

# Drawing Boundaries: The Politics of Ethnic Violence and the Case of Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>1</sup>

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Starting from a theoretical critique of theory-driven explanations of the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by Stuart Kaufman and Eric Melander my paper provides for a different analytic framework for the case at hand. While Kaufman and Melander emphasized preferences and strategies respectively, I combine intergroup and intragroup interactions in a two-level approach. I argue that a model of strategic signaling between groups has to be supplemented by an analysis of intragroup politics aimed at the consolidation of power positions through ethnonational radicalization. The escalation drove populations apart as boundaries hardened. This explains why the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh eventually escalated into war in spite of incentives to secure a settlement through negotiations. Having benefitted from the escalation, politicians were later unable to tame the nationalist fervor of their publics that precluded peace.

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The puzzle of the escalation of so-called ethnic conflicts continues to puzzle students of security studies. Different research programs have emerged over the years but evolved relatively isolated from one another. Although it appears difficult to provide for a neat synthesizing typology, these approaches are all situated on a continuum that, on the one end, sees ethnic groups as bounded and unitary actors with conflicts intrinsically related to the natural assertiveness of ethnic identity (e.g. Kaufman 2001, van Evera 1994, Horowitz 1985). On the other end of the continuum, one finds approaches that radically question the “ethnic” character of those conflicts and look for macro-social variables that entail individual-level incentives to organize along ethnic lines, albeit for selfish motives that have not much to do with ethnic identity *per se* (e.g. Fearon and Laitin 2003, Collier and Hoeffler 2001). Whereas the former opt for methodological holism, the latter favor an individual-level approach.

What we are facing here is an ontological dispute.<sup>2</sup> Although often framed as a theoretical disagreement over the value of rational-choice theory as compared to alternative approaches, the ontological nature of this contention makes that the respective theories, for better or worse, are ultimately incommensurable (but see Kaufman 2006 and Kaufmann 2005). With regard to the goal of explaining the escalation of violence I argue that a less contentious classification would differentiate between preference-driven and strategy-driven approaches. This has the benefit of cutting through the ontological divide while focusing on the explanation of violence. Preference-driven explanations emphasize the parties’ willingness to fight and highlight the motivational sources at play. Strategy-driven approaches, by contrast, keep preferences largely exogenous to the explanation and focus on the dynamics of strategic interactions under conditions of uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

Although both perspectives have important and complementary things to say about the escalation of violence, they hold contradictory assumptions on whether or not escalation is evitable. Preference-driven approaches tend to depict the conflicts as zero-sum whereas strategy-driven ones assume that a compromise can be reached. For the former escalation is the inevitable result of incompatible preferences, for the latter it is a process of negotiation with room for compromise as preventing an all-out war is in the interest of both parties.

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<sup>2</sup> The argument ultimately refers to the conceptualization of the phenomenon of “ethnic conflict” in itself. The question is what the predicate “ethnic” implies with respect to the explanation of escalating violence. Does it define the contentious issue or simply the organizational form of the parties to the conflict? Is ethnicity an individual attribute that can be activated depending on circumstances, an expedient focal point for collective action or is it a largely autonomous, self-propelled force that surpasses individual rational assessment? In short, is ethnicity merely incidental or integral to the explanation of violence?

<sup>3</sup> Both require however an environment that makes these explanations feasible. Preference-driven and strategy-driven explanations rely on antecedent conditions that define the scope of their applicability. Note that a third type of explanations I exclude from my discussion here contents itself with the discussion of broader structural changes that may induce violence.

Two competing studies of the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by Stuart Kaufman and Eric Melander allow me to discuss how these two approaches bear out in practice. In light of their respective shortcomings in explaining the escalation in that particular case I argue for combination of both approaches in a two-level framework. The first level analyses interactions at an intergroup level and offers insight into the strategic dilemmas that explain escalation. The second level addresses intragroup conflicts in terms of interactions between political leaders and their national constituencies. It accounts for the strategic interactions that shape the escalation process while emphasizing a parallel process of preference change that occurred in the course of the escalation and eventually made compromise short of full-blown war unavoidable.

In short, I argue that whereas the escalation on the first level is due to incomplete information under conditions of uncertainty that require costly signals, the second level addresses changing preferences in terms of the endogenous nature of collective identity in situations of escalating conflict. It is due to an intended transformation of collectivities into antagonists that the strategic games played by politicians cannot be resolved short of full-blown war. Ironically those who manufactured the antagonisms in the first place are eventually haunted by their own creation. Once the respective group-boundaries are hardened politicians face the dilemma that negotiations that could prevent the worst outcomes threaten their political if not physical survival. All out war is the price for avoiding being labeled a traitor to the nation as they are stuck in what Putnam famously coined a two-level game (Putnam 1988).

I will defend my point in a case study on the escalation of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, a formerly autonomous Oblast in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, populated by a majority of Armenians and nowadays one of the most intractable so-called “frozen conflicts” on the territory of the former Soviet Union (SU).<sup>4</sup> It emerged in earnest in early 1988, led to a full-blown positional war in the winter of 1992 and ended in a *de facto* secession of the territory which was sealed by a cease-fire in 1994. This case is particularly telling since it is one of the conflicts that informed Kaufman’s theory development and provoked an empirically based reply by Melander. Kaufman perceives in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict an authentic popular movement whose emotional force resulted in what he coined “mass-led violence”. Exploring a different avenue Melander provides evidence in defense of a rationalistic approach according to which the escalation was a signaling game over how to divide the stake that broke down as the SU collapsed.

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<sup>4</sup> “Oblast” has been translated by zone, region or district but this has the disadvantage to lead to confusion with other elements of the peculiar territorial-administrative organization common to several Eastern Block states. For example, the administrative subunits of lesser status, the “raions”, have also been translated as “district”. I therefore keep on using these technical terms.

My point then is to argue that although I agree with Melander that there was nothing inevitable about the war, the rising popular antagonism destroyed what room for compromise had existed. The strategic interactions between the groups could not but end in war as politicians in all three entities contributed to make compromise appear unacceptable. This process, in fact, took place before December 1991.

As I am going to show in the empirical section below, the analysis of the intergroup level strategies reveals that although strategic dilemmas were present, the actors in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh were driven by hostility. With hindsight one cannot help but assume that the populations wanted to fight it out. This poses a theoretical problem since the presence of dilemmatic situations is at doubt. But rather than assuming that some groups are simply malevolent because of their members believing in myths, as Kaufman seems to insinuate, I argue that this invites us to take a closer look at within-group processes of radicalization.<sup>5</sup> What made of the groups uncompromising antagonists were internal political struggles where the escalating violence became a coveted resource. Political entrepreneurs instrumentalized and/or instigated violence in order to create support for their oppositional platforms or to stay in power. Their actions contributed to the deepening of existing cleavages between the communities as they sought to unify their respective constituencies through fear by manipulating boundaries thereby destroying all forms of daily cooperation.

The next section discusses the explanatory framework Kaufman used to explain the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. I will show that his is ultimately a preference-driven attempt to present the escalation as inevitable. I compare this to Melander's argument that the escalation was a matter of strategic interactions that spun out of control. This is followed in the second section by a discussion of how intragroup politics can lead to a preference change within the population that precludes compromise. Based on these theoretical reflections the third part offers an alternative narrative of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict where I differentiate between intergroup and intragroup processes. I shows how emotions were intentionally stirred up in the course of within-group struggles among competing elites. Although the inter-group level analysis displays powerful emotions triggered by fears of survival that were embedded in national myths, the aggressive behavior which could be observed is not a natural property of the concerned groups. It rather can be traced back to those elite in-fights that are a pervasive phenomenon under conditions of rapid social transformation of which the dissolving SU offers an outstanding example. It is due to this process of radicalization that negotiations which would

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<sup>5</sup> It might still be possible to remain on the inter-group level and explain the escalatory interaction in strategic terms that do not require benign actors as the security dilemma does. Concepts that run under the heading of strategic problems (Powell 1999) or strategic dilemmas (Lake and Rothchild 1996) and do not depend on intentionality could be used here.

have stopped the escalation became impossible. I thus offer a new perspective on the Nagorno-Karabakh accounting for more of the known facts but without sacrificing analytical rigor.

