



Citizenship Dynamics in the Soviet Borderlands: A Case Study of Armenians of Nakhijevan

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Állampolgársági dinamika a szovjet határvidéken: Esettanulmány Nakhijevan örményeiről.

Absztrakt: A tanulmány azt vizsgálja, a Szovjetunió peremterületein élő etnikai csoportok hogyan éltek meg a szociális jogukat. A szovjet korszak során a hatóságok nemzetépítési politikát folytattak, amely gyakran magában foglalta a határok kijelölését az etnikai vagy történelmi határok figyelembevétele nélkül. Következésképpen ez a megközelítés időnként többnemzetiségű régiók kialakulásához vezetett, amelyre Nakhijevan jó példa. A tanulmány jelentős mértékben hozzájárul a dél-kaukázusi régió tudományos megértéséhez, betekintést nyújtva a történelmi politikák, az etnikai dinamika és a kortárs kihívások bonyolult kölcsönhatásába az állampolgárság szociális jogai terén. A tanulmány, mivel archív anyagok csak korlátozottan állnak rendelkezésre, szóbeli történelmi tanúvallomásokra (oral history) támaszkodik, illetve a szovjet Nakhijevanban, szovjet Azerbajdzsán igazgatása alatt élő örmények esetére összpontosít. Annak alátámasztására, hogy az örmények történelmi kapcsolatban állnak Nakhijevannal, a tanulmány bevezeti a „történelmi állampolgárság” fogalmát. Azzal érvel, hogy a nakhijeváni örmények az állam teljes jogú állampolgárainak tekintették magukat, mivel a Szovjetunióban a szociális jogokat a társadalomba való beilleszkedés alapvető elemeiként határozták meg. Ezenkívül azt is állítja, hogy az örmények és azerbajdzsánok egy állam alatti együttélését elősegítette a „szovjet állampolgár” fogalma, és bizonyos kihívások ellenére az örmények beleegyeztek abba, hogy az azerbajdzsáni hatóságok fennhatósága alatt éljenek, keresve a lehetőséget, hogy a saját országukban, a történelmi szülőföldjükön élhessenek.

Abstract

The study investigates how ethnic groups in the peripheral regions of the Soviet Union experienced their social rights. Throughout the Soviet era, authorities implemented nation-building policies that often involved delineating borders without consideration for ethnic or historical boundaries. Consequently, this approach has occasionally led to the emergence of multi-ethnic regions, of which Nakhijevan is a good example. The study makes a meaningful contribution to the academic understanding of the South Caucasus region, offering insights into the intricate interplay between historical policies, ethnic dynamics and contemporary challenges in the realm of social rights of citizenship. Because of the limited availability of archival materials, the study relies on oral history testimonies and focuses on the case of Armenians residing in Soviet Nakhijevan under the administration of Soviet Azerbaijan. To demonstrate that Armenians have a historical connection with Nakhijevan, the study introduces the concept of “historical citizenship”. It argues that Armenians of Nakhijevan regarded themselves as full citizens of the state since, in the Soviet Union, social rights were defined as core elements for inclusion in society. Furthermore, it contends that the coexistence of Armenians and Azerbaijanis under one state was facilitated by the notion of the “Soviet citizen” and that, despite facing certain challenges, Armenians consented to live under the rule of Azerbaijani authorities, seeking the opportunity to reside in their historical homeland.

I. Introduction

Nakhijevan exemplifies the complexities of historical identity shaped by imperial ideologies. Situated in the South Caucasus, this region has been a crossroads of civilisations and empires throughout history. Its strategic location has made it a contested territory, leading to the imposition of various territorial ideologies by successive ruling powers. From the time of the Persian Empire to the Ottoman Empire, and later under the Russian Empire, Nakhijevan served as a buffer zone between competing regional powers (Ivanov, 2011, 20–21). This geopolitical significance not only shaped its territorial boundaries but also influenced its cultural, ethnic and political identity. Before the formation of the Soviet Union, Armenians constituted a significant portion of the Nakhijevan population (Hewsen, 2001, 226), primarily residing in rural areas and actively participating in the region's economy. However, the demographic makeup underwent significant changes after the Russian ascendancy, leading to a shift in ethnic dynamics. By the time of the Soviet era, Nakhijevan became a part of Soviet Azerbaijan (Ivanov, 2011, 20–21).

