

Book Review*

Nagorno-Karabakh: History Read from Sources

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“Nagorno-Karabakh: History Read from Sources”, by Ramiz Mehdiyev, a well-known Azerbaijani scholar and active member of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, examines the roots of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The book provides an in-depth and thorough historical and political analysis of the evolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Readers are invited to consider the problematic discourse that has brought about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and key features of the history of the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories.

In his analysis of the etymology of Azerbaijani place names, the author notes: *the attempts of Soviet ideologists to reformat the past have not served as a warning example to Armenian scholars that cannot resist the charm of manipulations in their own history, much less in the history of other peoples* (p.36). It is hard to argue with that statement, as one of the main drivers of the tainted discourse that ultimately gave rise to the conflict was the attempt to shape history within the framework of Armenian propaganda. This has in turn led to the belief that the one and only truth belongs to the Armenian people. The book proves this belief to be false.

The author also accounts for Azerbaijan’s historical ties to ancient Caucasian Albania, showing the sources where these ties were strongest. He proves *that Armenians are practically the only people that are foreign to the anthropological type of the populations of the South Caucasus* (p.51). In conjunction with historical data on the origins of Armenians, this shows that Armenia’s historical claims to Karabakh are far from reality.

Following that line of argument, R. Mehdiyev turns to the mass migrations of Armenians to the South Caucasus. Those mass migrations caused the increase in the South Caucasus’ Armenian population, which later led to territorial claims. The author notes that *the process of appropriation of the foreign history that started more than two hundred years ago is continuing even today. Nowadays ancient Azerbaijani names on the occupied territories are substituted by the Armenian ones with astonishing speed* (p. 55). This type of appropriation is used to get rid of any reminder that Azerbaijanis lived there, and once more bend history to Armenian needs.

R. Mehdiyev also takes apart Armenian mythology about the Caucasian Albans. Despite attempts by Armenians to claim the name of Artsakh, the author clearly shows that the name of the

province belonged to the Caucasian Albans: *Caucasian Albans have populated the mountainous parts of Greater Caucasus, southern part of contemporary Dagestan as well as Caspian Sea shores and both sides of Kura river and had their own alphabet* (p.67). Many scholars confirm that the territory of today’s Azerbaijan largely overlaps that of ancient Caucasian Albania.

The author also reviews the historical sources on the historical period during which the term Artsakh was still in use. R. Mehdiyev comes to the conclusion that most of that history belongs to the Caucasian Albania and was forcefully “Armenianized”. *One of the Alban counties was Khachen, which included such a representative as Hasan Jalal who was able in a short time to unite many of the Alban counties and acquire the title of the King of Albania* (p.73). The unification of Caucasian Albania also saw the rise of its church, which Armenians later appropriated as their own.

The Armenianization of the Caucasian Albanian church is a separate section in the book. More to that is the fact that the relocation of the Armenian catholicos from Asia Minor to the Uch-Kilse (or Uch-muezzin, that later was armenianized as Etchmiadzin) constitute a special part of the study. As the author states, *soon the monastery in Uch-Kilse became a religious center for Armenians. Up until these territories went to Russia in the beginning of the XIX century, there were very few Armenians living outside Uch-Kilse* (p.80). This transfer paved the way for Armenians to enter to the South Caucasus, which led to the dire consequences later on.

R. Mehdiyev then turns to the expansion of the empires in the XVIII century and how that played out in relation to the Armenian factor. When searching for the possible ways to legitimize their expansions, empires turn to religious-ideological methods. The author suggests that *this factor was used by Peter the Great of Russia and later continued to be used by the Katherine II (1762-1796) in later Russian policies* (p.92). Especially under Peter the Great, the relocation of Christian populations to the Caspian coastline was part of Russian Imperial policy, supposed to allow Russians to consolidate their newly conquered positions on the Caspian.

The author establishes the geopolitical paradigm that even in the times of separate khanates, Azerbaijan was hard pressed, sandwiched between Russia and Iran. While the Russian Empire was challenging Ottoman Empire for the access to the warm seas, it

was also pressuring the Persian Empire in the Caucasus. R. Mehdiyev states that *Armenian population in the [South Caucasus] region did not have any kind of majority in any khanate [of Azerbaijan] and that is why it was important for Russia to create at least any kind of entity for Armenians in Azerbaijan* (p.93). The Armenian minority then was supposed to use the religious factor to change the situation in the region, and prompt Russian Empire to take active measures.