### 1) Kaufman vs. Melander: Preference or Strategy?

How to explain the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict? What theoretical framework is most appropriate? Kaufman's symbolic politics approach emphasizes the historical sources of clashing preferences and argues that an interethnic security dilemma explains escalation (1996a, 2001, 2006). But the security dilemma does neither apply to cases where malign intentions are at work nor does it capture the process of escalation – both essential features of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. What is left of Kaufman's approach then is his insistence on mass hostilities that precluded a settlement short of war. Such a preference-driven explanation I argue is unconvincing. Melander, on his part, seeks to address this problem in framing the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a costly signaling game under incomplete information. While his contention that war was evitable is well taken, the evidence he provides is questionable and reveals the need to account for changing preferences in such a strategy-driven explanation.

#### *Kaufman's Symbolic Politics*

Stuart Kaufman presents his symbolic-politics theory as the main challenger to what he perceives as the rational-choice mainstream. By contrast to the latter's emphasis on individual rationality, the social-psychological school, of which he is the self-declared *chef de file* "asserts the critical importance of intangible concerns such as status and of emotional motives in explaining ethnic violence" (Kaufman 2006: 46). Hence, the critical explanatory factor for the escalation of violence should be "powerfully hostile mass attitudes" (Kaufman 2006: 47, see also Horowitz 1985).

The escalation of violence is rooted in symbolic politics that relate to groups' so-called "myth-symbol complexes" (Kaufman 2001: 15, see also Smith 1986). These myth-symbol complexes can trigger powerful emotions which in turn explain why people are sensitive to ethnic appeals and eventually engage in violence. Myth-symbol complexes are seen as distinctive attributes of ethnic groups and constitute the individual's psychological make-up. While myths confer a particular meaning to historical events and actions, symbols are emotionally charged references to these myths (Kaufman 2001: 27). Myths and symbols usually refer to past defeats and victimizations which figure prominently in the collective memories of ethnic groups and are thus prone to provoke hostile reactions. However, these emotions cannot be reduced to ancient animosities but, as the title of Kaufman's (2001) book says, are rather "modern hatreds". As

Kaufman reminds us: “Ethnic hatreds are renewed in each generation by mythologies that are typically modern revisions of older stories with quite different messages” (2001: 11).

In sum, a threatened ethnic symbol triggers feelings of ethnic solidarity and even hostility that may mobilize individuals in defense of their group (Kaufman 2001: 29). But myth-symbol complexes are only one element, albeit the most important, in Kaufman’s approach. While myth-symbol complexes are a necessary condition, what is ultimately supposed to explain violence are inter-ethnic security dilemmas.<sup>6</sup>

### *A Security Dilemma?*

Drawing on structuralist IR theory that describes the escalation of interstate conflict as a spiraling process leading to war, Kaufman introduces the concept of inter-ethnic security dilemma in his theory. In an inter-ethnic security dilemma, he claims, the opponents are “openly hostile and are perfectly willing to fight. ... Yet, what each group does to pursue its own security-defined-as-dominance is so threatening to a rival group that the rival increases its security demands in ways threatening to the first” (2001: 35). The problem with Kaufman’s adaptation is that in presence of at least one party with malevolent intentions the security dilemma theorem does not apply.

Although theoretically the security dilemma is potentially at work in all human societies which are not hierarchically organized (Herz 1950: 157), empirically, security dilemmas are not at the root of every conflict. John Herz who can be considered one of the founding fathers of the security dilemma theorem emphasizes this point recalling his initial disagreement with traditional realism which led him to elaborate on the security dilemma:

I had asked myself how to explain the phenomenon of constant wars, even when there is *no apparent aim of conquest*. Of course, force might be needed to meet an obvious threat by expansionist powers. Who could not see that necessity at the time of Hitler’s and Mussolini’s aggressions? But I could not agree with Hans J. Morgenthau and others who saw the causes in innate human aggressiveness.... There were many cases in which *no such aggressivity was noticeable, and defensiveness had prevailed* (2003: 412, my emphasis).

According to Herz, since the security dilemma presupposes defensiveness, we have to differentiate between two types of explanations for war that are dependent on the actors’ intentions. First, where benign intentions prevail, “the unresolvable uncertainty in the mind of the potential or actual target state about the meaning of the other’s intentions and capabilities”

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<sup>6</sup> In spite of his insistence on mass psychology, he allows political entrepreneurs to play at times a determining role in the process of escalation; a process he terms “elite-led” by contrast to cases of “mass-led” violence (2001, 1996b). Because “people choose by responding to the most emotionally potent symbol evoked” myth-symbol complexes lend themselves to manipulation by predatory elites (Kaufman 2001: 28). Elite actions are an intervening variable but neither sufficient nor necessary in his explanation of violence.

creates dangerous situations (Wheeler and Booth 1992: 31). Under conditions of anarchy what one party does to be more secure inadvertently creates fears on the other side. The countervailing strategies may eventually spiral into violence although both would be willing to live side-by-side in peace (Jervis 1978: 170).<sup>7</sup> This is what the security dilemma is all about.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, if at least one party vies for domination and the threat is accurately perceived, there is no dilemma in the above sense because self-defense is the only appropriate reaction. Targeted actors have to cope with a “real” security problem not only an “apparent” one (Schweller 1996: 117). Robert Jervis (1976: 80) coined this “deterrence model”, as hostility is due to expansion and not to unfounded fears. From this perspective it appears that Kaufman’s interethnic security dilemma is not a dilemma at all but rather a case of deterrence as at least one of the parties defines its security in terms of domination of the other - as was the case in Nagorno-Karabakh.

A second problem is that the security dilemma is supposed to explain the onset of violence as one side launches a first strike in the hope to profit from offensive advantages and terminate a spiral of mutual armament (Melander 1999, Roe 2000). What it cannot explain however is why the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict violently escalated over a period of four years (also Melander 2001: 57). In sum, although the security dilemma is not the *cause* of the conflict that eventually led to war, the *escalation* of violence may still be explained in terms of strategic dilemmas (see Roe 1999).

Unless the mechanisms of this escalatory process are not specified the whole explanation Kaufman has to offer is based on symbolic politics that generated hostile attitudes and called for domination over the other.<sup>9</sup> One might nonetheless agree with Kaufman that “too much of a focus on the role of leaders encourages analysts to gloss over the role of historical and situational

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<sup>7</sup> The tragedy ultimately resides in the psychological predicament that “you yourself may vividly feel the terrible fear that you have of the other party, but you cannot enter into the other man’s counter-fear, or even understand why he should be particularly nervous” (Butterfield 1951: 21 cited in Collins 2000: 4).

<sup>8</sup> One might ask why states do not choose the risk of present insecurity as compared to the risk of future escalation. The answer is that the potential costs of being annihilated when remaining passive now by far surpass those anticipated for any future conflict when one might be sufficiently armed to defend itself. Seeking security, that is, freedom from threats, states have to take into consideration the harm others could possibly do to them in order to avoid exploitation. The dilemma is that by doing so states “get too much and too little – too much because they gain the ability to carry out aggression; too little because others, being menaced, will increase their own arms and so reduce the first state’s security” (Jervis 1976: 64-65).

<sup>9</sup> Note that Kaufman insists that the escalation of violence is theoretically avoidable when he states: “Violence is not their first choice – they would rather get what they want peacefully”; and he continues: “The tragic element is that the groups are spurred by their mythologies to define their security in mutually incompatible ways when more modest definitions on both sides would permit mutual security instead of a spiral of insecurity and violence” (2001: 35-6). Here the reader is left perplexed. Whereas Kaufman’s whole argument is based on the centrality of national myths and the perception of threats to the group’s survival which require dominating rivals, he suddenly claims that, after all, groups are essentially rational although its members hold self-deceiving beliefs. This ontological paradox is hardly convincing and flies in the face of his conceptualization of ethnic groups which he sees as *constituted* by beliefs and memories (2001: 16).

effects, which are important in explaining why manipulative leaders succeed in some times and places but not others”, but such a focus makes that Kaufman’s approach is essentially preference-driven (2001:6). Figure 1 sketches such a setting: A and Z have diametrically opposed preferences. A wants all of the stakes, but so does Z. But incompatible preferences are a necessary not a sufficient explanation and do not warrant the claim that war was inevitable.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 1

### *Melander’s Strategic Dilemma*

Taking a rationalist approach as outlined in seminal article by James Fearon (1995), Melander’s analysis of the violent escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict starts by asking: “why the parties to the conflict did not conclude an agreement that would have avoided mutually costly fighting. Why did they not pursue a compromise that would have stopped short of violence” (2001: 56)? Exogenizing preferences he claims that the escalation should be understood as a game of costly signaling in an ongoing negotiation process under uncertainty where opponents try to find a point of compromise short of full-blown war (see also Lake and Rothchild 1998). The problem is that actors suffer from incomplete information regarding capabilities and resolve of their adversary which is compounded by a short shadow of the future. If both were in possession of complete information, so the hypothesis goes, they would know how to divide the matters in dispute without incurring the costs of fighting. Put otherwise, the conflict could have been “resolved with much less bloodshed if the actors had been able to see through the strategic uncertainties of the situation” (Melander 2001: 49-50).

