech weaponry and ammunition, as well as mortar launchers, artillery and military vehicles. The production capacities covered more than 1,200 types of military goods. Large-scale procurement of cutting edge weapons was carried out as well. Military spending surged accordingly. Azerbaijan's military budget equalled Armenia's total state budget. A five-year program on comprehensively revamping, re-equipping and renovating the military logistics, passed in 2013, was successfully completed in 2019.

In the wake of Armenia's non-constructive stance, the long and challenging path to a peaceful settlement of the conflict mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group was completely deadlocked by the end of 2015. At the same time, Armenian troops ratcheted up shelling of Azerbaijani villages located near the frontline, which was claiming civilian lives. The "sniper war" on the Line of Contact in Karabakh escalated into clashes with the use of mortars and artillery, which eventually sparked a "four-day war" in April 2016.

In the early morning hours on April 2, units of the Azerbaijani army carried out operations in the southeastern and northern parts of Karabakh and drove the enemy out of the heights it was using to shell Azerbaijani residential areas. In an effort to regain the lost positions that had operational and strategic importance, the Armenian command pulled its best forces to the frontline, launching massive counter-attacks that lasted four days. However, having sustained significant loss, including that of tanks, and having failed to achieve its goals, the Armenian side requested a truce.

The April battles were a major alarm bell to Armenia and the world community, as well as confirmation of

*Special Forces of the Azerbaijan Army during exercises*

Azerbaijan's determination to regain its territories militarily if Armenia failed to resume the negotiations and pull out of the occupied land.

President Ilham Aliyev recalled in one of his post-war speeches that Armenia's Serzh Sargsyan pledged in the presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin during talks following the April clashes that a withdrawal of Armenian troops from the occupied districts would begin in two weeks. However, Sargsyan broke his promise upon return to Yerevan.

The fact that the Armenian president pledged a pullout after the April fighting, in itself, implied success of the Azerbaijani armed forces on the battlefield. The Armenian government witnessed Azerbaijan's decisiveness and ability to retaliate strongly. It was also assured that the combat morale of the Azerbaijani armed forces was higher than that of the Armenian army, which was "fighting with weaponry of the 80s" (a quote from S. Sargsyan) and unable to face the Azerbaijani forces, which were using the most advanced weapons and tactics. In addition, the Armenian propaganda myths on "invincibility of the Armenian army" and the notorious

"Armenian combat morale", which had been instilled in the young generation of Armenians, were instantly dispelled.

The outcome of the April battles also had significant consequences for Armenia domestically, triggering social and political tension and clashes at home. The Armenian people, who suffered from lawlessness committed by former field commanders for many years for the sake of ideological nonsense and a hope for protecting the purported territorial acquisitions of the 1990s, became confident that they were incapable of accomplishing these objectives. Rank-and-file Armenians no longer had a reason to tolerate the hostile and corrupt regime of the "Karabakh clan". Opposing forces, including the hardline opposition, stepped up their efforts. In July, the Sasna Tsrer terror group seized a regiment of a patrol guard service in downtown Yerevan, calling for President Sargsyan's resignation. Protesters supporting this demand demonstrated for two weeks, but failed to garner wide support of the loyal opposition due to Sasna Tsrer's terrorist methods. Although these attempts fell through, the "Karabakh clan" lost most of its victorious



*Combat helicopter MI-35 of the military aviation of Azerbaijan*

authority and image of “land conquerors” among the Armenian public, which it had gained in the aftermath of the First Karabakh War. Thus, the April battles could be equated to a full-scale war in terms of the importance of military, political, diplomatic and moral-psychological consequences, which ultimately led to a change of power in Armenia in May 2018. The latter is confirmed by the remarks of the ideologists of the “velvet revolution” of 2018 who said that “the Armenian revolution began in April 2016”.

The course and outcome of the battles that occurred in April 2016 were thoroughly analyzed by the Azerbaijani command and measures were taken to further improve the combat readiness of the armed forces, tactics, interaction among military divisions and different types of troops, as well as the use of new high-precision weapons. It is noteworthy that kamikaze drones were used for the first time in combat during these battles, along with Israeli-made Spike LR anti-tank systems, which proved to be highly effective in military action.