Drawing on oral history testimonies, this research not only provides a historical perspective on Nakhijevan but also establishes a compelling connection between citizenship, history and the peaceful coexistence of diverse ethnic groups within the Soviet framework. It delves into the intricacies of ethnic relations in Soviet Nakhijevan, exploring how the Soviet authorities managed to develop the interaction between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Within the socialist state, citizens were encouraged to coexist harmoniously, fostering the notion of a shared Soviet identity. Despite being governed by Soviet Azerbaijan, Armenians in Nakhijevan considered themselves full citizens, rooted in their historical connection to the region. The unique status of Nakhijevan as a borderland played a crucial role in shaping the relationship between the two ethnic groups. Soviet authorities treated the region as a distinct territory, requiring special permissions for entry by those not born within its borders (Xojabekyan, 2002, 164). However, Armenians residing in Nakhijevan were exempted from these restrictions, underscoring their recognition as integral members of the Soviet state (Artyom, 2022).

During the middle period of the Soviet Union, from the 1950s, in the Armenian villages of Nakhijevan, where cultural life was absent and connections with Armenia and national events were lacking, Azerbaijani specialists such as shepherds, agronomists, nurses and doctors were dispatched. Consequently, Azerbaijanis came to hold prominent positions in rural areas, with a few families multiplying into five or six or more within a span of just a few years. As Armenian sources assume, these circumstances gradually compelled local Armenians to leave their native places “of their own free will”; therefore, the sources call them victims of a white or bloodless massacre (Ayvazyan, 2005, 13). The turning point came with the onset of a national movement in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988, leading to Nakhijevan being entirely devoid of Armenians today.

2. Methodology

I selected oral history interviews as a way to uncover specific details that are not recorded in written sources. This choice of methodology is influenced by the limited availability of archival materials caused by political interference in the region. In addition, French historian Phillippe Joutard (1993) states that studying modern migrations nowadays requires first-hand accounts from the emigrants. It is important to note that the interview subjects are Armenians who lived under Azerbaijani rule during the Soviet Union, and all of them belong to the middle age group, reflecting on the middle period of the Soviet era.

The focus of this paper is the rights of citizenship, and it examines how Armenians experienced their social rights in Soviet Nakhijevan. Given that there was little published information from Soviet Armenia about Nakhijevan at that time, and physically, I do not have access to the Republic of Nakhijevan because of personal reasons, using oral history methodology proved useful in conducting this research. It is also significant because an argument often used against research on the history of minorities and the poor is the perception that these groups leave little behind that can be used for historical study (Thomson, 1999, 26).

An additional point to highlight is that my oral history research covers both female and male perspectives. During the interviews, I observed that women had described their daily lives with great enthusiasm. It is important to recognise that gender can impact what individuals remember when engaging with narrators in oral history interviews: what holds significance for one gender may not be as noteworthy for the other. Women have traditionally been encouraged to express their emotions, so it makes sense that they would remember them more vividly than men (Raleigh Yow, 2005, 50).

All the Armenians I interviewed are historical actors and eyewitnesses of events that happened during those years, and I acknowledged and assured the research's anonymity. Therefore, the texts do not include any identifying information or names. I decided to maintain their anonymity although I had verbal consent to reveal their identities or status. The research was conducted in the Republic of Armenia in the summer of 2022, and it covers eight in-depth interviews in Armenian.

2.1. A Brief Historical Background

The lack of territorial coherence can disrupt how territorial states, social groups and individuals perceive geographical boundaries. An interesting example is the differing historical accounts presented in textbooks of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot schools, used to legitimise their respective political agendas (Chao & Martin, 2024). In the same wake, both Armenians and Azerbaijanis have historical claims on the Nakhijevan region. It is crucial to recognise the significance of history in shaping their current political objectives when discussing their historical backgrounds. Azerbaijanis focus on

constructing a national identity and establishing heroes and legends to foster strong ethnic unity. Conversely, Armenians seek justice for the deported Armenians of Nakhijevan as a means of addressing their suffering and lack of representation in that region.