The problem of incomplete information thus consists of two elements, first, the impossibility of knowing beforehand with certainty what is going to come and how this will influence the balance of power, second, the process of identifying the point of division incites actors to conceal information and recur to bluffs in order to avoid being exploited.<sup>11</sup> Although it

<sup>10</sup> The existence of hostile myths in intergroup relations is a ubiquitous occurrence and in itself does not determine the nature of those relations. Moreover, hostile myths can give way to narratives of amicable partnership as in the case of Franco-German relations after World War II.

<sup>11</sup> For example in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, “neither side knew whether its opponent would succeed in imposing its will through force. Neither side knew whether the Soviet authorities would come down on one side or the other, or whether the central government would merely withdraw from the conflict” (Melander 2001: 56).

would make sense for both sides to reveal more information about their capabilities and their resolve, they face powerful incentives to hide or exaggerate them, in order to get a better deal at the bargaining table or in order to keep some advantage over the other on the battlefield.<sup>12</sup>

Violence is instrumental in that it signals one’s resolve and intimidates the opponent into making concessions. Generally, the higher the stakes are the more actors have incentives to manipulate information. But tactical maneuvering in order to improve one’s position may eventually degenerate into more violence. Such a situation is captured in figure 2. Leaders of A and Z retreat from maximalist demands and are ready to compromise opening a negotiations space X...Z. The precise point for a settlement however has to be found (displayed as “??”) by using violence as costly signals.

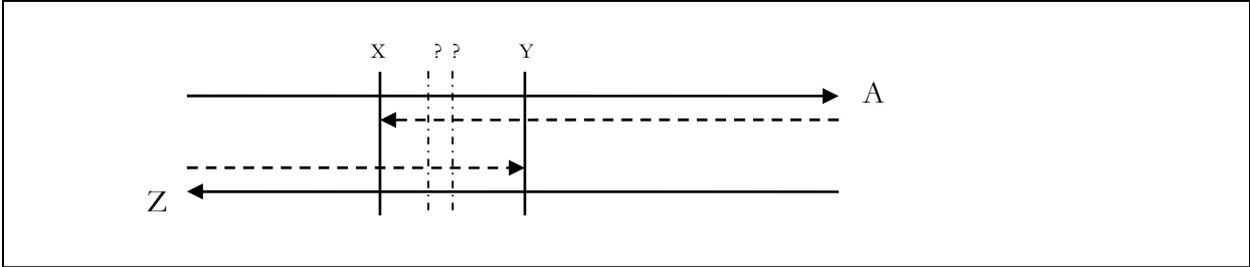


Figure 2

Rejecting Kaufman’s claim that war was inevitable, Melander points to an initiative of some Armenian representatives from Karabakh in the summer of 1991 that was aborted by the assassination of Valerii Grigoriyan at the hands of hard-liners and the demise of the SU. De Waal later questioned Melander’s contention, arguing that if negotiations with Baku had been possible, the window of opportunity was already closed at that time and the initiative was lacking popular support. Nonetheless, explaining the escalation process in terms of strategic dilemmas as Melander does avoids the problems of applying the security dilemma as discussed above since it is compatible with malign intentions. Moreover, it provides us with a structural explanation for the spiraling process. Still, what remains unexplored is the dynamics of the two-level game where intergroup strategies are related to intragroup struggles. I argue that while we should refrain from all too easy assertion about the inevitability of a negotiated settlement, it is at the second level there that answers can be found of why a settlement became impossible.

**2) Violent Boundary Politics and Preference Change**

<sup>12</sup> Ironically, this game of mutual deception goes on today as mostly unfounded stories of the active participation of thousands of Mujahedeen fighters from Afghanistan, Armenian mercenaries, genocide plans, etc. can be found in numerous accounts of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Starting from a the strategy-driven approach as proposed by Melander I seek to unearth the intragroup processes which explain the preference change that eventually made war inevitable. My argument is based on the benefits political entrepreneurs can reap from “nationalizing” politics. Exploiting violence they manipulate group boundaries thereby creating antagonistic identities which radicalize their constituencies. What had been beneficial in the first place later turned out to be a liability as compromising with the enemy in presence of fearful public was not an option anymore. Before detailing my argument I turn again to Kaufman’s work in order to show how my theory of preferences differs from his.

### *Determined Group Preferences?*

Kaufman assumes that as myth-symbol complexes are given, group preferences are determined and politicians cannot do much about it.<sup>13</sup> Hostile myths are autonomous forces that work beyond the reach of any one member of the group. Sometimes elites exploit this situation trying to ride the tiger of collective frenzy; sometimes they do not and are overrun by the events as the masses take the lead. This begets questions. What if myths that trigger fear and hostile emotions are only a component of a wider cultural repertoire that also comprises peace-promoting narratives? What if deliberate political choices and appropriate rhetoric determine whether one or the other prevails? In fact, it sometimes sounds as Kaufman endorses such a view. Kaufman (2001, 1996b) concedes that nationalist mobilization not only demands chauvinist rhetoric or the waving of a flag – it is often results from the instigation of violence. Appeals to myths have to appear credible in the first place. Not only speech acts or mere symbolism but tangible political actions that confirm latent fears are needed to stir hostile emotions. As Kaufman admits, “[h]ostility and fear arise as a result of symbolic events that activate ... myths”, the waving of a flag or the election of an ethnic minority party is rarely enough of a threat to mobilize an ethnic group in self-defense (see Kaufman 2001:34). Faced with the reluctance of their “brethren” to respond to ethnic appeals, political entrepreneurs may see the need to provoke interethnic violence in order to “[shock] moderates into the belief that extremist policies are necessary” (Kaufman 2001: 22).<sup>14</sup> Power-seeking elites have not only a crucial role to play in

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<sup>13</sup> Kaufman states that “group fears and myths that justified hostility were strong, leading to powerfully hostile mass attitudes. These attitudes created a context for leaders in which predatory policy was more popular than moderate policy; and the hostile narratives provided a symbolic vocabulary that the leaders used as tools to mobilize support” (2006: 48).

<sup>14</sup> The case of Serbia, lengthily discussed by Kaufman, is a case in point: Had the use of propaganda been sufficient to rally the Serbs for the next election, the Yugoslav Army would not have begun to arm the Krajina-Serbs, nor would Milosevic have felt the need to install a parallel institutional structure in the Krajina that allowed him to escalate the situation. The United Nations International Tribunal for the Persecution of Persons responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia since 1991 (ICTY) found that “[i]through the parallel structure, Milošević manufactured incidents, which provoked reaction and fear among

exploiting myths; they may actually foster the escalation of violence in order for mass hostilities to arise.

### *Intragroup Politics*

The within-group process of manipulation should be understood as a creation of antagonistic identities which materialize along group boundaries. Once events on the ground corroborate appeals to national unity that point to existential threats, people stop cooperating across ethnic boundaries and mistrust and fear hold sway over a formerly shared social space.

Identity construction functions as an informal boundary-generating device (Conversi 1995: 77, Somer 2005: 118). Social boundaries, following Wimmer's recent work, have categorical and behavioral dimensions: "The former refers to acts of social classification and collective representation; the latter to everyday networks of relationships that result from individual acts of connecting and distancing" (2008: 975). Put otherwise, boundaries so defined represent two cognitive schemes: "One divides the social worlds into social groups – into 'us' and 'them' – and the other offers scripts of action - how to relate to individuals classified as 'us' and 'them' under given circumstances" (Wimmer 2008: 975, see also Brubaker 2004).

Playing the "ethnic card" in order to eliminate political competition is a well know phenomenon. Where nationalism comes to dominate political discourse, rivals who appeal to non-nationalist issues and seek support across ethnic lines can easily be sidelined by rabble-rousers (Saideman 1998). Political entrepreneurs thus face incentives to turn to ethnonational policies that secure them quasi-monopoly positions in the political arena (Snyder and Ballentine 1996: 14). The success of such strategies is contingent upon the salience of antagonistic identity constructions which promote conflict over cooperation across boundaries (Kuran 1998: 624, Bhavnani 2006: 652). But without a "people's perception of an existence-threatening force ... people are unlikely to respond to the national agendas of politicians and intellectuals" (Bowman 2003: 320). Violence is thus instrumental for the "nationalization" of politics. The problem however is that such a process can be self-enforcing: "The less they undertake joint collective actions, the greater their perceptions of difference and the more likely they will perceive their interests to be zero-sum" (Somer 2005: 120). As people begin to exclude each other from their social, political, and economic interactions political compromise becomes precarious as mistrust reigns.

