DISPUTED CAUCASUS REGION

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Amal M. Ragheb (Carmen Aprahamyan), Egypt, April 2016

> ***Carmen Aprahamyan, who also uses the pen name Amal M. Ragheb, is an Egyptian-Armenian journalist and writer. She wrote "Disputed Caucasus Region" for the Egyptian media.--Editor.***

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The dispute's root go back to 1923 when Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin arbitrarily handed NKR to Soviet Azerbaijan, although the mountainous region had been Armenian for millennia and was inhabited (80%) by Armenians. Nagorno-Karapagh means Black Garden reflecting its black and fertile soil. Its Armenian name is Artsakh.

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Armenia, which had recently (1920) become a Soviet republic, couldn't oppose Stalin's diktat. In addition to being too weak to resist Moscow's will, Armenia was threatened by the Republic of Turkey and needed Soviet protection. As well, hundreds of thousands of Armenians, who had suffered genocide at the hands of the Turks during the recent WWI, had found shelter in Soviet Armenia. The memory of the massacres was still vivid in their minds.

A widely-accepted reason for Moscow's handing of Armenian lands to Azerbaijan (a Soviet republic

with cultural ties to Turkey) was to dissuade Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Ataturk from attacking the vulnerable Soviet Caucasus. Thus Armenians were forced to pay for Soviet security. They were also not consulted about Stalin's gift to Azerbaijan.

For the next 70 years the Armenians of the 4,400-sq. km. NKR suffered under the Azeri yoke. They were subjected to cultural discrimination and economic neglect, although they were supposedly autonomous. To dilute the Armenian demographics of the region, Baku settled Azeris in NKR with the obvious intention of eventually merging the autonomous region to Azerbaijan proper. So when the Soviet Union collapsed and Armenia and Azerbaijan declared their independence, NKR Armenians felt it was a propitious moment to claim their long-violated rights and become independent. They held a referendum, which was their legal right, about the future of their region. Almost 100% of the 145,000 NKR Armenians voted for separation from Baku. The 45,000 Azeris of NKR didn't participate as they wanted to stay within Azerbaijan.

Moscow and Baku rejected the NKR Armenian decision. Baku immediately attacked the region, in addition to massacring Armenians who lived in Azerbaijan proper.The Armenians of NKR put up a still resistance to the Azeri attacks. In the resulting war, neighbouring Armenia came to the help of NKR Armenians. After a two-year war, ceasefire was declared. Having won the war, Armenians liberated NKR and occupied seven adjacent Azeri territories which they have kept pending negotiations with Baku.

Ceasefire didn't mean peace. Azerbaijan refused to accept the independence of NKR and has for the past 22 years almost daily shot at NKR border soldiers and civilians. On the night of April 1 Azerbaijan made a surprise attack on NKR but after early successes retreated leaving more than 200 dead, at least one downed helicopter, as many as 15 destroyed tanks, and several downed drones. Armenian casualties were lighter. After four days of fighting a ceasefire was arranged by Moscow although the Azeris have continued firing intermittently at Armenian positions.