Historically, political and geographic borders have been employed to exclude and separate “in-groups” from “out-groups”, with the former enjoying citizenship privileges and community membership responsibilities while the latter are affiliated with different communities and may pose a potential threat (Olivas Osuna, 2024, 205). Malcolm Anderson (1996, 35) argues that territorial ideologies may have poor historical roots despite using history to support them. Stateless nations or ethnic communities that assert political independence frequently create a territorial ideology and historical identity. In local circumstances, these territorial ideologies form and develop into strong tools of political mobilisation. Disadvantaged people, negatively impacted by economic and political change, rely on them as a tool to shift the balance in their favour. In this sense, weak and vulnerable populations are more likely to support territorial ideologies.

I contend that the territory of Nakhijevan represents one of many border regions shaped by distinct historical phases. Nakhijevan was originally part of historical Armenia and retained this status until the outbreak of World War I (Ayvazyan, 2017, 8). The Russian imperial initiative to alter the demographic composition played a crucial role in establishing a core for the Armenian community and strengthening their territorial presence on historical lands (Ter-Matevosyan, 2023, 679). However, following a decision by the Soviet Union, Nakhijevan was incorporated into the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in the early 1920s. The Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic was established on 28 April 1920, when the 11th Army of the Bolshevik Red Army invaded the country, and later, it joined the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Balayev, 2013, 19). The following telegram was issued to Soviet Armenia by Soviet Azerbaijan: “As of today the border disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan are declared re-solved. Mountainous Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhijevan are considered part of the Soviet Republic of Armenia” (Croissant, 1998, 18). Thus, on 28 July 1920, the Red Army occupied Nakhijevan, which Turkey later acknowledged as Soviet territory governed by Soviet Azerbaijan. On 16 March 1921, Turkey and Russia signed a treaty on the status of Nakhijevan, without the Armenian side, and placed the territory under the protection of the Republic of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist. This was a result of the Soviet Union’s “divide and rule” policy (Ivanov, 2011, 20–21).

Article 5 of the 1923 Treaty of Kars¹ stated that the Nakhijevan exclave was an autonomous region within Azerbaijan despite the fact that its citizens were predominantly Azerbaijanis and, as such, belonged to the same ethnic group as the majority of Union Republic residents. On Nakhijevan’s territory, the Armenian SSR had further claims, none of which were approved by the Treaty (Balayev, 2013, 19). Armenian

¹ For the text of the Treaty in French and Ottoman Turkish, see <https://acikerisim.tbmm.gov.tr/items/5243b3c2-eb6a-46b0-80b2-e22fea233a8c>.

nationalists believed that giving Nakhijevan to Azerbaijan was a “historic injustice” (Cornell, 2011, 37). Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it remained an exclave of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Presently devoid of Armenian inhabitants, they still regard Nakhijevan as their historical homeland (Laura, 2022).

A total of 50,209 Armenians, or 40% of Nakhijevan’s population, were recorded as living there on 1 January 1916 by the Caucasian calendar for 1917. By the 1915 massacres, this number had increased because of the influx of refugees from the Ottoman Empire and Yerevani guberniya. There were 6,300 Armenians living in Sharur, with a large Armenian population, as of 1915 (Ivanov, 2011, 20–21). Nakhichevan had 11,276 Armenians in 1926, but only 9,519 (6,7%) in 1959, 5,828 (2,9%) in 1970, and 3,406 (1,42%) in 1979. Finally, only 1.5% of Armenians were living there in 1988. The Christian Armenians left for Armenia, and as a result, the Azerbaijani “Nakhichevanization” was successfully carried out (Hewsen, 2001, 226).

The issue of this borderland appears to have diminished in contemporary discourse as Nakhijevan has undergone effective homogenization and lacks active political discourse from the Armenian perspective seeking claims to this territory. Multiple factors contribute to this situation. Due to the widespread perception that every border and borderland should be viewed as unique, the theoretical focus on borders and border regions has been dismissed for a long time. Studies of border regions and societies eliminate misconceptions that the terms “state” and “society” or “state” and “country” are inevitably interchangeable or coterminous. Any state’s border marks serve as an arbitrator and unifier of intricate geopolitical, political and social conflicts (Anderson & Liam, 1999, 595).