While Wimmer's categorical dimension in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is unproblematic for the SU had firmly institutionalized ethnonational categories (Martin 2001,

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*the Serbs, ... and intensified intervention by the Croatian police. This spiraled up into intolerance, violence, and eventually war?* (Prosecutor v. Milan Babić, Case No. IT-03-72-I, Factual Statement, Case No. IT-03-72-I, para.16 cited in Marko-Stöckl 2004: 32 [her emphasis]).

Brubaker 1996), the politicization of boundaries was not self-evident. In fact, any form of nationalism had been suppressed and a Soviet identity had taken roots. Yet, the escalation of violence made that the nationalist agenda of politicians and intellectuals could successfully redefine the relationship between Armenians and Azeri<sup>15</sup> from one of brotherhood to enmity. In the wake of the first violent incidences in February 1988 long suppressed “kitchen-stories” of Armenian sufferings were activated and made for a vicious brew that let the Azeris of the day appear as a reincarnation of those “Turks” who had committed the 1915 genocide.

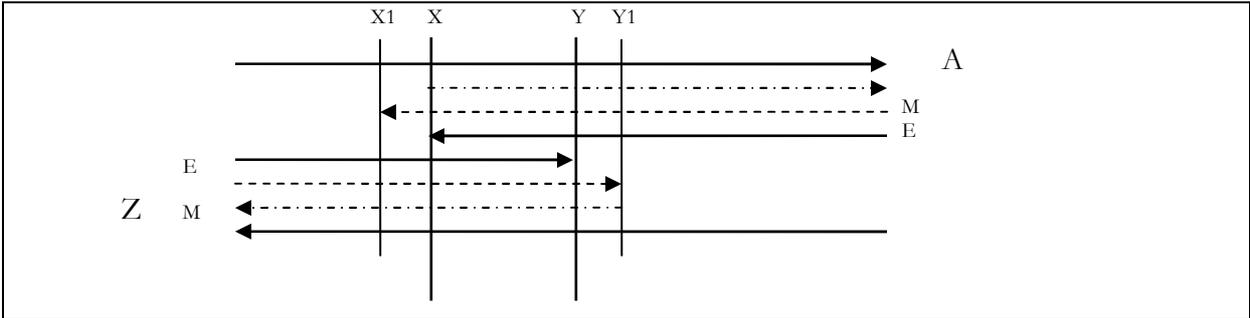


Figure 3

What happened then is sketched out in figure 3. While the population (M) might have been more flexible than their leaders (E) in the beginning ( $X1...Y1 > X...Y$ ), the escalation made them desert the zone of understanding and return to maximalist positions. Since leaders are constrained by their public, they could not strike a deal albeit they might have been ready to prevent further escalation.

But it takes two to tango. For such a process to take place there needs to be a tacit collusion between elites from both sides that hope to reap profit from radicalization. A calm and cautious response to incidences in general and measures of ingroup policing to check hotheads in particular would defuse the conflict and undermine intragroup claims of imminent threats (Fearon and Laitin 1996). As I will show below, this did not happen in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. All along the escalatory spiral did politicians in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh stake claims to power by exploiting the escalating violence. Once the conflict became too costly resorting to negotiations was not an option anymore. The unleashed nationalist fervor had crowded out any point of compromise. The analysis of the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict thus has to supplement the intergroup strategies of violent signaling under uncertainty as described by Melander with an account of how public preferences changed in function of the exploitation of this process on the intragroup level.

<sup>15</sup> Note that the ethnic denomination “Azeri” is of recent origin and betrays an ethnicization of identity which is among other things a consequence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

### 3) The Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh: An Introduction<sup>16</sup>

According to Human Rights Watch, the armed conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between 1988 and 1994 claimed more than 25,000 lives, most of them civilians (HRW 1994). All parties to the conflict committed grave violations of the rules of war. Forcible expulsions were used as a military strategy and whole villages were looted and arsoned. More than one million people were displaced in one of the bloodiest conflicts that accompanied the dismemberment of the SU (Rieff 1997: 119).<sup>17</sup> Though considered “frozen” it continues to be a security issue that impedes political integration and economic development in the southern Caucasus (Laitin and Suny 1999: 145).

The analysis of the case of Nagorno-Karabakh is however not without difficulties and available facts have been hijacked by one or the other party to the conflict. As Köhler succinctly puts it: “The question of a starting point in space and time for the conflict became as disputed as the question of what the conflict is over and who is fighting” (2001: 4). For example, was it the bold demand of the Soviet of Nagorno-Karabakh for unification of the Autonomous Oblast with the Soviet Republic of Armenia in February 1988 that triggered the violent escalation? Or was it the anti-Armenian riots of the same month in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait in which more than 32 Armenians were killed?<sup>18</sup> The identification of the parties to the conflict is no less politicized. For Azerbaijan the conflict is one with Armenia who is accused of occupying Azerbaijani territory in violation of international law. By contrast, the official position of Armenia consists in pointing out that this is a domestic conflict within Azerbaijan where Nagorno-Karabakh is fighting for self-determination.<sup>19</sup>

For analytical purposes, the conflict can at least be separated in two periods, one before and one after the end of the USSR and both countries’ accession to independent statehood. It is mainly in the first that the escalation took place while the second was dominated by all-out war. Notwithstanding the anti-Armenian Pogroms in 1988 and 1990 the conflict was in its early days a constitutional struggle over the territorial transfer of the Autonomous Oblast to Soviet Republic of Armenia. On the ground, all actors counted on Moscow to take the role of an arbiter in this dispute. But on the eve of the SU’s demise, the center proved incapable of managing a crisis that

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<sup>16</sup> For detailed, historical accounts, see e.g., Ruf 2003, Herzig 1999, Cornell 1999, Goldenberg 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Although many national groups were separated from their “homeland” in the early 1990s as they found themselves as minorities in newly created sovereign states, it was only in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh that an irredentist conflict escalated into a war. More than seventeen years after the end of the SU one can say that despite predictions to the contrary, no Pandora’s Box was opened and armed conflicts remained a rare occurrence (see e.g. Medvedev 1995).

<sup>18</sup> The Azeri side would answer that this was an unfortunate reaction to the killings of two Azeri in Nagorno-Karabakh. Still others like Cornell (1999) locate the beginning of the escalation in a petition by the Armenian academy of science with thousands of signatures calling for the territorial transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

<sup>19</sup> Note that Nagorno-Karabakh has not been annexed to Armenia for political reasons although its survival as an internationally not recognized entity depends on Armenia.

picked up in pace as more and more people fled to their “home republics” once the first inter-ethnic clashes had taken place.<sup>20</sup>

In the early days the conflict was marked by petty crime like the stealing of livestock and violent clashes took mainly the form of brawls. But the situation worsened during the summer of 1991. Guerilla warfare now dominated claiming more and more victims as the conflict went on “less as a confrontation between two armies and more as a struggle between one army or the other against civilians” (Laitin and Suny 1999: 156). In autumn of 1991 Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh successively proclaimed their independence. With the USSR disappearing the situation changed dramatically not at least because heavy weaponry now became easily accessible to the opponents. The newly independent state of Azerbaijan abolished Nagorno-Karabakh’s autonomy status in November 1991 and soon after government troops began shelling its capital Stepanakert. The following Armenian counter-offensives not only captured a land corridor connecting the enclave with Armenia but led to territorial gains outside of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. This wrought havoc to Azerbaijan’s fledgling political system and internal struggles undermined the war effort. Notwithstanding several attempts to broker a peace deal over the years, the conflict went on until a ceasefire was negotiated under Russia’s mediation in 1994 (Herzig 1999: 67). The hot phase of the conflict ended with total Armenian control over Nagorno-Karabakh and five districts of Azerbaijan (de Waal 2003: 215).<sup>21</sup> A situation that essentially remains unchanged until today.

On the following pages I first analyze the violent escalation of the conflict surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh on an intergroup level assessing the strategic dilemmas that might explain the escalation. Next I will look at intragroup processes and show how leaders within the respective groups exploited or actively contributed to the escalation by radicalizing the populations for political benefits and how this eventually became a liability.

