

**Queen Mary, University of London**

**Understanding the Dynamics of Ethnonationalist  
Contention: Political Mobilization, Resistance and  
Violence in Nagorno-Karabakh and Northern Ireland**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis analyzes the dynamics of ethnic conflict evolution, mobilization and radicalization with a focus on Nagorno-Karabakh (1987–1992) and Northern Ireland (early 1960s–1969). It concentrates upon the periods when intersocietal communication was gradually being reinterpreted and reshaped on an ethnic basis, which also became increasingly crucial to public discourse. I argue that many of the weaknesses of the existing interpretations of these conflicts arise from an absolutization of single theoretical and methodological approaches. This study utilizes a synthesis of the literatures on ethnic conflict, social movements, collective action and nationalism. The perspective offered in this research sees nationalist activity as embedded in cultural contexts, social networks and intersubjective relations of reciprocity. I stress that the understanding of these dimensions is crucial to account for temporal evolution within and variation across nationalist movements. Securing the success of a specific nationalist agenda requires operating in an interdependent field of rival strategies of legitimation. The study also highlights unintended consequences in the trajectory of conflict development. Many academic accounts approach this subject from the point of view of one of the respective communities without recognizing the value of alternative conceptualizations. This study systematically examines the interactions, perceptions and attitudes of the main parties to the conflicts in question avoiding one-sided and often static interpretations.

The thesis builds on extensive documentary and press material, archival research and over 50 semi-structured interviews. New empirical evidence presented here casts doubt on strong versions of the ‘ethnic entrepreneurship’ literature by emphasizing the fact that the connection

between developments on the ground and elite conduct was not purely automatic, and drawing attention to the symbolic repertoires, self-perceptions, categorizations and ideas that feed into the collective representation of the nation. I suggest that the constraints facing elites within each ethnic bloc, as well as ‘external’ (state) leaders, are built into the process of ethnic contestation. Overall, the thesis makes a strong case for greater attention to the limits of elite flexibility in sustaining uniform group preferences, freely opting for the path of compromise and/or (constitutional) reform.

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## Abbreviations

<b>ANM</b>	Armenian National Movement
<b>CCCP</b>	Central Committee of the Communist Party
<b>CP</b>	Communist Party
<b>CRM</b>	Civil Rights Movement
<b>CSJ</b>	Campaign for Social Justice
<b>DCAC</b>	Derry Citizens' Action Committee
<b>IRA</b>	Irish Republican Army
<b>KGB</b>	<i>Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti</i> (Committee for State Security)
<b>NICRA</b>	Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association
<b>NILP</b>	Northern Ireland Labour Party
<b>NK</b>	Nagorno-Karabakh
<b>NKAO</b>	Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast' (Region)
<b>NKR</b>	Nagorno-Karabakh Republic
<b>PD</b>	People's Democracy
<b>PRO</b>	Public Records Office (Kew)
<b>PRONI</b>	Public Records Office, Northern Ireland
<b>RUC</b>	Royal Ulster Constabulary
<b>SDLP</b>	Social Democratic and Labour Party
<b>SSR</b>	Soviet Socialist Republic
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom

## Introduction

The broad aim of this thesis is to analyze the causes and dynamics of ethnic conflict, mobilization and radicalization in deeply divided societies with a particular focus on the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus (hereafter NK) (1987–1992) and Northern Ireland (early 1960s–1969). Integrating some of the key insights from the literatures on ethnic conflict, social movements, nationalism and collective action into a mixed theoretical approach I attempt:

- to explore the ways in which nationalist strategies are enabled or constrained by the shared cultural perceptions and collective definitions of the groups involved, rather than (as is often assumed in the literature) solely by political institutions and/or structures;
- to look at the issue of agency in nationalist movements – to what extent does their activity necessarily imply mass participation and what tactics is used by elite networks to secure support from co-nationals?
- to assess how the interrelated processes of state-activist interaction, the shifting dynamics of (real and perceived) opportunities and threats and within-movement competition combine to translate into radical political action.

I attempt to show that elite power and success in neutralizing and minimizing challenges to their authority from within the group, as well as from outside, and maintaining at least a semblance of community cohesion depended largely on their ability to relate the pursuit of objective interests, past traumas and sacrifices to contemporary struggles and future ventures in an overarching narrative. Building on documentary and press material, archival sources and over 50 semi-structured interviews my perspective acknowledges and privileges the standpoints of the activists themselves, both elites and non-elite actors, which have generally been underrepresented in academic literature. The

thesis also brings into clearer focus the microdynamics of ethnic radicalization by considering the (often not automatic) link between public expressions of nationalist ideologies as articulated by elites and the grassroots reality of (violent) collective action on the ground. Many academic accounts approach this subject from the point of view of one of the respective (Armenian or Azeri, nationalist or unionist) communities without recognizing the value of alternative conceptualizations. This research systematically examines the interactions, perceptions and attitudes of all the parties to the conflicts in NK and Northern Ireland avoiding one-sided and often static interpretations.

### **Case studies and research design**

In this section I outline my research design and justify case selection. I define my study as one based on a most different systems analysis. I adopt a comparative strategy and in so doing I hope to partially address one of the ‘pathological conditions’ of comparative research, that of too many variables, not enough cases (Lijphart, 1971; Ragin, 1987). I also examine the advantages and pitfalls of cross-regional comparison and explain what a paired comparison can reveal and is therefore preferable for my task to a single case or multiple case studies. There has been a long dispute about the power and relative merits of the comparative method, all the details of which I cannot cover here. This subchapter outlines some of the reasons why we learn more about deeply divided societies by comparing rather than isolating them. By focusing on the mobilization processes in different societies scholars can better understand how and why collective action varies/ is similar in its causes, forms and outcome.

Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune (1970: 32-5) differentiate between comparative research designs based on most similar systems

analysis and those focusing on most different systems. In the most similar systems research design, studies are built on systems that are similar in many respects and share, for example, similar cultural, economic and political characteristics. When significant differences are found, they become the subject of a comparative investigation. Alternatively, the most different systems design, advocated by Przeworski and Teune, explains variation below the systemic level of analysis, and appeals to factors at the level of the individual, subgroup or the wider community. This approach, therefore, seeks to eliminate irrelevant systemic factors. Thus, a least similar case design is typically intended to isolate mechanisms producing similar outcomes among otherwise varied cases (e. g. George and Bennett, 2005: 81-2). Sidney Tarrow identifies the main feature of a paired comparison analysis of different types of polities or processes as ‘the capacity to point to robust causal mechanisms that repeat themselves across broad ranges of variation and concatenate differently with different environmental conditions and with each other’ (Tarrow, 1999: 10). This perspective is likely to produce more convincing arguments when they are shown to be associated with similar and/or divergent outcomes emerging under diverse conditions across different geographic regions.