I link another contributing factor with the issue of territoriality. Territoriality is “a spatial strategy to affect, influence, or control resources and people, by controlling area”. This type of enforcement “uses area to classify and assign things” and operates by limiting access to and from designated regions (Sack, 1986, 21–34). The question of whether and to what extent state borders are currently undergoing a historic transition is directly affected by the complex nature of territoriality (Anderson & Liam, 1999, 595). As this borderland became part of Soviet Azerbaijan and continues to be an exclave of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan earned the privilege over the region’s territoriality.²

2.2. Defining the Concept of Citizenship from Social Perspective

The formal status of being a member of a political or legal institution, along with the associated rights and obligations, has historically constituted the core of citizenship. This fundamental conception of citizenship dates back to the classical era and evolved from two broad conceptions that originated in ancient Greece and Imperial Rome. These conceptions later developed into what are now known as “republican” and “liberal” interpretations of citizenship (Bellamy, 2015). Various facets of citizenship can be

² See https://nakhchivan.preslib.az/en_b1.html#17.

distinguished and selectively emphasised; the prominence of a particular facet in a given context is contingent upon historical antecedents and prevailing economic and political circumstances (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2012, 1736).³ To conduct this study, I explore the alternative concept of citizenship, specifically from a social standpoint. To understand how Armenians in Soviet Nakhijevan viewed their citizenship, it is important to approach citizenship through a social democratic lens.

Citizenship in non-democratic and totalitarian systems is often perceived as merely a nominal designation, leading to individuals with this status being viewed more like subjects than true citizens (Herzog, 2012, 792). During the Soviet era, the social dimension of citizenship played a significant role in exercising citizens' rights within the state. The socialist state brought a set of material and social rights, but these were rights without citizenship. Abolition of private property and denial of the right to free association had largely emptied civil rights of their meaning in Soviet style communities. Given the passive nature of "elected" official entities, political rights proclaimed in constitutions were primarily formal. What remained were universal social rights, which ensured some equality in mediocrity and served as one of the foundations of people's subordination to the all-powerful paternalistic state (Heinen, 1997, 583). Soviet nationality policy inadvertently fostered the formation and strengthening of ethnic identities, leading to increased unity among the predominant national groups (Suny, 1990, 6). This policy facilitated the "reconstruction of an ethnic identity that encompasses the entire nation" (Saroyan, 1988, 220). I argue that the implementation of shared citizenship rights has made feasible the coexistence of multiple ethnicities in the Nakhijevan region. Armenians and Azerbaijanis, two competing ethnic communities, have been able to develop a sense of belonging to the state because of these citizenship privileges.

Citizenship in the USSR, like post-imperial citizenships in France and Great Britain, was layered on top of national citizenships. While political rights were limited, substantial social rights, including the right to education, were granted. These rights were distributed differently based on class, ethnicity and position within the party hierarchy (Cooper, 2018, 107). Golfo Alexopoulos (2006, 488–489) studies citizenship as a weapon of control used by the government apparatus to keep out people who were seen as a threat to the system, to ensure loyalty to the regime and to promote the identity of a Soviet citizen. He investigates how the Soviet Union's stratification of citizens with full rights operated from the 1920s to 1938 and states that one distinctive aspect of Soviet rule was the ability to separate citizenship rights from citizenship itself: one might have the title of a citizen, while not experiencing all the rights and protections that are associated with it. He also suggests that since the formation of the Soviet Union, besides

³ An international research group has conducted research utilising this conceptual framework in the context of the South Caucasus region. One outcome of these investigations was the completion of a PhD dissertation by Milena Baghdasaryan.

the category of “citizens with full rights”, there also existed categories of “persons without citizenship”, “citizens stripped of all rights” and “citizens lacking certain rights”. I propose that Armenians in Soviet Nakhijevan were “citizens lacking certain rights”.

Another important aspect is that the Soviet Union upheld its citizens’ ethnic identities, which in Soviet terms referred to personal “nationality” and subsequently made a distinction among the citizens. Starting from 1932, “nationality” was registered in citizens’ internal passports (Simonsen, 2005, 211). Thus, nationality has come to be seen as an eternal, rigid characteristic of birth, as opposed to pre-Soviet more fluid, religious or ethno-religious identities, thanks to the practice of nationality registration in citizens’ passports, which persisted until the early 1990s in Russia and some former Soviet republics (Simonsen, 2005, 211). Additionally, this technique has promoted a number of ethnic or national identities, including new ones. The state managed or produced ethno-national identities of its citizens through registration of personal nationality, supporting processes of nation-formation based on religious, tribal or other identities (Saroyan, 1996, 403). It is significant to note that Armenians residing in Nakhijevan were identified as “Armenians” in their passports. This could be attributed to the autonomous status of Nakhijevan. In contrast, other smaller groups such as Kurds, Lezgins, Talyshed Avars or Meskhetian Turks were listed as “Azerbaijanis” in their passports (Dudwick, 1996, 439). Nakhijevani Armenians were particularly conscious of their minority status within the ethnically dominant Azerbaijan during the Soviet era because of discriminatory policies and limited prospects for regional advancement. Citizenship has been employed to “reinforce existing identities” (Agarin & Karolewski, 2015, 137).

