7 Armenian volunteer fighters in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

An eye on narrative trajectories in a no-war no-peace situation

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Introduction

In April 2016 the 'Four-Day War' erupted in Karabakh.[1] This short but brutal bout of hostilities was one more manifestation, if any were needed, of the unstable situation – 'neither war nor peace' – that has reigned in Karabakh since the cease-fire in 1994. It is a clear reminder that the conflict that erupted in 1988 has never truly been resolved, resulting in a 'frozen situation' (Broers, 2013a). The OSCE Minsk Group offered proposals at regular intervals throughout the 1990s and 2000s, only to be met with a refusal by one party or the other to compromise. The irrelevance of the expression 'frozen conflict' – that had already been challenged by growing cease-fire violations since 2014 – is no longer questionable. Instead, the term 'unresolved conflicts' is now often preferred to describe such seemingly intractable post-Soviet conflicts characterized by varying but constant degree of intensity of military operations. While the 2016 war signals an abrupt break in the low-intensity conflict going on since the 1994 cease-fire, leading to the identification of two distinct wars, on the long-run it primarily underscores a continuum of instability.[2]

The Karabakh status quo, on the other hand, could actually be described as frozen. Since 1994, Karabakh has displayed many features of a *de facto* state[3] (Broers, Iskandaryan and Minasyan, 2015). After developing a strategy of openly claiming 'unification' with Armenia, Karabakh chose to declare its independence in 1991 and has continued to demand the recognition of this status following the military victory of 1994.[4] Even if Karabakh has remained totally outside Azerbaijani control ever since the cease-fire of 1994, Baku reckons that it still belongs to Azerbaijan.

By immersing ourselves in a particular societal response – the engage-
ment of volunteer fighters from Armenia in the Karabakh war in 1988–
1994 and again in April-May 2016 when military confrontations were at
their peak[5] – we attempt to re-explore motivations for the conflict over a
period of more than 25 years, which encompasses an entire generational
cycle. Our research question deals with how war veterans remember and
tell about their war experience against the backdrop of the 2016 warring
peak. It aims at analysing the subjective meaning of voluntary engage-
ment and the perception/labellization of the conflict by volunteers. The
purpose of this chapter is to offer some insights on the features of that
particular societal response (volunteering) in a situation of politically
non-resolved and militarily never-ending conflict and the effects that
situation produces on their trajectories. At this point in our investigation,
we are providing a preliminary analysis of the qualitative data collected
during two fieldworks in Armenia (June 2016 and January 2017), fol-
lowing an inductive approach.

We worked through 20 single and group semi-open interviews.[6] By
navigating our way through various channels that led to a 'snowballing'
effect of participation, we were able to interview a variety of people: some
'old-timers', members of organizations for the assistance of former com-
batants, the head and the vice-head of the *Yerkrapah* Union of volunteers
('defenders of the land'), former combatants who became career soldiers,
members of a special *djogad* [battalion] (the *Ardziv Mahabart* battalion of
those 'condemned to death'), and of *Osoby polk* [special battalion], a
professional soldier who defected from the Soviet Army to join the front,
a former GRU soldier become a field agent during the war, two women,
and a television reporter/documentary filmmaker who had reported on the
Karabakh war in 1992–1994. We also conducted two complementary
interviews with close relatives of former combatants (the widow of a 'lost'
volunteer and the son of a soldier who died in combat). The diversity of
their sociological profiles was particularly enriching, and we placed great
importance on the meaning that the participants gave to their actions,
taking a Weberian[7] perspective of interpretive approach to the partici-
pants, which means that we focus on their rationale as 'actors', without
any prejudgment towards them. The list of people interviewed has no sta-
tistical weight in terms of representativeness, but the qualitative material
that it represents provides us with the heuristic elements that we will
develop subsequently.

The manner in which hundreds of veterans voluntarily enlisted again in
April 2016 and the subsequent weeks,[8] and the testimonies we were able to
gather from them, have enlightened us on their perception of the conflict and
their role within it over a long no-war no-peace period. It would naturally be
necessary to complete this investigation with a symmetric enquiry of the per-
ceptions and experiences of Azerbaijani ex-combatants who participated in
the same conflict.

Becoming a combatant: singular trajectories within a collective sociopolitical history

Our interviews clearly show that the experience of the war in 2016 unleashed vivid memories of the events of 1988–1994. Those memories followed two narrative paths: one picking up key events that marked the outbreak of war in Karabakh, and the other traveling the road of personal histories of 'becoming a combatant', the latter process stemming, as the stories make clear, from the intersection of an objective situation and a subjective process of involvement into the fighting. A striking example of this combination is reflected in the question of the beginning of the war. For each volunteer, dating the start of the war is necessarily caught up in this dual narration: in the absence of any general mobilization, the former combatants describe their entry into the war as a mix of informal improvization and a logic of collective action.

Two dimensions coexist. One is the collective sociopolitical fabric of history, within which a number of events remain in the memories as critical junctures. In this interlacing of events, where objective facts meet individual decisions, one event is common to the narratives of all former Armenian fighters we interviewed: the Sumgait events of February 1988 where 32 Armenians were killed and 197 injured in the span of a 3-day pogrom in Azerbaijan.[9] It is mentioned as an event of collective significance holding a predominant place in the beginning of the war, one it indeed gained from a political point of view as well (Papazian, 2016). Strikingly enough, the term Sumgait is sometimes used by the interviewees as a generic expression encompassing several such instances that took place in Azerbaijan between 1988 and 1990.[10] The other is the individual representation of events, particularly in a society where access to information was highly controlled by the state, according to which actors date the beginning of their war subjectively. Thus each participant's actual experience offers first-hand information, and the aggregate of these experiences outlines a collective history, emphasizing the autonomy of societal rationales over political ones.