### **Intergroup Level**

“Both sides are trapped in the logic of war”, deploras Goldenberg in her account of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (1994: 173). Moscow’s de facto withdrawal from role as guarantor of the territorial-administrative structure of the SU and neutral arbiter created an environment in which a compromise had to be found on the ground if parties wanted to avoid war. Both parties tried to signal their power and resolve using aggressive rhetoric and violent

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<sup>20</sup> In only two weeks 200,000 Armenians are said to have left Azerbaijan in reaction to the riots in Sumgait while about 230,000 Azeri left Armenia until 1993 (Laitin and Suny 1999: 153).

<sup>21</sup> Although the numbers are disputed, the Azeri side claims that 20% of their territory (i.e. including Nagorno-Karabakh) is occupied (see Aliyev and Budagav 2003).

means in the hope to see the opponent back down. By doing so they accelerated an escalatory spiral that, instead of bringing a negotiated settlement, ended in war.

The publicly displayed solidarity in Armenia with the demands by the Karabakh Armenians for a territorial transfer underscored their boldness. For Armenian nationalists the thrust of that demand was unequivocal: “Reunification would ... satisfy the primordial and instrumental needs for the population, as it would reunite the historically Armenian territories, would end foreign domination and would improve the material well being of the population” (Papazian 2001: 66). Notwithstanding the prosaic nature of the grievances that had caused the request in the first place and the democratic principles to which it appealed, placed within a nationalist frame of interpretation, this step sent a strong message to the leaders in Baku and Moscow, for that matter.

The widely publicized story of a deadly clash in Nagorno-Karabakh where two Azeris had been killed heightened the tension. Combined with stories of ethnic cleansing in Armenia the foundations were laid for vanguard actions. The Sumgait pogrom of 1988, albeit unplanned, became interpreted in Armenia as a replay of the 1915 genocide and presaged a bleak future for the Armenians in Azerbaijan. Were it intended to send a signal to the Armenian, it clearly backfired as Armenians in the Oblast and Armenia proper massively mobilized in display of unity and resolve (Kaufman 2001: 55). The subsequent anti-Armenian riots and bloody clashes only seemed to confirm the existential threat that the Armenian nation was facing, living amidst hostile “Turks”. As a refugee remembered these days: “I had these powerful feelings thinking back to 1915. In 1915 Armenians were totally unprotected, vulnerable and hurt by ‘Turks’” (Millers and Miller 2003: 78-9).

Early on, Moscow became a powerless bystander as the groups were bound to sort it out on the ground. Acting upon its decisions to reject the demand for the territorial transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia in the summer of 1988, the Supreme Soviet put the Oblast under direct control beginning of 1989 as the situation deteriorated. Although Nagorno-Karabakh remained within the Republic of Azerbaijan, Baku’s sovereignty over the enclave was suspended (Suny 1992: 499). The situation stabilized as order could partly be re-established. Yet, Karabakh Armenians pursued their protests and strikes and blockades in Azerbaijan threatened to escalate the conflict anew (Kaufman 2001: 69).<sup>22</sup> The lack of progress in finding a lasting solution the conflict and the need to end the Azeri blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia led to the

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<sup>22</sup> This is all the more important since Kaufman concurs with Cornell (1999) and perceives a positive trend in the year 1989: “The special commission, regardless of its other failings, had at least managed to limit the degree of violence: by one count, only forty people were killed in Azerbaijani-Armenian clashes in 1989 – a far better record than that of 1988 and incomparably better than what was to follow” (2001: 71). Until mid of February more than 48 000 Armenian refugees returned to Azerbaijan (Kaufman 2001: 68).

end of Moscow's direct control in November 1989.<sup>23</sup> The Azeri nationalists had proven their resolve and Nagorno-Karabakh formally became again subordinated to Baku. A throwback into the escalation spiral was the result.

But the Armenian side did not remain passive. In July 1989 the Soviet of Nagorno-Karabakh annexed the Shaumian district, which lay outside of the Oblast's boundaries.<sup>24</sup> The signal could not be stronger since a "reference to Azerbaijan as a formerly Armenian territory ... implicitly carried the message that the Armenians were entitled to annex as much of Azerbaijan as they could" (Zverev 1996: 3). Some Azeri intellectuals raised the specter of a Greater Armenia: "It's not just Azerbaidjan ... They want annex parts of Georgia, Iran, and Turkey" (cited in Suny 1992: 492). Far from being a mere administrative contention over the future of the Oblast that had turned bad, in the eyes of many a Azeri the conflict now took the form of an Armenian offensive on Azerbaijan territory where the nation's survival was at stake. What had begun as a struggle over Nagorno-Karabakh had evolved into an Armenian attack on Azerbaijan. Anticipating what was going to come the strategy in these days already consisted in "seizing as much territory as possible" to hold enough bargaining chips once talks were underway (Goldenberg 1994: 171).<sup>25</sup>

There was no doubt that the Karabakh Armenians received aid in men and material from Armenia proper. Seen from this perspective Erevan's decision of August 1990 to create an Armenian army while at the same time reiterating Armenian rights to Nagorno-Karabakh did not help to diffuse the tension. Though not officially justified by the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh the increase in capabilities was certainly alarming for the leadership in Baku and the consequences were soon felt on the ground.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the whole Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh was mobilized for the war effort: "Stepanakert was governed by a wartime regime; every male between the ages of 18 and 45 was enlisted; everything was subordinated to the needs of the army; and the military and the economy functioned as a single mechanism" (Papazian 2001: 80). In the ranks of the Armenian *fedayeen* one could eventually find volunteers from Armenia, mercenaries from abroad and even whole units of the newly created Armenian army (HRW 1994: fn. 6). The Azeris were now fighting on two fronts. Against the Armenian forces in

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<sup>23</sup> It is noteworthy that even as the blockade ended, trains coming from Azerbaijan were attacked on the border by Armenians so that the reestablishment of transportation links was hampered for lack of security (Kaufman 2001:69).

<sup>24</sup> The Shaumian district (referred to as "Geranboy" by the Azeris) was inhabited by 16,000 Armenians.

<sup>25</sup> The Armenian offensives that had captured territory beyond Nagorno-Karabakh proper can be seen as part of a defensive strategy. One interviewee of the Millers emphasized that point when he remarked: "Whatever it takes. We need to defend ourselves. Whatever area is necessary to take away from the Azeris so that we can live peacefully" (Miller and Miller 2003: 79).

<sup>26</sup> Officially the reason to create an army was the security of the border with Turkey (Goldenberg 1994: 143).

Karabakh on the one hand and against those fighters crossing the border from Armenia on the other (HRW 1994: 31-2).

But in these days Azerbaijan with its Communist leadership still in position could count on Moscow's support. As mentioned above, the Supreme Soviet denied a territorial transfer and eventually restored Baku's nominal sovereignty over the Oblast after it had suspended its control for much of 1989.<sup>27</sup> A turning point was the cooperation of Soviet army troops and Azeri Ministry of the Interior units in ethnic cleansings of Armenian villages on Azerbaijan territory that took place in spring 1991. Referred to as "Operation 'Ring'", it had a tremendous effect on the Armenian perception since for the first time actively Moscow took sides (Croissant 1998: 42).<sup>28</sup> Whatever the officially stated aims of this operation, it was one of "search-and-destroy" (Cornell 1999: 26). Hundreds of Armenians were arrested and thousands forcibly expelled in order to eradicate Armenian paramilitary forces. Between 22 and 24 villages were "ethnically cleansed" (HRW 1994: 3-4). The signal was unmistakable: Armenians now faced an overwhelmingly powerful enemy. The costs of their struggle made some of them even consider negotiations (Melander 2001: 69). However, resistance dragged on.

In November 1991 Azerbaijan severed all transportation links to Armenia, drafted all men above 18 years of age and withdrew Nagorno-Karabakh's autonomy status (Croissant 1998: 46). Moreover, the evolving alliance between Azerbaijan and Turkey that adopted an embargo policy against Armenia seemed to confirm the worst suspicions of a Turkish-led anti-Armenian alliance (Dehdashti 2000: 45, Zverev 1996: 16, Papazian 2001: 77).<sup>29</sup> The period after both Republics had acceded to independence continued to be marked by an increase in military capabilities which translated into more violence on the ground.<sup>30</sup> Azerbaijan's accelerated military mobilization increased the risks for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh to find themselves sooner or later confronted with an overwhelming force that would certainly try to regain control over the whole territory. The massive shelling of Stepanakert with Grad missiles that began at the end of the same year vindicated these claims. For one observer, now "the bare survival of Nagorno-Karabakh was at stake" (Soljan 1995: 156).<sup>31</sup> Full-blown war was imminent.