The uniqueness of each of these conflicts is emphasized (and frequently overemphasized) in single case studies or cases in a single region (like the South Caucasus). Analysts of the former Soviet block have tended to look mainly to each other for comparative referents in tracking the dynamics of interethnic relations. For this reason there is value in comparing a late/post-Soviet case with a European case. There is a similar benefit to understanding the Northern Ireland radicalization process in a comparative framework outside of European context. In seeking more traction on a range of underexplored but theoretically

important questions, a wider array of comparable cases from diverse regions, while still analytically bounded can potentially offer better analytic leverage precisely because they do not have the combinations of features characterizing the historical and institutional framework of the South Caucasus in general and NK in particular. Applying the rule of inclusion as articulated by (Goertz and Mahoney, 2006: 186) – that is ‘cases are relevant if their value on at least one independent variable is positively related to the outcome of interest’ – there is no methodologically compelling reason for ignoring the experiences of any polity where the specific process of interest can be adequately studied.

As Cheng Chen and Rudra Sil have recently noted, one of the distinctive attributes of cross-regional comparison is the self-conscious decision of the researcher to choose cases from more than one region to engage in multiple strands of historiography and theory that shape intellectual debates within two or more area-studies communities (Chen and Sil, 2007: 276). The investigation of ethnic conflict and the dynamics of interethnic relations is one of the areas where an expanded universe of cases has the potential to offer increased analytic leverage with some comparative interpretations emphasizing how the relative economic and political backwardness of Eastern European countries had always created a fertile ground for a type of *ressentiment* nationalism rather than the predominantly ‘civic’ type that had taken root in Western Europe (e. g. (Dogan, 1997; Gellner, 1983: 85-105). While being quite persuasive this argument reinforces the tendency to treat late Soviet and early post-Soviet nationalism as a relatively homogenous phenomenon. A cross-regional comparison can draw attention to a more nuanced understanding of late Soviet nationalism and of the effects and consequences of the ways in which internationalist ideology and nationalist sentiments were fused in specific socio-spatial contexts.

This research project follows the approach of comparative-historical analysis that has been influential in the repertoire of scholars of comparative politics. My investigation shares with this school a ‘commitment to offering historically grounded explanations of large-scale and substantively important outcomes’, as well as the contention that these ‘fundamental processes could not be analyzed without recognizing the importance of temporal sequences and the unfolding of events over time’ (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003: 4). Mahoney and Rueschemeyer further point to three specific advantages of comparative-historical analysis in relation to rational choice and statistical models. First, in contrast to single case studies aiming to develop ‘thick descriptions’ comparative historical analysis is inspired by causally centered interpretations designed to account for outcomes of interest. Second, in contrast to synchronous comparisons of many cases at a particular point in time, it takes seriously the logic of historical sequencing and processes as they develop. Third, in contrast to large N statistical studies or formal modeling the comparative historical method seeks to practice contextualized comparisons of similar and/or contrasting cases, therefore moving back and forth between theoretical generalizations and the historical features of a given case.

As Pierson argues, processes that unfold over time may be ‘slow-moving’ or even seem invisible but they are frequently decisive in generating divergent outcomes for social phenomena (Pierson, 2003: 177-207). At the same time it is important not to overemphasize deterministic conceptions that focus only on antecedent conditions in explaining specific outcomes. In such instances the effort to simultaneously engage in process-tracing within cases and track similarities and differences in these processes across cases makes the comparative historical approach particularly well suited for analyzing



the operation and consequences of historically embedded processes and social relationships that shape forms of collective action and perceptions in a given context.

Instead of seeking answers to questions, such as ‘How much?’ or ‘How many?’ the case study design is useful for investigating ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. Although case studies are frequently criticized for lack of rigour and the inability to make generalizations from specific cases, proponents maintain that ‘case studies are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes... in this sense the case study does not represent a sample, and the investigator’s goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)’ (Yin, 1984: 21). Whereas single case studies can richly describe the existence of a phenomenon, multiple case studies are thought to provide a stronger base for theory building. Multiple cases also contribute to more robust theory because the propositions are more deeply grounded in varied empirical evidence. While attention must be paid to the issue of context sensitivity, as each divided polity will present its own combination of conflict-producing factors, certain patterns can still be discerned. More specifically, ‘there is no such thing as singularity until one case is compared with another. One will not recognize the specificity of an individual case unless parallels are drawn with other instances’ (Schneckener, 2004: 37). In a recent study Sidney Tarrow highlights three main advantages of a focused paired comparison as opposed to a single ‘critical’ case or an examination based on multiple cases: correcting generalization from single cases, creating an intermediate step in theory building and offering ‘a balanced combination of descriptive depth and analytical challenge that progressively declines as more cases are added’ (Tarrow, 2010: 245-6).

Consequently it is important to find the middle ground between ‘one size fits all’ approach and what Andreas Wimmer has called the ‘new realism’ in the field of ethnic conflict studies, which assumes that the idiosyncrasies of each case preclude meaningful comparisons (Wimmer, 2004: 340-2). Richard Kearney notes the weakness of analyses stressing the singularity of the Northern Ireland case: ‘A crucial weakness of the internal conflict interpretation is that it is vulnerable to the superficial reading that the conflict is unique – a hangover of seventeenth-century religious quarrels which the rest of Europe has long left behind’ (Kearney, 1997: 75). While Kearney is concerned specifically with the parallels between Northern Ireland and the rest of Europe, I attempt to show the inadequacy of one dimensional interpretations that tend to be applied in single case studies. Similarly, in a recent study of police behaviour in Northern Ireland during the 1960s G. De Fazio focuses on the need to explore the comparability of its ethnopolitical dynamics moving beyond the focus on Northern Ireland in isolation from other societies (including those in Western Europe) (De Fazio, 2007: 83).

This argument is not intended to suggest that shared geographic or geopolitical factors do not deserve to be taken seriously. Nor does it imply that context-specific historical or institutional components cannot produce idiosyncratic outcomes that defy analytic framing. However, if conducted in response to a theoretically significant problem a more diversified cross-regional historically sensitive approach can be deployed to identify key processes and mechanisms across varying temporal and spatial contexts. Additional reasons for choosing to compare two case studies as opposed to a research design based on a single or multiple cases relate to scope and depth, as well as pragmatic considerations. Similarly, a multi-case study comparative approach

allows the researcher to identify shared themes and patterns on a broader scale without over-emphasizing the particularities of a single case. Small-N comparative studies can incorporate underrepresented cases while retaining an awareness of the specificity of each case, permitting a ‘close analysis of relatively few observations’ (Collier, 1991: 7).