One way of dating the outbreak of war: Sumgait

> *It started immediately after Sumgait. The most important thing is how the whole of the Armenian people rose up. In '88, on the 28th of February – that's the most important thing. It started after Sumgait. And then the Armenian people rose up and their foremost demand was: Nagorno-Karabakh.*
>
> (Gegam, born in 1961, president of *Osoby polk* – special detachment, an organization for ex-combatants from this detachment)

All of our respondents insist on the catalysing effect that the events of Sumgait had on their own engagement,[11] as the sign of a watershed after which it was impossible to remain neutral or continue to put one's faith in political mobilization. While demonstrations were experienced as important places and times for socialization, they were often presented in an inverse chronology to that of actual facts: memory reorganizes the logic of past events, since

after the massacres of Sumgait participation in demonstrations did not intensify numerically but rather took on a new significance. By going to demonstrations, people tried, sometimes haphazardly, to become involved on the military front and not simply the political one. Demonstrations were no longer simply an occasion for chanting *Miatsum* (unification), but also a space where people created ties, signed on to lists, let others know that they were ready to set off, by reaffirming Karabakh's claims. But our participants' memories were often jumbled, with some people attributing the demands for independence of Nagorno-Karabakh to that period, when in fact they would only be formalized in slogans in 1991 when the strategy of unification was abandoned in favour of a bid for independence. That is how Manvel, a former soldier who is currently active in a veterans' assistance organization, associates the gatherings in the square of the Opera house after Sumgait to the demands for Karabakh's independence.

> Yes, like all normal people, everyone stood up and went to the Opera…
> and demanded Artsakh's[12] independence, because…
>   (Manvel, member of a veteran organization, Yerevan, 7 June 2016)

At the political level, the pogroms played a role in accelerating attempts to form militarized groups ready to leave for the front. As soon as 1988, the Karabakh committee decided to set up *yerkrapah djogadner* [*lit*. armed groups of guardians of the country] (Papazian, 2016). Simultaneously, the Armenian National Movement (ANM), leading the demonstrations in favor of Karabakh's inclusion within Soviet Armenia's territory, radicalized its defiance towards Soviet power and started to claim sovereignty. The most significant decision in that regard was the creation of a defence committee in 1990 headed by Vazgen Sargsyan.[13] The committee's mission was to try to supervise the formation and dispatching of *djogads,* informal armed groups comprised between 15 and a couple of dozen men, mounting to a maximum of 5,000 persons in the whole Republic. Since Armenia was still part of the Soviet Union, that mission was all but official.[14] The various conflicts in the Caucasus exhibit some of these same commonalities: individuals gravitated towards the war, in a mix of informal groups of fighters, attempts at self-organization and formalization by the burgeoning political forces.[15]

Committed volunteers, improvised fighters

The absence of a declaration of war as well as of an established state produced a situation where spontaneity and improvization prevailed in the formation of groups of *djogad.* There is a sort of shortcut in people's memories that led from demonstrations to the formation of *djogad.*

> At the beginning. When there were meetings, I stayed there for several
> days. I took part. There were guys who were all the same age, or about
> the same age. From the depths of their souls, they were all eager to join
> Karabakh. And then we started setting up detachments, djogads.

As Gamavoragan? [As volunteers?]

Yes. Gamavoragan. [As volunteers]. (…)

We gathered altogether. Nobody knew each other. We didn't know who the others were, they didn't know who I was, we just met at a meeting and set up a detachment.

(Manvel, member of a veteran organization, Yerevan, 7 June 2016)

The way arms were acquired was typical of the improvization reigning in the late 1980s–early 1990s period when the Soviet system was gradually disintegrating before new states had been institutionalized. Weapons were gathered from any available source and by any means: storming garrisons, buying, swapping, corrupting. These same practices can be seen at work in Abkhazia and Chechnya: becoming a combatant was part of a context of economic disorganization that resulted from the perestroika reforms, in conjunction with the logic of privatising and weakening the Soviet state (Beissinger and Young, 2002). So we can discern a varied 'fighter's kit': some went scavenging amongst the weapons of village hunters, some in garrisons that had been forced, some criss-crossed the Caucasus to stockpile arms:

There were no automatic weapons. We had hunting rifles…

Where did the weapons come from? From homes?

Sure.

Are there weapons in every house?

No, not in every one.

Did you know where to look?

Naturally.

Did you ask neighbours? Relatives?

Friends. Neighbours. Anywhere.

(Armen, vice-president of a local *Yerkrapah* branch, Dilijan, 3 June 2016)

Ruben is a former Soviet officer who defected in order to form a group of combatants and reach the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1990. He recalls both how he organized his group of combatants and what weapons they had when they went off to fight:

So you got these eight people together in 1989? At the beginning of the year? And after that, what did you do in concrete terms? Where did you get weapons? What strategy did you use?

Weapons… Yes, we had weapons… well, I mean hunting rifles, and later on we got our hands on small calibre rifles from the DOSAAF (the Soviet Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Fleet). Then we took weapons from the Azeris.[16]

(Ruben, former Soviet officer, 7 June 2016, Yerevan)

Their combat experience before volunteering to fight was often quite varied.
Most of the people we interviewed had done their military service during the
Soviet period, but some still learned in the field. Gegam concedes that every-
one in his *djogad* learned to fight that way – simply by fighting.

