

WHEN PEACE DEALS ARE NOT PEACEFUL -- WILL THE CONFLICT END?

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN CONFLICT THROUGH THE LENS OF CRITICAL
GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract

On 27 September 2020, a bloody war broke out in the Caucasus. This was not the first time Armenia and Azerbaijan have been engaged in a war over a small mountainous region called Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh). The beginning of the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war was as unexpected as it was expected. This conflict is usually analyzed by looking into the larger goals of the bigger players of the region namely Russia and Turkey. The goal of this project is to understand why Armenia and Azerbaijan are willing to sacrifice thousands of manpower and millions of dollars for a small unrecognized state. The conflict will be explored through the lens of Critical Geopolitics. The conclusion that is reached suggests that the history of those countries, imaginaries that the inhabitants of this space have and the cultural narratives that circulate from generation to generation keep this conflict alive.

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Introduction

It is close to impossible to find an Armenian or Azerbaijani whose life has not been affected by any of the Nagorno Karabakh wars. Usually a forgotten conflict for the world, this war claimed 2 to 3 generations of men in many families, others had to flee their homes, while a whole generation of men in both Armenia and Azerbaijan despite managing to outlive the war, were left with disabilities after the end of it. This research is motivated by a personal anecdote. 9 November 2020, the day that the ceasefire was signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan, is seen as one of the most tragic and shameful days in Armenian history. Of course, the war was long and bloody, however, this ceasefire which marked the defeat of Armenia was a painful reality that no one was willing to accept. Back then I was working at an international school and my immediate boss was a German lady. We had a meeting that morning after which she expressed to me that she does not understand why all the Armenians that study and work in that school are so upset with the fact that the war is over and do not feel a sense of relief as no matter what the outcome of the war is, it has been stopped, soldiers will stop dying and life will go back to normal. Due to my bad mood and the sleepless night that I had, I was not willing to engage in a long discussion with her so I simply said “You are not Armenian or Azerbaijani, you will not understand.” And she indeed did not. I forgot about this conversation and only remembered about it when during one of my classes at CEU the concept of critical geopolitics was being discussed. As for most of the literature on critical geopolitics, the class was focused on Russia, however, I could not help but think about how this concept can be an effective theory for explaining the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict as it takes that extra step into diving deeper into the history and culture of the country.

Upon lengthy research, I quickly noticed a gap in the literature -- most of the articles and books on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict focus on the bigger powers that are involved

in it, Russia and Turkey. Many simply believe that most of these wars are geopolitical games of superpowers for reaching their regional goals.¹²³⁴ Upon a few clicks and quick research, dozens of articles show up that explain how the Caucasus is an important territory of influence for Russia, so called ‘Russia’s backyard’, therefore Russia has a constant need of reinforcing and, when needed, improving its regional standing.⁵ Some go as far as questioning Russia’s motives and speculating that many escalations of the Armenia-Artsakh-Azerbaijan line of contact might not be accidental.⁶ This paper does not attempt to undermine the importance of the big regional powers in this conflict -- it would be extremely naïve to assume that Russia and Turkey do not have their own agendas for the region which they push forward through Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, much of the context is lost when the historic background, cultural myths and narratives and regional specificities are not taken into an account. Why were these two states willing to spend 16.7 percent (Armenia) and 12.7 percent (Azerbaijan) of their 2020 budget on the military expenses which comes to \$634 million and \$2.2 billion respectively.⁷ Even during the ‘peaceful times’ servicemen and civilians regularly get killed and wounded on this highly militarized line of contact. Crisis Group reports that between January 2015 and 27 September 2020, excluding the time period of 2-11 April 2016, 180 servicemen and 10 civilians from both sides of the conflict were killed on the border while 58 servicemen and 12 civilians got wounded.⁸ Since the end of the

¹ Hakan, Yavuz, Vasif, Huseynov. 2020. “The Second Karabakh War: Russia vs. Turkey?” *Middle East Policy*. Vol. 17, No. 4. Pages 103-118.

² Gulshan, Pashayeva, Nigar, Göksel. 2011. “The Interplay of the approaches of Turkey, Russia and the United States to the Conflict Over Nagorno-Karabakh.” *SAM Center for Strategic Studies*. Pages 1-31.

³ Emil, Souleimanov, Lia, Evoyan. 2012. “Two Positions on the Nagorno-Karabakh War: Russian and Turkish (1990-1994).” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*. Vol. 13, No. 4. Pages 7-22.

⁴ Daria, Isachenko. 2020. “Turkey-Russia Partnership in the War Over Nagorno-Karabakh: Militarised Peacebuilding with Implications for Conflict Transformation.” *Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit*. Pages 1-4.

⁵ Dumitru, Minzarari. “Russia’s Stake in the Nagorno-Karabakh War: Accident or Design?” November 12, 2020. *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ani, Avetisyan. “Military Expenditures and the Economy: Behind the War of Weapons.” EVN Report. May 5, 2021. <https://evnreport.com/>.

⁸ Crisis Group. “Before the 2020 War: Visualising the Data.” <https://www.crisisgroup.org/>.

2020 Nagorno Karabakh war, 65 servicemen and 38 civilians were killed while 67 servicemen and 67 civilians were wounded.⁹ It is obvious that this conflict is extremely costly, both economically and in terms of human lives, therefore it feels like there has to be a bigger reason as to why all the parties involved are not willing to make concessions and compromise. This project is worthwhile because it will attempt to fill an important gap in the literature and apply the concept of critical geopolitics in a situation that it is meant to be applied in. One of the criticisms of classical geopolitics is that it mainly takes into account world superpowers, the big players in the conflict.¹⁰ The scholars of critical geopolitics believe that equal attention has to be placed on all the sides that are involved in the conflict, no matter how small or big. However, most of the analyses that one comes across that use the conceptual framework of critical geopolitics focus on Russia and China, two of the biggest players in the arena of world politics. This project intends to use the lens of critical geopolitics to understand the reasons behind the longevity of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict while merely focusing on Armenia and Azerbaijan. I was not able to detect any study that attempted to look into the Armenia-Azerbaijan relations through the lens of critical geopolitics and only focuses on these two countries. This is understandable, as it is almost impossible to separate this conflict from a wider geographic and geopolitical narrative, however, a new side dimension of this conflict can be unveiled in case of successful completion of the project. Nevertheless, I was able to detect a body of literature that focuses on national identities and shared memories specifically for Armenians and Azerbaijanis -- this literature will be crucial for the creation of the imaginary of the geopolitical culture in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the later chapters. The research question that will guide this project follows:

⁹ Crisis Group. "The Situation Today." <https://www.crisisgroup.org/>.

¹⁰ Gerard, Toal. 2017. "Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus." Oxford University Press. Page 26.

How can one interpret the ongoing Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict through the lens of Critical Geopolitics? More specifically, what is the role of geopolitical culture in the repeated emergence of the conflict?

The main theoretical framework that will be used for this project is Critical Geopolitics, which is one of the post-colonial branches of Classical Geopolitics. Scholars of critical geopolitics believe that while geography can be an important factor in world affairs, it should not take the central role in the analysis of the foreign affairs and regional and international relations of a country.

The introduction will be followed by a detailed account of the history of the development of the concept of Geopolitics. After gaining a better understanding of what Classical Geopolitics entails, a switch will be made to the exploration of Critical Geopolitics and what is meant by Geopolitical Culture. The Third Chapter will explore the history of Nagorno Karabakh/Artsakh and cover the First Nagorno Karabakh War and the 4-day April war. For the purpose of this project and what it has to focus on a more detailed account of the historic tensions between the Armenians and Azeris in the Nagorno Karabakh prior to the First war will be provided while the history of the wars themselves will be less detailed. This will be followed by the chapter on the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war where all the information that has been provided beforehand will be collected together in order to analyze the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict through the lens of geopolitics. The project will be concluded with a short Conclusion chapter and Bibliography.

That Complicated Theory Called Geopolitics

Buzzwords that are catchy and easily convey messages are a big part of current international relations lingo and discourse. It is almost impossible to read a text on politics and international relations and not come across the term *geopolitics*. It seems like every step that a country takes and every decision that it makes has to be considered within the bigger geopolitical realm. Nevertheless, while geopolitics is a widely used term, not many sources present an accurate and coherent picture of the origin and development of the term. *Critical Geopolitics*, which is one of the postcolonial developments of the concept, is the central theoretical framework of this project. However, before conducting a deep dive into this specific branch of geopolitics, an attempt will be made to create a clear timeline of the development of this term. It is worth mentioning that the works of the two main ideologues, Friedrich Ratzel and Johan Rudolf Kjellén, that are associated with the concept of geopolitics are not available translated into English, therefore for the creation of the account of their work one has to rely heavily on other academics, their works and the parts of translations that they made. Nevertheless, as the intention of this project is not the conduction of a deep dive into the history and genealogy of the concept of geopolitics, using secondary sources should not negatively impact the quality of this dissertation.