Pragmatically the comparative approach limited to two cases allows me to engage deep enough with these cases, preserve a relatively high degree of contextual specificity and to include richer empirical data while maintaining some ability to generalize. It utilizes the richness of the single case study approach but also goes beyond a single case to make comparative assessments. These two cases should not be mistaken as a representative sample of contemporary conflicts. Of course a two-case study does not have ambitions to generate statistically relevant conclusions. King, Keohane and Verba consider the key task of social scientists to be ‘explaining as much as possible with as little as possible’ (King et al., 1994: 29). The contentious assumption embedded within the comparative approach is that some general patterns can be identified.

As mentioned above, the case studies were chosen for their data richness and the analytical leverage they provide. In addition, these cases allow particularly well for two types of comparative analysis: longitudinal, whereby variations and shifts within a case study are examined over time, and cross-national whereby similarities and differences are investigated across the case studies. The first type of analysis permits to control for variables such as rough terrain, rural and urban settlement patterns, the presence/absence of natural resources, political culture, all of which tend to be static. The second type of comparative investigation allows the researcher to contest claims of uniqueness or cultural specificity by showing how seemingly unique processes can operate under different national and cultural contexts. A

lot of existing empirical research deals with a single case over time, in part because it is easier to operationalize key theoretical concepts within a single country setting. In a pioneering comparative analysis of conflict in Northern Ireland Frank Wright (1987) focuses broadly on the interactions between ‘metropolitan’ Britain with the Ulster ‘frontier’. He then compares Northern Ireland to other ethnic frontiers in Western and Eastern Europe where the intermixing of ethnic communities under imperial rule created problems in the modern era. Here the emphasis is on cases that, from a politico-institutional perspective, embodied political peripheral units vis-à-vis their larger states. In a historical comparative study of Britain’s relationship to Ireland, France’s relationship to Algeria and Israel’s relationship to the West Bank and Gaza, Ian Lustick constructs a common framework concentrating on state elites’ justifications for state expansion and contraction (Lustick, 1993).

Despite the saliency of conflict in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period NK has remained a relatively marginal case within the post-Soviet and comparative conflict research field. Compared to the Baltic or Central Asian regions NK and the South Caucasus more generally has emerged much less distinctively as a coherent unit of analysis. This general pattern reflects the region’s genuinely heterogeneous cultural make-up (demanding knowledge of Russian and, preferably, of local languages). As a result scholarship has paid much less attention to the South Caucasus than to Central Asia. There is a consequent lack of detailed studies of interethnic relations in NK (partly because this case does not fall within particularly popular schemas of late and post-Soviet studies), especially from a comparative perspective, and much of the empirical literature is poorly informed by theoretical insights from the wider field in terms of seeing how this case confirms

and/or moderates such insights. Somewhat similarly, the literature on the development of the civil rights movement (CRM) in Northern Ireland has, a few notable exceptions aside, been overly concentrated on historical-descriptive accounts stressing the distinctiveness of the region and therefore lacking a strong potential for a comparative perspective.

This thesis asks how contentious activism in deeply divided societies is radicalized during periods when intersocietal communication and public discourse becomes ‘ethnicized’, and ethnicity is seen as being of growing significance to interpersonal relations and self-definition. As mentioned above, the thesis focuses on very specific time periods. For Northern Ireland I adopt 1969 as the cut off point, because it marked the disintegration of the CRM, at least in its original form, and a different phase of the conflict. From 1969 onwards radical groups on both sides of the communal divide succeeded in legitimizing a new cycle of claims and counter-claims, underpinned by a different (even though not a new) political discourse. For the NK case I regard the start of a full-fledged war in early 1992 as the cut off point. At that stage the complex and dynamic fluctuation between non-violent dissent, attempted reforms, inconsistent state responses, discursive transformations, resistance and violence was replaced by an overwhelming reliance on military force which significantly reduces the value of that particular phase for ethnic conflict studies. The time periods chosen for an analysis of contentious activity in this study are comparable for at least three reasons. First, alterations between non-violent and violent forms of contention are particularly apparent during the periods under investigation. Such vital shifts make these time spans particularly well-suited for applying a more fine-grained analysis of the radicalizing trajectories of nationalist movements, as well as the complex ‘relationality’ between different actors and the dynamic (re)structuring of the linkages and alignments of

interethnic interactions. In Northern Ireland the initial effort to challenge institutionalized discriminatory practices relied upon mass-based non-violent tactics while deliberately avoiding the partition issue. Its activities prompted changes in the electoral system, housing allocation and law enforcement. Yet this amelioration also heightened mobilized opposition to reform thus contributing to the adoption of more radical repertoires by civil rights activists. Similarly, in NK this conflict phase saw the open non-violent pursuit of claims that were not initially antisystemic but ended up as such.

Second, in both cases the contentious episodes took place amidst political, economic and cultural relaxation and liberalization of hitherto hegemonic systems<sup>1</sup>. The link between political and economic reforms and mass protest, especially at the beginning of such ‘transitional’ periods has long been recognized (e.g. Bunce, 2003, 2000; Leff, 1999; Offe, 1991: 866; Lapidus, 1989: 99-102). Liberalization enhances and makes more visible the vulnerability of the regime and accelerates extra-institutional contentious activity. During these time spans the capacities, behaviour and manouevr of state elites are particularly strongly influenced (and frequently constrained) by the dynamics within the wider population. The combined effect of quite radical socio-economic changes in Northern Ireland society and the ‘deinsularisation’ (Bosi, 2007: 248) of Northern Ireland economically, politically and culturally, pressures for modernization from Ireland and Britain, and international influence on Northern Ireland affairs can be compared to the sweeping transformations triggerred by Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. Third, these periods are analytically significant because in both cases they were marked by transformations of dominant discourses at the elite and

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<sup>1</sup> Even though in Northern Ireland the liberalization was arguably more rhetorical than real, the openings were still highly significant insofar as they changed the actors’ perceptions of the availability of avenues for protest and opportunity to create new, non-nationalist issue space.

grassroots levels, and the consequent erosion of any previously available shared social space. In Northern Ireland an exclusivist nationalist narrative ultimately succeeded over an alternative ‘story’ focused on equal rights and social justice. Similarly, in NK a single nationalist narrative emphasizing traditional historical themes, conflict over cooperation and enmity over brotherhood completely sidelined the discourses of democratization and economic renewal within a common Soviet institutional framework. Such shifts resulted in the hegemony of a particular form of self-representation of the nation as an uncompromising community that has to close ranks in a struggle where its survival is at stake. They also triggered changes in patterns of intercommunal interaction and behaviour across group boundaries.