The author also explains the fate of the Karabakh khanate and its last khan. Russia conquered the Khanate and signed a treaty with Ibrahim Khalil-khan, who was later murdered by the Russian chief of garrison in Karabakh. R. Mehdiyev notes that *this murder of one of the most influential leaders in the Caucasus was not a spontaneous act by the Russian garrison's chief, but a planned order of the Imperial Russia* (p.107). Moreover, after the victory over France, the Russian Empire became very active in the South Caucasus and abolished the last khanates in Azerbaijan, integrating the territories into its own administrative system.

While explaining from historical point of view the ethnic background of the South Caucasus, specifically in the conflict areas, R. Mehdiyev stresses the role of Imperial Russia and its governing commander in the Caucasus - General Tsitsianov. He notes that the provisions and supplies, in greater numbers in the Karabakh khanate as opposed to the Nakhichevan or Irevan khanates, forced the Russian policy of relocating Armenians to Karabakh in 1828. In one of the sources it is noted that *Armenians are mostly relocated to the lands of Muslim landowners* (p.115). As the author suggests, such an act have created tensions between the rightful land owners and the people who appeared out of thin air and took their lands. This was the imperial policy at the time.

As the author mentions, the Armenian academic elite ignores the fact that Armenians are foreign to the South Caucasus. R. Mehdiyev shows sources that prove this beyond doubt. Noting that *Armenians that were nomadic and came from the Balkans lived through the assimilation with gypsies and other Asia Minor small nationalities* (p.123). Moreover, the author mentions that *after the adoption of the Turkmenchay Treaty in 1828 serious ethno-demographic changes have shaken Northern Azerbaijan, prompted by the mechanical movement of the population such as a planned out policy of relocation of Armenians* (p.127). All these factors have also prompted the Imperial policies to engage with the Armenian Church to influence the situation in the South

Caucasus; this factor later played a crucial role in history.

R. Mehdiyev also sheds light on the situation at the beginning of the XX century. The author describes the situation after the revolutions in Russia in 1917, concentrating on the role of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR), established in 1918, Armenian expansionist and ethnic cleansing policies towards Azerbaijan and the turmoil situation that brought the South Caucasus under communist rule. Moreover, he outlines all that led to the self-determination of Armenians on the territories of Azerbaijan. *In the end, European states through their emissaries have notified the government of F. Khoysky that transfer of Irevan (Yerevan) and some adjacent territories to Armenians would lead to the international recognition of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic* (p.149). Despite some opposition in ADR, the transfer of Irevan to Armenians was arranged, leading to further claims on Azerbaijani lands.

While part of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan lost another part of its territory - the region of Zangezur. The author explains that this occurred due to the activity of Armenians and their far-reaching connections with the communist leaders. According to the author, the same fate was almost certain for Karabakh, however due to the heavy resistance from Azerbaijani communists, Karabakh was left in the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan, and the 'Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast' was formed in its center. Moreover, *in 1948-1950 "voluntary" deportation of 150,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis from Armenia took place; the heads of relocation committee in Azerbaijan Central Committee secretaries Brutents and Sevumyan did everything not to relocate them to the Nagorno-Karabakh* (p.176).

R. Mehdiyev sees the clear "footprint of the Kremlin" in the crisis in Karabakh in the late 1980's, which evolved into the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The loyalty of Mikhail Gorbachev (then-First Secretary of the Soviet Union) to the Armenians in many ways pushed them towards their destructive reestablishment of "Great Armenia", which led to terrible consequences for the whole region. The author discusses in detail the "first blood" in the conflict drawn in Askeran, the Armenian role in the Sumgait events and their positioning as an ideological instrument, the tragic events of January 20, 1990, the Spitak earthquake and its impact, ethnic massacres in Khojaly, and the effects on the conflict and other major events during the toughest years of the war. R. Mehdiyev concludes with some legal analysis and a discussion of the peace

process in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Overall, the book is very comprehensive in terms of its historical and political analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It provides a clear analysis of the roots of the conflict, enabling the reader to better understand the nature of the situation and how it came to be a protracted armed conflict. This book is a great read both for people who are starting to familiarize themselves with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well as for scholars engaged in the conflict studies, who can find many new detailed arguments here.