Early History of Geopolitics

The idea of geopolitics was formulated in the late 19th century in the background of the expansion of the German Empire. It reached its peak ideological importance during the Nazi Germany time and resurfaced again after the Cold War. Geopolitics is one of the central theories of Political Geography as the physical location of the state and its geography are used as a lens for understanding the political processes that take place within states. The term *Geopolitik* was first coined in 1917 by Johan Rudolf Kjellén, a Swedish geographer, political

scientist, university professor and politician in his book *Der Staat als Lebensform* (The State as a Living Form). Kjellen was the student of Friedrich Ratzel, a German geographer and ethnographer, therefore Kjellen's work was highly influenced by Ratzel's ideology.

The core of Political Geography is the state which according to Ratzel "is a fragment of humanity on a piece of soil".¹¹ One of the core texts that influenced German geographical thought during the mid-nineteenth century was Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.¹² The Darwinian ideas presented in the book were almost immediately picked up and promoted by the younger generation of German geographers, particularly by Oscar Peschel who was Ratzel's predecessor as the chair of geography in Leipzig.¹³ Peschel coined the term *Lebensraum* which was an attempt to present Darwin's theory on natural selection in geographical terms and draw attention to the fact that "natural selection was always already a telluric selection."¹⁴

Ratzel polished and further developed the term *Lebensraum* and described it as a concept that "gathers together the biological, geographical and anthropological conditions of a given environment."¹⁵ Space and its scarcity are of significant importance not only in the theory behind *Lebensraum* but also in most of the German geographical thought – Ratzel argues that "[Every] new form of life needs space in order to come into existence, and yet more space to establish and pass on its characteristics."¹⁶ Stripped to its most basic elements, Ratzel's theory consists of two main variables – space and position.¹⁷ According to him, these

11 Charles, Hagen. 1942. "Geopolitics." *The Journal of Politics*. Vol. 4, No. 4. Page 479.

12 Christian, Abrahamsson. 2013. "On the genealogy of *Lebensraum*." *Geographica Helvetica*. Vol. 68. Page 38.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid. Page 39.

16 Ibid.

17 George, Kiss. 1942. "Political Geography into Geopolitics: Recent Trends in Germany." *Geographical Review*. Vol. 32, No. 4. Page 634.

two elements fully determine the value and destiny of the state.¹⁸ The most revolutionary and radical contribution of Ratzel's work to the field of Political Geography is his portrayal of the state as a living organism "states can expand, contract, live, prosper, decay, and die just as living organisms."¹⁹ Ratzel also emphasizes the 'spiritual connection' of man and the soil he lives on – two elements that are bound together inseparably.²⁰

Ratzel's theory heavily relies on the assumption according to which the world population experiences constant growth due to which states face a need for constant expansion. This scenario is crucial for the rise of great powers and the liveliness of individual states.²¹ Nevertheless, the physical space on Earth is limited, therefore, eventually, the unclaimed space for expansion will run out. While not always explicitly, Ratzel's ideas lead the reader to think that adaptation to the geography/soil encourages population growth which in turn raises a need for expansion. The weaker states, which are usually smaller in size, will eventually be the losers of this process and would be the ones that ultimately lose their territory which in Darwinian terms can be called the 'survival of the fittest'. Limited space, the ongoing need for expansion and size equating to strength helps one to understand why there can only be a limited number of superpowers as only a few states can expand to the necessary size for becoming one before the space simply runs out. Ratzel argues: "The given space of every age has decided how far countries have had to expand in order to become in reality 'world powers', i.e., to span the earth; and in this general process, every single country, even the smallest, has had its position continually modified by the growth of the whole. Since the size of the Earth's surface sets limits to this development, the zenith can be

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid. Page 635.

20 Ibid.

21 Christian, Abrahamsson. 2013. "On the genealogy of Lebensraum." *Geographica Helvetica*. Vol. 68. Page 39.

reached by only a few states at the same time.”²² Furthermore, “only one power can play a leading role in world politics at a time,” however, this too is in a state of constant change and the leading powers are in an “ever-changing pageant of ascent, brilliancy, and decay.”²³

Following Ratzel’s logic, humans are in a constant state of fighting for space (and influence over the world politics) as evolution and ongoing growth of population make space a scarce resource, hence, the continued existence of a group of people (nation) can only be guaranteed if the state takes part in this struggle for space. The idea of *Lebensraum* emphasizes the interconnectedness of geography, space and the volume of expansion that potentially can reach far beyond the borders of the state. According to Ratzel “the only way a strong and vital state can achieve a semblance of equilibrium is through continuous expansion” as limiting the growth of the population will automatically set the nation back in relation to others.²⁴ Therefore, taking steps toward the expansion of the state can be seen as a step toward ensuring the fulfillment of the natural needs of the nation. As the space on Earth is scarce and the population can potentially experience an unlimited growth, there is simultaneously a growing need for *Lebensraum* by a multiplicity of actors hence “the same space would be struggled over by different groups.”²⁵ This further suggests that states have no choice but to engage in a fight for *Lebensraum* if they want to survive and thrive. Subsequently, not only the space but also the position of the state is crucial for its future. Ratzel’s thought which received the name ‘organic theory’ equates expansion with growth for the state while static boundaries or decline in space equals to decay and death.²⁶

22 Friedrich, Ratzel. 1897. “Über den Lebensraum, eine biogeographische Skizze.” *Die Umschau*. Vol. 21. Pages 363–367. Quoted in Ibid. Christian, Abrahamsson. 2013. “On the genealogy of *Lebensraum*.” *Geographica Helvetica*. Vol. 68. Pages 39–40.

23 George, Kiss. 1942. “Political Geography into Geopolitics: Recent Trends in Germany.” *Geographical Review*. Vol. 32, No. 4. Page 635–636.

24 Christian, Abrahamsson. 2013. “On the genealogy of *Lebensraum*.” *Geographica Helvetica*. Vol. 68. Page 40.

25 Ibid.

26 Charles, Hagen. 1942. “Geopolitics.” *The Journal of Politics*. Vol. 4, No. 4. Page 479.

Ratzel's ideas sparked the interest of many and found a solid base of followers, one of the most prominent and influential ones being Johan Rudolf Kjellén. Kjellen was especially fascinated by Ratzel's ideas regarding the organic nature of the state as a living organism – he “treated the state as an actual organism rather than as a useful analogy, and he emphasized the growing and expanding traits of that organism.”²⁷ Ratzel's and Kjellen's works are full of metaphors where they give states characteristics of living organisms and draw analogies between changes in state and living organisms through these metaphors. As the state is a living organism, loss of its land cannot just be seen as a property loss, but rather it is a loss of not only a body part, like a limb or tissue, but also of strength.²⁸ Therefore, it should be expected from countries that still have some strength left after the defeat to attempt to fight back to restore the lost parts of their organisms.²⁹ The only time a state will allow its land to be taken over or part of the country to get detached is when this development will benefit the state and make it stronger – a development that has been seen throughout Europe after the collapse of the Berlin Wall.³⁰ Ola Tunander, a research professor emeritus at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, describes Kjellen's organic view of the state as “an attempt to regard the state as an independent object of study with its own dynamic and logic, power and will, an organic unity of land and people, an organism with body and soul, a personality on the international stage.”³¹

Kjellen argues that “the foundational element of the state is always its natural location” and that it is of the highest importance for the state.³² He attempts to prove this assumption by saying: “Nothing can better demonstrate the consciousness of the modern

27 Charles, Hagen. 1942. “Geopolitics.” *The Journal of Politics*. Vol. 4, No. 4. Page 482.

28 Ola, Tunander. 2001. “Swedish-German Geopolitics for a New Century Rudolf Kjellén's 'The State as a Living Organism'.” *Review of International Studies*. Vol. 27, No. 3. Page 455.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid. Page 453.

