

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN: THE CULTURAL CHALLENGES OF A LASTING CONFLICT

Friday 29 September 2023, 4:30 p.m. - 6:00 p.m., Gold Room



Grégory Rayko, Taline Ter-Minassian, Régis Genté, Anita Khachaturova and Gaïdz Minassian

The brutal end of an ancestral conflict

Grégory Rayko, a journalist at The Conversation France, indicated in the introduction that in the context of the dazzling attack carried out ten days earlier in Nagorno-Karabakh, the theme of the cultural issues of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan would be treated in light of the current geopolitical situation in the Caucasus.

Historian Taline Ter Minassian was invited to retrace the broad outlines of the history of the conflict between the two countries in *'the former margins of the USSR'*. The researcher pointed out that *'Nagorno-Karabakh has been a predominantly Armenian region for hundreds of years, which evolved in the Russian, Persian and Ottoman spheres of influence'*. Living *'next to the Tatar populations,*

ancestors of the Azerbaijanis, in varying proportions', the historian explains that *'inter-ethnic relations were often conflictual, particularly during the Armenian-Tatar wars of 1905-1907'*. With Georgia, the two Caucasian countries *'acquired their independence in 1918 before being integrated into the USSR in 1920'*. The Bolsheviks, *'who needed to have good relations with Atatürk's Turkey'* let Stalin, then Commissioner for Nationalities, *'arbitrate over these new republics and create a big Azerbaijan, a small Armenia, and give a gift to the Turks by founding the autonomous republic of Nakhichevan on Armenian territory but now populated by Azeris'*. In addition, the Soviet leader of Georgian origin *'gave Nagorno-Karabakh a special administrative status in which it was separated*

MODERATOR:

Gregory Rayko, Chief of International Section at The Conversation France

SPEAKERS:

Anita Khachaturova, ethnographer of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Armenia-Azerbaijan relations

Taline Ter Minassian, historian, Inalco, associate researcher at the Centre for Studies on the Russian, Caucasian and Central European Worlds (EHESS)

Gaïdz Minassian, political scientist and journalist au Monde - Régis Genté, independent journalist based in Tbilisi (Georgia)

from Armenia'. It was not until *'the 1970s that we heard voices criticising Baku, which led to a political movement for the self-determination of the peoples of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, adding to the great movement of nationalities that was part of the break-up of the USSR'*.

Régis Genté, independent journalist, took up the rest of the chronology after the fall of the Soviet bloc in 1991, after which *"two principles of international law clashed: the right of people to self-determination and respect for territorial integrity'*. Unable to resolve the situation, the *'international community, which places these principles on an equal footing, allowed the situation to be settled de facto by force'*. Today, with *'the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, Azerbaijan will be able to take advantage of UN resolutions and leave the international community in a state of embarrassment'*. The journalist recalled the Armenian victory during the 1988-1994 war between the two countries, which saw *'Armenia take Nagorno-Karabakh as well as seven surrounding districts'*. One of the reasons for this operation was *'the importance of the 1915 genocide in people's memories and the historic opportunity to reclaim this land'*. After this victory, *'Armenia would live 'happy' for 30 years, while Azerbaijan, its larger neighbour with significant oil resources, patiently rearmed itself, to the point*

that the Azerbaijani military budget ended up being worth the total budget of Armenia' the journalist stressed. At the same time, Baku was *'developing a very anti-Armenian racist discourse'* while waiting to be able to launch the offensive *'planned since the 2000s' in 2020*. This *'44-day war'* saw Putin's Russia intervene as mediator in order to *'leave Nagorno-Karabakh out of the agreement'*. But as soon as the agreement was signed, *'Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan put pressure on Armenia'* then imposed a blockade on the region from December 2022, before attacking in September 2023 and obtaining the final concession from Yerevan.