> Did those 36 guys know how to fight?
> They learned.
> In the field?
> You know, we all learned in the field.
>   (Gegam, Osoby polk, veteran organization, 7 June 2016, Yerevan)

'Political scheming' *versus* 'noble fighting'

The stories we gathered from Armenian ex-combatants place great impor-
tance on etiquette in the conduct of warfare. Whether this reflects reality or a
myth, the fact that they mention this topic at all is interesting. Experience in
fact shows that warfare, wherever it takes place, pushes all boundaries:
anyone can end up perpetrating acts of barbarity. Topics which one comes
across when interviewing *gamavoragan* are: fighting for one's land, one's
people, one's nation; fighting only in self-defence; respecting the laws of war-
fare and rules pertaining to prisoners and their rights; situating one's own
battle within the long collective history and justifying it partly on the basis of
past traumas – these are the basic elements of their stories.

Memory and personal memories of the genocide of Armenians (1915–
1918) are omnipresent in veterans' narratives of their engagement in the
Karabakh conflict. Family memories and/or national history are often called
on to assimilate fighting for Karabakh as a just cause.

> We knew what happened in 1915. And when Artsakh war started I
> gathered my djogad and fought from dusk to dawn. (…) My nom de
> guerre is 'Black tulip'. Not because I am Alain Delon.[17] But because
> when Turks massacred our ancestors in 1915, black tulips came through
> the soil on which they fell.
>   (Sasun Mikaelyan, former commandant and politician, Hrasdan, 14
>   January 2017)

Contrasting with the moral justification of war, disdain for politics or geo-
politics comes across very often in the interviews, some of them consider
opportunistic and dirty, an attitude widespread in the ex-Soviet space. The
world depicted in these conversations is neatly divided into two camps: one
worthy of engagement, and the other not. Vova, a former GRU officer and
member of a secret intelligence group, shares his vision of the world in the
following terms:

> Do you think politics is more dirty than war?

I consider that war is mud, blood and sweat, whereas politics is only muddy. Furthermore, war is a necessity, whereas one can very well live apart from politics. I don't meddle with politics. It is very disagreable for me to have any contact with people in politics. Some political forces offered me financial support, I refused.

(Vova, Yerevan, 13 January 2017)

The worthy harks back to romantic, chivalrous epics of disinterested sacrifice for a noble cause; the unworthy smells of lowly self-interest and corruption, of individuals and oligarchies who calculate for short-term gains. In other words, it is utopian to speak of the (noble) political translation of a military state of affairs (also noble), since politics to the point of view of veterans by definition is never a noble thing.

This dichotomy is found equally in domestic and international politics. The issue of Russia's role in local geopolitics reveals the way in which the Four-Day War has reawakened memories of the first war and its aftermath. A striking case in point was the veterans' view of the 1994 ceasefire, its temporality and consequences, a leitmotiv in our interviews. In May 1994, after three years of all-out military warfare, Russia brokered a cease-fire between the three belligerent parties: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. Looking back, nearly every single one of our interviewees' narratives about the ceasefire of 1994 is tinged with a palpable bitterness. The common thread is Russia 'imposing'[18] the ceasefire, thus preventing the Armenian fighters from completing their task which, in the interviewees' fantasies, meant possibly going all the way to Baku or taking over Nakhichevan.

Did you have a feeling that the war was going to end?

No. Aliyev asked the Russians and they forced the Armenians to sign the ceasefire document.

Did you want the war to continue? For how much longer?

I don't know what our government thinks but these are historically Armenian territories and our historical border was at the river Kura. The war will not end until there is a natural border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

I would like to concentrate on the fact that Aliyev asked the Russians to force the Armenians to stop.

Not forced but convinced.

So what do you think you should do? Continue the war?

Why didn't the USSR stop its offensive after it had reclaimed its borders and reached Berlin? Why should they? Their goal was to make Germany capitulate. So I don't understand why we stopped. It makes no sense.

(Gagik, a former member of *Ardziv Mahabarat*, in Yerevan, 1 June 2016)

One can sense a deep bitterness at the web of patronage that binds Armenia,
a country that depends on Moscow for its security (Minassian, 2008),[19] while
Russia continues to sell arms to Azerbaijan.[20] This situation of 'neither war nor
peace' has been in place for 22 years and is largely ascribed to Moscow's geo-
politics of the status quo in the southern Caucasus, resulting in a plan of dif-
ferentiated yet balanced support for both parties in the conflict. The Four-Day
War has also reawakened their earlier sentiments regarding the *Koltso* in 1991,
when the Soviet Army intervened by surrounding and deporting Armenian
villages from the Karabakh oblast and its surroundings.[21]

> They were all against us; the Soviet Union was against us. There was
> even the whole 'Koltso' operation where Soviet troops defended Azer-
> baijan. They gave them weapons, they fought against us, they made us
> outlaws and declared us separatists.
>
> (Ruben, a former Soviet officer, Yerevan, 7 June 2016)

The legitimacy that comes from having fought and contributed to the military
victory in 1994 gives soldiers and former soldiers the right to criticise Russia.
And their criticisms gain in strength since they themselves have not subse-
quently entered politics; the generally unfavourable perception of politics
encourages a harshly critical stance. As such, Gagik is criticising not only
'Russia' but also the Armenian political elite when he vents his indignation at
the fact that Nikolai Ryzhkov was awarded a hero's medal:

> Since 2004, Nikolai Ryzhkov has been the only person to receive a
> national hero's medal in Armenia. This is someone who has nothing to
> do with independent Armenia. He was the Prime Minister of the USSR
> in 1988 and lived in Gyumri for one month to evaluate the consequences
> of the earthquake. Nothing was even done. I don't understand the point
> in giving him a national hero's medal... If he had at least done something
> to help after the earthquake, then... maybe... but it's still a disaster area
> there. Why was he given a hero's medal but not the people who really
> deserved one? Why don't our current heroes like Armenak Urfanyan,
> Robert Abajyan, Kyaram Sloyan get national hero's medals?