32 Christian, Abrahamsson. 2013. “On the genealogy of Lebensraum.” *Geographica Helvetica*. Vol. 68. Page 41.

state's intimate connection with the earth than this that he bears the loss of people more lightly than the loss of land.”³³ According to Kjellen, the state will always prioritize its land over the lives of people – “the state shows more solidarity with the land than with the people... Everything becomes clear with one single word; the Reich [riket] is the state's body. The Reich [riket] is not a property as the farmers' soil; it is connected to the personality of the state. It is the state itself ... the modern anthropogeography signifies man as a “piece of highly developed soil” ... Also the state “is of soil”; also he is ... a developed piece of soil.”³⁴ Both Ratzel and Kjellen place huge importance on the soil itself and emphasize the connection between the soil and people that live on it. Additionally, Kjellen sees the state to be “inseparable from its land and people.”³⁵ He quotes Ratzel's *Politiche Geographie*: “Every state is in part a piece of humanity and in part a piece of land.”³⁶

Kjellen introduces the concept of *Geopolitics* in the Swedish geographical journal *Ymer* in 1899 as the “doctrine of the state as a geographic organism.”³⁷ He emphasized the importance of the “interplay between geographic factors and material resources of power for the relations between states.”³⁸ Kjellen also touches upon the question of states' borders and recognizes that only a few states have solid natural borders, for the majority of them “cultural, economic, social, and historical factors, including political will” decide the future of those borders and how they will change over time.³⁹ Kjellens's thoughts and ideas are considered to be highly deterministic due to his belief in the ‘organismic’ nature of the state

33 Rudolf, Kjellen. 1916. “Staten som Lifsform.” Hugo Grebers Forlag. Stockholm. Page 47. Quoted in Christian, Abrahamsson. 2013. “On the genealogy of Lebensraum.” *Geographica Helvetica*. Vol. 68. Page 41.

34 Ibid.

35 Ola, Tunander. 2001. “Swedish-German Geopolitics for a New Century Rudolf Kjellén's 'The State as a Living Organism'.” *Review of International Studies*. Vol. 27, No. 3. Page 454.

36 Ibid.

37 Rudolf, Kjellen. 1976/77 [orig. 1899]. “Studier öfver Sveriges Politiska Gränser.” *Ymer*. Pages 70–80. Quoted in Carl, Marklund. 2015. “The Return of Geopolitics in the Era of Soft Power: Rereading Rudolf Kjellén on Geopolitical Imaginary and Competitive Identity.” *Geopolitics*. Vol. 20. Page 251.

38 Carl, Marklund. 2015. “The Return of Geopolitics in the Era of Soft Power: Rereading Rudolf Kjellén on Geopolitical Imaginary and Competitive Identity.” *Geopolitics*. Vol. 20. Page 251.

39 Ibid.

and how due to the present circumstances state borders “grow and shrink” and states like organisms “live and die.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Kjellen’s ideas and views are somewhat contradictory – while in his writing he seems to an extent skeptical of the natural borders of the state and thinks of them as lines that can be changed relatively easily, simultaneously, he does put a lot of emphasis on the connection between the nation and the land and finds it crucial for the nation to find its own space on Earth. However, Carl Marklund provides a new reading of this contradiction in the thought of Kjellen and offers a unique perspective through a more in-depth reading of his works. In *Inledning* Kjellen writes: “the destinies of the peoples are determined not only by geographical compulsion, but also by a quantum of free will which is embedded in them, and which in many ways may modify, or even to some degree neutralize nature.”⁴¹ So it can be concluded that Kjellen’s views are not fully deterministic and at least in some works and through a certain way of reading them he does believe that nations (especially small ones as most of Kjellen’s work is based on Sweden and Swedish politics) and people that live on the soil of that state are able to change the rules (or in this case the boundaries) that the nature created, therefore Kjellen “stressed the importance of the underdetermined, processual and political elements of geopolitics.”⁴² With this much less rigorous separation of state and culture, Kjellen introduces an innovative outlook on state expansionism and the role of nature and natural borders in it while developing Ratzel’s ideas further and coming closer to how geopolitics is viewed and understood in the 21st century.

Kjellen and his work recognized the importance of not only relatively stable factors like geography and natural resources but also of “science and technology to promote the

40 Ibid. Page 252.

41 Rudolf, Kjellen. 1900. “Inledning.” Göteborg, Wettergren & Kerber. Page 117. Quoted in Carl, Marklund. 2015. “The Return of Geopolitics in the Era of Soft Power: Rereading Rudolf Kjellén on Geopolitical Imaginary and Competitive Identity.” *Geopolitics*. Vol. 20. Page 253.

42 Carl, Marklund. 2015. “The Return of Geopolitics in the Era of Soft Power: Rereading Rudolf Kjellén on Geopolitical Imaginary and Competitive Identity.” *Geopolitics*. Vol. 20. Page 253.

health, productivity, and growth of the population as well as the economy.”⁴³ While other thinkers as well recognized the relationship between technological development and geography, Kjellen and other members of the school of German geopolitics stressed the connection between the abovementioned two and “their connection with ethnicity, political thought and economic space.”⁴⁴ In the field of geopolitics, the separation between “material and immaterial power resources cannot always be maintained” and for Kjellen “nature and culture are profoundly interconnected.”⁴⁵

Three theories: “Sea Power” theory, “Heartland” theory, “Rimland” theory

When speaking of the history of the concept of Geopolitics, three theories jump out. The first theory is the *Sea Power theory* developed by Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan which stresses the importance of sea power and the possession of naval power. Mahan presents Great Britain as an exemplary case for the United States and advocates for possession of stronger and better-developed naval power for the United States.⁴⁶ The second theory – *Heartland theory* – was developed by an influential British geographer Halford Mackinder. The theory suggests that the world is divided into distinct sections which are in an eternal battle with each other (the main battle being between Europe and Asia). The division is along these lines: the world island that includes Europe, Asia and Africa, the offshore islands, including the British Isles and the islands of Japan and the outlying island that are North America, South America, and Oceania.⁴⁷ The most important part of the world is the

43 Ibid. Page 259.

44 Ola, Tunander. 2001. “Swedish-German Geopolitics for a New Century Rudolf Kjellén's 'The State as a Living Organism'.” *Review of International Studies*. Vol. 27, No. 3. Page 459.

45 Carl, Marklund. 2015. “The Return of Geopolitics in the Era of Soft Power: Rereading Rudolf Kjellén on Geopolitical Imaginary and Competitive Identity.” *Geopolitics*. Vol. 20. Page 259.

46 Joshua, Boucher. “Alfred Thayer Mahan, The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future (1897).” *Classics of Strategy and Diplomacy*. 27 July 2015. <https://classicsofstrategy.com/>.

47 Eldar, Ismailov, Vladimir, Papava. 2010. “Rethinking Central Eurasia.” *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program – A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center*. Pages 85-86.

heartland which includes Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region, some of the Central Asian countries as well as Russia.⁴⁸ As Mackinder famously stated: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island. Who rules the World-Island commands the World.”⁴⁹ This area indeed has been one of the main battlegrounds for the major powers and ‘enjoyed’ the attention of any emerging world players throughout history. The *Rimland theory* was created by Nicholas Spyman in rejection of Mackinder’s Heartland theory as Spyman believes that Rimland (the coastal lands of Eurasia) and not the heartland have unmeasurable geographic importance and ruling the Rimland was the key to world dominance.⁵⁰ These three theories are classical examples of geopolitical thought where space and geography play a critical role in determining the role and level of importance of a nation-state.

The ‘death’ of Geopolitics

The concepts of Geopolitics and Lebensraum are tightly associated with Nazi Germany due to the adaptation of Kjellen’s ideas by Karl Haushofer – a German general, professor, geographer, and politician. Haushofer has been called “Hitler’s master teacher” and “the father of Nazi ideology” by Bruno Hipler. In 1945, US Chief of Counsel Sidney Alderman argued that it was Haushofer rather than Rudolf Hess who wrote *Mein Kampf* and that Haushofer was “Hitler’s intellectual godfather”.⁵¹ Translated from German, Haushofer’s definition of Geopolitics is “the doctrine of the earth relations of political developments ... based on the broad foundations of geography, particularly political geography, as the doctrine

48 Ibid. Page 87, Figure 1.

49 Halford, Mackinder. 1942 [1919]. “Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction.” National Defense University Press, Washington, DC. Page 106.

50 Saul, Bernard Cohen. 2003. “Geopolitics of the World System.” Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

51 Catherine, Epstein. 2017. Review of “The Demon of Geopolitics: How Karl Haushofer ‘Educated’ Hitler and Hess by Holger H. Herwig”. www.europenowjournal.org.

of political space organisms and their structure.”⁵² Haushofer adopted the idea of Lebensraum from Ratzel and the one of national self-sufficiency and the importance of power from Kjellen.⁵³ Haushofer came up with the notion of ‘social aristocracy’ which advocates for “rule by the fittest on the basis of natural selection without class or racial exclusivity.”⁵⁴ This is one of Haushofer’s ideas often-cited by his supporters that argue that his role in the creation of ideology behind Nazi Germany is overexaggerated. Nevertheless, this association of geopolitics with Nazi Germany strongly hindered the usage and popularity of the concept way until the end of the Cold War when thinkers yet once again returned to the idea of geopolitics and attempted to explain the world developments through this lens.