2.3. Ethnic Coexistence in the Soviet Union

The borders of the Soviet republics were not based on geographical features and did not serve the functional needs of Soviet administration. Instead, they were drawn to align with the ethnic makeup of local populations, ensuring that the titular nations of each republic had a numerical majority (Hajda & Beissinger, 1990). The ethno-federal strategy enabled the dominant ethnic group’s representatives to exert control over administrative decision-making in their Union republics, with somewhat reduced influence in autonomous republics and even less so in autonomous regions.⁴ This meant that the political leadership of ethnically defined territories within the Soviet Union had greater privileges in governing local affairs compared to other subjects of the federation (Csergő, 2002). Thus, the Soviet authorities emphasised the concept of internationalism, promoting the idea that people of different nationalities could live and work together harmoniously within the framework of the socialist state. The government highlighted the supposed unity and friendship among the Soviet states, presenting the Soviet Union as a multinational federation where diverse ethnic groups coexisted

⁴ Autonomous oblast (AO) in Russian.

peacefully. Stalin's phrase "friendship among the peoples" has been used since 1935 to describe the connection between Soviet nations (Gerhard, 1991).

Arman (2022) emphasised:

"The ordinary people did not discriminate among themselves. Discrimination was imposed by the elites. Even in the last period, local Turks⁵ helped Armenians to cross the Yeraskh border. The population lived with their usual daily worries."

This statement elucidates that during their coexistence in the Soviet Union, Armenians and Azerbaijanis shared common daily experiences, fostering a sense of unity as a community. Hasmik (2002) noted that they did not perceive significant differences between themselves until certain challenges emerged, such as the rise of nationalist movements:

"It was very good during the Soviet Union because I was a citizen of the Soviet Union. People were equal, and they lived equally. My grandmother, for example, used to come to Yerevan; the Turk said: 'Dear sister, what can you bring from Yerevan?' My grandmother used to buy it. After the Karabakh movement, the Turks were furious. In 1988, Nakhijevan was finally depopulated. But there were helpers from the Turks; they told us in advance to go; it would not be good. My father did not manage to get something out because he helped each of the villagers."

In the Soviet Union, despite the endeavours to foster a unified Soviet identity, the recognition of cultural rights was deemed imperative. Individuals and diverse ethnic groups within the Soviet Union were entitled to partake in their cultural practices, use their native languages, and observe their traditions. However, the extent to which these rights are upheld and exercised has varied across different regions and has evolved over time (Stalin, 1953, 65–66). Armenians were not deprived of their cultural rights during this period. Although churches were often closed in Soviet times, Armenians still managed to uphold certain religious celebrations. Additionally, they were able to organise cultural events in collaboration with Azerbaijani individuals. Elina (2022), who was born in the village of Aza in Nakhijevan and is 64 years old, recalled her upbringing in the region. Despite not pursuing higher education due to financial constraints after completing her school, she highlighted the ability of her community to maintain its customs and traditions:

"It was a kolkhoz from the beginning, then in 1973, it became the collective farm village. Every year, on the Sunday after 20 June, we used to celebrate Vardevor.⁶ We gave a concert with Armenians and Turks. The opening was when we performed the Hayastan-Azerbaijan song, but they did not forbid us to hold Armenian events."

⁵ It is interesting to mention that all Armenians do not discriminate against Turks and Azerbaijanis. They refer to them as one nation.

⁶ Vardavar is an Armenian festival, for which see <https://folkdancefootnotes.org/culture/special-occasions/vardavar-%D5%BE%D5%A1%D6%80%D5%A4%D5%A1%D5%BE%D5%A1%D5%BC-armenian-summer-water-fest/>.