Armenak Urfanyan, Kyaram Sloyan, Robert Abajyan and Andranik Zoh-
rabyan were the first military casualties Armenians (from Armenia and
NKR) suffered in the four-day war.. They have been praised for their beha-
viour in battle and awarded several distinctions. By contrasting the merits of
a former Soviet minister with those of young military officers and soldiers, the
interviewee points out that, in his eyes, the highest distinction in the Republic
should be given to people who sacrificed their lives for its sake. When glan-
cing over more than 25 years of history of Armenia from the late Soviet years
to current independence, the interviewee's landmark of appreciation of one's
deed is action undertaken in the ongoing conflicting situation.

For our sample of veterans, the main feature characterizing the last 25 years is permanent absence of peace: although the concept of 'peacelessness' does not exist, it would be appropriate to describe and analyse situations like the one over Karabakh where a cease-fire is theoretically holding on for decades, but in fact merely containing all-out warfare; instead, quasi every-day violations, regular more intense military peaks of activity and small-scale warring episodes take place. The expectations of veterans – and more largely of a sizeable portion of the Armenian society – are turned towards the next military peak,[22] a psychological state that can be coined of alert.

Unresolved conflict and the paradox of an ordinary state of alert seen through veterans' social trajectories

> Well, the ceasefire has been in place for 22 years, but every year, every month, every week we hear that they have killed, they have killed, they have killed… So is it a ceasefire? It is not. It is obviously war.
>
>   (Armen, vice-president of the organization *Yerkrapah*, Dilijan, 3 June 2016)

These are the words of a former combatant who later became a career soldier in the Armenian Army after the 1988–1994 Karabakh war, and then the vice-president of the local Yerkrapah branch. They are indicative of the situation that is 'neither war, nor peace', which by and large characterizes all the so-called 'frozen' conflicts of the post-Soviet space (Merlin, 2017, Fischer, 2016). In the absence of a peace treaty and a deep-rooted resolution to the conflict, violence continues unabated on the frontline while the conflicting states – recognised and unrecognised – keep arming themselves and remaining permanently on alert. The absence of faith among states and, to a large degree, among societies, increases the degree of alienation of the two peoples.

After the Armenian military victory and the cease-fire of 1994, the question of statehood remained a determining factor in many respects, especially when compared with other military victories of non recognized would-be states in the post-Soviet space: Abkhazia and Chechnya. The issue of combatants' return to civilian life and especially of their disarmament epitomizes this. In stark contrast with Abkhazia after the cease-fire of 1993, and Chechnya after the cease-fire of 1996, the Armenian state endeavoured to systematically collect arms. In the case of Chechnya, almost all of the combatants held on to their weapons after Grozny was retaken in August 1996, and some of them immediately became spoilers of the fragile peace they wanted no part of (Merlin, 2012). As for Abkhazia, the separatists had no intention of requisitioning arms, since the idea seemed absurd and even meaningless in the absence of a peace treaty.[23] In the case of Armenia, however, there is a clear distinction to be made: while Karabakh is a non-recognized state, like Abkhazia, Armenia relies heavily on its identity as a state that is in the process of being built and that is recognized by the international community,

which makes a considerable difference and moulds the post-war period in an
altogether different manner.

One thing that comes across in the interviews is that veterans see a con-
tinuum of war of varying intensity between 1994 and 2016, with the Four-
Day War coming as a climax but not an ending in a long period of unfinished
war. Among Armenian society at large, on the other hand, the dominant
perception is more of a continuum of post-war stability that is interrupted by
specific moments of greater violence. At the same time, the veterans are part
of society so interactions and gaps exist in the evolution of these perceptions.
In this section, we suggest that veterans' sociological trajectories – within the
scope of our interviews which obviously offer a bias since nobody in our
sample had turned into an outright marginal after the cease-fire – has a
heuristic value to look at the notion of a state of alert: the social activities of
a significant proportion of them emphasize both a reconversion of their skills
in civilian life and the practical consequences of their representation of the
Karabakh conflict as unfinished. In our sample, trajectories in the long cease-
fire period of 25 years can be analysed as a reflection of a process of alert
institutionalization on the level of the state but also its impregnation by
individual practices.

Reinsertion of former fighters and the institutionalized state of alert

Several interviews point to a strong link between war experience as a com-
batant on the one hand, and enlisting in the Armenian army after the cease-
fire on the other, a choice that interviewees report for significant numbers of
their *djogad*'s comrades. This institutionalization of individual military tra-
jectories in the post-war context contrasts with the informal paths leading to
'becoming a combatant' described earlier. Each of these individual paths
follow on from the making of the Armenian independent state, first and
foremost tangible in the state's handling of a military prerogative: the birth of
the Armenian army came about precisely in a context of war, in accordance
with a pattern that Charles Tilly has already analysed under the heading 'The
State makes war and war makes the State' (Tilly, 1984; Blom, 2006, Papazian,
2010). But these former combatants were also determined to participate in the
creation of a new army. In that sense, their decision to pursue a military
career was an obvious move.