Critical Geopolitics

Gearóid Ó Tuathail, one of the founders of critical geopolitics, recalls: “For better or worse, the critical geopolitics that Simon and I began to articulate was defined more as an approach than as a developed theoretical system, a set of critical aspirations rather than clearly specified concepts and methods. In keeping with its deconstructive ethos, we adopted a tactical response to hegemonic geopolitical narratives rather than a more strategic response through the development of critical geopolitics as a distinct school of international relations theory.”⁵⁵ Similar to other concepts in political science, scholars of geopolitics and international relations were unable to propose a unified definition for the concept of geopolitics. Nevertheless, as it has been demonstrated thus far in this chapter, regardless of not having an exact definition, when writing about classical geopolitics, scholars focus on

52 Karl, Haushofer et al. 1928. “Bausteine zur Geopolitik.” Berlin: K. Vowinckel. Pages 23-4. Quoted in Holger, H. Herwig. 1999. “Geopolitik: Haushofer, Hitler and Lebensraum.” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*. Vol. 22, No. 2-3. Page 219.

53 Holger, H. Herwig. 1999. “Geopolitik: Haushofer, Hitler and Lebensraum.” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*. Vol. 22, No. 2-3. Page 220.

54 Ibid.

55 Gearóid, Ó Tuathail. 2021. “Reflection on Criticisms of Critical Geopolitics.” *Geopolítica(s) Revista de Estudios Sobre Espacio y Poder*. Vol. 12, No. 2. Page 6.

“the impact upon foreign and strategic policies of certain geographical features – location, position, resources, topography, and the like.”⁵⁶ The geographical position is seen as the main determinant of the role and future of the nation-state with not much possibility for a change of the status quo. Gearóid Ó Tuathail describes geopolitics as a “problem-solving theory for the conceptualization and practice of statecraft.”⁵⁷ However, Ó Tuathail and Dalby are frustrated by the widespread acceptance of the classical geopolitical thought as a mere truth and reality, they say: “rather than accepting geopolitics as a neutral and objective practice of surveying global space – the conventional Cold War understanding of the concept – we begin from the premise that geopolitics is itself a form of geography and politics, that it has a contextuality, and that it is implicated in the ongoing social reproduction of power and political economy.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, classical geopolitics is seen to be imperialistic and great power centric. This is exactly what Gerard Toal criticizes: “Geopolitical explanatory stories ... tend to be great power-centric stories that privilege its decision-making centers over all other sites. There is a tacit presumption of control, coherence, and command.”⁵⁹ This argument is especially significant for analyzing the geopolitical situation around smaller states as the substantial part of classical geopolitics often centralizes on the actions of the bigger players involved in the conflict while overlooking the role of the smaller states. Nevertheless, the inner geopolitics of smaller states are equally important and can provide essential explanations for the progression of the events and the reasons for the escalation of the conflict. The thinkers of critical geopolitics also closely associate classical geopolitics with

56 Phil, Kelly. 2006. “A Critique of Critical Geopolitics.” *Geopolitics*. Vol. 11, No. 1. Page 26.

57 Gearóid, Ó Tuathail. 1999. “Understanding Critical Geopolitics: Geopolitics and Risk Society.” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*. Vol. 22 No. 2-3. Page 107.

58 Simon, Dalby, Gearóid, Ó Tuathail. 1998. “Rethinking Geopolitics.” Taylor & Francis Group. Page 2.

59 Gerard, Toal. 2017. “Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus.” Oxford University Press. Page 26.

political realism as the core principles of both theories describe states as fearful and extremely rationalistic without taking into account emotions, outside influence, etc.⁶⁰

As there is no one all-encompassing definition for critical geopolitics, a more generalized explanation of the concept has been established. The latter criticizes the ‘self-evident’ character of classical geopolitics, or at least how it is portrayed as self-evident by the academia. Through that criticism, the thinkers of critical geopolitics attempt to find characteristics that are at the foundation of geopolitics, however, are left out from the classical storyline. Elements considered in critical geopolitics can vary from the local culture to the power of official speeches to the creation of certain narratives by the media. Ó Tuathail and Dalby also suggest that cultural myths, imaginations, and national lore are equally important to consider when analyzing states’ geopolitical imaginations.⁶¹ The followers of critical geopolitics do not reject the importance of geography and location, however, they believe that geography should not be the mere factor when analyzing geopolitics and foreign affairs. Additionally, they believe that with the end of the Cold War era the realities of the world order have changed, therefore, theories of classical geopolitics do not reflect the new world realities.⁶²

To some extent, it is rather hard to make sense of what exactly the scholars of critical geopolitics argue as the works in this field cover a wide variety of topics, research methods and approaches. Almost no one gives a detailed definition of the concept and leaves the exact nature of the theory to their readers’ interpretation.⁶³ However, Dalby and Ó Tuathail present several distinct arguments that critical geopolitics is motivated by – when brought together, these arguments clearly showcase the main differences between the theories of classical and

60 Ibid. Pages 31-33.

61 Simon, Dalby, Gearóid, Ó Tuathail. 1998. “Rethinking Geopolitics.” Taylor & Francis Group. Page 3.

62 Ibid. Page 2.

63 I came to this conclusion during my research as it was extremely hard/close to impossible to find an exact definition of critical geopolitics which I could have in mind when researching and analyzing my case study.

critical geopolitics. At first, the authors argue that the “critical study of geopolitics must be grounded in the particular cultural mythologies of the state,”⁶⁴ therefore understanding the state’s culture, history, background, ingrained beliefs and traditions, and national identity are critical for analyzing the motives and actions of the state leaders and its inhabitants.

Interestingly, some of those elements transfer from generation to generation without any changes, while others progress and change over time. Therefore, this geographical space is not a constant, it is ever-evolving and these cultural changes affect the geopolitical realities that states operate in.

The second unique character of critical geopolitics is its interest in state borders but not in the traditional sense: “Critical geopolitics is not about ‘the outside’ of the state but about the very construction of boundaries of ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ ‘here’ and ‘there,’ the ‘domestic’ and the ‘foreign’.”⁶⁵ This action of boundary-drawing is one of the primary analytical interests of critical geopolitics as countries draw lines based on culture, history, beliefs and other unmeasurable elements that are merely understandable to the insiders of the culture. These borders, which are not physical and cannot be seen on a map, allow citizens of the nation-states to make sense of the outside world by contrasting what is outside with what is inside the state borders. The third characteristic argues that geopolitics is not a singularity but a plurality, meaning that it is not simply reserved for the heads of the states – it is a “broad social and cultural phenomenon.”⁶⁶ Critical geopolitics does not reject the decision-making powers that the heads of states possess, however, so-called ‘popular geopolitics’ is also considered which is found in pop culture, movies, magazines and other formats that are accessible to the general public.

64 Simon, Dalby, Gearóid, Ó Tuathail. 1998. “Rethinking Geopolitics.” Taylor & Francis Group. Page 3.

65 Ibid. Page 4.

66 Ibid.

The last two considerations are rather self-explanatory – authors argue that the practice of studying geopolitics cannot be politically neutral as neutrality is almost absent from the realm of geopolitics, thus nothing can be seen as a mere truth and reality.⁶⁷

Furthermore, Ó Tuathail and Agnew argue that geopolitical writing has always been “highly ideological and deeply politicized”⁶⁸ which is one of the changes that the field of critical geopolitics is attempting to achieve. Last but not least, critical geopolitics attempts to locate the wider use and developments of the knowledge that geopolitics provides.⁶⁹

Geopolitical culture is another significant and interesting concept in critical geopolitics that has been already lightly touched upon. Scholars of critical geopolitics believe that the area of geopolitical culture is one of the first concepts that has to be researched and understood in order to evaluate the state’s geopolitical actions. One of the commonly cited ‘definitions’ of geopolitical culture is by Gerard Toal who proposes that “a geopolitical culture is, first and foremost, about the identity of a territorial entity and the locational narrative it presents to itself and the world.... A geopolitical culture, in other words, is made up of a series of geographical imaginations about self and other in the world.”⁷⁰ Geopolitical culture determines who are seen as the friends and who are the enemies of the state, how far is the state ready to go to preserve its land and identity, and what are the imaginaries of the citizens of a particular nation-state about their role in the world. As Toal puts it: “Geopolitical cultures formulate answers to three fundamental questions facing all territorial states: who are we, how do we survive, and how do we prosper?”⁷¹

67 Ibid. Pages 5-6.

68 Gearóid, Ó Tuathail, John, Agnew. 1992. “Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy.” *Political Geography*. Vol. 11, No. 2. Page 192.

