

The right of priority in Karabakh: Russian and Armenian documents dispel European myths

Karabakh's ethnic history is extremely politicised. Both sides of the conflict are asserting their rights to this mountainous piece of land, including the antiquity of their own presence there. Moreover, one of the parties is supported by European intellectuals. Thus, in October 2020, at the height of hostilities in Karabakh, the French historian and writer Olivier Delorme called from the [pages of Le Figaro](#) "to stop using the word separatism against Nagorno-Karabakh and Artsakh by Armenians who have been populated by more than 90% Armenians since ancient times". Unfortunately, Delorme did not provide any references to sources or documentary evidence of his words.

[Qarabag.com](#) tried to figure out whose ancestors of modern Armenians or Azerbaijanis really dominated the territory numerically before [the authorities of the Russian Empire began to move Armenians from Persia and Turkey into Karabakh in 1828-1830.](#)

As the scientific community of Azerbaijan and Armenia with few exceptions, serves as a propaganda tool in this conflict, we have ignored the contemporary academic works of both sides. Our main sources are Russian official documents and certificates of Russian explorers, historians and publicists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Only in some cases we referred to the works of the most reputable Armenian researchers of the Soviet period, who published their scientific works before the escalation of the conflict in 1988. And this is what we have managed to collect:

Who were the ancient Karabakh people?

“In the second half of the 1st century, BC Artsakh was captured from Albania by Armenia. The domination of Armenians lasted until the end of the IV century (more than 400 years).

...The power of the Armenian kings in Artsakh, as a frontier region, was initially based solely on military force.

...The Armenian king, having conquered Artsakh, resorted to the most terrible and brutal methods of struggle against the inhabitants of Artsakh, so that they would not dare to rise again to fight for their independence...

The ruling class of Armenia decided to resort to another event – the Armenianization of the population of Artsakh. For this purpose, special Armenian colonies were organized in Artsakh... Further resettlement of Armenians in Artsakh and the organization of colonies there continued in the following years”.

[\[Arakelyan A. Karabakh before the conquest by Russian Tsarism // Istorichesky Zhurnal, No. 2, 1938. Pp. 69-70\].](#)

Another tool for the Armenianization of the Albanian population in Karabakh was Christian agitation.

“Christian preachers were sent from Armenia to the subordinate Albanian regions of Artsakh, Utik and Balasakan starting from the time of the Armenian king Tiridates III the Great (287-332).

... Armenian Arshakids, using Christianity to strengthen their political position in the country, sent Christian missionaries to the subordinate Albanian regions”.

[Essays on the history of the USSR: the crisis of the slave-holding system and the emergence of feudalism in the territory of the USSR in the III – IX centuries. Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Moscow, 1958. Pp. 323, 326]

“In Aghvania (the Armenian name for Albania), the church

served as another instrument of Armenianization of the country...".

[Petrushevsky I. On the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku, 1930. Page 8].

Some Karabakh inhabitants "joined the church of Armenian confession and assimilated with Armenians".

[Ioannisian A. Essays on the history of Armenian liberation thought. Yerevan, 1957. T. I, pp. 130]

But despite that: *"Karabakh has never belonged to the centres of Armenian culture. The Church could not show among the Armenian descendants of the peoples of Aghvania the cultural influence it had at least in Syunik ...".*

[\[Petrushevsky I. On the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku, 1930. P. 13\]](#)

"In the fourth century, Armenia's economic and military power was significantly weakened... After more than 400 years of dominance over Artsakh, Armenia had to abandon it. Artsakh was liberated from Armenia and again passed into the ownership of Albania".

[\[Arakelyan A. Karabakh before the conquest by Russian Tsarism // Istorichesky Zhurnal, No. 2, 1938. Pp. 70-71\].](#)

For a more accurate understanding of the ethnic history of Karabakh in the first centuries of our era, it is only necessary to clarify who the Albanians are:

"A significant part of Azerbaijani Turks are Turkish ancestors of various peoples of ancient Aghvania".

[Petrushevsky I. On the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku, 1930. P. 14]

"It is necessary to recognise, and it was repeatedly pointed out by researchers that the Caucasian-Albanian tribes have played an important role in ethnogenesis and formation of the Azerbaijan people", – authoritative Russian caucasian historian Alikber Alikberov marks.

[Petrushevsky I. On the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku, 1930. Pp. 14]

How did Karabakh people become Muslims and Turks?