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<sup>27</sup> This step had been caused by Azerbaijan's escalating domestic conflict between the nationalist Popular Front and the ruling Communist Party.

<sup>28</sup> "Operation 'Ring'" officially aimed at searching Nagorno-Karabakh and its neighboring districts for illegal weapon caches and carry out identity controls in the targeted areas in order to prevent illegal Armenian infiltration.

<sup>29</sup> Armenia thereby lost 80% of its imported energy supply which led to massive shortages (Rutland 1994: 849).

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Azerbaijan's first president Ayaz Mutalibov had first opposed the creation of an Azeri army.<sup>30</sup> However, Nagorno-Karabakh's declaration of independence the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1991 left him with no choice than to accede to the demands of the nationalist Popular Front.

### *Summary*

As none of the opponents could count on Moscow for definitive arbitration any more, the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh turned into a violent signaling game where both sides sought to test the power and resolve of their opponents in the hope that showing determination would confer an advantage in an eventual settlement. The rapid switch between aggression, retaliation, and appeasement one could observe in those years corroborate the strategic nature of the escalatory process (Papazian 2001: 72). As uncertainty reigned the parties to the conflict “seemed to believe they had more to gain on the battlefield than at the conference table and were plainly willing to go on fighting” (Altstadt 1996: 227). Indeed, it seems that there was no one among the belligerents that was willing to compromise in the early phases of the escalation. However, the war was not inevitable. There were numerous attempts of individuals to prevent the conflict escalation, especially in its early days. These actions warrant the assumption that room for compromise existed. Two events illustrate this point. Kaufman (2001: 63) as well as de Waal (2003: 15) recount the story of the brawl in 1988 during which two Azeri youths lost their lives. They had marched with a group of protesters from the city of Agdam to Nagorno-Karabakh where they had clashed with some villagers and the police. But a further escalation of violence was prevented by the boss of the local Kolkhoz in Agdam who stopped an angry crowd of Azeri from taking revenge. Much in the same way, although less successful in the end, was a functionary of the Communist Party who prevented anti-Armenian riots in Baku. However, the pogrom instead took place in Sumgait where the mob faced no obstacles to lash out on their innocent victims. Indeed, Laitin and Suny find that “it is clear that there has been movement and flexibility on both sides and that the political conditions of the bargaining, rather than the structural conditions of the conflict, have undermined resolution” (1999: 158). What were these political conditions?

### **Intragroup Level**

The analysis of the intergroup dimension urges us to take a closer look at the role of elites and the way socio-political dynamics within the groups have an impact on conflicts among them. The escalation into a war that nobody could have wished for was less due to strategic interactions between the groups alone but a result of politics within the groups. Political entrepreneurs tried to rally people around a nationalist program by exploiting the escalation on the ground. But once radicalized the respective publics would see any attempt to compromise as treason.

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<sup>31</sup> In fact, the build up of Azeri forces was low and the war over Nagorno-Karabakh resulted in several armed units operating more or less independently from each other (see Dehdashti 2000: 88).

The dominant ideological framework that came on the heels of demands to democratize the Soviet System was nationalism (see Nodia 1993). Existing ethnonational categories institutionalized by Soviet nationalities policies were manipulated by political entrepreneurs in order to bring down the incumbent *apparatchniki*. Those who were quick to adapt to the new ideological guidelines of the day out-competed those who still held dear the Soviet slogan of “brotherhood of the peoples” that had legitimated their rule (Derluigian 2003). I show how the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in general and its escalation in particular were functional in the competition for political power and, as in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh proper, the control over the distribution of resources. The result however was a hardening of group boundaries as identities turned antagonistic.

### *Armenia / Nagorno-Karabakh*

During political opening of the 1980s Armenia’s political opposition had focused on issues like ecology, corruption, and democratization more generally. In these days a group of intellectuals founded the Karabakh Committee which would later become the most powerful oppositional movement and eventually end communist rule in Armenia. The name was well chosen. The issue of Nagorno-Karabakh was used as a testing ground for democratization while at the same time it helped to present the disparate grievances voiced in these days as only so many aspects of a larger national struggle. Indeed, the committee could point to the fact that the demand of a territorial transfer of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast to Armenia had been a majority decision of the local Soviet and the public in Armenia proper seemed to support the request as well.<sup>32</sup> It pressured the Armenian Supreme Soviet to act in accordance with its role as a representative body and to endorse this request – an action that would send a strong signal to Moscow.

What undeniably helped to mobilized people for huge rallies was the escalation on the ground. What had started as a movement towards more democratization turned into a national reawakening as interethnic violence galvanized the masses. The use of appeals to the nation as rallying point for the opposition was not fortuitous. Contrasting the situation in Azerbaijan, Armenia’s nationalist opposition had the advantage that it could build on well developed national identity that carried powerful collective threat perceptions rooted in the experience of the 1915 genocide and other misdeeds (Dehdashti 2000: 68). Although populations could look back at a long tradition of peaceful coexistence even predating the SU, the way the unfolding events were

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<sup>32</sup> The question over whether Nagorno-Karabakh should be united with Armenia can be traced back to the 1920 and lingered on. The drafting of petitions and the circulation of signature lists in favor of such a step were recurrent.

portrayed and exploited destroyed existing bonds and drove the communities apart (see Miller and Miller 2003: 70 and Derlugian 2003: 189).

Ironically, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh was in its beginnings not so much motivated by nationalism but was a scramble over the distribution of gains from the shadow economy amidst the SU's faltering territorial-administrative structure (Derlugian 2003, Köhler 2001, de Waal 2003). It was a "carefully planned, albeit provincially naïve, bureaucratic insurgency" as the later President of Nagorno-Karabakh, Robert Kocharyan admitted in an interview (Derlugian 2003: 191-2). In fact, the Karabakh Armenians felt that they were "losing out to more powerful Azerbaijani networks in the underground economy: as a minority they were not strong enough to claim a large slice of the pie" (de Waal 2003: 139). More particularly, it were the mid-ranking local officials in Karabakh who sensed that, as Gorbachev retired from his Politburo position, the time had come to break free from the oppressive patronage network of a small circle of Armenians who had been co-opted by Baku and controlled the Oblast (Derlugian 2003: 191).<sup>33</sup> Seizing on the spirit of democratic opening they began to use their administrative resource to organize popular rallies. While the protest movement grew stronger, openly contesting the old order, the center neither repressed their actions nor consented to their demand. Brawls and occasional skirmishes between Azeris and Armenians erupted in these days but it was particularly the pogroms in Sumgait of February 1988 that "nationalized" the conflict as the oppositional movement in Armenia found in this event a powerful rallying point.

Two examples illustrate how much the political success of the Karabakh Committee was contingent upon the escalating conflict over the Oblast. In October 1987 the news about anti-Armenian riots in a village in Nagorno-Karabakh only brought about 1000 people into the streets of Erevan, while the day before between 2000 and 4000 demonstrators had marched against environmental pollution (Suny 1992: 490). A few months later the picture had fundamentally changed. After the Sumgait pogrom a crowd of almost a million gathered in front of the parliament building and successfully prompted the Supreme Soviet of Armenia to vote the demand for reunification of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia (Rutland 1994: 843). But the connection between the Anti-Armenian riots in Azerbaijan and Armenia's tragic history on the one hand and the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh on the other was not automatically forthcoming: "At first, few Yerevan residents knew much about Nagorny Karabakh, but rallies and pamphlets were soon giving everyone a crash course in the Armenian version of the dispute" (de Waal 2003: 24). Suny provides for a condensed version of how the events were interpreted and given sense in the lights of the past:

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<sup>33</sup> At the end of 1987 some ethnic Armenian officials had secretly traveled to Moscow in order to seek patronage in Gorbachev's entourage which comprised numerous advisors of Armenian origin. Particularly Gorbachev's economic advisor, Abel Aganbeyan was one of those favorable to a territorial transfer (Cornell 1999: 13).

As a people that suffered genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Turks and the loss of three-quarters of historic Armenia to the Turkish republic, the Armenians were desperate to prevent the loss of 'orphaned' Karabagh. Beside the memory of genocide, they remember the clashes with Azerbaijanis in 1905, the massacre of 20,000 Baku Armenians in September 1918 by Azerbaijanis, and the perennial grievances over Karabagh (1992: 493).