A glimmer of hope for a peaceful settlement of the long-standing conflict that had emerged turned out to be unjustified. The coming to power of Nikol Pashinyan, who had been associated with democratic values, in 2018, fostered some expectations for a negotiated solution in Azerbaijan and

internationally. Initially, the Armenian prime minister took time “to study the negotiating framework more deeply”. However, he later started to put forward unacceptable terms on changing the format of talks, which was rejected both by Azerbaijan and the OSCE Minsk Group. Furthermore, in May 2020, Pashinyan claimed during a defiant trip to the occupied Shusha that “Karabakh is Armenia, period!” Such a statement was never made by any of his predecessors. In doing so, Pashinyan completely derailed the core of the already stalled negotiations. So, what could possibly be the subject of talks with the Armenian side after it asserts in an ultimatum-like manner that “the dispute is resolved” and that allegedly “Karabakh is part of Armenia”?



*Tanks of the Azerbaijan army*

*Sniper of the Azerbaijan army during exercises*

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's public rebukes of Pashinyan over the latter's rhetoric derailing the peace process and calls from the OSCE MG co-chairs failed to have due impact on the actions of the Armenian prime minister. Moreover, the regime in the unrecognized "Nagorno Karabakh Republic" called Shusha, a cradle of Azerbaijani culture, as the "capital of Artsakh", while Armenian Defense Minister Davit Tonoyan threatened to deal "a preemptive strike on Azerbaijan", declaring that "a new war means new (captured-N.B.) territories!"

Thus, even the slightest hope for Pashinyan's making an effort and directing the democratic potential of the Armenian public to a peaceful and fair settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict turned out to be futile. To the contrary, the policy and rhetoric of the Armenian side since the 1994 ceasefire became more aggressive and provocative than those during R. Kocharyan and S. Sargsyan's tenure. This conclusion was confirmed by its military provocation in July on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border in the area of Tovuz, 200 km away from the conflict zone and close to international transport corridors and transnational energy communications that play an important role in ensuring European energy security.

On July 12, 2020, Armenian subversive groups attempted to seize an Azerbaijani checkpoint. The Aghdam and Dondar Gushchu villages of Azerbaijan's Tovuz district were shelled from the territory of Armenia with the use of howitzer weapons and 120 mm mortars. A 76-year-old local resident died at the doorstep of his home. At the same time, Armenian armed forces fired at residential areas in Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic for several days. The Tovuz clashes sparked a military escalation, leading to the use of mortar launchers, artillery units and attack drones. Trench warfare continued for a few days. 11 Azerbaijani servicemen were killed, including Major-General Polad Hashimov, who served as Chief-of-Staff of an army corps of Azerbaijan's Armed Forces, and Chief of Artillery at the Army Corps, Colonel Ilgar Mirzayev. Both military officers were named National Heroes of Azerbaijan posthumously.

What was the goal pursued by the Armenian politicians and military leaders in unleashing warfare at the border and near Nakhchivan? The answer to this question is valuable from the viewpoint of assessing Armenia's real policy. A substantiated conclusion may be made that the borderline provocation was aimed at

spreading the conflict internationally by shifting hostilities to Armenia's territory to drag the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) into it and trigger a conflict of interest between Russia and Turkey in the region. This would ensure Russia's unconditional support for Armenia, restraining Azerbaijan and prolonging the occupation of its territories. However, Moscow swiftly figured out "who started it" and the purpose behind these actions. Therefore, the CSTO was reluctant to respond to Armenia's complaints over Azerbaijan's strikes upon (legitimate) military targets in the Armenian territory.

The funeral of Col. Ilgar Mirzayev, who who killed during the Tovuz battles, took place in Baku on July 15, 2020 when the fighting in Tovuz was still underway. At this time, the public organized a march to support the Azerbaijani armed forces. Participants called for the liberation of Karabakh, a nationwide military draft and an order from the Commander-in-Chief to liberate the occupied territories. Within a few days, tens of thousands of Azerbaijani citizens, including women, signed up as volunteers to be sent to the frontline. The State Service for Mobilization and Conscription had to suspend the admission of volunteers, thanking everyone for their support to the armed forces.

*Lala-Tapa strategic height liberated by the Azerbaijani army in April 2016*



Azerbaijan's response to the Tovuz developments made it clear that another military provocation might be the last such attempt for Armenia. Azerbaijan's «strategic patience» was running out. 🇦🇿

**to be continued**



*Tanks of the Azerbaijan army*