

PROBING ESSAY ABOUT ARTSAKH WAR OF LIBERATION

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Peter Anderson, London Review of Books, 27 August 2015

According to a significant segment of Russia-watchers, the late Dmitri Furman was unmatched in his analysis of Russia's post-communist era. The Russian political observer was also unapologetic about his pro-Azeri views regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In "London Review of Books" (August 27, 2015), Peter Anderson wrote about Furman's controversial work. Below are excerpts from the Anderson essay re Furman's take on the conflict.—Editor.

After his first study of Estonia, Furman turned his attention a year later to another neuralgic zone of nationalism in the last years of Gorbachev, where religion played a far more central role, and there was no such peaceful outcome. Fighting had broken out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988, with reciprocal ethnic cleansing escalating to full scale war in late 1991. In the USSR, Armenia had not only produced a unitary national movement before any other republic; the scale and duration of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh exceeded that of any other struggle in the former Soviet lands. Yet the oppression of the Armenian population by the Azerbaijani authorities in whose territory it lay was not great enough to account for this.

What could explain the peculiar intensity of Armenian national investment in the enclave? In Furman's view, two fundamental historical experiences had shaped it. The first was the fateful choice of the Armenian clergy in the fifth century of a quasi-Arian version of Christianity, a primordial heresy for what would become the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The option of a Miaphysite faith led to the creation of a *sui generis* script and liturgical language that cut Armenians off from the rest of Christendom, leaving them only with the weakest links to Copts or Syriacs. The result was a fusion of ethnicity with religion not unlike that of the Jews, minus the conviction of being uniquely chosen by God. Armenia was also a perpetual buffer zone between Byzantium and Persia, and later the Ottoman and Safavid empires, crisscrossed by their armies, and subject to mass deportations, producing a worldwide diaspora of traders and financiers like that of the Jews, if without demographic loss of a homeland.

Then in the 20th century, the Armenians were victims of a Turkish genocide, as the Jews would be of a German. Since there was still a core Armenian territory, with the collapse of the tsarist and Ottoman empires in the First World War the goal of the Armenian national movement was an independent state in situ, rather than colonization in Palestine. But caught between the Russian Revolution and the threat from Turkey, the dominant Dashnag party opted for the safety of the Bolsheviks and integration in the Soviet Union—no match of the Zionist triumph in the creation of Israel. So the trauma of the genocide found no catharsis, its memory continuing to haunt a people and a diaspora possessed of a millennial cultural-historical identity.

When perestroika came, Armenia had far the oldest continuous national movement in the USSR, going back to the last decade of the 19th century, and among the various republics could lead the

way in the drive for independence. Once it was launched, however, the recovery of a virtually contiguous Armenian community under the rule of another Turkic oppressor became the nearest compensation within reach for the original trauma—the bid to retrieve it triggering Azeri pogroms against the Armenian minority in Azerbaijan proper, in a fatal reproduction of the trauma itself. The Moscow intelligentsia, Furman argued, had been thoroughly irresponsible in supporting Armenia down this road, which was bringing misery and dislocation, amid a flood of refugees in each direction, to both countries. The only path to peace was autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan.

Of Azerbaijan, writing a decade later, Furman—frequent visitor to Baku, where he had many Azeri friends—was at pains to dwell on the positive side of the record. Contrary to expectations of prejudiced liberal opinion, it was not Islamic nationalism but a popular front that led the overthrow of the corrupt communist regime in place after the Soviet break-up, and won democratic elections in 1992. Its victory had not been durable, because of the strains of the war with Armenia, and the strength of clan ties in Azeri society. But there was a prehistory behind it that gave hope for the future. Azerbaijan was the Muslim society with the longest history of European colonization in the world, which in the aftermath of the Great War had produced an advanced democratic movement, giving birth to a short-lived independent republic, with a flourishing cultural life—press, theatre, even opera. With the return of Aliyev clan to power in 1993, authoritarian rule had been restored. But the country's chances of democratization, Furman thought, were greater than in any of the Central Asian republics. Russia had a great deal of stake in a peaceful and progressive modernization of the world of Islam, both because of the length of the border with it, and the number of its citizen who were Muslim. Islamic fundamentalism was an illness of the passage to modernity, but it was a more epidemic, less dangerous variety than those Christianity had produced—fascism, Stalinism—in the 20th century. It was wrong to exaggerate its menace. The memory of Azeri democracy would not go away."

In a telling footnote to the essay, Anderson wrote: "Furman's writing on the conflict at the time, influenced by his apprehension that its impact could only create difficulties for Gorbachev's position in Moscow, and his dislike of anti-Muslim prejudice in the Russian intelligencia, largely ignored its historical origins. In a later and fuller account, he would make some correction for this, admitting that the 'relatively illegitimate and randomly drawn border between Armenia and Azeria' gave Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh every reason to consider the embodiment of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan to be an error liable to amendment'. The allocation of the enclave to Azerbaijan in 1923, violating Bolshevik promises that it would go to Armenia in keeping with the natural preferences of its population, was no random, however. It was a calculated move by Stalin to gratify the Kemalist regime in Turkey, whose diplomatic benevolence he sought."