“During the period of Arab domination in Albania, an event of great significance took place: the population of a dominant part of the country, including the lowlands of Artsakh, under the influence of the Arabs adopted Mohammedanism (Islam). As a result of this, the further struggle between Armenia and Albania, particularly in the territory of Artsakh, took on two forms: national and religious”.

[\[Arakelyan A. Karabakh before the conquest by Russian Tsarism // Istorichesky Zhurnal, No. 2, 1938. P. 72\].](#)

“By the time the Arab rule was established (beginning of the 8th century) ... the population of the Albanian regions of Artsakh and a significant part of the Utik region had already been assimilated by Armenians...”.

[Essays on the history of the USSR: the crisis of the slave-holding system and the emergence of feudalism in the territory of the USSR in the III – IX centuries. Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Moscow, 1958. P. 328]

In the 10th century, Arab geographer and explorer Al-Masudi wrote: *“The mountains of Abu Musa (Garabagh) belonging to Arran (as the Arabs called Albania) are inhabited by tribes from the Arran peoples”.*

[Historical geography of Azerbaijan. Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan SSR. Baku, 1987. P. 48]

At the end of the XI century, Karabakh was captured by the Seljuks. Since then, these lands have been continuously the arena of the military and political activity of Turkic tribal associations and state formations. As a result, the Turks were settled here and gradually mixed with Albanians. The outstanding Soviet orientalist Ilya Petrushevsky, who researched the Armenian villages of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1928, wrote about the Turkification of even previously Armenianized descendants of the Albanians.

[Petrushevsky I. On the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku, 1930. P. 39]

“As Turkic nomadic tribes established themselves on the winter pastures of the Kur-Araz Lowland, the Muslimised part of the aboriginal population of ancient Albania was assimilated by the Turkic tribes that came along. So the modern Azerbaijani nationality was formed”.

[\[Essays on the history of the USSR: the crisis of the slave-holding system and the emergence of feudalism in the territory of the USSR in the III – IX centuries. Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Moscow, 1958. Pp. Page 330\].](#)

The memory of the Turkic tribes of the Middle Ages has long been preserved in the toponymy of Karabakh. For example, in honor of the Oguz Land, from which the founder of the Karabakh Khanate Javanshir originated, was named Javanshir district of Elizabetspolis (Ganja) province. Its western part with 55 villages was included in the Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh in 1924. The name was changed to Armenian, and it turned into Jraberd district.

[Caucasian Calendar for 1850, published by the Office of the Governor of the Caucasus. Tiflis, 1849. Page 94;

Petrushevsky I. P. Essays on the history of feudal relations in Azerbaijan and Armenia in the 16th – early 19th centuries. Leningrad, 1949. Pp. 48;

[Kocharyan G.A. Nagorno-Karabakh. Society for Research and Studies of Azerbaijan. Baku, 1925. P. 8\].](#)

In the same Javanshir district, there was a “Tatar village” of Karagozlu, which received its name from the Turkic tribe of the same name.

[Bartold V.V. T. VII. Works on historical geography and history of Iran. Moscow, 1971. Pp. 502]

Antagonism of newcomers and Karabakh Armenians

Besides the Turks, descendants of Albanians assimilated by Armenian colonists continued to live in Karabakh. The orientalist Petrushevsky called them “ Armenianized

descendants of the peoples of Aghvania”.

[Petrushevsky I. On the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku, 1930. Pp. 13]

But even centuries later, there were still clear differences between these Karabakh “Armenians” and the Armenians who moved here from Persia in the late Middle Ages. Migrants settled separately. According to Petrushevsky’s notes, people from the same region of Persia usually settled together. And even their villages differed from the habitats of the native Armenianized descendants of the Albanians. As an example, there are two villages in Nagorno-Karabakh – Zamzur and Jan-yatag. They were founded by Armenian settlers from Persia. According to Petrushevsky, this happened in the second half of the 17th century. The researcher noted, after visiting one of these villages, that “Zamzur also differs from other villages in appearance”. Moreover, “the father-in-law of a local priest, an old man of one hundred and fifteen”, also remembered that the inhabitants of Zamzur are descendants of Karadag (a historical region in north-western Iran).

[Petrushevsky I. On the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku, 1930. P. 22].

What antagonism should have been between the first generations of Persian Armenians and Armenianized Albanians, if even almost 300 years later, the descendants of migrants kept the memory of their coming?

Turkic-Armenian symbiosis

In the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th century, before the mass resettlement of Armenians to Karabakh from Iran and Turkey in 1828-1830, Turks and Karabakh Armenians got along much better than in subsequent times.