69 Ibid. Page 6.

70 Gerard, Toal. 2017. “Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus.” Oxford University Press. Page 39.

71 Ibid.

Dalby and Ó Tuathail use a more structured approach in order to explain the elements from which the geopolitical culture consists of. They divide geopolitics into 3 distinct categories – formal geopolitics, practical geopolitics and popular geopolitics.⁷² Formal geopolitics considers how strategic institutions, think tanks and academia participate in policy advocacy and creation.⁷³ Political institutions, bureaucracy and foreign policy fall under the realm of practical geopolitics which is the more traditional governmental sphere of influence and mass media, movies, cinema, novels, etc. that are part of the popular geopolitics.⁷⁴ All of these respective forms of geopolitics are produced and consumed by different actors which further supports the argument of critical geopolitics scholars that everyone is involved in geopolitics to a certain extent regardless of one's occupation and societal standing. Similarly, everyone is involved in the creation of geopolitical culture: "these cultures are formed not only by the institutions of a state, its historical experiences and geographical embeddedness, but also by networks of power within society, debates over national identity, prevailing geopolitical imaginations, codified geopolitical traditions and the institutional processes by which foreign policy is made in the state."⁷⁵ Geopolitical culture allows the nation-state, its residents and government to make sense of their role and standing in the world. All the states regardless of their size and location have geopolitical culture.

As any other theory, critical geopolitics as well faced its fair share of backlash from more traditional scholars and thinkers. Some argue that critical geopolitics, instead of widening the scope of geopolitics, limits its possible wider application.⁷⁶ Others believe that

72 Simon, Dalby, Gearóid, Ó Tuathail. 1998. "Rethinking Geopolitics." Taylor & Francis Group. Page 5, Figure 0.1.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 John, O'Loughlin, Gearóid, Ó Tuathail, Vladimir, Kolossov. 2005. "Russian Geopolitical Culture and Public Opinion: The Masks of Proteus Revisited." Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers. Vol. 30, No. 3. Page 324.

76 Terrence, W. Haverluk, Kevin, M. Beauchemin, Brandon. A. Mueller. 2014. "The Three Critical Flaws of Critical Geopolitics: Towards a Neo-Classical Geopolitics." Geopolitics. Vol. 19 No. 1. Pages 19-39.

it is an anti-Western ideology that is hypocritical and contrary to common sense.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, critical geopolitics is one of the most prevalent schools of thought within the Western theories of political geography and, despite its limitations and certain unclarities, it is a great alternative to other theoretical frameworks. Particularly, looking at the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict through the lens of critical geopolitics would allow one to finally concentrate on those two states with their own histories and imaginaries rather than just seeing them as puppets in the hands of larger powers.

⁷⁷ Gearóid, Ó Tuathail. 2021. "Reflection on Criticisms of Critical Geopolitics." *Geopolítica(s) Revista de Estudios Sobre Espacio y Poder*. Vol. 12, No. 2. Pages 7-8.

History of Nagorno Karabakh/Artsakh

For the majority of the world's population, the name Artsakh Republic or Nagorno Karabakh⁷⁸ does not evoke the recognition of a distinct geographic area. When asking Europeans if they know of any wars in Europe or in close proximity to it that took place within the last 3 years, most of them are not able to mention much other than the current war in Ukraine. My personal stories of my family trips to Artsakh for the summer holidays seem unclear to others as they have no understanding of the location of it -- they often assume that my stories are related to a small town somewhere in Eastern Europe. For such unknown territory, Artsakh has an extremely bloody history -- while there is not an exact number, it is estimated that the First Nagorno Karabakh War claimed more than 30.000⁷⁹ lives of servicemen and civilians both from the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides, while the death toll of the second war reaches 7.000^{80,81}.

Ishaan Tharoor, a columnist in The Washington Post, called the situation surrounding Artsakh "one of the world's most intractable conflicts".⁸² For years it has been considered a frozen conflict -- small clashes were part of the everyday reality of servicemen and civilians that lived on the line of contact between Artsakh and Azerbaijan, however, the large-scale war of 2020 made this conflict as hot as it can get.

78 The proper Armenian name of this territory is the Republic of Artsakh, however, internationally, it is better known as Nagorno Karabakh which is the Azerbaijani name of this area. While in the past I myself used to call this area Karabakh, after the 2020 war, for personal reasons, I prefer to use the Armenian name of it. This dissertation will also talk about the implications and meaning behind calling locations with certain names and having that knowledge in mind I will use the term Artsakh or Artsakh Republic in this dissertation.

79 Mansur, Mirovalev. "Here's Why a 'Frozen' Conflict Between Armenia and Azerbaijan Has Gotten Hot." Los Angeles Times. April 19, 2016. <https://www.latimes.com/>.

80 Radar Armenia. "3822 People Were Killed in the War, the Whereabouts of 187 Servicemen and 21 Civilians are Unknown." March 21, 2022. <https://radar.am/>.

81 AzVision. "The Search for Servicemen Missing in the War Continues." January 21, 2022. <https://azvision.az/>.

82 Ishaan, Tharoor. "The Crisis Over Nagorno-Karabakh, Explained." The Washington Post. April 5, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

The history of Artsakh is long and perplexing with the involvement of multiple actors. Therefore, clear transparency and warning are needed before beginning to uncover its history -- there is no one storyline that all the members of the conflict would sign under. Disagreements surround even very major and, from a first glance, 'set in stone' events. This is a common occurrence in the Caucasus region -- states tend to disagree on the events that occurred or at least portray the same event in a different light depending on who is creating the storyline.

Similar to Armenia, the area of Karabakh went through various rulers and belongings, however, during the early nineteenth century, prior to the Russian Empire's annexation of the area, it was semi-independently governed by Armenians.⁸³ Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that the Karabakh issue dates back to the early 1900s -- the collapse of the Russian Empire and the creation of nation-states in the South Caucasus. On 26 May 1918, Georgia declared independence, followed by Armenia and Azerbaijan on 28 May. Soon after the Bolsheviks came to power, from 1918 until 1920, the Karabakh Council was created which, to some extent, allowed Nagorno Karabakh to have a relatively independent status. Another active actor during this period was Britain which both did not allow Armenia to annex back the region and heavily pressured the Karabakh Council to accept a status as part of Azerbaijan, an attempt that was generally unsuccessful.⁸⁴ Multiple heavy clashes took place between the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh and the Azerbaijani army as the British and Azeris tried to subordinate Karabakh Council by force. In March 1920, Azerbaijani forces burnt down the Armenian quarters of Shushi (or Shusha which is the Azerbaijani name of the city) and massacred its population. Developments of this period clearly showcase the

83 Ronald Grigor, Suny. 1992. "Nationalism and Democracy in Gorbachev's Soviet Union: The Case of Karabagh." *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Vol. 28, No. 4. Page 483.

84 Ibid.

longevity of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and give a better understanding of the historical importance of Artsakh for both the Armenians and Azeris.

The event that is commonly seen as the beginning of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict took place in 1921 when on July 5, during the Russian Communist Party's Central Committee's meeting, which was also attended by Joseph Stalin, a decision was made to include Nagorno Karabakh oblast in the Azerbaijani SSR: "...proceeding from the necessity of establishing peace between Muslims and Armenians, the economic ties between Lower and Upper Karabakh, and the permanent ties of Nagorno Karabakh with Azerbaijan, leave Nagorno Karabakh in the Azerbaijan SSR, granting it wide regional autonomy, with the administrative centre of Shushi included in the autonomous region."⁸⁵ This was an abrupt change in the situation, as only a day prior, on July 4, the same committee decided to include Nagorno Karabakh in the Armenian SSR. This one decision resulted in decades of fighting and unrest between the Armenians and Azeris.

After the inclusion of Nagorno Karabakh within the Azerbaijani SSR, Armenian and Azerbaijani sources once again get divided in their historic accounts and give a rather different imaginary of the lives of Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh under Azerbaijani control. Nevertheless, ethnic conflicts and ongoing clashes were always present between the Armenians and Azeris both in Nagorno Karabakh and outside of its borders.