In addition to reconverting newly acquired skills in order to make a living –
which obviously has a utility – we found there a strong desire on behalf of a
former volunteer to transmit his/her ethical motivations and ideological prin-
ciples to fellow comrades who became the next generation with time under
cease-fire passing. Even more distantly related to war choices that appeared
among interviewees such as making research on deceased young soldiers
when being a mourning mother or becoming head of legal affairs in a muni-
cipality and thus 'strengthening the state' are consciously related to a desire to
pass on what motivated an engagement of life and death through war and to

keep that alive for them, for the society at large and for the youth especially. The arguments brought to explain this choice tend to be of a political, symbolic or historical nature; the economic reality is not immediately mentioned, and when it does come up, it is not used as an explanation.

> So you came back in May of 1994 after handing over your weapons… What did you do? Did you have any plans?
>
> I was obviously thinking about work.
>
> What type of work specifically?
>
> I continued in the military. I have twenty-three years of experience and now I'm a military instructor in the schools. We actually provide instruction to our youth before they reach draft age, so that when they leave for the army they know what to expect…
>
> What if there had been no Karabakh war? Would your life have been different? Would you have done something else, or would you still have been a soldier?
>
> I didn't want to be a soldier, but my great grandparents are from Muş and Van. They told us about what it was like back then… May the earth lie over them as soft as down. They told us about what happened in 1915 and afterwards.
>
> Armen, when you enlisted after the war, was that something you wanted to do, or was there simply no other work to be found?
>
> It was something I wanted to do. I wanted to transmit my experience and know-how to the kids who were going to do their military service. It worked. I had some good kids. We still keep in touch by phone nowadays and our families have become friends.
>
> (Armen, vice-president of the local branch of Yerkrapah, Dilijan, 3 June 2016)

The way in which people began to enlist as professional soldiers in the burgeoning Armenian army sheds light on how the Armenian state itself came into being.

The double movement of demobilization and enlisting in the regular army takes a sequential form, with a clear break marking the combatants' return to civilian life, and another marking their entry into the life of professional soldiers.

Most of the people we interviewed still had a vivid memory of V. Sargsyan's role in that process. Manvel had this to say:

> Do you know what Vazgen Sargsyan said? He said, 'It's good that you fought to get the lands of our ancestors back, but now it is time to build our army. In memory of those who sacrificed their blood, their strength to achieve victory. Now it's time to build the army.' And those of us who wanted to do that got involved.
>
> (Manvel, veteran association, Erevan, 7 June 2016)

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In fact, the move towards independence combined with the outbreak of
war made the army an urgent necessity, as both a fundamental building
block in the construction of a state and as a logical consequence of it. In
reality, however, the gradual process of turning volunteers into experienced
soldiers and then professional military officers was at work long before the
cease-fire of 1994. It began during the war itself, in particular from 1992
onward (Papazian, 2016), when the Armenian Defence Minister, Vazgen
Sargsyan, created the *Mahabart* ('condemned to death') battalion, laying
the groundwork for the professionalization of volunteers. When Vazgen
Manukyan took over the position in October 1992, he gradually reorga-
nized volunteers through a system of contract and turnover: although
payment was extremely low, the men were listed and the brigades were
rationalized. In parallel, an army of conscript soldiers was built. The
Armenian Army was thus formed during the war, and its formation was
no doubt hastened by the war. On the state level, the daily concerns over
security translated into giving institutional, financial and personnel prior-
ity to issues and agencies dealing with defence (Papazian, 2016). Strik-
ingly, this state of permanent alert is also reflected in our interviews, not
only in discourse but also in practice. For instance, a number of inter-
viewees, old and young alike, mentioned being 'always ready' to depart,
having for example a bag ready with military equipment, checking on their
uniforms regularly, updating crisis related utilities, sometimes taking a
couple of extra military classes, etc.

The Yerkrapah Union, a case in point

The *Yerkrapah* Union's creation aimed more specifically at supporting the
process of reintegration of war veterans and maintaining their engagement.
The *Yerkrapah Gamavoragan Mioutiun* (Union of Volunteer Defenders of
the land), is a union of volunteer combatants which was officially founded
in July 1993 by Vazgen Sargsyan. It really took off once the cease-fire had
proved stable: starting from 1995, V. Sargsyan emphasizes the absolute
necessity for Armenia that 'the powder in the barrel remains dry'. (Papa-
zian, 2016). Once again Defence Minister, he was concerned with offering
a social space to all volunteers returning to civilian life, rewarding them
socially and symbolically for their participation in the war, but also keep-
ing an eye on them in order to avoid two pitfalls or tendencies in parti-
cular that he considered risky. The first was armed men returning to
civilian life; the second was veterans forming political parties and turning
Armenia into a military regime (Papazian, 2016).

The *Yerkrapah* gradually came to number some 6,000 former comba-
tants within the war years. Several thousand more former soldiers swelled
its ranks, although this figure cannot be verified. Some sources put their
total numbers as high as 30,000 people in the beginning of the 2000s (De
Waal, 2003). In any case, the *Yerkrapah Gamavoragan Mioutiun* has

become a powerful political organization in Armenian public life. Other associations of former combatants also sprang up, some sources saying as many as several dozens, but the *Yerkrapah* Union is the most visible, powerful and active (Libaridian, 2003; De Waal, 2003). *Yerkrapah* are important in the question of transmission for their involvement in *badani* (youth) clubs where *Yerkrapah* members come to instruct teenage members.

