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Former Soviet Union Carnage in Karabakh

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JAMES CARNEY/STEPANAKERT

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Rosa Babayan was in her kitchen fixing tea and slicing bread for breakfast when the first artillery shell of the morning slammed into her concrete apartment building. As she rushed down to the cellar with her family, another shell burst nearby, smashing the windows in the stairwell and sending a shard of glass into her forehead. Ten minutes later, she emerged to survey the damage, daubing the blood from just above her hairline. The corner bedroom of her fourth-floor apartment and all the rooms below it were a heap of rubble and twisted steel.

Since that February morning when a Soviet-made GRAD missile destroyed part of her home, Babayan, 53, and her family have lived in the cellar, sleeping on a row of cots alongside neighbors. They are hardly alone. Babayan lives in Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous enclave fully within the borders of the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. Populated almost entirely by Armenians, Karabakh has seen more than 1,500 people die since 1988, when Armenians and Azeris, each side claiming the enclave as its own, began their skirmishing with hunting rifles. They have now graduated to modern weapons, including tanks, missiles and heavy artillery, turning their ethnic conflict into the bloodiest and most intractable of the many such conflicts bequeathed by the Soviet Union to the new Commonwealth of Independent States.

Scarcely a single building has escaped damage in Stepanakert, the target of almost daily shelling all winter from a mountaintop stronghold held by the Azeris at Shusha, just four miles away. The city has been without running water, electricity or telephones for three months; other regions of Karabakh have been without these basic services for much longer. A near total absence of fuel — a product of Azerbaijan's economic blockade of the enclave — has left Karabakh's factories silent, its workers unemployed and without pay. Schools that have not been leveled are closed. The basement of the partially destroyed parliament building serves as the city's maternity ward, where nurses tend newborn babies by candlelight. A member of the International Committee of the Red Cross, which opened a station in Stepanakert three weeks ago, said he fears the city could soon be struck by hunger, and, as the weather warms, by epidemics.

Once home to 70,000 of Karabakh's 200,000 residents, Stepanakert's population has been shrinking as some families send their children to outlying villages. Most of the 50,000 who remain live underground in crowded, dark basements. They emerge, as Babayan did recently, only when there is a lull in the shelling. Adapting to life in wartime, they walk the streets carefully, always trying to place the wall of a building between themselves and the likely trajectory of incoming artillery. "We will live on," said Babayan, whose sister had died the day before from shrapnel wounds. "We are simply not going to give up our land."

The war over the unspoiled mountains and fertile valleys of Karabakh is a blood feud with roots that reach deep into the history of the region. In 1915, during the twilight of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians living in Turkish Armenia were deported into the deserts of what is now Syria. At least 1 million people of Armenian descent were either killed or died of starvation, though modern Turkey disputes that figure as exaggerated. Azeris are ethnic cousins of the Turks, and in Karabakh today some Armenian soldiers claim they are continuing the historic battle. "For the Azeris, the only solution is to rid Karabakh of all Armenians, just like the Turks in 1915," says Artur, one such freedom fighter in Stepanakert. "But we won't let that happen again."

In 1923, after Soviet power had been established in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Bolsheviks granted the disputed region of Karabakh to the Azeris. Before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, Armenian protests over Karabakh were sporadic and quickly suppressed. But in 1988 the Armenian movement to free Karabakh from Azeri rule went public, and the fighting began.

Until the Soviet Union's collapse, the Kremlin tended to favor the Azeris in the conflict, largely because Azerbaijan was the last bastion of communist orthodoxy in the Caucasus. Soviet army and Interior Ministry troops alternately tried to keep the peace or assisted the Azeris in military operations. Though the Azeri government in Baku accuses Russia of helping Armenia, it is the Azeri fighters in the region who are far better equipped with Soviet military weaponry than their opponents.

While Gorbachev was President, the international community treated the Karabakh conflict as an internal affair of the Soviet Union. But as the fighting increased this year and former Soviet troops pulled out of the enclave, the United Nations, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (C.S.C.E.), and Iran, which shares borders with both Armenia and Azerbaijan and is trying to expand its role in the region, all launched efforts to resolve the conflict. The first cease-fire brokered by Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati collapsed within a few hours. The second one lasted for several days, with both sides reporting relatively minor violations. That was long enough for U.N. special envoy Cyrus Vance to visit Stepanakert on a fact-finding mission late last month and to declare his hope that third-party mediation could help bring peace.