Given the fact that there is a particularly vast (predominantly historical) literature on this specific period in Northern Ireland, I see my contribution here as primarily comparative and theoretical. While I do introduce and utilize different categories of empirical material (see the next section) I also draw widely on the available literature for my investigation of Northern Ireland. Thus, one might notice that there is richer, more detailed and extensive original empirical data on NK than on Northern Ireland in this study. However, as discussed above, the comparability of the time periods, the need to remedy the scarcity of comparative research bridging different geographic regions and the insular nature of scholarship on each of these conflicts explain the inclusion of Northern Ireland in this project. In addition, the explicit theoretical framing of the discussion of Northern Ireland directly addresses the deficiencies of many of the purely narrative historical and largely static accounts of the CRM.

When looking at the contribution of the comparative study of these periods to the broader understanding of ethnic conflict and elite behaviour the thesis focuses on the following questions:

- In what ways did institutional and discursive opportunity structures, real and perceived threats and their interpretation by various elite actors and ordinary community members enable or constrain ‘elite manipulation’ strategies?
- How did the use or lack/(in) consistency of repression influence activist choices to employ violent or non-violent dissent?
- In what ways did the actions and decisions of the people on the streets interact with the actions and (non)-decisions of ‘external’ state officials?

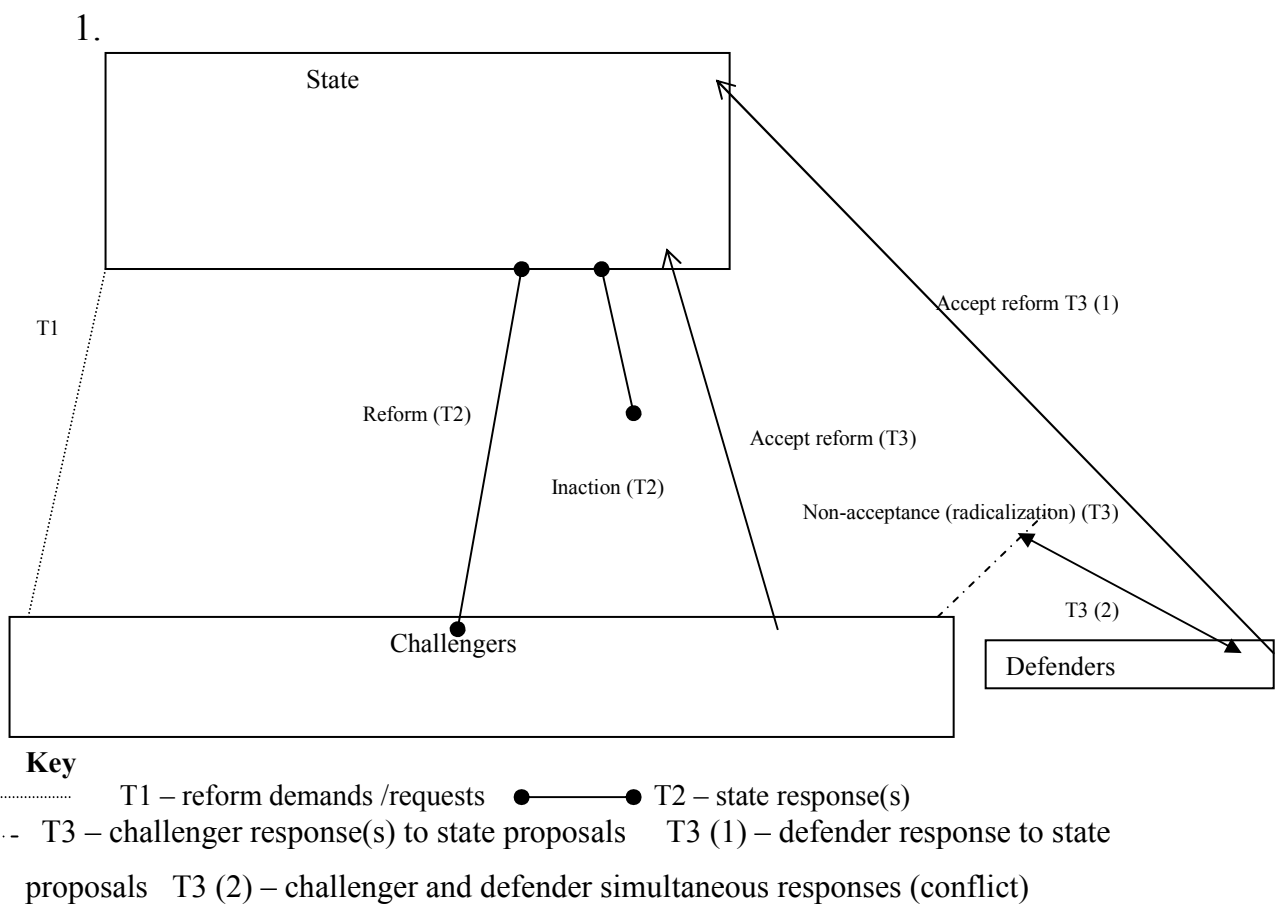
Here I argue that in both cases state elites were increasingly restricted in their capacity to implement conflict transformation or to ‘deactivate’ the ethnic cleavage and in that sense found themselves ‘locked’ in a specific conflictual dynamics that intensified and took on self-reinforcing qualities very rapidly.

In path-dependence theories ‘lock-in’ is said to exist where relationships between the parties change within definite limits and are confined to a particular trajectory (Ruane and Todd, 2004; Pierson, 2004: 27; Mahoney, 2000: 529-35). Lock-in confines potential action alternatives and thus impacts the course of future developments (Beyer, 2010). This thesis understands the ‘lock-in’ effect in a broader sense. I show how in both cases the situation on the ground was becoming resistant to ‘external’ intervention and even measures that had the intention of addressing constituency concerns were interpreted as parts of (non)-persuasive ‘stories’ holding historical and symbolic significance for the respective communities.



- In what ways was the process of elite legitimation affected by within-movement competition? In particular, how are those presenting themselves as the most ethnically ‘authentic’ granted powers of representation on behalf of a community, while different voices and alternative expressions of social change are silenced?