Elina's mention of performing the "Hayastan-Azerbaijan song"⁷ underscores the shared cultural values between the two nations, highlighting mutual respect and collaboration. Living together within one community fostered the development of shared linguistic elements, with Armenians adopting certain words from Azerbaijani vocabulary. The term "kirva"⁸ serves as a prominent example of this linguistic exchange. Moreover, collaborative efforts in work settings did not impede the maintenance of a stable and relatively peaceful coexistence between the two ethnic groups.

Laura (2022) provided vivid examples of the everyday interactions she had with Azerbaijanis, delving deeply into the concept of discrimination among ethnic groups. She emphasised that despite having close friendships and maintaining intimate relationships with Azerbaijanis, Armenians were careful not to blend with Turks. They maintained a cautious approach, recognising that they could not become a unified brotherhood or integrate into a single nation-state:

"I had a Turkish friend named Sevda; we were very close. Her brother Salei, when we went to the village, would meet us in his car, take us wherever we wanted; we were very close. Actually, at one point, he got angry with me. I did not invite her to my wedding; my wedding was at my uncle's house; mama said that it would be a shame to invite a Turk. She [Sevda] herself got married in Baku; she wanted me to be a bridesmaid. We have been to a lot of Turkish weddings; we also went to Bayram, but at that time, our grandfathers said that even if a Turk were a raisin, do not put it in your pocket. The elder Turks did not give much trouble. Our Turks helped us to cross the border. Until 1988, we considered ourselves more Armenians, with full rights, because we judged ourselves healthier, and now, we do not know whether we will get home safe or not."

Despite their caution towards Turks and the maintenance of internal boundaries, it is intriguing to analyse certain key aspects. Laura mentioned the term "our Turks", indicating a level of familiarity and acceptance towards the Azerbaijanis they coexisted with. This suggests that over time, the Turks developed a sense of kinship or connection with their Azerbaijani neighbours, meaning that the concept of kinship is not solely tied to blood relations but also extends to the neighbours with whom they shared their daily lives. Through prolonged proximity and shared experiences, their relationships with Azerbaijanis became even closer than those with distant relatives.

This follows the argument that Soviet nation-building policy succeeded within some period. People could live together and, despite some conflicts, could share their daily life matters. Even the sentence "we considered ourselves more Armenians, with full rights, because we judged ourselves healthier, and now, we do not know whether we will get home safe or not" (Laura, 2022) proves that for ordinary people, it did not seem much difference what political status they bore, or what their citizenship was. In most

⁷ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OlrUMTUPpSU>.

⁸ See <https://ganjalyanyura.wordpress.com/2016/08/26/kirva/>.

cases, people would prefer to live in peace and preserve their national identity, and it seems that they succeeded in doing so at that time. Hasmik (2022), who considers herself a Zok, which is an indigenous Armenian community that uses the Zok language, a typical dialect spoken in seven regions of Nakhijevan, also agrees that two nations could live together in a nation-state, and it is clear from her narrative that not only Armenians but also Azerbaijanis wanted to keep their close relations:

“The Turks used to call my father ‘kardash’. We have a dialect; I am pure Zok. Zoks live in seven districts. Let us say that *hac* is pronounced *hoc*. The TV was in Turkish. Once, I fell and broke my nose because of them [the Turks]. My neighbour told me to go and tell my mother about Zeinab’s concert; I ran and fell. It had nothing to do with being a Turk; since she was an artist, everyone was listening. I also participated in Turkish weddings. The Turks used to come and bake bread for us. Baking bread was another ceremony; there must have been 7–8 people. The bread was baked throughout the year. They sat down from 6 in the morning and baked bread, then they gave it to everyone. Every day, they gave fresh bread to your household.”

Marianna (2022) noted that their relationships with the teachers were positive. She observed that there was no apparent tension or discrimination among the students:

“We did not learn Turkish at school, but we had a Turkish algebra teacher; he was a good person. In the 80s, Azerbaijani was introduced as a language. We studied Russian and English in our school years. The English teacher came and went from the city of Nakhijevan every day.”

It is crucial to note that tensions began to escalate due to actions taken by local authorities, which subsequently impacted the daily interactions between ethnic groups. Azerbaijani individuals were often appointed to high-ranking positions within the state administrative system, while Armenians were not afforded similar opportunities. Despite instances where Armenians and Azerbaijanis coexisted peacefully, there were certain villages where residents opted to maintain distance from Azerbaijani counterparts, leading to minimal interaction between the two groups.