But early last week artillery shells cascaded in violent waves upon Stepanakert. From mid-morning until after nightfall, the city rattled to the thunderous explosions of 157 GRAD missiles, highly destructive artillery- launched shells. Karabakh leaders said more than 500 Azeri troops had moved down the mountain from Shusha to attack Stepanakert's outskirts. At a makeshift hospital on the first floor of the city's former Communist Party headquarters, doctors operated throughout the shelling as jeeps and ambulances arrived carrying the wounded. In the building's foyer, an old woman stared in grief at

the body of her dead son, her rhythmic cries punctuated by the deep roar of artillery. On the sidewalk outside, a man waiting for news of his own son's wounds turned to those near him and asked, "Do you see the life we live?"

The Azeri government denied that an attack had taken place and accused the Armenians in Karabakh of breaking the cease-fire. Even in Stepanakert, it was impossible to tell for sure who had started the fighting that raged just a kilometer from city limits. But the GRAD bombardment on the city was no illusion. Nor was the stream of dead and wounded. By day's end nine Armenian soldiers had been killed in battle, three civilians in the shelling. More than 30 people had been wounded. After nightfall, the Karabakh Defense Minister, Serge Sarkisian, said the offensive had been turned back and that more than 100 Azeri troops had died in the fighting. "Perhaps we Armenians are naive," said Karabakh Prime Minister Oleg Yesayan. "We expected them to violate the cease-fire, but not on such a large scale."

Despite the renewed fighting, international mediation efforts continued. Last week, in negotiations organized by Iran and Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to stop their cross-border fighting. Karabakh was not discussed, but at a recent C.S.C.E. meeting in Helsinki, tentative plans were made for high-level talks on the future of the enclave. The two sides, however, remain far apart. Armenia insists it is a third party to a conflict between Karabakh and Azerbaijan and demands that the elected leaders of the enclave's self-declared government participate in all negotiations. Azerbaijan does not recognize Karabakh's leaders or its demands for independence. "Nagorno-Karabakh risks entering a new phase of all-out conflict that could possibly draw in other states," warned Armenian Foreign Minister Raffi Hovannisian, referring to the competition between Turkey and Iran for influence in the region. To avoid that, he said, "there must be a simultaneous dispatch not only of international observers but of peacekeeping troops."

But not all hope for peace rests on outside mediation. Almost every day for the past three weeks, commanders from Askeran, an Armenian town on Karabakh's border with Azerbaijan, and Agdam, on the Azeri side, have met along a dirt road on the front to negotiate prisoner exchanges. Alakhverdi Bagirov, the commander of local Azeri Popular Front forces, and Vitaly Balasanian, his

Armenian counterpart, have known each other since childhood, long before their two towns were divided by war. Balasanian, 33, who managed a restaurant in peacetime, runs the headquarters of his battalion from a stone fortress built in 1751 on a hill overlooking Askeran. At their daily negotiations, he and Bagirov sit on rocks beside a shelter dug out of the road and agree to keep their own separate peace, even as others continue to fight.

Both men blame the Russians in general, and the Soviet army and Gorbachev in particular, for allowing and even encouraging the transformation of the Karabakh conflict into a violent war. “Here’s perestroika for you,” Bagirov scoffs, his hand swooping out to encompass the surrounding soldiers from both sides, every one of them armed with a Kalashnikov rifle. “The Russians gave us weapons, and they gave the Armenians weapons. And they are guilty.”

Now the Russians have left, and the Soviet Union has disappeared. But the fighting in Karabakh continues, and the death toll rises. The suffering is indiscriminate, with innocent civilians afflicted as often as warriors. Last week, as rockets could be heard falling once again on Stepanakert a few miles away, a small plane landed to evacuate wounded to Yerevan, the Armenian capital. A stretcher bearing a woman in her 50s, her face scarred and swollen, was lifted aboard. She had lost both her legs to a GRAD missile the night before. Her husband, pale and exhausted, said nothing as he bent down to dab her lips with a moist cloth. After takeoff, the plane rose level with the white tops of the mountains that define Karabakh. The sounds of a war in progress fell away, replaced by the soft moan of one more of its victims.