Some of the key elements common to conflict dynamics in the two cases discussed in this thesis are represented schematically in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Visualialization of the key elements of the radicalization process in NK and Northern Ireland**

It could be argued that ethno-political mobilization in NK cannot be studied in the same way as activism in Northern Ireland, because

NK formed part of an already extremely weak or collapsing polity (the Soviet Union) with opening windows of political opportunity, whereas Northern Ireland represented a closed political formation with an elaborate system of hegemonic control. A comparison of these cases therefore exemplifies, one might suggest, the lack of appreciation of the differences between open and closed (or semi-closed) political systems where open claim-making is not possible or is severely restricted. This project recognizes the important distinction and contends that each individual conflict must be examined with reference to its particularities and in its own temporal and spatial context to permit a meaningful comparison with other cases. Although there is some danger of not controlling for historical, social and economic variation, selecting cases from different regions helps challenge the argument that the process of conflict escalation in each of them in isolation was entirely the function of features unique to the region.

It is indeed very difficult to argue that Northern Ireland in the 1960s was a weak state, which differentiates it from the Soviet Union during the period when the movement for NK fully emerged on the political scene. The state in Northern Ireland in the 1960s was economically robust, it had control of internal security and was able to govern effectively. However, at least three points are worth noting. Firstly, while Northern Ireland was not a weak state it was in an insecure position regarding its regime type. Secondly, both cases showed signs of incomplete democratization and weakened legitimacy rather than weak state structures. Thirdly, as Tarrow (1998: 82) points out, strength and weakness are also relational categories that vary for different sectors and levels of the state. This is perhaps partly why the Northern Ireland CRM initially made claims about local government rather than the devolved

administration and why the devolved administration was the general target rather than the British state. Many of the CRM grievances involved the behaviour and policies of local authorities and many sections of the movement initially legitimized their struggle as being on a local scale, related to local issues (O'Dochartaigh, 2010: 165).

Comparing the NK and Northern Ireland cases means dealing with a wide range of variation. There are contrasting patterns of political development. There is a colonial dimension to the patterns of intercommunal relations in Northern Ireland, which is absent in NK<sup>2</sup>. The common denominator of NK and Northern Irish history is the existence of numerically disproportionate and territorially mixed ethnocultural communities with competing claims to territory. The relative intractability of both conflicts stems from a contestation over sovereignty of a particular piece of territory which has been disputed by competing ethnonational groups. In both cases one can point to historically identifiable antagonisms between two collectivities that are rooted in experiences of domination/ subordination and have the qualities of a 'we' versus 'the others' zero-sum game. This basic 'we'/'they' structure conditions the relations of power and interest between the parties, and is analytically, if not necessarily historically prior to it taking on an ethnic character. Conflicts with an alien religious community in the land only reinforced each group's sense of vulnerability. Viewing Northern Irish nationalists and Azeris as complete outsiders both unionists and Armenians sought to protect their cultural and religious identities from the (perceived as) alien environment in which they lived. Both conflicts are complicated by the

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<sup>2</sup> I will not engage with the debate over whether the Soviet Union can or should be seen as an empire (for an overview of whether aspects of Soviet rule may usefully be viewed as colonial see e. g. (Smith, 1998: 8-10; Beissinger, 2002: 5-6, Kuzio, 2002: 241-64).

presence of ethnic kin-states advancing irredentist claims to reunite with their ‘lost’ co-nationals<sup>3</sup>.

The outbreak and escalation of violence in NK does not present a mirror image of events in Northern Ireland. Some of the key similarities and differences between the two cases are summarized in the tables below. For the purposes of clarity I divide them into structural, socio-economic components and those related to identity salience<sup>4</sup>.

**Table 1**  
**Structural variables in NK and Northern Ireland**

	<b>Weak central authority</b>	<b>Illegitimate borders/territorial claims</b>	<b>Substantial minority population</b>	<b>Geographically concentrated minority</b>
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	No – part of a centralized state		Yes, core of the dispute.	Yes. 35% Catholic minority population
<b>NK</b>	Mixed – strong formal governance structures		Yes, core of the dispute.	Yes, 25% Azeri minority population.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the active phase of the conflict (1987–94) the NK issue dominated Armenian politics and served as a major catalyst for Armenian independence in 1991. The active participation of the Armenian ethnic brethren from the start of the NK conflict contrasts with the much more passive stance of southern Irish nationalists in supporting the CRM. Yet within Northern Ireland the perception of support by successive Irish governments in a historical context was significant however weak it might have been in practice.

<sup>4</sup> Identity salience is taken to reflect those conceptions of the differences between one’s group and outsiders that are prevalent in a given society (the extent to which ‘the other’ is represented as threatening to the ‘in-group’); comparative advantages or disadvantages of one community vis-à-vis other communities and the intensity of past conflicts with the state and rival groups. The underlying argument here is that identity is constituted rather than essential, processural rather than fixed and is intrinsically social – hence, the context in which the process occurs is crucial. Studies confirm that strong identity salience tends to negatively affect attitudes towards members of the ‘out-group’ (e. g. Korostelina, 2003).

**Table 2**

**Socio-economic variables in NK and Northern Ireland**

	<b>Relative deprivation</b>	<b>Discriminatory economic system</b>
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	Yes, strong interethnic inequality	Yes. Large economic disparity, unequal allocation of resources, minority exclusion
<b>NK</b>	Yes, <b>perception</b> of the Armenian (majority) population being at a clear disadvantage compared to Azeris	Yes, <b>perceived</b> economic discrimination and exclusion of the Armenian population from state structures.

**Table 3**

**Identity salience in NK and Northern Ireland**

<b>Shared conception of in-group/out-group</b>	<b>Shared perception of the “other” as threatening to the core group</b>	<b>Clear advantages or disadvantages shared by the group</b>	<b>Intensity of past conflict with the “other”</b>	<b>Ethno-cultural national identity builds state around a core group</b>

<b>Northern Ireland</b>	Yes.	Yes. From its inception many Protestants viewed Northern Ireland as a state under siege, particularly demographically and culturally.	Yes. Minority at a clear disadvantage that has been institutionalized	Strong.	Yes. The (Northern Ireland) state was built upon an exclusive conception of an ethno-cultural national identity
<b>NK</b>	Yes.	Yes. Perception of insecurity, cultural and demographic threats intensely felt by the Armenian majority	Yes. Policies of indigenization strengthened and promoted the titular (Azeris).	Strong. Past intergroup conflicts include massacres, civil war during the early 1900s.	Yes, the state was built around the ethno-cultural identity of the titular group.