Laura (2022) recounted a case where, despite Azerbaijanis being granted certain privileges, Armenians were able to assert their rights to reside within their own community:

“If you were a little stronger, you could go to them and complain. My mother, for example, was strong; she could carry her words. My father worked as a driver on a collective farm. Once, the Turks wanted to harass my father: he was driving a new car; they cut off the front of the car; they wanted to hit him; my mother said that when Aliyev was coming, I would lean against the car with my bare feet and tell him: ‘Look, what your nation is doing’. So many policemen came to our house, apologised and told me not to do such a thing. My mother said: ‘I will complain that you are discriminating between nations’. My mother said: ‘Look, if something like this happens again, I will write a letter’.”

It shows that Armenians were not afraid of claiming their rights. Even they were living side by side with Azerbaijanis, and sometimes there were some ethnic problems. An interesting point here is that the local Azerbaijani people were also afraid of Armenians, though they were given some privileges, and when they were threatened (“I will complain, you are discriminating between nations” [Laura, 2022]), they tried to maintain peaceful relations with their neighbours. Thus, Armenians considered themselves full Armenians despite being controlled by the local Azerbaijani authorities. This is important for claiming the rights of integration into the community. They were aware of the system operating in the Soviet Union. So, claiming to protect their rights is a means of feeling full citizens of the state. People used citizenship as a tool for their daily survival.

The policy against ethnicity was developed by the authorities. Arman (2022) mentioned “Azerbaijan had a special policy: in order to work in state institutions, you had to know Azerbaijani”. This was a nationalistic approach towards other nations and caused further discrimination between nations. After the establishment of Soviet order in Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Azerbaijani authorities created difficulties for Armenians from exile to return to their ancestral homes. Among the many such anti-Soviet and anti-constitutional decisions of the Azerbaijani authorities, the decision made in 1922 should be emphasised. The June 24 telegram of Musabekov, the Chairman of the People’s Committee of the Azerbaijan SSR, reported that the “mass entry of the population to the borders of Azerbaijan” is prohibited by the decision of the Central Executive Committee of Azerbaijan (Ayvazyan, 2005, 13).

Artyom (2022), born in 1962 in Znaberd village of Nakhijevan, highlighted the restricted access to the territory of Nakhijevan. Crossing the border zone required permission, indicating that Nakhijevan, being considered a borderland, received special treatment. As Soviet Nakhijevan was under the jurisdiction of Soviet Azerbaijan, entry to its territory was tightly controlled. Even Armenians born in other parts of Soviet Armenia were required to obtain permission and present written documentation at the checkpoint:

“We had Soviet passports. In our passports, there was a sign stating our status. To enter the territory of Nakhijevan, there was a military post that checked: if you did not have that document, they did not let you in, or you had to get permission from the passport department because there were strong weapons in Nakhijevan. It was a border city; it was not small; with the military, the population was approximately 250,000–300,000.”

Boris (2022) pointed out that within the state organising system, Armenians could attain certain positions, but the more privileged roles were often given to Azerbaijanis:

“Armenians had positions, but second or third positions. During the Soviet Union, you were considered a full Armenian, but they prevented you in every way possible. Once, when my uncle was going in a truck, the drunk Turks cut his way; my uncle got out alone. There were ten of them; he beat all of them; they complained to the police. The police asked, among them, how many were Turks and how many

were Armenians. When he found out that one Armenian beat ten Turks, he said he had done well.”

Workplaces in Soviet times can highlight the idea of equality among nations. What Marianna (2022) mentioned, that is “Our schoolchildren were taken to harvest, and the Turks were brought from the neighbouring village, too”, is a clear statement that the Soviet policy was not discriminating between nations. This was done to preach brotherhood and solidarity in the community (Gerhard, 1991).

Therefore, national problems between Armenians and Azerbaijanis started to arise gradually in the middle of the Soviet period and developed intensively up to its collapse. Soviet Azerbaijan developed a special policy so that Armenians would leave their homeland. The first victims of the white massacre were the Armenians of Astapat village left behind by the Great Patriotic War, who gradually moved to Yerevan. The people of Astapat were followed by some Armenians from the cities of Nakhijevan and Julfa. Then, starting from the 1940s, the number of Armenian schools in Nakhijevan began to decrease. Armenian departments of Nakhijevan Pedagogical College, Medical Technical College and Armenian Theater, for example, were closed. Thus, in the 1950s, the emigration of Armenians became a common phenomenon (Ayvazyan, 2005, 13).