Ethnographer and specialist in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Anita Khachaturova looked back on the progress of the clashes between 2022 and 2023. After the defeat of 2020, Nagorno-Karabakh was *'surrounded, the districts were occupied and only the Lachin corridor, the lifeline to Armenia through which humanitarian aid passed, remained as an exit to the outside world'*. *'In a position*



Taline Ter-Minassian

The Caucasus is on the outskirts of three empires and the empires don't have borders but fronts

Gaïdz Minassian

of strength with the conflict in Ukraine which occupied Russian forces' Baku decided to block the corridor while Moscow had to 'guarantee passage'. Quickly, 'the Azeri soldiers, under the supervision or laissez-faire of the Russians, set up a checkpoint and tightened the noose'. The expert specified that 'during the last three months, no one could pass through'. On 19 September, 'after ten months, faced with weakened forces and a starving population, the attack was launched and the enclave fell in 24 hours'. In addition to hundreds of military and civilian deaths, 'numerous testimonies of abuses and war crimes' were reported, preceding a massive exodus since '100,000 of the 120,000 inhabitants fled Nagorno-Karabakh, or 90% of the population'. Anita Khachaturova also stressed that President Aliyev has always expressed this 'intention of ethnic cleansing' without any reaction from international players.

Gaïdz Minassian endeavoured to demonstrate the international scale of this local conflict since 'the Caucasus is on the outskirts of three empires and the empires don't have borders but fronts'. The two countries are in fact between Turkey, Russia and Iran, 'heirs of three empires which still think of themselves as imperial powers, which each consist of one country and play out rivalries'. Whether it's Georgia and

Russia, Armenia and Turkey or Azerbaijan and Iran, each relationship maintained is 'equivocal' assures the political scientist. But the neo-imperial powers aren't the only ones looking closely at the Caucasus, he continued. European Union, United States, China and India have interests there. Europe is also eyeing 'Baku hydrocarbons', while the Americans seek to weaken Russia, and China and India to expand their zone of influence. 'Two approaches to resolving the conflict are on the table', explained Gaïdz Minassian: 'Western peace and Russian peace' but in both cases 'the blind spot remains Nagorno-Karabakh'. While Yerevan wants 'a peace of law, respecting territorial integrity and minorities', Baku advocates a 'peace of punishment to take revenge on 1994', he lamented, and 'the international community is still caught up in the war in Ukraine'.



Régis Genté

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Following this presentation, during the discussion with the public, an Armenian refugee from Nagorno-Karabakh who had arrived in France a year earlier asked to speak to describe her traumatic experience. In Armenian, the woman recounted her birth during the 1988-1994 war, her difficult childhood and the loss of her home in 2020 which forced her into exile. 'We survived by helping each other', she said. 'My grandparents told me that they had already experienced this, that it was a second genocide under the gaze of the international community', before showing photos of her family, survivors of this genocide who were still in Nagorno-Karabakh.



Watch the full debate on YouTube

DEBATE

IRAQ: BEYOND THE WAR

29 September, 4:30 p.m. – 6 p.m., Azur Room



Feurat Alani, Zoubida Debbagh, Adél Bakawan and Nagham Hasan

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A country and an identity to rebuild

While 2023 marks the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the American invasion of Iraq, taking stock of contemporary issues in Iraqi society seemed essential to Zoubida Debbagh, the moderator of this debate. The war and US occupation, justified by the lies of the Bush administration, left a failed Iraqi state, dysfunctional institutions and rampant corruption, she said.

The Franco-Iraqi sociologist, Adél Bakawan, first provided a summary of the thousand-year-old history of Iraq. The current Iraqi territory corresponds to Mesopotamia, he noted – the cradle of civilization, religion, writing and even the first constitution. When Baghdad was founded by the Abbasid dynasty in the 8th century, the city was as central as the American capital is today. The region was invaded and occupied by the Ottomans in the fol-

lowing centuries, becoming part of their empire until the arrival of the British during the First World War. The latter then founded the first modern Iraqi state, the Hashemite monarchy of Iraq. This would then be overthrown by the coup d'état of General Abdel Karim Kasseem in 1958, who proclaimed the Republic of Iraq and distanced himself from the pan-Arabism promoted by Egyptian leader Nasser. Coming to power a few years later, Saddam Hussein succeeded in building a strong Iraqi state, equipped with a robust social and educational system, dynamic economic infrastructures and a competent army, while consolidating a harsh dictatorial regime. However, the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) completely destroyed the country, its infrastructure and its economy. The beginning of the end of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship began with the failed 1991 invasion of Kuwait.