The nationalist opposition exploited the conflict in order to push the communist leadership into their direction and thereby managed to occupy more and more public space (Kaufman 2001: 65). As Walker remembers: "Gradually this 'Committee', which had the support of the overwhelming majority of the population, became a *de facto* opposition, controlling political affairs by regular meetings attended by crowds ..." (1991: 126, his emphasis). Fearing that public dismissal of nationalism would result in complete loss of power, the communist party embarked on supporting the demand for Nagorno-Karabakh's self-determination (Goldenberg 1994: 142). What had changed though was that the nationalist opposition and the communist party were now aligned with regard to the question of Nagorno-Karabakh: The dispute was considered a matter of historical justice and Azerbaijan had simply no rights to this territory. As the first free elections in spring 1990 approached, the public debates were dominated by nationalist rhetoric but Karabakh Committee had already become "a second government in Armenia, one with more popular support and credibility than the Communist Party and the Soviet government" (Suny 1992: 503).<sup>34</sup> In October 1991 Levon Ter-Petrossian one of its founding members would become the first president of independent Armenia (Goldenberg 1994: 142).

Since the first free elections in the summer of 1990 the nationalist opposition was running the Republic actively, intervening in the escalating conflict by helping refugees and recruiting fighters for the guerilla campaign launched in and around Nagorno-Karabakh (Rutland 1994: 850). But soon the Nagorno-Karabakh issue turned out to be a liability for the fledgling Armenian state. Having swiftly taken over power in Erevan riding on a wave nationalist fervor, it was now Ter-Petrossian who had to cope with the consequences of nationalist radicalization. Since he had built his political career on the demand for Karabakh's redemption, one could have expected that his primary policy goal was unification but this turned out to be wrong. Ter-Petrossian was more concerned with the consolidation of the fledgling Armenian state. This required concessions, namely on Nagorno-Karabakh.

A negotiated settlement short of unification was objected by public opinion and ultranationalists forces, the Dashnaks.<sup>35</sup> They thought inadmissible the pragmatist turn towards

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<sup>34</sup> The arrest of the Karabakh Committee's leadership helped only to increase the movement's popularity (Suny 1992: 504, also Rutland 1994: 844).

<sup>35</sup> Founded in 1890, the Daschnakzutjun ("Federation") ruled the first Armenian Republic in the period of 1918 – 1920 and later became the most important political organization in the diaspora community. In the wake of the

political flexibility that was sold to the public as “realism”. In their esprit of “now or never”, the ultranationalist not only reiterated the demand for unification with Nagorno-Karabakh but also raised claims to the Azeri enclave of Nakhitchevan and Turkish territories lost after World War I (Goldenberg 1994: 144; Laitin and Suny 1999: 155).<sup>36</sup> It thus does not come as a surprise that a peace initiative in the summer of 1991 by Russian president Yeltsin and his Kazakhian colleague Nazarbayev that called for an end of the Azeri blockade and a reinstatement of the status quo was accepted by Ter-Petrosian but blocked by an alliance of ultranationalist and Armenian Karabakhis. What could have become a “milestone in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan” (Croissant 1998: 44-5) was seen by the Dashnaks as an affront and led them to declare Nagorno-Karabakh’s independence on December 10, 1991.<sup>37</sup> Again, Ter-Petrosian balked, rejecting to formally recognize its independence. The membership of Armenia in the newly created Community of Independent States (CIS) required respect for and protection of existing borders of the former SU and he was not ready to sacrifice the economic viability of Armenia for Nagorno-Karabakh (Goldenberg 1994: 147-8).<sup>38</sup>

The Dashnaks however had more success in Nagorno-Karabakh proper. Although the massive damage inflicted by “Operation ‘Ring’” in the spring of 1991 induced a faction of the old Soviet *nomenklatura* to call for negotiations, the young militants continued to reject any compromise rightly interpreting this step as amounting to nothing more than a capitulation. Having taken up arms they had too much to lose from backing down (Melander 2001: 70). Confident in their popular support, they assassinated Valerii Grigoriyan, a senior official at the Stepanakert Communist Party city counsel who had traveled to Moscow to initiate negotiations with Baku (de Waal 2003: 118, Melander 2001: 71).<sup>39</sup> “After this event the radicals became the dominant force in Nagorno-Karabakh” (Melander 2001: 71). In the wake of mounting tensions between Stepanakert and Erevan, the radical forces in Nagorno-Karabakh stuck to an aggressive military strategy which Ter-Petrosian apparently could not control. Although Nagorno-Karabakh was entirely depended on Armenian support there was no sign of a political

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political opening of the 1980s and the international humanitarian help to the Republic after it had been hit by a devastating earthquake, allowed it to become politically active again. In 1990 it was finally re-established in Armenia soon took on a oppositional role (see Dehdashti 2000: fn. 83).

<sup>36</sup> Armenia’s national symbol, the Mount Ararat today lies on Turkish territory.

<sup>37</sup> In November 1991 a Helicopter crash over Nagorno Karabakh that killed several officials implicated in the process wrecked the peace plan.

<sup>38</sup> Armenia’s first president Ter-Petrosian insisted in an interview “We want to make every effort to ensure that the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh is not regarded as a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is wrong to say that Armenia has territorial claims on Azerbaijan” (cited in Croissant 1998: 70).

<sup>39</sup> In fact, he stood not representative for the majority. De Waal (2005: 111) states that he was the “only Armenian” who cooperated with Moscow and Baku throughout 1990.

subordination whatsoever (Dehdashti 2000: 61).<sup>40</sup> As Ter-Petrosian could not risk an open split with Stepanakert, lest he would lose all his credibility and incur the risk of seeing Nagorno-Karabakh returning under Baku's authority, it became more and more obvious that now the Karabakh tail was wagging the Armenian dog (Herzig 1999: 70).

### *Azerbaijan*

By contrast to the situation in Armenia where the Communist Party had soon capitulated before the nationalist opposition, in Azerbaijan the Party managed to maintain its dominant role (Zverev 1996: 4). The emergence of a nationalist mass movement in Azerbaijan was a late reaction to the Armenian claims to Nagorno-Karabakh. It was only in 1989 that the nationalist Popular Front was created. This movement stood for the defense of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sought to pressure the communist leadership to take more drastic measures against Nagorno-Karabakh's attempts to secede (Goldenberg 1994: 116, Suny 1992: 500). But it was lacking the mass support that its counterpart in Armenia had received and could not challenge the power of the Communist Party who denied any dialogue with the opposition (see Suny and Laitin 1999: 156). From this position of weakness the Front began to radicalize and switched from a civic nationalist agenda to "an increasingly nationalistic, anti-Armenian program" (Dudwick 1993: 277).

The decisive moment came as the Popular Front organized a blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh in August 1989, then under Moscow's direct control (Croissant 1998: 34). Such a provocation could not go without a response by the Karabakh Armenians since they were now cut-off from Armenia. Moscow requested the Communist Party leadership in Baku to lift the blockade but the latter could not control the situation. The blockade eventually was lifted but for the price of the Front's recognition as a political party (Croissant 1998: 34, Auch 1995: 165). The next step in this escalating conflict was reached when for a second time anti-Armenian riots broke out in Baku in January 1990. Neither the police nor the troops of the Ministry of the Interior stepped in. In order to bolster the fledgling communist rule in Azerbaijan, Moscow opted for a heavy-handed crackdown on the opposition and deployed the army to Baku (see Auch 1995: 166-7). According to official figures 137 people died in what is considered in Azerbaijan historiography as the crushing of the nascent independence movement.

Now the situation had changed and the oppositional mobilization gained in pace. Ayaz Mutalibov who became first secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan in May 1990 had to

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<sup>40</sup> According to Cornell (1999: 33), in 1992, a common budget was already in place. At least 85% of the budget of the self-declared Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh was provided by Erevan – a situation that has certainly not changed since.

steer a more nationalist course. The “Operation ‘Ring’” of 1991 can be interpreted in this way. In the end Mutalibov’s strategy of gaining nationalist credentials profited the Front since it accelerated the escalation (Zverev 1996: 7). In consequence it appears not surprising that he was eventually deposed in 1992 after a series of military defeats in Nagorno-Karabakh and the popular wrath over the massacre of Azeri refugees close to Khojaly.<sup>41</sup> The war brought Abulfaz Elchibey, a nationalist oppositional leader, into power. After initial gains on the battlefield he would also become a political victim of the escalating conflict which finally ended in defeat after Heidar Aliev, one of the old guard, had taken over command.