In 1987 about 74 percent of the population of Nagorno Karabakh was ethnically Armenian,⁸⁶ in 1959 that number was 84.4 percent.⁸⁷ Despite being inhabited by a majority of the ethnically Armenian population, the Nagorno Karabakh autonomous province (oblast)

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Erik, Melander. 2011. "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited: Was the War Inevitable?" *Journal of Cold War Studies*. Vol. 3, No. 2. Page 50.

⁸⁷ Ronald Grigor, Suny. 1992. "Nationalism and Democracy in Gorbachev's Soviet Union: The Case of Karabagh." *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Vol. 28, No. 4. Page 484.

continued to remain as part of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. The decrease in population was due to the discontent among Armenians of Karabakh with the Azerbaijani rule and how the Azerbaijani government was underfunding the region.⁸⁸ The Azerbaijani and pro-Azerbaijani sources emphasize the fact that compared to other mountainous regions of the Soviet Union, as well as to Azerbaijan itself, the living standard of the Nagorno Karabakh autonomous province was relatively high.⁸⁹⁹⁰ The focus of Armenian and pro-Armenian sources is the discrimination, neglect and prosecution that Armenians faced under the Azerbaijani rule at this time period.⁹¹ As resentment towards the Azerbaijani rule grew stronger in Nagorno Karabakh, nationalist movements started to form both in Nagorno Karabakh as well as in Armenia with a primary objective of reunification with Armenia.

On the territory of Nagorno Karabakh, the traditional Communist nomenklatura was at the forefront of this nationalistic uproar, while on the territory of Armenia, the newly formed 'Karabakh Committee' movement was the bearer of the Karabakh's future. The members of the 'Karabakh Committee' were also big opponents of the Communist regime.⁹² Azerbaijan of course was not willing to give up any of the Karabakh's territory, therefore, a conflict seemed unavoidable. The third side of the conflict, the Soviet leadership, while generally more inclined toward the Azerbaijani side, was not willing to use any force to silence the emerging movements in Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh as Gorbachev was worried that this might stall the development of his reform programs.⁹³ Ironically, those programs themselves get often quoted as the catalyst of the movements that arose in Armenia

88 Ibid.

89 Shamkhal, Abilov, Ismayil, Isayev. 2016. "The Consequences of the Nagorno-Karabakh War for Azerbaijan and the Undeniable Reality of Khojaly Massacre." Polish Political Science Yearbook. Vol. 45, No. 1. Page 292.

90 Anatoly, Yamskov. 1991. "Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh." Theory and Society. Vol. 20, No. 5. Page 640.

91 Erik, Melander. 2011. "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited: Was the War Inevitable?" Journal of Cold War Studies. Vol. 3, No. 2. Page 51.

92 Ibid. Page 52.

93 Ibid. Page 53.

and Artsakh due to the more relaxed atmosphere and relative freedom of speech. Meanwhile, clashes between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis became more frequent, especially after January 1988 when tens of thousands of Armenians signed and sent a petition to Moscow calling for a referendum to be held in Nagorno Karabakh regarding the future of the region.⁹⁴ The first major demonstration took place on 13 February 1988 in Stepanakert, after which, only 5 days later, protests erupted in Armenia as well -- sources suggest that some of the protests were attended by as many as one million Armenians.⁹⁵

Two tragic events that cannot be left out when discussing the First Nagorno Karabakh war are the Sumgait programs (massacre) of 1988 and the Khojaly massacre of 1992. The Sumgait programs were carried out by Azerbaijani forces and civilians in the town of Sumgait⁹⁶ for 3 consecutive days without much effort from the Azerbaijani government to stop it. At least several dozen Armenians were tortured, raped and murdered.⁹⁷ The Khojaly massacre, which was one of the defining moments of the First Nagorno Karabakh war, took place in the town of Khojaly. It was an Azerbaijani town prior to its capture by the ethnically Armenian forces during the Karabakh war. On February 26, during the capture of the city, as well as during the evacuation attempt of the Azerbaijani civilians, hundreds of Azerbaijani servicemen and civilians were killed by the Armenian forces.⁹⁸ This major moment of the Karabakh war raised many speculations and conspiracy theories as some sources claim that Armenian servicemen did not kill the fleeing Azerbaijani civilians but rather Azerbaijani

94 Ronald Grigor, Suny. 1992. "Nationalism and Democracy in Gorbachev's Soviet Union: The Case of Karabagh." *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Vol. 28, No. 4. Page 487.

95 Ibid.

96 The town is located in Azerbaijan, about 26 kilometers North of the capital Baku. Prior to the escalation of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan which led to the First Nagorno Karabakh war, about 500.000 Armenians lived in the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan.

97 Against Xenophobia and Violence, NGO. 2012. "The Sumgait Syndrome. Anatomy of Racism in Azerbaijan." "MIA" Publishers.

98 Abilov, Shamkhal, Isayev, Ismayil. 2016. "The Consequences of the Nagorno-Karabakh War for Azerbaijan and the Undeniable Reality of Khojaly Massacre." *Polish Political Science Yearbook*. Vol. 45, No. 1. Page 297.

servicemen themselves did it.⁹⁹¹⁰⁰ These kinds of narrative creations are not unusual for the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Many events of this conflict are surrounded by layers of speculations and, at times, misinformation. Both sides of the conflict have their own narratives regarding the events that took place and at times these narratives are the exact opposites of one another. These narratives are conveyed to the masses by the highest levels of governance and play a huge role in the perception of not only the history but also the current state of affairs of the region.

After the first wave of protests, while smaller in scale, the protests continued both in Artsakh and Armenia in line with ongoing attempts by the Armenian government to find a legal ground for the reunification of Artsakh and Armenia. In July of 1988, demonstrators once again took it to the streets, blocked the airport and organized marches in Yerevan, Armenia as they believed that the Armenian government is not doing enough for solving the Karabakh issue. Masses became uncontrollable and nothing could stop them anymore. This level of revolt was also provoked by Soviet Russia's government's unwillingness to side with Armenia on this question and make any concession on the Karabakh issue. In the fall of 1988 large-scale protests also started to emerge in Azerbaijan, which further escalated the tensions between the two countries and further reinforced the national divide between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. There was no possibility of a return to the state of affairs that was in place prior to the late 1980-s developments as citizens of both Armenia and Azerbaijan were unhappy with the 'inaction' of their respective governments regarding the Karabakh issue.¹⁰¹

On 10 December 1991, a referendum took place in Artsakh. The question on the ballot was: "Do you accept that the proclaimed Nagorno Karabakh Republic be a sovereign

99 Ibid.

100 Joshua, Kucera. "Armenian and Azerbaijani Leaders Embrace Denialism." Eurasianet. 22 November 2019. <https://eurasianet.org/>.

101 Ronald Grigor, Suny. 1992. "Nationalism and Democracy in Gorbachev's Soviet Union: The Case of Karabagh." Michigan Quarterly Review. Vol. 28, No. 4. Pages 500-502.

state independently determining forms of cooperation with other states and communities?”¹⁰² 108.736 people out of 132.328 eligible voters participated in the referendum out of which 108.615 people voted ‘in favor’ which makes it 99.89 percent of the votes.¹⁰³ The Azerbaijani population of Artsakh refused to participate in the referendum and instead engaged in violence toward the Armenian population. On the day of the referendum, 10 ethnically Armenian civilians were killed and 11 were wounded.¹⁰⁴ This referendum never carried any political importance or got accounted for anything.

In April-August 1991, the Azerbaijani government with the help of the Soviet forces began the ‘Koltso’ operation which was a forceful deportation program of ethnically Armenian citizens from various villages and towns of Nagorno Karabakh. This and many other factors resulted in the eruption of the first Nagorno Karabakh war which started in 1991 and ended with the signing of the Bishkek Protocol on 12 May 1994 that ended the active fighting. Armenia took control over the entirety of the territory of Artsakh as well as captured 7 adjacent Azerbaijani regions. Those regions were meant to be a buffer zone between Armenia and Azerbaijan. After this war, Armenia and Artsakh became connected with a huge border rather than with a small corridor. Nevertheless, even after the First Nagorno Karabakh war, the status of Karabakh did not change and, legally, it remained as a part of Azerbaijan, despite having its own government and constitution. A status quo was established which lasted for almost 2 decades.

As expected, besides Armenia and Azerbaijan, other major powers are involved in this conflict as well, namely Russia and Turkey. NATO-member Turkey is the biggest ally and supporter of Azerbaijan. In 1991, Turkey was the first country to recognize the

102 Artsakh Republic’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Karabakh in 1988: The beginning of the modern stage of national-liberation struggle” <http://www.nkr.am/>.