Both conflicts revolve around territorial claims about the redrawing of borders that are perceived as illegitimate. In contrast to NK where settlement patterns were mixed, Northern Ireland had a high degree of local level territorial segregation. Unlike Catholics/nationalists in Northern Ireland, Armenians were a majority in NK. However, it is important to recognize that they constituted a minority in Azerbaijan as a whole, somewhat similarly to Northern Ireland Protestants constituting a minority on the island as a whole. From its inception many Protestants viewed Northern Ireland as a state under siege. Despite the stability of the size of the Catholic population during the years of unionist rule, Protestants feared that Catholics would ‘outbreed’ them. The sense of anxiety Protestants had in relation to the perceived ‘enemy’ meant that they could see a time ‘just beyond the horizon, when the majority (would) vote non-unionist’ (Akenson, 1992: 290). Somewhat similarly,

despite having a numerical advantage the Armenian majority in NK perceived an acute threat that the demographic balance would shift dramatically in favour of Azeris.

The salience of identity in both cases could be seen as increasing the likelihood for conflict with both majority and minority groups having a strong shared sense of collective identity. On the one hand, in both cases ‘defending’ groups felt threatened by the ‘other’ with Northern Irish Protestants and NK Azeris fearing oppression if the challengers (NK Armenians and Catholics in Northern Ireland) join forces with their neighbouring ethnic kin to overturn the current structure of the state within their homeland. On the other hand, NK Armenians and Northern Irish nationalists in turn felt threatened by the real or perceived discriminatory and exclusionary nature of state policies, since the state was built around an ethnocultural identity that was perceived to rule out any meaningful role for the aggrieved groups. Past conflicts served to affirm the image each group had of the ‘other’.

### **Data-gathering methods**

Understanding and explaining the connections between different actors, levels of analysis and theoretical perspectives invariably involves working at the intersection of methodological boundaries in empirical investigation. In advocating a more dynamic approach to my case studies I also attempt to demonstrate the utility of a mixed method of data collection as a means of examining empirical processes and patterns that cannot be adequately captured by singular methodological frameworks, which focus only on content analysis of selected newspaper sources or interviews with key decision-makers.

As Margaret Somers (1994) and others have emphasized, the (re)creation and maintenance of identity categories and boundaries that

are so central to ethnic polarization and violence takes place largely through narratives but narratives, which are constrained by a relational setting<sup>5</sup>. Of the four general types of narratives Somers outlines two are particularly relevant here – ontological and public (Somers, 1994: 618-19). Ontological narratives exist interpersonally and in interactions over time. They are used by individual social actors to make sense of everyday lives and provide a lifeworld aspect to ethnic categories. Interviewing is one of the ways to examine these narratives in action. A second category – public narratives – concerns ‘those narratives attached to cultural formations or institutions larger than the single individual’ (Somers, 1994: 619). While interviewing helps the researcher to engage with the individual or local level, the analysis of newspaper content, unofficial movement documents and, to some extent, archival material helps uncover the public realm beyond the local, and often at statewide, level. Thus, the triangulation of sources and the use of mixed methods of data collection provide a means to incorporate more areas of investigation than would have been possible through the application of single methods. This broadening of perspective allows to pay greater attention to the spatio-temporal contexts and sequencing of actions, policies and interactions in conflict situations, as well as the subjectively defined content of exchanges within ethnically polarized environments.

The evidence I use to support my argument draws on five categories of sources including secondary sources, official government sources, unofficial sources, such as pamphlets, leaflets, unpublished letters and petitions by movement participants, interviews and small-scale surveys. Between July 2008 and February 2010 I conducted over 50

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<sup>5</sup> For a study of the social constraints of narratives and of how the accounts given by activists depend partly on the specificity of their social ties and environment see (Tilly, 2006).



semistructured interviews in Yerevan (Armenia), Baku (Azerbaijan), Stepanakert (NK) and Belfast (Northern Ireland), Moscow (Russia) and London (UK). For both of my cases checking the information obtained in interviews against published, archival and other unpublished material allowed to complement the subjective perspectives provided by those directly involved in the events under investigation and to minimize the problems inherent in interviewing.

Any researcher conducting interviews in a deeply divided society in the aftermath of a violent conflict faces several methodological difficulties. People often portray events during the conflict in a manner that is favourable to themselves and members of their ethnic community. One of the most common demands made during my interviews, especially for the NK case, was a request by members of each group that I write a ‘true’ story of their relationship to the other group, by which they meant their version of the conflict and of history rather than the other’s version. The representation of history is acutely perceived as a terrain of struggle for legitimacy – whether a group is understood to be the persecutor or the persecuted, the wronged or the inflictor of wrongs strongly affects the probability that future claims on behalf of group interests will or will not be seen by the outside world as legitimate. It would, however, be too simplistic to label these efforts ‘mere manipulation’. Such histories resonate with individuals, since they are perceived to coincide to an extent with their own lived experiences. It is for this reason that they are not mere inventions of intellectuals and/or politicians but become an integral part of each group’s collective existence. Written from a perspective outside both NK and Northern Irish politics this project aspires to be free from political and ideological constraints commonly encountered in much of the literature. In addition,

acts of violence or war distort memories and can also modify the ways in which informants justify their actions to outsiders.

Most historians and social scientists agree that oral sources can be problematic and ‘it is a rule among historians, and a good one, to place greater reliance on contemporary sources than on recollections produced years later, after memory has been reprocessed and refigured’ (Novick, 1999: 106). Such distortion is especially problematic given the traumas, devastation and suffering invariably involved in conflict situations. Self-defense, a common justification for violent action, may become the default explanation for pre-conflict activity, regardless of the groups’ original motivations. Carrying out the research a few years after the events in question often means that individuals fully believe their version of events and present it as final to outsiders. Using oral evidence from postwar environments therefore inevitably involves the risk of mistakenly employing arguments that emerged after the violent phase of conflicts as explanations of why and how the conflict evolved. For this reason triangulation of sources – obtaining different versions of the same events from opposing sides and supplementing such oral narratives with accounts based on archival, documentary and press material is particularly important. I have also consulted the personal recollections of prominent activists that had already been published, including memoirs and interviews that appeared in the local press.

In both of my case studies interviewees were selected largely on the basis of their engagement in the movements during the periods studied and /or being affected by the conflicts in one way or another, which necessarily entailed the construction of a relatively narrow set of selection criteria. Focusing on a singular aspect or a particular period of an individual’s life can be problematic as the very process of categorization in this way involves drawing boundaries around and

‘freezing’ or delimiting the diversity of experiences. However, research manageability required such categorization. The interview samples included a combination of elites and ordinary participants (see Appendix 2). In the project I attempt to bring into clearer focus perspectives ‘from below’, which are often undervalued in academic literature. In his investigation of popular contentious action in Argentina Javier Ayurero insists on the need to integrate the ‘lived experience of movement participants into the ‘grand, ‘serious’ narratives of protest’ (Ayurero, 2003: 13, 205). In addition to targeting those whose ideas, opinions and experiences can already be found in published memoirs and interviews, I made extra efforts to obtain interviews with individuals who had not written or spoken publicly about their experiences.

