



The Impact Of Natural And Human-Made Disasters In The Caucasus

By: Anatoly Isaenko

Abstract

"Mommy! Mommy!" -- a voice of a child was coming out of the opening -- "let me out please, I've always been a good boy . . ." "Please, go to sleep, dear": what else could this desperate mother have said, mad with fear, while on her knees amidst the ruins of their former house? . . . One could observe such scenes on December 7, 1988, when one of the most devastating earthquakes pounded Armenia -- the South Caucasus republic of the former Soviet Union. The center of this disaster was the village of Nalband; it disappeared entirely. The earthquake affected 40% of Armenia's territory and a million of its inhabitants; 31 cities and 342 villages suffered heavy damage, 18% of the country's dwellings were annihilated . . . This natural calamity came in the background of another disaster, this one created by the ethnocentric nationalists. The cruelties that occurred in the Caucasus, and in many other places of the world in the last couple of decades, remind us that humankind has the capacity to behave in very destructive ways.

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The Impact of Natural and Human-Made Disasters in the Caucasus

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“Mommy! Mommy!”—a voice of a child was coming out of the opening—“let me out please, I’ve always been a good boy...” “Please, go to sleep, dear”: what else could this desperate mother have said, mad with fear, while on her knees amidst the ruins of their former house? Her child cried under a heavy concrete slab inside of a miraculously preserved tiny space in the rubble.

One could observe such scenes on December 7, 1988, when one of the most devastating earthquakes pounded Armenia—the South Caucasus republic of the former Soviet Union. The center of this disaster was the village of Nalband; it disappeared entirely. The earthquake affected 40% of Armenia’s territory and a million of its inhabitants; 31 cities and 342 villages suffered heavy damage, 18% of the country’s dwellings were annihilated. Spitak-City was destroyed completely; Giumri, Stepanavan, Vanadzor suffered partial devastation. Overall, out of 2,966,802 inhabitants living in Armenia, this natural calamity named after Spitak took the lives of 25,000 people and 514,000 were left without a roof over their heads (Kavkazskii Uzel, viewed Oct. 12, 2012, [http://www. Kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/216891/](http://www.Kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/216891/)).

This natural calamity came in the background of another disaster, this one created by the ethnocentric nationalists. The cruelties that occurred in the Caucasus, and in many other places of the world in the last couple of decades, remind us that humankind has the capacity to behave in very destructive ways. (See Peter Pet-schauer, “Some Underpinnings of American Violence,” *Clio’s Psyche*, Vol. 19, 3, 263-7). I closely observed the breakup of the Soviet Union because in the late 1980s, my family and I lived through the many sided societal crisis that had been building up for decades. A psychological model developed by some specialists demonstrates that people in such human-made circumstances naturally feel frustration and anger (see Marta Cullberg Weston, “When Words Lose Their Meaning: From Societal Crisis to Ethnic Cleansing,” *Mind and Human Interaction*, 8:1, 1997: 22).

Containing this frustration often proves difficult. In the late 1980s, the formal and informal radical leadership in the Caucasus indulged on a dangerous track of externalizing anxiety and scapegoating others. Soon, human-made societal crisis changed into a deadly conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanians over the disputed territory of Nagorny Karabakh. As Vamik Volkan aptly noted, "The entire nation may attempt to deal with frustration by utilizing other nationalities or groups as suitable targets of externalization" (Vamik Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies*, 1998, 48).

Traveling across the area, I observed how during this crisis, envy and distrust between the Armenians and Azerbaijanians built and ethnocentric nationalism grew to a massive level. Numerous interviews of ordinary residents showed me that both peoples developed group mentality and group belonging, self-assertive and integrative perceptions, mirror-reflected prejudices, brotherhood within/war likeness without restraint, blind obedience to the ethnocentric charismatic leaders, and readiness to resort to unrestricted violence, i.e., to ethnic terrorism. According to Dusan Kekmanovic, such behavioral patterns characterize ethnic nationalism—the most malignant form of this ideology (Dusan Kekmanovic, "The Ethnonationalism-like Behavioral Patterns," *Mind and Human Interaction*, 8:1, 1997: 3). The late and renowned Caucasian historian Mark Bliev called such behavior of distressed masses, especially the ideas of their leaders, "a manifestation of local fascism." From 1986-1994, leaders of both peoples actively played on ethnic antagonisms to further their political agendas, and this policy invariably put those peoples on a collision course.

