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## [Review: The Making of Nagorno-Karabagh: ed. Levon Chorbajian](#)



The edited volume, [The Making of Nagorno-Karabagh: From Secession to Republic](#), represents the first sustained effort by Armenian academics to analyze the broad political implications of the war over **Nagorno-Karabakh** between 1988 and 1994 for an English-speaking audience. While the authors utilize diverse arguments and methodological approaches, the papers are unified in their challenge to the a priori legitimacy granted by most analyses of the conflict to ex ante territorial integrity as the only solution to this unresolved territorial conflict. That is, each author largely rejects the premise that returning Nagorno-Karabagh to formal Azerbaijani control is a sustainable means to achieving regional peace.

In terms of its presentation of an unbiased or even-handed account of Armenia's longstanding irredentist claims to the territory, Azerbaijan's treatment of its Armenian population, or of the behavior of both Armenian and Azerbaijani fighters during the war itself, the volume obviously falls short. This, however, is not the objective of the book nor should it necessarily be. Rather, argues Levon Chorbajian as the editor of the volume, the intent is to analyze the conflict employing a "different voice," one which seeks not the test the validity of Armenian claims but the origins and contexts within which they have developed, grown, and changed.

Given my own interest in the sources of domestic perceptions of territorial entitlement which structure international territorial conflict, this obvious lack of "objectivity" is of no important consequence. It is in fact significantly more instructive than those accounts which seek to problematize and delegitimize competing accounts. The former lends insight into the ways in which people actually conceive of their entitlement to territory while the latter often spends significant analytical energy attempting to disprove the bases of these collective understandings without similarly critically defending the legitimacy of status quo ante claims.

Recurrent themes throughout this volume include the inherent tension between principles of territorial integrity and self-determination in international practice and law, the historical roots of collective territorial entitlement, and the roles played by Armenian civil society and political elite in both Armenia and Karabakh itself in constructing the territory as a key rallying point of national identity, collective cohesion, and national security.

Chorbajian's introduction and Lalig Papazian's paper, "A People's Will: Armenian Irredentism over Nagorno Karabagh," highlight the importance of contemporary self-determination claims of Karabakh Armenians vis-a-vis Azerbaijan and the particular disjunction these claims represent against international norms of the preservation of territorial integrity (9-13, 54-58). Yet territorial division on the basis of preexisting administrative boundaries have actually become increasingly acceptable by international standards. Indeed the now-independent

republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan are a product of this shift, as are most post-Soviet states, the former Yugoslav republics, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Eritrea, and now Kosovo. Similar to these cases, the overwhelming majority of Karabakh's population is ethnic Armenian, the now de-facto republic was a constituent administrative unit of Azerbaijan, and the domestic desire for secession is seemingly universal.

They, along with Armen Aivazian in his piece, "Possible Solutions to the Nagorno-Karabagh Problem: A Strategic Perspective," also emphasize the geopolitical threat faced by Armenia surrounded by hostile Azerbaijan and Turkey lacking the strategic highlands of Karabakh (207-214). Both Papazian and Aivazian point to the recent historical disenfranchisement and repression faced by Karabakh Armenians as well as those elsewhere in the country under Azerbaijani rule, their desire for independence, and the continued military threat posed by Azerbaijan and Turkey as sufficient bases for self-determination. These perceptions of threat are significantly constituted, they argue along with Robert Krikorian in "The Anguish of Karabagh: Pages from the Diary of Aramais," by Armenians' collective invocation of the 1915-1918 Armenian Genocide perpetrated by Turkey. By contemporary international standards, one may argue that these factors alone should be enough to constitute a just claim to territorial self-determination.

Yet Chorbajian takes these territorial claims a step further in that he bases their legitimacy in the ancient historical record. Armenian residence and control of Nagorno-Karabakh dates back to at least the 4th century BCE, and this, he argues, significantly predates those of any claimed national ancestry of neighboring Azerbaijan (32-38). This emphasis on ancient history and the centrality of the territory of Karabakh itself to the Armenian national consciousness resonates through other pieces in this volume including Levon Abrahamian's "Civil Society Born in the Square: the Karabagh Movement in Perspective," and John Kasparian's "We Are Our Mountains: Nation as Nature in the Armenians Struggle for Self Determination."

Abrahamian emphasizes that modern Armenian civil society was born amidst the crumbling of the Soviet Empire and used the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh to mobilize mass support for causes more diverse than the independence of Karabakh itself. Yet the very framing of the struggle first against Soviet authorities, and then in the defining of the priorities of the independent state, he argues, were informed by broadly accepted narratives of national liberation dating back to the 18th century and even to medieval times against "Turkic Muslim invaders" (117). According to the author, it was this consciousness of history that helped select and empower the early leaders of independent Armenia including the first president, historian and philologist Levon Ter-Petrossian (121). This sensitivity to history, Abrahamian argues, also structured both Armenian and Karabakh Armenian political relationships with Moscow leading to Armenian resistance and Karabakh Armenian initial deference to Russian rule. Unfortunately he fails to substantively account for why this variation occurred.

Kasparian's piece focuses on how Karabakh Armenians themselves conceived of their own struggle against Azerbaijani control; tying their identity to that of the land itself. He argues that employing the ideology of human nature as isomorphic with physical nature allowed Karabakh Armenians to exert a "tremendous sense of strength and permanence amidst duress and rapid change" (138). By positing a "special human relationship with the environment," they sought to bolster the legitimacy of their claims and, in so doing, reclaim and repossess a history and territory long denied to them (140). While the analytical precision of this chapter is suspect with its evidence drawn primarily from the stories of three artists living in the territory, it does raise interesting questions about the nature of Armenian's connections to the land and the roots of irredentist claims to it.

Finally, Panossian's study, "The Diaspora and the Karabagh Movement: Oppositional Politics between the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the Armenian National Movement,"

examines the conflicting priorities of domestic and diaspora elite and their impact on modern Armenian political identity. Focusing on the the relationship between the ruling party of Armenia, the Armenian Nationalist Movement (ANM), and the most important diaspora party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), he shows how the ARF maintained a hard-line in its demands for genocide recognition and land claims while the ANM's focus was primarily on strengthening the new Armenian state and ensuring security for Nagorno-Karabakh (163). While the disjunction between the two raises important considerations regarding who defines the scope of the identity of the nation and, in turn, its policy objectives, the areas on which the two parties converge are of equal importance. The apparent inability or unwillingness of either to relinquish national claims in some form to Nagorno-Karabakh while diverging on other issues seemingly central to Armenian identity suggest the necessity of some substantive investigation of why this might be true. From data elsewhere in the volume, the strength of Armenian's historical ties to the territory and not simply its strategic importance to defense of the "homeland" seems to be an important aspect of any explanation.

That many of these authors feel a need to historicize and, in effect, naturalize Armenian claims to Nagorno-Karabakh despite the political sufficiency of conventional self-determination claims and threats to collective security speaks quite powerfully to the centrality of history in Armenian (or at least Armenian intellectual) conceptions of the appropriate territorial boundaries of their nation. Argues Richard Giragosian in his conclusion to the volume, strategies which marginalize Karabakh Armenians and ignore the substantive bases of Armenian claims to the territory have been tried and, to date, have failed. From a policy perspective it may be just as unacceptable to portray the resolution of conflict as contingent on Nagorno-Karabakh's recognition as politically independent from Azerbaijan as it is to deny the possibility of secession altogether. However to deny the importance of the historical narratives that in large part constitute this claim serves merely to encourage intransigence on the part of the leaderships of both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. For the international community to be an honest broker in this conflict, the authors in this volume implicitly insist, it must be open to these realities.

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