

# A Return to Tradition?

## ASPECTS OF POSTWAR POLITICAL CULTURE IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

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In the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev's promotion of democratic liberties and values, including freedom of speech and pluralism of opinion, provided a basis for the development of a number of ethnic conflicts on the territory of the USSR. The succession of events that led to war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis began with a dispute over the jurisdiction of the historically contested Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region of Soviet Azerbaijan. In February 1988, the population throughout the region flooded the main square of its capital, Stepanakert, demanding unification with Armenia. Crowds of people roared, chanting: "*Miatsum-Karabakh-Hayastan!*" [Reunification-Karabakh-Armenia].

This national celebratory spirit soon faded after war broke out. In fact, the Karabakh war became a tangible breaking point in the people's construction of time and identity, in which the shape of a new post-communist political culture was born. An extremely romanticized notion of national brotherhood served as the catalyst arousing new social energies. The components of the new political culture that emerged consisted of a combination of reinforced neo-traditionalism and neo-liberal discourse and practice.

Specifically, the renewal of older, patriarchal models of communal relationships became an optimal strategy for resistance and victory. The reinstatement of a philosophy that valued a "return to the village" and reliance on extended family became the primary formula for survival. The transgression of gender roles, including the rise of female fighters, was a second, opposing, strategy by which all resources were mobilized for victory. Paradoxically, however, such practices also served to reinforce traditional ideologies of male domination.

### **Transformations of Family Structure**

Despite the urbanization and modernization that occurred during the Soviet era, the Karabakh Armenian population maintained throughout this time a special and respectful attitude toward historical and rural tradition. During the war, however, this respect for tradition became a simple survival formula.

While the war and ensuing social disaster provided the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh with a different perception of the world and a heightened sense of their ethnic roots and unity, there emerged an acute need for a strict adjustment of life strategies aimed at long-term survival. Individual interests were shoved aside in the pursuit of group survival. The constant conflict between individual interests and the ethics of duty was resolved in favor of the latter.

In this environment, kinship-based relationships of responsibility and dependency were endowed with almost mystical significance. In Soviet times, the existing patriarchal system in Nagorno-Karabakh, like elsewhere, had been marginalized as state ideology promoted female emancipation and industrialization. The war pushed Karabakh Armenian society back toward its pre-Soviet patriarchal order. When the region's towns were bombarded by Azerbaijani artillery and aircraft, whole families escaped to half-deserted mountainous villages, which were difficult targets. The Karabakh Armenian urban population, which had come to take pride in its urbanized lifestyle, was forced to re-group into extended family units and revert to the peasant traditions of the mountain village. By doing so, they managed to achieve a maximum economy of resources.

As a result of the pressures of the Karabakh war, family structures changed, reflected in a shift from small nuclear families to large patriarchal ones with several men in charge, who collectively cared for these extended families when not away for military action or guard duty. Wartime chaos and post-war disorganization put such strains on the institution of the nuclear family that such structures were almost impossible to sustain. In their stead arose blood ties, and the functional social networks based upon them. Within a discourse of nationalism, all the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh became coherently tied to one another.

### **Postwar Empowerment of Women?**

At the same time, the women of Nagorno-Karabakh took on multiple roles during the Karabakh war. While the war shifted the social structure of the community toward traditionalism, some women did acquire new, non-traditional female roles either by choice or by force, in both cases justified by the discourse of national defense and unity. For some, the national battle developed into a romantic concept. According to official and unofficial data, some one hundred women were directly involved in the Karabakh war, of which 17 were killed and 16 disabled. Some women after the war also came to hold positions in national government, including as minister of health.

Despite this sense of progression, women who violated stereotypical roles were considered dangerous upstarts. Even though they swore and drank like men (and with men), and were given high praises such as being called a *tyghamard-kyneg* (literally, "man-woman"), these women were ultimately rejected. They were considered as "one of the men," but only temporarily and not completely.

In such cases, the woman pays too heavy a price for the honor of being accepted into a male brotherhood. From a sexual object and the role of a caregiver that is socially recognized and protected by traditional culture, she turns into a non-systemic semi-component. This constitutes a dual marginalization of women. In the traditional role,

women are bound to, and marginalized by, domesticity. Fighting side by side with men counteracts this marginalization and domesticity, but it still does not result in the coveted social status of equality. On the contrary, counteracting the patriarchy actually marginalizes these sorts of women even more. In the end, female soldiers were tolerated during the war, only to be denounced again afterward.

The war led to a transgression of conventional relationships between the sexes, but an essentialized system of thought about gender roles persisted. Extreme emotional tension and constant risk and danger, coupled with the idea of the nation as a horizontal brotherhood fighting for national survival, made possible unusual male-female relationships and role inversions. Still, the direct inclusion of gender policy on the national agenda was deliberately avoided. This was justified by the claim that addressing the consequences of war on gender relations would put a strain on national unity, based as it was on patriarchy.

Thus, nation-building in Nagorno-Karabakh—a process that resumed with vigor after the passing of socialism—has been accompanied by conflict at the intersection of ethnicity and gender or, rather, a clash of tradition/patriarchy and modernization/feminism. This conflict is reflected very clearly in a statement by Zhanna Galstyan, presidential adviser on cultural issues. In response to a question about what she thinks of women's solidarity in the region, Galstyan, with a poorly concealed indignation, replied with another question: "Why divide the nation into men and women?"

### **Civic Identity**

Ultimately, post-Soviet political action, protest, and even warfighting, so different from the experiences of political reality in the USSR, created a sort of activist model of civic culture in Nagorno-Karabakh. The features of that culture are a high motivation among citizens to work with local authorities; a relationship with those authorities characterized by trust; a belief that the local political structure is not foreign or hostile but formed by those who fought for independence along with the rest of the population; and, in general, emotional investment in political life. The social "lift" that raised the entire Karabakh Armenian community to a higher level within the national Armenian community on the basis of victory in war has promoted heightened political and civic identities, as well as a commitment to democracy and modernization.

At the same time, this new reality must compete with another. Due to Nagorno-Karabakh's unrecognized status, real opportunities for industrialization, modernization, and the development of a free market will remain limited for some time to come.

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