My own exploration of this ethnic conflict demonstrated that it passed through all the stages of a full cycle, including the bloodiest hot stage in the post-Soviet era. It unleashed predominantly along nationality, commonly shared history, and religious building blocks that were aggravated by acute unresolved chosen traumas. Biological and linguistic building blocks played a subsidiary mobilizing role. Both sides implicated mild and middle ground forms of ethnic cleansing, gradually sliding into their extremes with even elements of genocide (See my *Polygon of Satan: Ethnic Traumas and Conflicts in the Caucasus*, Second Edition, 2011, Ch. 7).

As a result, during the hot stage of the conflict in 1991-1994, 22,000 to 25,000 people perished in both countries, predominately civilians, and more than a million became refugees and forcibly displaced persons (*Europe, Nagorny Karabakh: Risking of War, The Report of International Crisis Group*, No. 187, November 14, 2007). Thus Armenians and Azerbaijanians experienced two devastating calamities: a natural life-shattering earthquake and a human-made brutal ethnic conflict. Both disasters resulted in almost the same number of human losses. However, the psychological impact was drastically different.

Contemporary witnesses and survivors of the Spitak Earthquake of December, 1988, unanimously testified that the shock, deep sorrow, and despair of Armenians were overwhelmingly shared with compassion and empathy by all the peoples of the Soviet Union and beyond. When the immediate shock and disorder had passed, Armenia received humanitarian aid from practically everywhere. Well-trained rescue crews were coming from Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, France, and other countries. In Armenia's Ashtarak, people still remember coal miners from Ukraine's Donetsk working selflessly in the most dangerous conditions, constantly risking their own lives (*Trud*, January 5, 1989). Remarkably enough, among those who were the first to come to the Armenians' rescue were their Azerbaijanian neighbors. Azerbaijan sent thousands of metrical tons of oil, gas, and other necessary supplies. Rescue crews from the republic saved hundreds of lives; sadly, 50 Azerbaijanian rescuers died in a plane crash over the Armenian city Leninakan (*Bakinskii Rabochii*, January 8, 1989). Independent observers who visited Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, testified that the natural calamity in Armenia temporarily forced people there to forget about their grudges and ethnocentric phobias. Mutual accusations and demands were put aside and mutual suspicion and mistrust began to evaporate (*Bakinskii Rabochii*, August 9, 1989). I also vividly recall my contemporary encounters with the Armenian colleague Professor Djanpaladian. He admitted that anxiety and perturbation among Armenians and Azerbaijanians in the months preceding Spitak Earthquake had reached very dangerous levels and both societies stood on the verge of war.

The situation had deteriorated to such a point that crude

forms of ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanians in Gugark district of Armenia had already forced dozens of thousands of Azerbaijanian residents from this republic. In turn, in February, 1989, the same hatred triggered a brutal massacre of the Armenian population in the Azerbaijanian city of Sumgait.

In a burst of empathy, the Spitak Earthquake calmed both communities. Moderates grabbed the opportunity to reduce the earlier violence and tried to persuade their people not to become re-stranged. They endeavored to persuade them to think not about what was dividing them but to concentrate on what was unifying them. Unfortunately, people of good will of both nations missed this chance: unlike the ethnocentric nationalists, they were not united and proactive. Ethnocentric radicals managed to drown out their calls for dialogue and began to dominate both peoples once more. In addition, the Central Soviet government failed to find any appropriate solution to the Karabakh problem, and, because of his ambivalent and inconsistent policy towards ethno-nationalists, Mikhail Gorbachev lost moral authority in the two nations. Corrupted local communist party bosses and law enforcement authorities, backed by ethnic mafias in their lust for power, sided with the ethnocentric radicals.

Provocations resumed all too soon. Horrific acts of violence in the post-quake period completely undermined even the most timid attempts to start an interethnic dialogue. Ethnocentric nationalists promoted the idea of absolute loyalty to their own ethnic groups. Supposedly that loyalty is superior to any other alternative ideas or entities. Gradually, empathy for the victims of the natural disaster gave way to the belief that they are inferior to their co-nationals and supposedly "were righteously punished by God for their evil deeds." Rights of ethnic aliens and their interests were disregarded and the idea that the fate of individuals is determined by, and dependent on, the destiny of one's own ethno-national group was reawakened.

Bedeveled with overpowering ethnocentric emotions, both peoples had their long-standing cultural code of helping others undermined and distorted. The uncontrolled forces of an infuriated nature reminded them about such fundamental human values as compassion, empathy, and wish to help their neighbors in wretched

circumstances, but they quickly forgot them in a firestorm of poisonous verbiage.

Since that time, this dominant ideology has not changed, and the conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanians remains among the most dangerous ethnic confrontations and threatens to destabilize not only the whole region of the Caucasus, but countries beyond the mountains.

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