103 Ibid.

104 Artsakh Republic’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “The Referendum on Independence of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic” <http://www.nkr.am/>.

independence of Azerbaijan and its former President Heydar Aliyev described the two as "one nation with two states".¹⁰⁵ In 1993, in solidarity with Azerbaijan, Turkey closed its borders with Armenia followed by an economic blockade, which was supposed to push Armenia towards making concessions on Nagorno Karabakh.¹⁰⁶ Armenia and Turkey have a very complicated history due to the repression of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire and the Armenian genocide. The Nagorno Karabakh war and broken relations with Azerbaijan were the last straw in relations with Turkey.

Russia, on the other hand, is the main ally of Armenia. The two countries historically had very close relations and, nowadays, Russia is the biggest security and economic partner of Armenia. In 1995, after the end of the First Nagorno Karabakh war, a military agreement ratified the deployment of a Russian military base in Gyumri, Armenia for 25 years.¹⁰⁷ In 2010, a renewed agreement extended Russia's lease of the base until 2044.¹⁰⁸ In 2015, the two countries created an integrated air-defense system as well as a Joint Group of Forces which was launched in 2016.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, Armenia is in a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) which is a military alliance between Armenia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. However, Russia also has rather good relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, as far as selling arms to Azerbaijan, which at times leaves Armenia in unease. Another player that is involved in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group which is chaired by France, Russia and the United States. The organization was involved in peace creation between

105 BBC. "Armenia-Azerbaijan: Why did Nagorno-Karabakh spark a conflict?" November 12, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/>.

106 Anahit, Shirinyan. 2019. "Armenia's Foreign Policy Balancing in an Age of Uncertainty." Chatham House. Page 6.

107 Ibid. Page 7

108 Arshaluys, Mgdesyan. 2014. "Russia-Armenia-Azerbaijan: Arms Balance in the Face of Political Imbalance." [Россия - Армения - Азербайджан: оружейный баланс в условиях политического дисбаланса.] July 15, 2014. <https://regnum.ru/>.

109 Anahit, Shirinyan. 2019. "Armenia's Foreign Policy Balancing in an Age of Uncertainty." Chatham House. Page 10.

Armenia and Azerbaijan since 1992. However, for the majority of the time, Russia is the main actor that is involved in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. The OSCE Minsk Group has been rather unsuccessful in its attempts to establish peace between the two countries and has mostly lost its legitimacy.

After the First Nagorno Karabakh war, multiple attempts have been made by Russia and the OSCE Minsk Group to negotiate a peace deal with Armenia and Azerbaijan, however, those attempts have been unsuccessful. The best known and most spoken about agreement was the 2007 Madrid Principles which is based on the Helsinki Final Act principles of “Non-Use of Force, Territorial Integrity, and the Equal Rights and Self-Determination of Peoples.”¹¹⁰ Any mention of this agreement has always caused an uproar in Armenia as according to it Armenia would have to return the 7 Azerbaijani regions to Azerbaijan and stay connected to Artsakh only by a small road. Ironically, 13 years later Armenia had to do exactly this but at this time after a devastating loss in the Second Nagorno Karabakh war.

One more episode of war that has to be mentioned is the 2016 4-day April war. After more than 2 decades of relative calmness, a 4-day war broke out between the Artsakh and Azerbaijan on April 2, 2016. Both sides blamed one another for starting the military actions and officially breaking the 1994 peace agreement.¹¹¹ None of the sides presented an official death toll, however, it is generally believed that about 200-300 Armenian and Azerbaijani servicemen died during the April clashes.¹¹²¹¹³ The war ended as unexpectedly as it started -- Russian news agencies simply announced that the war was over after which Russian

110 Emma, Klever. 2013. “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Between Armenia and Azerbaijan: An Overview of the Current Situation.” European Movement International. Page 5.

111 Bradley, Jardine. “Armenians and Azerbaijanis Commemorate Two Years Since Breakout of April War.” Eurasianet. April 2, 2018. <https://eurasianet.org/>.

112 Asbarez. “165 Armenian Servicemen Died in 2016.” January 12, 2017. <https://asbarez.com/>.

113 Aleksandra, Jarosiewicz, Maciej, Falkowski. 2016. “The four-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh.” OSW Centre for Eastern Studies. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/>.

President Vladimir Putin held phone conversations with the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents.¹¹⁴ No major geographical changes happened as a result of these clashes and soon enough the situation went back to the status quo.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Geopolitical Culture and Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

Thomas de Waal, British journalist and writer on the Caucasus, known best for his book *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* stated: “Along with Kashmir’s Line of Control, North Korea and Nagorno Karabakh surely comprise the three most militarized borders in the world. All of them are disputed lines on the map that mark a truce rather than a political settlement.”¹¹⁵ For over 2 decades after the first Nagorno Karabakh war, the people of Artsakh lived and created on a land that has never, according to international law, belonged to them. The feeling of uncertainty has always been one of the most prevalent feelings that one catches during a short banter with residents of Artsakh. The beginning of the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war was as unexpected as it was expected.

On September 27, 2020 people both in Armenia and Azerbaijan woke up to the news that early in the morning a large-scale military operation began on the Artsakh-Azerbaijan line of contact. Both sides were quick to mutually blame each other for the outbreak of the war. Soon enough military mobilization began in Armenia, Artsakh and Azerbaijan and for 44 days chaos has been unleashed in the Caucasus region. Even 2 years after the war many unanswered questions remain in place regarding the course and outcome of the war, however, that is not relevant to this paper. During the 44 days of the war, 3 attempts of signing a peace agreement were made by Russia, France and the United States until on November 9 a Russia-sponsored peace agreement was signed. The outcome of the war has been devastating for Armenians -- Armenia had to return to Azerbaijan all 7 Azerbaijani regions that surround Nagorno Karabakh which leaves Lachin Corridor as the only connecting route between Armenia and Artsakh.¹¹⁶ Including the 7 regions, Armenia lost about 75 percent of what has

115 Thomas, de Waal. 2013. “The Two NKs.” Carnegie Moscow Center. <https://carnegie.ru/>.

116 Kremlin. “Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation.” November 10, 2020. <http://en.kremlin.ru/>.

been considered Artsakh after the 1994 ceasefire.¹¹⁷ Russian peacekeepers were deployed and the only road that connects Artsakh and Armenia is under their supervision.¹¹⁸ This has been a reality that was extremely hard for any Armenian to grapple with.

Dalby and Ó Tuathail write: “there is no geopolitics that is ever ‘simply Geopolitical.’ Geopolitics is already about more boundaries than those on a map, for those boundaries are themselves implicated in conceptual boundary drawing practices of various kinds.”¹¹⁹ This statement explains the core of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict -- the issue of Nagorno Karabakh is a boundary that both Armenia and Azerbaijan drew a line under. Both the states do not imagine giving up this small mountainous region, that is a boundary that can not be crossed. However, the question remains -- why is this THE boundary?

Rudolf Kjellen, in his reading of classical geopolitics, suggests that the state and its citizens bear the human loss lighter than the loss of land.¹²⁰ The thinkers of classical geopolitics place a huge emphasis on the human connection with the land and the importance that it possesses. This can be an explanation as to why both the Armenian and Azerbaijani people have such a strong connection to Nagorno Karabakh. However, critical geopolitics will suggest that this connection is to some extent created through various sources -- ranging from the government to pop culture. What are those imaginaries that Armenian and Azerbaijani people consume which make them so attached to both the physical space of Artsakh as well as to the idea of it?

117 Lusine, Budaghyan. “‘We have lost 75% of our territory, but the expenses of the president and government staff have not changed.’ Artsakh ARF MP Arthur Mosiyan.” Aravot. February 11, 2021. <https://www.aravot.am/>.

118 Kremlin. “Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation.” November 10, 2020. <http://en.kremlin.ru/>.

119 Simon, Dalby, Gearóid, Ó Tuathail. 1998. “Rethinking Geopolitics.” Taylor & Francis Group. Page 4.

120 Rudolf, Kjellen. 1916. “Staten som Lifsform.” Hugo Grebers Forlag. Stockholm. Page 47. Quoted in Christian, Abrahamsson. 2013. “On the genealogy of Lebensraum.” *Geographica Helvetica*. Vol. 68. Page 41.