As the Armenian population began to decrease in the region of Nakhijevan, Armenians continued to regard themselves as full citizens of Soviet Nakhijevan until the nationalistic approach of Soviet Azerbaijan became increasingly prominent in the final decades of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, individuals born in Nakhijevan received special consideration. Despite these shifts, there were no conflicts or military actions between the ethnic groups, and ordinary people did not complain about living alongside one another as neighbours. Over time, they developed a shared identity as part of a unified community, greatly influenced by the concept of “Soviet citizens”.

3. Conclusion

The research focused on the Armenians residing in Nakhijevan. Choosing oral history interviews as the primary source, it depicted the middle period of the Soviet Union since the interviewees were middle-aged people. Additionally, the research incorporated Armenian and Russian sources to facilitate a comprehensive and multidimensional examination of Soviet Nakhijevan. The interviews were conducted in Armenian in the Republic of Armenia.

The research analysed the concept of citizenship from a social perspective, particularly within the framework of the Soviet Union, where social rights were deemed fundamental for inclusion in society. The focus on Soviet Nakhijevan was chosen due to its historical evolution as a borderland region, heavily influenced by specific historical stages, with the Soviet era leaving a profound impact on its trajectory. During this period, Nakhijevan attained the status of an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

under the auspices of Soviet Azerbaijan, thereby being regarded as an exclave due to its lack of a direct border with Azerbaijan. Consequently, governance in Soviet Nakhijevan was administered by local Azerbaijani authorities.

This borderland serves as a focal point for the construction of a historical identity intertwined with territorial ideologies, as both Armenians and Azerbaijanis claim its territory. Presently, Armenians refrain from asserting rights over this region in political discourse, a trend that persisted during the Soviet era as well. Soviet Armenia avoided publishing articles on Soviet Nakhijevan, likely due to adherence to Soviet ideologies and concerns about potential ethnic tensions between the two nations. Consequently, archival sources on the topic of Nakhijevan are scarce. Nevertheless, some Armenians continue to produce literature and scholarly works exploring the cultural and territorial history of Nakhijevan.

Armenians perceive Nakhijevan as their historical homeland due to the profound sense of belonging instilled by being born there or having lived in the region for a significant period of time. Conversely, Azerbaijani authors have written numerous books and articles, particularly during and after the Soviet era, emphasising Nakhijevan as the ancestral land of the ruling Aliyev family. The objective of the study was to elucidate the historical citizenship of Armenians in Soviet Nakhijevan. The concept of historical citizenship suggests that Armenians maintained a historical connection with Nakhijevan, and the social rights they experienced within the Soviet Union were linked to their historical ties to the region. Moreover, the nationality of Armenians was registered as “Armenians” in their passports, though Nakhijevan was part of Azerbaijan, and other smaller ethnic groups, such as Lezgins, Talyshed Avars or Meskhetian Turks, were registered as “Azerbaijanis” (Dudwick, 1996, 439).

The research through oral history interviews revealed that during the Soviet period, Armenians in Nakhijevan regarded themselves as full citizens of the region under the framework of “Soviet citizenship” even though facing discrimination within the state administrative system by local Azerbaijani authorities. Despite these challenges, Armenians maintained positive relationships with the ordinary people of Nakhijevan and actively participated in the region’s economic activities. Their interactions were characterised by a shared daily life and common customs, fostering potential for peaceful coexistence and unity. Ultimately, Armenians in Nakhijevan opted to live under the governance of Soviet Azerbaijan, thereby preserving their historical citizenship in their historical homeland.

This small, forgotten and distant region is extremely significant in the daily life and politics of the South Caucasus. Today, it is relevant from a geopolitical, historical, social and psychological standpoint. It is a good ground for social science theory studies since, as my research shows, citizenship and state membership have social implications. The research conducted on historical citizenship in this region has the potential to contribute valuable insights that can be applied to other peripheral areas of the Soviet

Union. This work will hopefully be integrated into larger research endeavours in the future, thereby expanding its applicability and relevance to broader academic discourse.

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