Although nationalist ideology galvanized the masses in the capital, it did not have a pervasive effect comparable to what happened in Armenia. The disastrous development of the war for Nagorno-Karabakh showed that the nationalism was not robust enough to sustain a costly military campaign.<sup>42</sup> What certainly contributed to the inner fragmentation of the Azeri polity was that the national movement in Azerbaijan was lacking powerful national narratives as was the case with Armenian. Moreover, it was dominated by workers by contrast to the situation in Armenia, where the movement was led by intellectuals who had a greater capacity to frame the events in nationalist terms. For instance, there are signs that the different Azeri paramilitary forces fighting in and around Nagorno-Karabakh conditioned their fighting on the balance of power in the capital (Dehdashti 2000: 89, see also de Waal 2003: 163).<sup>43</sup> The pursuit of personal welfare as well as the maintenance of local patronage networks weighted more than a however defined national cause (Auch 1995: 174).<sup>44</sup> Moreover, what became publicly expressed in the streets of Baku were social grievances like the lack of housing that were embedded into an anti-Armenian discourse (Suny 1992: 501). The Anti-Armenian rhetoric only mobilized people politically as the populations separated under the impact of the escalating conflict.

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<sup>41</sup> What has become known as the massacre of Khojaly took place at the end of February 1992. The fleeing inhabitants of the shelled city of Khojaly were ambushed by Armenian militias. About 485 people most of them civilians were killed (de Waal 2003:170f.).

<sup>42</sup> It is telling that Elchibey’s successor Heydar Aliyev urged in a televised speech the population to unite for the “Great Fatherland War” but, at the same time, deplored the lack of the populations readiness to make sacrifices in defense of the nation (Auch 1994: 174).

<sup>43</sup> For instance, Elchibey eventually succumbed to the strong men and war hero Husseinov. The latter who had been given the responsibility to defend the city of Agdam failed, allegedly because his unwillingness to defend this stronghold of president Elchibey. Elchibey attempt bring Husseinov to heel led to his troops marching on Baku. The ensuing clash cost many lives and made Elchibey fled the country. (HRW 1994: 6; 25f. also de Waal 2003: 215f.).

<sup>44</sup> Auch (1995: 161) suggests that it was the switch to a market economy that explains much of Azerbaijan’s inner fragmentation. In a society where the majority of the population depended on agrarian modes of production property rights were of paramount importance. Yet, these rights could only be guaranteed through local ethnic, tribal, or religious networks.

Regarding the assumption that especially in Azerbaijan social grievances spurred the conflict, the Sumgait pogrom is a case in point. Although it has been said that the assailants were Azeri refugees from Armenia, traumatized and full of hatred, the available accounts rather emphasize their social background. Zverev, for instance, describes them as belonging to marginalized groups, a “city ‘mob’ – the plebs torn from rural, traditional Islamic way of life and plunged into crime-ridden factory towns. Prone to revolt and fanaticism when aroused by some external jolt” (1996: 5). Moreover, some of the Armenian victims who managed to escape recall that many of the attackers were drunk and behaved like ordinary criminals: There was a “selfish urge to steal other people’s goods: television sets, furniture, jewelry, and other items of value” (Miller and Miller 2003: 57).<sup>45</sup> This hardly confirms the story of a sudden eruption of age-old hostile emotions (see Cornell 1999: 17). Notwithstanding claims to the contrary it seems that the riots were not centrally planned. The tragic effects it had on the conflict and particularly the subsequent escalation that was fueled by chauvinist rhetoric by contrast, was a product of opportunist actions and the structural constraints these created.<sup>46</sup>

### *Summary*

What began as a petty struggle for bureaucrats’ control over the Oblast transformed into a bloody confrontation between nations as exogenous events like the riots in Sumgait suddenly put a local conflict into the larger framework of alleged hatreds and the Armenian struggle for survival.<sup>47</sup> The escalation of violence, if not instigated was instrumentalized by political entrepreneurs to maintain or gain power position amidst the political struggles that marked the thoroughgoing structural change brought about by the end of the USSR.

Far from nationalist in the beginning, the way key actors dealt with the anti-Armenian riots of 1988 deepened the cleavage between the communities and stood at the beginning of the escalation process that radicalized the populations. The alarming rhetoric created a climate of fear

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<sup>45</sup> Indeed, many Azeri abhorred the violence against Armenians and even tried to come to help. The Millers find that their “interviews with refugees from Azerbaijan clearly indicate that there was a strong division of opinion regarding the violence against Armenians and the effort to force them out of the country. Neighbors and friends of Armenians were often horrified by what was happening. When direct violence occurred against their Armenian neighbors, they often provided temporary refuge, but Azeris were also often fearful that the marauding crowd would attack them if they were found to be sheltering Armenians” (Miller and Miller 2003: 56).

<sup>46</sup> Although there were signs and rumors of an organized plot, de Waal suggests that the events got simply out of control: „Perhaps some of the local officials deliberately manipulated the crowd, hoping they could force Armenians to leave Sumgait and thus solve the town’s most pressing social problem – the housing shortage. Whoever were targeting the Armenians, what they planned almost certainly got out of control” (de Waal 2003: 43).

<sup>47</sup> In fact, it is not certain that the anti-Armenian riots of Sumgait were intentionally organized (Derluigian 2003, Melander 2001, Cornell 1999). If this is the case than whole disaster can be attributed to the tragic conjecture of single events which took an unknown dimension as they were all related through the historical lenses of past crimes and hatreds.

that tore the communities apart as condition went sore. Yet, one is left perplexed with the prosaic nature of the first stages in the escalatory process. As an Armenian eye-witness later remembered: “We had good relations with them [the Azeris]. But when the Sumgait incident took place, slowly things started to get bad here as well. We started to steal their sheep, their donkeys. They stole our sheep, our donkeys” (Miller and Miller 2003: 73). Meanwhile activist like Robert Kocharyan already prepared for the war to come (Derluguian 2003: 191). But the oppositional movements in Armenia and Azerbaijan who had played the ethnonationalist card and fostered escalation in order to wrest power from the ruling Communist Party found themselves haunted by the forces they had unleashed. Even in Nagorno-Karabakh where the conflict eventually yielded a total victory for the Armenian side, the war ushered new conflicts into the open – internal ones this time.<sup>48</sup>

The way things evolved put a negotiated peace out of reach. The cleavage between the communities was deepened by the aggravation of the conflict, fear, mistrust, and hate prevailed. As Sergan Bagdasarijan, chair of the Karabakh-commission of the Armenian parliament pointedly declared: “No one believes any guarantees of Azerbaijan; it’s a fairy tale” (Helsinki Watch 1992: 5).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has offers a new perspective on the escalation of violence in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Criticizing earlier works by Stuart Kaufman and Eric Melander which emphasized either preferences or strategies I suggest a two-level approach that allows me to present a different analytic narration of the events that led to war. On the first level I show how the escalation can be seen as a game of costly signaling in strategic interactions between the parties involved. The second level then offers an explanation of why this did not yield a negotiated peace as should be expected. I argue that political entrepreneurs on both sides in the beginning profited from the escalation and had no reasons to hedge it. Violent clashes validated nationalist rhetoric and hardened ethnic boundaries. The rising antagonism proved to be a valuable resource for collective mobilization as fear and hostile emotions were stirred up. But once those in power faced incentive to negotiate a settlement they faced a public that did not believe in peaceful solutions anymore (see figure 3). The escalation had driven communities

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<sup>48</sup> Local warlords-turned-politicians took over control in the former Oblast and transformed it into their own fiefdom. Not only former mid-level bureaucrats like Kocharyan, who became Prime Minister of Armenia in 1997, but also thugs like Samuel Babayan who was on of the most important military leaders in Nagorno-Karabakh and after 1994 advanced to the post of Minister of Defense of the self-declared Republic reaped huge benefits from the war and the ensuing stalemate (de Waal 2003: 241-2). He was convicted in 2000 for the attempted assassination of Nagorno-Karabakh’s then president.

apart, entrenching cleavages and destroying cooperation across boundaries leaving mistrust and fear behind.

The empirical analysis supports my theoretical argument that strategy-driven approaches can benefit from an account of how preferences change in the course of the escalation. Vice-versa, preference-driven approaches should take strategies seriously in order to avoid determinism with regard to outcomes. Neither should ethnicity or nationalism be evacuated from our studies as some did in the past, reducing violent escalation to a continuation of economics by other means, nor should it be used as self-explaining explanation for violence. The point is to put collective identity in its right place, that is, to recognize the preeminence of strategic choices in the escalation of violence without neglecting the fact that collective identity while it constraints the range of preferences is endogenous to conflict.

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