As it has been demonstrated in an earlier chapter, Armenia and Armenians went through tumultuous times and due to the geographical location almost all those conflicts have been with what now is Turkey and Azerbaijan. Ronald Suny says: “Besides the memory of genocide, they remember the clashes with Azerbaijanis in 1905, the massacre of 20.000 Baku Armenians in September 1918 by Azerbaijanis, and the perennial grievances over Karabakh.”¹²¹ Armenia’s history is full of pain, however, what that pain created is a heightened sense of national identity and nationalism.¹²²¹²³ This is further reinforced by the state and cultural narrative that one has to be proud of being an Armenian. Armenian folklore songs are war songs that either grieve the loss of a loved one or serve as a hymn for the servicemen that are on a battlefield. On the contrary, Azerbaijan, as a country that was formed during the Soviet time, had a hard time finding its own national identity as the Soviet leadership was strictly punishing any of those attempts.¹²⁴ Azerbaijanis trace their roots to the aboriginal Caucasian Albanians and the Turks, some trace it to the 10th century while others to the 17th-19th centuries.¹²⁵ Due to this, some of the popular Armenian narratives refuse to accept Azerbaijanis as a distinct ethnic group.¹²⁶ It is often emphasized in Armenia that prior to 1918, a country under the name of Azerbaijan has never existed. By emphasizing this fact, Armenians attempt to prove the Armenian nature and identity of Artsakh, as it dates further back in history than the Republic of Azerbaijan does. However, another narrative is prevalent in Azerbaijan: “[Nagorno Karabakh] is remembered as the birthplace of Azerbaijani identity, the center of Azerbaijani culture and the home to many Azerbaijani poets and musicians. The

121 Ronald Grigor, Suny. 1992. “Nationalism and Democracy in Gorbachev's Soviet Union: The Case of Karabagh.” *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Vol. 28, No. 4. Page 490.

122 Peter, Rutland. 1994. “Democracy and Nationalism in Armenia.” *Europe-Asia Studies*. Vol. 46, No. 5 Pages 839.

123 Murad, Muradov. “The Long-Term Threat of Armenian Nationalism.” *Modern Diplomacy*. August 4, 2020. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/>.

124 Behlül, Özkan. 2008. “Who Gains from the “No War No Peace” Situation? A Critical Analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict.” *Geopolitics*. Vol. 13, No. 3. Pages 587-589.

125 Philip, Gamaghelyan. 2010. “Rethinking the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Identity, Politics, Scholarship.” University of San Diego. Page 9.

126 Ibid. Page 8.

loss of Nagorno-Karabakh equated to the loss of a big part of national identity.”¹²⁷ Armenians on the other hand argue that Artsakh has always been autonomous or independent regardless of the status of the rest of Armenia, therefore, seeing the fall of Artsakh is unbearable for Armenians.¹²⁸ Similar to Azerbaijanis, the historic connection to Artsakh is part of a national identity for Armenians.

Through these contradictory historical accounts of the two countries, one can gain a better understanding of how different the known realities of Armenians and Azerbaijanis are. They both believe that they rightfully ‘own’ the land of their ancestors and that the enemy is trying to take part of their country’s identity. This once again is usually reinforced by the government, nationalist political parties, local nationalist think tanks, movies and books. Here one can fully observe the whole scale of the geopolitical culture that Dalby and Ó Tuathail present.

One of the statements that is quoted as one of the catalysts of the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war was when Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in 2019 in Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno Karabakh, announced: “Artsakh is Armenia and that is it.”¹²⁹ This is an example of how on the highest levels of governance, the country leaders convey certain ideas that become closely interconnected with people’s geopolitical imaginaries. It can be as straightforward as this example with Pashinyan or it can be done more subtly. Gerard Toal starts his book “Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus” with a ‘Note on Place Names’ where he explains the significance of geographic names: “names are often chosen to signify ownership of a territory or place, symbolically marking the political and cultural dominance of one group, and one geopolitical relationship,

127 Ibid. Page 10.

128 Ibid. Page 9.

129 Civilnet. “Artsakh is Armenia and That is It” [Արցախը Հայաստան է և վերջ]. August 6, 2019. <https://www.civilnet.am/>.

over others.”¹³⁰ This is another aspect that is carefully examined and considered by the scholars of critical geopolitics. A development that one can not help but notice in the speeches of the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. Shortly after the end of the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war, he began to use the Azerbaijani names of the Armenian cities and regions, even the ones that are located in the Republic of Armenia. This change was followed by statements from the Azerbaijani government claiming ownership of Armenian cities and regions as far as stating that Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, is a historic Azerbaijani land.¹³¹¹³² This change in the language was immediately picked up by the Azerbaijani media and all of their newspapers made a switch to using the Azerbaijani names for Armenian cities and regions. Critical geopolitics would argue that these kinds of claims and changes have to be taken seriously and the repetition of those creates certain national beliefs and imaginaries that in the future can result in actions.

The process of othering is another important tactic that is used by the Azerbaijani government in conveying certain ideas and creating ideologies. This concept is not new -- it has been used by many --most famously, by Nazi Germany. What is interesting is that in line with presenting the Armenians as the others, the ones that are different and do not belong here, the Azerbaijani government also portrays the Azerbaijani people as the victims of the Armenian aggression.¹³³ A similar narrative can be observed in Armenia. Calling someone a Turk or Azeri is deemed to be an insult in Armenia while calling someone an Armenian is an insult in Azerbaijan.

130 Gerard, Toal. 2017. “Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus.” Oxford University Press. Page xvii.

131 News Am. “The Reaction of the Armenian Foreign Ministry to Aliyev's Statements that Yerevan and Syunik are Historical Territories of Azerbaijan” [Հայաստանի ԱԳՆ արձագանքը՝ Ալիևի Երևանը եւ Սյունիքը Ադրբեջանի պատմական տարածք լինելու մասին հայտարարություններին]. April 30, 2022. <https://news.am/>.

132 News Am. “Aliyev Made Territorial Claims to Armenia” [Ալիևը տարածքային պահանջներ է հնչեցրել Հայաստանի հանդեպ]. June 16, 2022. <https://news.am/>.

133 Ceylan, Tokluoglu. 2011. “The Political Discourse of the Azerbaijani Elite on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict (1991-2009).” *Europe-Asia Studies*. Vol. 63, No. 7. Page 1224.

The hatred towards the other nation is so deeply ingrained in the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies that most of the people simply cannot accept a different narrative. People who advocate for peace between the two nations are seen as traitors to the national interest. The best example of this is the current political situation in Armenia -- after the devastating loss in the war, the Armenian side had to go to many concessions. However, the Armenian Prime Minister is attempting to move forward with an agenda that supports diplomatic relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan and the end of the economic blockade of Armenia. However, this arguably ‘friendly’ attitude towards the ‘enemy’ countries became one of the biggest talking points for the Armenian opposition that for almost 2 months now demands the resignation of Pashinyan through daily protests and acts of disobedience.¹³⁴¹³⁵

This chapter attempted to showcase the deeply routed tensions that are present in the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies and why due to the geopolitical culture and prevalence of certain ideas, stories and narratives peace seems almost impossible between these two countries. Looking into this conflict through a critical geopolitics lens allows one to stray away from a burning urge to put all the responsibility for the Armenian-Azerbaijani crises on Russia and Turkey and explore how the internal processes of those countries allow this conflict to have a continuous nature.

134 Ani, Mejlumyan. “Armenian Police Arrest Hundreds as Protests Grow.” Eurasianet. May 2, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/>.

135 Ani, Mejlumyan. “Armenian Opposition Scales Back Protests but Promises to Impeach PM. ” Eurasianet. June 16, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/>.

Conclusion

Is peace possible between the countries that were enemies for years? This is a challenging question to answer but it becomes even more challenging when considering this question through the lens of critical geopolitics. Are the history, national memory, stories and anecdotes that travel from generation to generation powerful enough to harden certain feelings and emotions towards the other state to an extent that they cannot be changed? The example of the Armenia—Azerbaijan conflict, unfortunately, makes one believe that, yes, those ideals are extremely powerful.

Critical geopolitics is a school of thought that grants its scholars an opportunity to conduct a deep dive into the history and culture of a country in order to gain a clear understanding of the origins and possible outcomes of the conflict.

The answer to the initially proposed question for this dissertation is that the geopolitical culture in both Armenia and Azerbaijan exacerbates the crises between the two countries as deeply-rooted historical tensions reproduce themselves through various levels of geopolitics and only get stronger from generation to generation. This culture plays a gatekeeping role and does not accept a different narrative. Getting out of this continuous cycle is extremely hard to say at least. The ongoing and repeating clashes between the two countries further reinforce the ideals that geopolitical culture creates. In short, the history of those countries, imaginaries that the inhabitants of this space have and the cultural narratives that circulate from generation to generation keep this conflict alive.

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