On the one hand, I view elites and intellectuals as critical actors whose access to intangible (legitimacy, skills) and material resources allow them to be prominent in the mobilization process. Understanding their behaviour and motives provides an insight into the mechanisms of political and social change. On the other hand, I do not consider the masses to be mere ‘passive followers’ who automatically respond to the appeals made by elites. Interviews reveal that ordinary members of each group tend to see their grievances and demands as entirely just and resonant within their own community but frequently maintain that their opponents have been manipulated by elites. As a result, increasing polarization is often explained by the deliberate efforts of the rival elites. The combination of elites and ordinary participants rectifies to some extent what Robert Benford (Benford, 1997: 421) calls a pervasive ‘elite bias’ in social movement literature, which has partly obscured analytic understanding of the degree of consistency between a movement’s public statements and its grassroots discourse.

As mentioned above, many scholars have noted the difficulty of relying on personal accounts to investigate actual historical events (Tilly, 2002a: 25-42; Passerini, 1987: 10-16). Given the fact that individuals are considered to be ‘the worst narrators of the events in which they have been involved, in so far as they have a direct interest in them’ (Della Porta, 1992: 181), oral narratives do not contain ‘objective truths’ or uncontested ‘facts’ and the historical accuracy of such accounts cannot be guaranteed. In addition, informants may purposefully distort their accounts to make themselves, or the movement, appear in a favourable light (White, 2005: 287). Even proponents of oral methods in research concede that they ‘ultimately produce data derived from artificially constructed realities’ (Blee and Taylor, 2002: 111). Nevertheless they provided additional – more nuanced and dynamic perspectives on the events referred to in secondary and archival sources. Interviews helped to reveal the ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 1990: 2-4) that informed participants’ understandings of the conflicts. The distortions, omissions and emphases on some issues at the expense of others are all part of the story I wanted to tell. In fact, one of the ways to study the misrepresentations, mirror images and the us-them dichotomy, all of which feed into the macro-level factors, is to consider how collective memory seizes upon certain interpretations of events at specific points in time.

In line with some recent studies of violence in ethnically divided societies (e. g. Kalyvas, 2006: 409), I found that informants were generally willing to talk about their experiences and perceptions, and memories of the events under investigation were quite vivid, since most families had been affected in very tangible and often dramatic ways. In sum, extensive use of oral sources in my project has at least three distinct advantages. First, the inclusion of oral narratives and particularly

of the generally neglected in the public domain voices of ordinary movement participants gives greater depth and subtlety. It provides a more nuanced view of the cultural and emotional contexts of collective identities. Second, adding the individual/ subjective dimension to the research helps focus on the dynamic and interactive nature of the conflict escalation process by highlighting the meaning events have for participants, which emerges and sometimes changes as a result of social interaction (Blumer, 1969). Engagement with participants' perspectives rather than the 'obvious' meanings of key issues, objects and events is especially important given the conflicting interpretations that are so central to polarized societies. Third, one should note the limited insights that can be drawn from official accounts of events and quantitative sources of data, such as surveys and opinion polls, in semi-closed societies. The practical difficulties of collecting this type of data should also be mentioned. In the late Soviet period the nature and dynamics of interethnic relations was not particularly amenable to public discussion. For 1960s Northern Ireland such data is also very limited, a few exceptions aside (e. g. (Rose, 1971). In this context conducting research on ethnic polarization and intrastate violence would require supplementing the study of concrete events and claim-making with a methodology aimed at understanding group perceptions, choices and strategies.

I have also undertaken a qualitative examination of the main Russian-language Armenian and Azeri newspapers. In divided societies the choice of one newspaper over others often influences the nature and content of primary material, since their reporting often diverges when it comes to contentious political events. This is particularly true, as Soviet censorship had an explicit or implicit input into the editorial policy of the regional press. For Northern Ireland I have also used the political

leanings of different newspapers in such a way as to reconstruct the various perspectives on the CRM's development. Archival material was gathered during an admittedly incomplete survey of archives in Yerevan, Belfast (Northern Ireland Public Records Office, Linen Hall Library) and London (Public Records Office Kew). My usage of disparate source materials has been necessarily eclectic, drawing upon those sources most relevant to the central themes of the study.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Chapter 1 locates the thesis within the literatures on nationalism, comparative ethnic conflict and contentious politics and summarizes the benefits of a process centered approach to conflict evolution. It also critically assesses the main explanations of the NK conflict. Chapter 2 outlines the historical background to the NK conflict. Drawing upon ethnosymbolic interpretations of ethnicity it shows how conflicting historical narratives on NK, contrasting perceptions of the past and arguments about nationhood provided the ideational sources for the unfolding of the conflict. It also sketches the main stages and themes in the development of Armenian and Azeri identities, as well as the intellectual and the wider public (historical) discourses that continue to inform the dynamics of interethnic relations.

Chapters 3 to 7 comprise the core of the thesis where the main research evidence is presented. Chapter 3 looks at the reasons behind the divergent trajectories of mobilization in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the late 1980s. It also introduces the context of Gorbachev's reforms and examines how strategically-oriented activists adapted their tactics to a new political and social environment during the 'constitutional' phase of the movement for NK. Chapter 4 utilizes theories of ethnic riots to highlight the limits of elite centered interpretations of the NK conflict. It

also emphasizes the limits of agent flexibility and their capacity to shape the rapidly changing situation with regard to three interrelated arenas – within-movement competition, state-activist interaction and the transformation of interethnic relations.

Chapter 5 moves on to critique the dominant interpretations of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, and the social, political and ideological milieu in which it developed. Chapter 6 further traces the main developments between the peak of civil rights and the virtual disintegration of the movement and the (re)launch of an armed campaign. In particular, this chapter seeks to address two main questions:

1. What were the sources of the movement's internal fragmentation and what effect did it have on facilitating or inhibiting collective action by non- state challengers?
2. How did the movement interact with other actors in the system and what did this interaction mean for the decisions on what strategies – violent or otherwise – were appropriate for achieving the desired objectives at different points in time and for the eventual demobilization of the civil rights movement as a cross-community alliance?