Here is the testimony of the vice-president of the Dilijan branch of the Yerkrapah:

> Can you explain what it means to be Yerkrapah?
> We saw what happened in April (2016)… the Four-Day War. We were made for that, that's our reason for existing. When military operations take place, we're all together.
> When was the Yerkrapah founded?
> Yerkrapah was founded in 1989, well, for all intents and purposes in 1990.
> By whom?
> By our Sparabed[24] [Constable] Vazgen Sargsyan, of course.
> What was the purpose?
> The same purpose naturally.
> How many members are there in the Yerkrapah?
> Now? Umm, you'll have to excuse me but I don't know the exact number. But there's a new generation developing.
> *Do you have to have combat experience to become a member of the Yerkrapah?*
> Yes, of course, experience. But you also have to love your country first and foremost.
> Are there people of all ages from every generation?
> Of course.
> Vazgen Sargsyan created the Yerkrapah Union, and after the war their ranks filled?
> Yes, of course.
> The people returning from the war joined the Yerkrapah?
> They were already members.
> What does it mean in concrete terms to be a member of the Yerkrapah? Does it mean going to schools and talking in front of the school children? Helping veterans? Or being a reserve force in case of war?
> All of those things.

The seeming confusion of dates regarding the creation of the *Yerkrapah* in this excerpt actually points out how Armenian combatants were amalgamated from war volunteers to veterans and onto professional militaries whose tasks included teaching war skills in cadet schools and later on to young *Yerkrapah* members.

Making transmission their new mission: from the battlefield to the teaching ground, and back

Among our interviewees' trajectories of reconversion in the long run, one feature is striking: almost all of them chose to do something through which they could firstly relate to their war experience and secondly transmit it to others, generally younger people. This is done either through institutional channels such as the *badani Yerkrapah* [Yerkrapah youth] or through individual initiatives.

Concerning the first channel, the Yerkrapah Union founded a badani section in 1999 that really kick started in 2009. In 2014, a cooperation agreement was signed between the Yerkrapah, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Defence aiming at expanding the network of clubs, which are now partly funded on the state budget for education. As of 2014, there were 72 badani branches in Yerevan and the regions and in 2016, badani clubs were hosted in more than 1,400 regular schools throughout the country, gathering children and teenagers aged 12 to 18. Their claimed membership is 30.000.[25] The badani curriculum comprises practical lessons of military artfare grounded in an ideology of 'patriotic education'. The Zovouni school that we were able to visit[26] offers a particularly instructive glimpse at the way in which courses are conducted and in which history and geography are mustered, sometimes for fanciful –obviously partial to the Armenians – ends. The use of visuals in the classrooms illustrates a concern with long-term transmission, jumbling history, memory and war, as well as the territorial, political and institutional de facto integration of the Armenian state and the non-recognized entity of Karabakh. Hanging on the main wall is a map of 'the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh' united in a single territory.. Right underneath, a collage modeling *Tsitsernakaberd* – the Genocide Memorial in Yerevan – and the *anmorouk* flower – a forget-me-not chosen as the world-wide symbol marking the centennial of the event in 2015, made by the young *Yerkrapah*. And above, a large poster gathering photos and short biographies of the great military figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: from famous *fedayis* (volunteer fighters) of the last century to the leaders of the First Republic (1918–1920) to the Second World War hero of the Soviet Union: Karabakh born Marshal Baghramyan. In a second classroom are five posters representing the principal actors and military operations of the four great moments: the *fedayi* movement (which here is called *hayduk*); operations from the First Republic, especially Sardarabad, a 1918 battle where ragged Armenian troops were able to prevent a conquest of Russian Armenia by the Turkish army; operations from the Second World War with emphasis on the role of Armenians within the war; and the Artsakh [Armenian for Karabakh] *azadamart* [liberation war], all illustrated through maps. To the right of these five posters are two smaller documents. One is an award given by the Ministry for Emergency Situations in 2013 to Artur Hovanisyan, the *badani* instructor of the school, for 'his work on patriotic

military education and culture for the benefit of the sacrificed generation'. Below it, is the pledge the conscript makes when joining the Armenian armed forces.

The example of Vova, former GRU officer mentioned earlier, is typical of a private path of reconversion and transmission: after leaving the GRU – military intelligence department of the USSR – at the end of the 1980s Vova engaged in a secret group called 'Karabakh 2' which purpose was to collect up-to-date information on developments on the ground. Years after the war, in 2010, Vova founded a club called 'Art of staying alive' [*Vokhtch Menalou Arvest, VOMA*]. The VOMA is in fact a school where a number of instructors, including its founder, teach volunteers of all ages how to deal with crisis situations in their everyday life and more particularly in war times. The audience is mainly young (from 16 to 35), two thirds male but with increasing numbers of women. The total number of students is confidential; based on our fieldworks, we estimate its total (past and present) at more than 500. When interviewed, Vova reckoned that his private initiative is complementing the state's actions in that domain.[27] This initiative implicitly points out a defiance of the state's capacity to adequately cover all necessities dictated by the volatility of the conflict and the fragility of the cease-fire. Private initiatives thus become a way to complete the defence training provided by the state (military service) and by institutional large channels (Yerkrapah) to young (and less young) men and women, so that they acquire the potential of turning into voluntary combatant at any moment and the ideological principles sustaining their engagement. Overall, private initiatives of transmission speak of the daily integration of the state of alert in the Armenian society outside state channels.

Conclusion

The material we have been working on, albeit of no statistical or general value on combatant trajectories of Armenians in the Karabakh conflict, sheds lights on three dimensions. First: how major symbolic collective historical facts (Sumgait, the genocide of the Armenians) mould individual narratives of going at war. Second: the very concrete ways through which individuals would become fighters in the troubled ending of the Soviet Union in the South Caucasus, where a deliquescent Soviet state was leaving disorganized military structures but where no functional independent state was yet able to organize mobilization for war. Third, the representations of a long cease-fire period that is neither a genuine post-conflict era nor a viable peace and which impregnates bodies and souls with a permanent state of alert.