At least among the ruling nobility, there were even instances of mixed marriages. Thus, Petr Butkov, a member of the Council of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire,

based on archival documents, reported that in the middle of the 18th century, the son of the founder of the Karabakh Khanate, Panah-Ali-khan married the daughter of one of the Armenian princes-melik Shahnazar. Moreover, for 20 years both these leaders, Turks and Armenians, were the closest military and political allies.

[\[Butkov P.G. Materials for a new history of the Caucasus, 1722-1803; St. Petersburg, 1869. T.I., pp. T. I, p. 386\].](#)

It is possible that already at that time Turks and Armenians lived together in some places in Karabakh. At least 70 years later, two Russian state officials, who were responsible for the first statistical survey of the region, found this situation there and presented the data collected in April 1823 in the form of a report "Description of Karabakh province". The document mentions villages with a mixed Turkic-Armenian population: Khojagan, Hajilli, and Ujanis.

[\[Description of the Karabakh Province compiled in 1823 by order of the General Manager of Georgia, Yermolov, the real state councilor of Mogilev and Colonel Yermolov 2nd. Tiflis, 1866\].](#)

The symbiosis between the two ethnic groups, which gradually formed in Karabakh before the mass migration of Iranian and Turkish Armenians there began in 1828-1830, is also reflected in the common faith. It still existed more than a hundred years later. Petrushevsky wrote about it after his ethnographic research in Karabakh in summer 1928:

"The faiths of Karabakh Armenian peasants and their Turkic neighbours – settled and semi-nomadic – are generally similar. Their structure, to a large extent their terminology, sanctuaries, and cult are common.

[\[Petrushevsky I. On the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku, 1930. Pp. 14; scan N9\].](#)

The author describes the cult of the Muslim saint Sarah Bek, which was widespread among both Turks and Armenians. "Honouring the Muslim saint did not push Armenians away at

all”, – Petrushevsky was surprised. The same was true of the Shasakh shrine, which was located near Hadrut. In Tatev and Gandzasar the nomadic Turks worshipped Christian shrines, where more than Armenians. And the sacred mountain Ağ Oglan, near the village of Arakyul, as well as Ziarət Öquz in the Tatev district were “highly worshipped by Turkic and Armenian peasants”.

[Petrushevsky I. On the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku, 1930. Pages 23, 25-26, 30-31, 37-38].

“We had to make sure that the faith of the Armenian and Turkic peasants was almost identical”.

[Petrushevsky I. On the pre-Christian beliefs of the peasants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku, 1930. Pp. 42]

Turks and Armenians: who were the most numerous?

The first statistical data on the numerical correlation between Turks and Armenians (including descendants of Armenianized Albanians) in the Karabakh Khanate relate to the beginning of active Russian expansion in the region.

Two years before the official inclusion of this khanate into the Russian Empire, on July 19, 1811, a memorandum was drawn up to the Minister of Internal Affairs Osip Kozodavlev “with a description of Georgia and some other regions of the Caucasus.” It reported:

“In the Karabakh possession, there are residents of up to 12 thousand families, including Armenians up to 2500 families, and the rest are Tatars or Mohammedans (Muslims).”

[\[Accession of Eastern Armenia to Russia. Collection of documents. T. I \(1801-1813. Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR. Yerevan, 1972. Pp. 1801-1813. Publishing of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1972. Page 562\].](#)

Ten years after the official inclusion of Karabakh in the Russian state, two officials, having visited all the previous khanate, on April 17, 1823, presented to their superiors the “Description of Karabakh province”. The task of the authors

was to determine the number of local people and the amount of taxes paid during the khanate. On this basis, it was planned to establish a Russian taxation system in Karabakh. At the same time, the ethnic origin of each village and the number of families living there were also identified in the report. This makes it possible to calculate the total ethnic composition of the population. Thus, of the 600 villages, 450 are listed as Tatar (i.e. Turkic), and 150 as Armenian. There were 20,095 families living there: 15,729 (78.3%) were "Tatar" families, and 4,366 (21.7%) were Armenian families.

[\[Description of the Karabakh Province compiled in 1823 by order of the General Manager of Georgia, Yermolov, the real state councilor of Mogilev and Colonel Yermolov 2nd. Tiflis, 1866\].](#)

Both documents represent a particular value for the history of Karabakh, as they provide a clear picture of its ethnic structure before the mass resettlement of Armenians from Persia and Turkey in 1828-1830. Obviously, as a result of this migration, the demographic situation in Karabakh began to change cardinally. The nature of the relationship between the two ethnic groups also began to change for the worst.