

Observation no: 201 – Azeri-Armenian Conflict

Country-year: Azerbaijan 1992

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No.

The current regime in Azerbaijan was undergoing severe political instability. Between 1990 and May 1992, the regime in Azerbaijan was the communist regime installed by the Soviet Union under the leadership of Ayaz Mutalibov (who was the leader of the Azerbaijani Communist Party). In 1991, Azerbaijan declared independence from the Soviet Union, but the communist government stayed in power. In May 1992, protestors led by the nationalist political party (APF) stormed government buildings and forcibly ended the communist regime, in a coup that installed an interim nationalist government. A month later, however, the nationalist government came to power through elections.¹

Armenia and Azerbaijan existed in a state of de-facto war in 1991, but experts argue that all out war did not begin until January 1992.² So while there was a coup in May 1992 (and then another one led by a colonel in 1993), I would argue that prior to all-out war, the current regime in power was the communist government, which did not come to power in a coup.

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

Yes.

Azerbaijan experienced a coup in April 1920, when the Soviet Union's 11th Red Army invaded Azerbaijan, and the newly created Azerbaijani Communist Party declared themselves Azerbaijan's only legitimate authority. This marked the end of the First Azerbaijani Republic, the first republic in the Muslim world built on democratic principles.³

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

No.

The country's top leadership around this time period was in flux. The country's leader prior to the war with Armenia in 1992 was the President of Azerbaijan and the head of the communist party, Ayaz Mutalibov. Before Moscow chose him as President in 1990,

¹ Curtis, Glenn. 1994. *Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia: Country Studies*. Washington DC: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, p 94-97.

² Croissant, Michael P. 1998. *The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Causes and Implications*. Westport, CT: Praeger, p 77.

³ Cornell, Svante E. 2011. *Azerbaijan Since Independence*. New York: M.E Sharpe, p 29-30.

Mutalibov was a chairman of the Azerbaijani Council of Minister and senior member within the communist party.⁴

There is no evidence that he ever served in the Soviet or Azeri military.

4. Are ethnic, sectarian, or racial criteria used to exclude segments of the population from the officer corps?

Yes.

There is no smoking gun evidence to suggest that any particular ethnic, sectarian or racial criteria were used to *exclude* segments of the population from the officer corps.

However, even prior to the independence in 1991, there existed severe ethnic tensions in Azerbaijan, particularly against Armenians that went as far back as the beginning of the 20th century. Ethnic divisions between the two were never resolved. In the waning years of the USSR in the 1980s, mutual ethnic distrust had devolved into pogroms of ethnic cleansing where Azerbaijanis, including Azeri militas, would attack Armenian villages and displace them, and vice versa.⁵

Finally, in Oct 1991, when newly independent Azerbaijan created a national Azerbaijani army, the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet issued a summons to all Azerbaijanis serving in the Soviet armed forces to return to Azerbaijan and serve in their “homeland.”⁶

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

Prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union and Azerbaijan’s independence in December 1991, Azerbaijanis were a part of the larger Soviet military system, which required obedience to the communist party.⁷ Between 1990 and 1991, the armed forces within Azerbaijan comprised of various militia brigades, and the Soviet 4th Army. The former operated under control of Mutalibov, and the latter under control of Moscow.⁸ While the latter was certainly comprised of communist officers, it is hard to pinpoint the ideological requirements for the senior officers for the militias. One source called them “Azerbaijani Special Function Militia Troops (OMON),” which makes it likely that their officer corps must have had previous Soviet army military experience.⁹

⁴ Curtis 1994, p 94.

⁵ Rieff, David. 1997. “Nagorno-Karabakh: Case Study in Ethnic Strife.” *Foreign Affairs* 76(2): 118-132, p 118-119; *Azerbaijan: Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh*. 1994. New York: Human Rights Watch, p 1.

⁶ Curtis 1994, p 142.

⁷ Curtis 1994, p 142.

⁸ Croissant 1998, p 41.

⁹ Human Rights Watch, p 5.

The National Armed Forces of Azerbaijan were officially formed by Presidential decree in October 1991, and the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet brought the Soviet 4th army under Azeri jurisdiction around the same time.¹⁰

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

Until May 1992, the regime remained Communist. Additionally, a large majority of the Azeri armed forces were made up of the Soviet 4th army.

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes.

During the Soviet era, Azerbaijani officers were trained at the Soviet Union's Higher All Arms Command School and the Caspian High Naval School, both located within Azerbaijan (although Azeris tended to be underrepresented in the top ranks of the Soviet armed forces). Military training for conscripts was undertaken within secondary schools in Azerbaijan, which was similar to other Soviet republics.¹¹ However, Curtis (1994) reports that Azeri conscripts were often assigned to construction battalions, in which military training was minimal and troops carried out non-combat duties.¹² He further states that the quality of training in secondary schools was also less stringent.¹³

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

Yes.

Between 1989 and 1991, Azeri Special Function Militia Troops, the Soviet army's 4th Army, as well interior ministry troops from the USSR Ministry of Interior (MVD) were used to enforce a state of emergency in Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. The MVD troops were also used to violently repress nationalist protests that broke out in Baku. In the Nagorno-Karabakh region, this also included attacking ethnically Armenian villages, arresting and executing suspected Armenian rebel or rebel sympathizers, and displacing thousands of Armenians in the region.¹⁴

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

¹⁰ Curtis 1994, p 141-142.

¹¹ Curtis 1994, p 142.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, p 3-6; See also: Croissant, p 41-42.

Yes.

In Jan 1990, the USSR Ministry of Interior (MVD) sent over 17,000 troops to Baku (the Azeri capital) to violent suppress protests that had broken out in the capital, and to administer a state of emergency in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the Azeri-Armenian border.¹⁵

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

Yes.

There existed a variety of militia groups that took part in the fighting in the fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. There were Azeri special function troops, as well as private paramilitary groups that were not disbanded until major military reforms were put in place in 1993.¹⁶ In addition, there was the Soviet 4th army, that was not under direct Azeri control until the end of 1991. Finally, between 1989 and 1991, the USSE interior ministry (MVD) troops were used to provide regime security.¹⁷

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

No.

There is no evidence to suggest that there existed an intelligence apparatus that was under Azerbaijani control. Surprisingly, I did not find any evidence of the presence of any branches of Soviet secret police or the KGB either during this time period in Azerbaijan.

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

No.

There is no evidence to indicate that a purge of either the Azerbaijani or the Soviet armed forces within Azerbaijan occurred in the past five years. All purges of military leadership and the civilian defense establishment did not begin until later in 1992 when Azerbaijan began losing strategic battles to Armenian armed forces.

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

Yes.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, p 3.

¹⁶ Curtis 1994, p 145.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, p 3.

Curtis (1994) reports, “even before the formal breakup of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, Azerbaijan had created its own Ministry of Defense and a Defense Council to advise the president on national security policy.”¹⁸ The president was made the commander in chief of the Azeri armed forces, and was nominated as the overseer of defense and security efforts taken by the prime minister, and the ministers of defense, internal affairs and security.

That said, experts agree that the Azerbaijani forces were extremely fragmented, uncoordinated, and undisciplined – which was a “pattern common to most of Baku’s military operations over [1992-1993].”¹⁹

¹⁸ Curtis 1994, p 141-142.

¹⁹ Croissant 1998, p 78; See also: Rieff 1997, p 125.