Preliminary results of our research on volunteers from Armenia in the Karabakh conflict are twofold. First, narratives of war veterans about their engagement, their memories of it, emphasize the troubled waters surrounding the temporality and quality of this conflict. On the one hand, there is the official political-military dating of the war: the Karabakh

movement from 1988 onwards alongside low intensity conflict in Kar-
abakh, including operation 'Ring' in 1991; then full out warfare starting
with the break up of the Soviet Union in December 1991; and finally the
post-1994 cease-fire period. The Four-Day War in 2016 did not break the
tempo of unstable peacelessness, since another cease-fire was concluded
after that episode which is just as inefficiently living up to its purpose. On
the other, there are individual narratives showing a mixed picture with no
clear sequence of events between peace and war, but a couple of striking
events emerging from their memories. These two levels of narratives are
bridged on numerous crossing-points where we have seen the individual
narratives traveling. Although small, our sample displays noticeable
homogeneity in perceiving the Karabakh war as one of defense of an
endangered Armenian people in Azerbaijan, transposing Sumgait's Arme-
nians faith in the Karabakh region of Soviet Azerbaijan.

Second, the issue of the conflict's temporality and quality is strengh-
tened by the post-cease-fire situation of peacelessness, tainted by all hues
of the warfare palette, from ordinary cease-fire violations claiming a
couple lives every week to the short but intense operations of the Four-
Day War in 2016. To veterans interviewed in the aftermath of the Four-
Day War, the situation is predominantly one of permanent instability and
looming of resumption of hostilities we called a 'state of alert'. Far from
being a conjunctural coincidence resulting from the events of April 2016,
for many of them their practices testify that they indeed remain on alert.
This feature is best exemplified through veterans who built their post-war
lives in continuity with skills and know-how acquired in the war, particu-
larly military officers and/or teachers, instructing young potential new
volunteers. In our sample of interviewees, there were also young volun-
teers, albeit too few to be included in the present analysis. Nevertheless, let
us signal that so far our interviews with young volunteers who joined the
April war point out the relevance of the issues raised in this chapter con-
cerning older veterans. On the eve of the 30th anniversary of the beginning
of the Karabakh conflict, and as hostilities threaten to resume sooner
rather than later (ICG report, June 2017), the interest of pursuing this
investigation on the meanings of engagement to extend it to a full gen-
erational cycle remains high.

Interviews

Armine works as a legal expert in a ZAGS (public registry) in Dilijan, a city
located in the North of Armenia. She fought actively during the war in
Karabakh.

Zepiur is an instructor at the Tigran Mets military training centre. She left
for the front lines during the Four-Day War.

Ruben is a former Soviet soldier who defected at the end of the 1980s
(during the Soviet period) in order to enlist in Karabakh.

Gagik was put in solitary confinement during his military service for arguing with an Azeri about the history of the Karabakh territory. He was a member of the 'special' *djogat Smertnik* (Artsiv Mahabart, those who are condemned to death). He currently teaches traditional Armenian dance in schools.

Gegam is a former commander of a djogad (group or detachment of fighters), who now runs 'The Special Regiment' (*Osoby polk* in Russian) an organization for former combatants, in Erevan. he was seriously wounded. The interview was conducted in the organization's building with a group of combatants, in the 'Bangladesh' neighbourhood in Yerevan.

Tatul and Manvel are members of Gegam's organization (*Osoby polk*).

Born in 1972, Armen is the vice-president of the *Yerkrapah* ('the defenders of the land') in Dilijan. At the age of 16, he left with the partial consent of his parents and the gratitude of his schoolteacher. He enlisted in the Army when he returned from the war in 1994. Then he 'naturally' left again in April 2016. He is married with two children.

Levon is from Dilijan. He began as a commander of a djogad, then became a career soldier, and finally became an instructor with the Badani Yerkrapah after retiring. He is a well-respected man with five children. He led his son Albert in the April 2016 conflict.

Erik is an 'independent' taxi driver: just like his volunteering during the war, he says that he transports whom he likes where he likes. He fought during the Karabakh war from 1988 to 1994, then left again in April 2016. He is photographed with the young conscripts and *gamavoragan* (volunteers).

'General' Manvel has been president of the Yerkrapah since the disappearance of their founder, Vazgen Sargsian. He combines the figure of a former fighter who once again set off to fight in April 2016, as well as of the local despot in his stronghold of Echmiadzin. He is a controversial figure in public opinion, both much loved and often criticised.

'Mamigon' (assumed name) broadens the conventional image of a volunteer as he is not strictly speaking a former soldier even though he saw a lot of combat. He volunteered for special missions such as finding arms caches and transporting seized weapons.

Vagam, born in 1971, volunteer from the 1988–1994 war and member of the Dashnak Party.

Vardan Hovhanissian is a television journalist and a documentary filmmaker at Bars Media whose documentary *A Story of People in War and Peace* won an award at Voske Tsiran, the Erevan film festival. As a television journalist, he covered the entire first war.

Vova Vartanov, former officer of GRU, founder of the VOMA ('Art of staying alive' club)

Arsen is a young Dashnak who set off in April 2016.

Hovik is the son of a soldier who died from war-related causes.

Silva is the wife of a volunteer soldier who was listed as missing in 1994.

Sasun Mikaelyan is a former commandant (of Sasun's djogad) and a politician.

Notes

1 Mainly with bombings of Talysh, Madaghis and Mardakert villages (east of NKR), and then Kazakhlar/Nuzger, Alkhanli/Fizuli (south), as well as Kapanli-Seysulan and Gulistan/Tonashen (north). Information collected and reported by Emil Sanamyan, independent analyst and journalist, on April 23, 2016. The complete timeline of events by Sanamyan is available on his blog: http://yandunts. blogspot.co.il/2016/04/april-2016-war-in-karabakh-chronology.html (accessed June 2017).

2 See: ICG, 'Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds', 1 June 2017, www.cri sisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan/244-nagor no-karabakhs-gathering-war-clouds?utm_source=Sign+Up+to+Crisis+Group%27s +Email+Updates&utm_campaign=1070550f73-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_06_ 01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1dab8c11ea-1070550f73-359866597, Report N°244, Europe and Central Asia.

3 When compared to the legal definition of a state as established in the Montevideo convention, Nagorno-Karabakh lacks international recognition and arguably a permanently defined territory, this last point being part of the negotiation process. Because its independence has not been *de jure* recognised internationally, despite a growing number of states individually recognising the republic, particularly in the USA, Karabakh does not enjoy the benefits of complete sovereignty (Broers, Iskandaryan and Minasyan 2015).

4 In addition, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic has undertaken a number of political and legal steps in order to acquire various attributes of statehood, most notably holding regular elections since 1996 and adopting a constitution in 2006 and a second one in 2017 renaming itself the Republic of Artsakh – the Armenian name of Karabakh.

5 Most sources mention several thousand Armenians leaving to fight in Karabakh in 2016. As a comparison, initial figures of volunteers at the beginning of the war at the end of the 1980s were roughly similar, around 5,000, organised into *djogad* (groups of combatants). As an estimate, the numbers of fighters from Karabakh per se run from just below 1,000 to a couple of thousand for the 2016 war. Field notes, June 2016.

6 Interviews were conducted in Armenian by Taline Papazian and in Russian by Aude Merlin.

7 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (1922), revised edition 1978, University of California Press.

8 Interviews with the deputy Minister of Defense and with the head of the department of social affairs of the Ministry of Defense, June 2016.

9 See Cheterian (2008), pp. 97–109.

10 Three anti-Armenian pogroms took place in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan: two in 1988, first in Sumgait then Kirovabad/Ganja, and one in January 1990 in Baku.

11 For an analysis of the link between the events of Sumgait and the Karabakh war, see V. Cheterian, 'Sumgait: the birth of Karabakh conflict', in *War and Peace in the Caucasus, Russia's Troubled Frontier*, Hurst, 2008, pp. 97 & ff.

12 Artsakh is the Armenian name of Karabakh.

13 See the chapter 'Violence physique et souveraineté politique', in Papazian, 2016.

14 For more in depth analysis of this political process, see chapter 'La guerre, épreuve de l'Etat', in Papazian, 2016.

15 Aude Merlin, Silvia Serrano, 'Repenser le lien entre Etats et violences au Caucase', *Dynamiques internationales*, 2012, http://dynamiques-internationales.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/DI6-Merlin-Serrano.pdf.
16 Weapons were often acquired on the battlefield. For more information on the different channels through which Armenia addressed serious shortage in weaponry the Karabakh war, see Papazian, 2016, chapter 'La guerre, épreuve de l'Etat'.
17 *Black tulip* is a french film (shot by Christian Jaque in 1963) where Alain Delon plays the first role.
18 This is the word used by all of our respondents.
19 On Russia's defence support of Armenia, see Minassian, 2008: Armenia, a Russian Outpost in Caucasus? www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifri_RNV_minassian_Armenie_Russie_ANG_fevr2008.pdf.
20 The resentment towards Moscow has been growing rapidly in the last years, under the conjunction of several factors pointing out the unequal relationship between Russia and Armenia. Among the important facts, let us note: the use by Russia of its security leverage over Karabakh to make Armenia join the Customs Union in 2013; the murder of a family in Gyumri by a Russian soldier stationed in that city's military base in 2015; the continuous selling of large quantities of weapons to Azerbaijan ($3 billion in 2015).
21 Cheterian (2008), p. 121. 'Koltso' (Ring) is the name of a military operation conducted by the Soviet OMON and the 4th Soviet army stationed in Azerbaijan in the Spring of 1991 consisting of brutal displacement of Armenian populated areas inside the Nagorno-Karabakh oblast and in its surroundings. The unsaid reason for this brutal intervention of the Soviet army in Karabakh was to stop Armenia from pursuing an independence process launched the previous year. Armenia interpreted this act as an unsaid declaration of war but followed on its constitutional path towards independence. For more detailed analysis of political and military implications of operation *Koltso*, see Papazian, 2016, chapter 'La guerre, épreuve de l'Etat arménien'.
22 Marielle Debos (2016) coins the concept of 'interwar' (*entre-guerres*) to emphasize a situation where fighters keep waiting for the next episode of war in a long-lasting absence of peace in Chad.
23 Field notes, Abkhazia, Aude Merlin, January 2015, January 2017.
24 Honorary title that was given to Vazgen Sargsyan before his untimely death: although a civilian, Vazgen Sargsyan is considered as the lasting commander of the volunteers, and by extension the father of the Armenian army since it was built primarily on the volunteers' engagement in the war.
25 Information retrieved from the official website of the Yerkrapah Union (www.ekm.am) and given also by Manvel Grigoryan, at the time President of the Union, during an interview in June 2016.
26 Near Yerevan, June 2016 and February 2017.
27 Interview with Aude Merlin, January 2017, Yerevan.

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