Chapter 7 compares and contrasts the two cases with an emphasis on the discursive opportunity/threat context, and its utilization, state-activist relations and the influence of intra-group dynamics. The conclusion reflects upon the arguments of the thesis and considers the implications of the findings for ethnic conflict theorizing.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Literature review**

Since the collapse of the bipolar international system and the breakdown of the Eastern European socialist bloc the renewed salience of ethnic conflict has led to an increased interest in ethnically centered collective action, as well as the links between identity and action. This chapter is structured as follows. The first section analyzes the underlying theoretical presuppositions of the different approaches to the factors and processes, which foster high levels of antagonistic ethnic mobilization examining the characteristic features of each analytical position. In this connection, three bodies of literature are explored – theories of nationalism, ethnic conflict and social movements. The objective is to trace some of the most important strands of theorizing and to single out those that will guide my interpretation of the empirical material. The second section presents a critical discussion of the main approaches to the radicalization of Armenian and Azeri nationalisms in the dispute over NK as a case study in violent conflict escalation. To this end the literature on the conflict is examined concentrating especially on the late Soviet period.

### **Unpacking mobilization**

Given that the term mobilization has been used to refer to an extremely wide range of activities, including riots, rebellions, electoral contests and some other contexts, it is important to define what is meant by the term in this study. Karl Deutsch was the first to define it as occurring to ‘large numbers of people in areas which undergo modernization’. The concept, Deutsch continues, brings together several



processes of social transformation, notably the ‘need for new patterns of group affiliation and new images of personal identity’ (Deutsch, 1961: 493). I agree with Birgitta Nedelmann in that mobilization involves some attempt ‘to influence the existing distribution of power’ (Nedelmann, 1987: 181). What is vital here is the actors’ efforts to reshape and legitimize the distribution of power within a society. I refer to ethnonational mobilization as a form of mobilization, where (ethnic) group identity is used as the basis for collective action, typically for the purposes of establishing a separate political formation (Olzak, 1983: 355; Tilly, 1991: 574). By ethnically divided societies I mean societies where regimes lack legitimacy, ethnic and cultural differences are persistent markers of identity, and ‘ethnicity is a politically salient cleavage’ (Reilly, 2001: 4). Political claims are seen through the lens of identity and political conflict becomes synonymous with conflict between ethnonational groups. Within this particular field there has been relatively little consideration of how ‘reformist’ messages of non-violent protest are gradually transformed, how they move from moderation to radicalism. The next section discusses various attempts to conceptualize these transformations.

### **Theoretical approaches: main strands of research**

Attempts to theorize ethnonational mobilization have been based on three interrelated but nevertheless separate bodies of literature – firstly, the rise of nationalism and national identities, secondly, ethnic conflict, and finally, social movements and collective action. As key analysts in the field of social movement research have noted, scholars of social movements, conflict studies and nationalism have generally paid little

attention to each other's findings (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 1996: 19). In particular, relatively few studies have applied the conceptual framework of social movement studies to ethnonational mobilization, especially in divided societies (notable exceptions include (Bosi, 2006, 2007; Maney, 2007; Githens-Mazer, 2006, 2008). The vast majority of works that employ this framework have analyzed social mobilization in industrialized democratic settings. This section attempts to map out the main ideas espoused by the proponents of each of these broad research paradigms.

Most of the literature on nationalism is quite weak in accounting for mobilization and especially the transition from non-violent to violent conflict since it focuses predominantly on specific causes of national identification, such the role of ethnic origins (Smith, 1986, 1991), state education (Gellner, 1983), print media (Anderson, 1983) or political institutions (mainly federalism (Brubaker, 1996; Roeder, 1991)). Primary explanations within this broad tradition emphasize the importance of the mobilizational resources afforded to a group as a result of 'social mobilization' (Deutsch, 1961), cultural markers (Barth, 1969; Anderson, 1983) and the psychological power of appeals to group identity (Connor, 1994). According to primordialists (Geertz, 1963: 107-113; Shills, 1957), ethnic differences are stable 'givens' that make societies inherently conflict-prone and automatically lead to hostility towards the outgroup. Primordialists hold that people have a natural emotional bond with the ethnic and national groups to which they belong and the strength of this organic solidarity and self-evident attachment accounts for feelings of antagonism towards ethnic others, which eventually expresses itself through violence. The presence of ethnic divisions and the sense of ingroup belonging are seen as sufficient to explain both the nature of collective solidarity and the occurrence of

violence. This line of thought tends to assume that interethnic violence flows logically out of the intensity of allegiance to the collectivity and this bond constitutes the single coherent motivation for the perpetration of violence.

This approach has been consistently challenged by scholars who argue that the identities of conflicting ethnonational groups are in fact recent social constructs, which selectively appropriate traditions to justify ethnicity-based claims. Here ethnicity is understood as a means-end concept, since the articulation and politicization of ethnic identity is possible only because of the efforts of political entrepreneurs. What is relevant is the capacity of nationalist leaders to manipulate mass sentiments. Constructivists discuss the discursive resources available to political leaders, intersubjective understandings of identity and the ways in which elites frame their own interests as the interests of the collective (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Anderson, 1983). According to this line of thought, the main aim of collective action by groups is material and political gains. Political entrepreneurs seek to raise the level of group consciousness and cohesion among their target populations, promoting ethnic solidarity is a means to achieve pragmatic objectives.

Here nationhood is conceived of as ‘a contingent conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action, rather than as a relatively stable product of deep developmental trends in economy, polity, or culture’ (Brubaker 1996: 19). Paul Brass conveys a similar idea when asserting that ‘the study of ethnicity is in large part the study of ...the process by which elites and counterelites within ethnic groups select aspects of the group’s culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group’ (Brass, 1991: 75). Intellectuals ‘construct a discourse that undermines the legitimacy of the current order of things’

(Guibernau, 2000: 1003). The agency of elites and especially intellectuals in moulding political outcomes is, thus, widely recognized in the literature.

Neither the primordialist nor the social constructivist perspectives explicitly address the issue of the translation of ethnic antagonism into political mobilization or violence. On the one hand, for primordialists interethnic violence flows naturally out of the intensity of cultural allegiance to a given community. On the other hand, constructivism with its focus on the fluid and fluctuating nature of ethnic and national identities would assume that support for violence moves exactly hand in hand with elite discourses emphasizing antagonism towards the opponent, so that it is difficult to demonstrate a causal link between the content of these identities and violence.

Since nationalism does not always manifest itself violently it is essential to explain variations in support for violence (as well as non-violence) across time and space and the low frequency of such support compared to the vast numbers of potential movements which fail to mobilize and take action in support of the nation. It is hardly questionable that ethnonational mobilization often results from the conscious efforts by political elites to obtain access to specific social, political and material resources. At the same time theoretical and empirical studies consistently demonstrate that there are vastly more ethnic and cultural communities than there are nationalist movements. Traditional theories of nationalism fail to establish a causal connection between the variables discussed and the sociopolitical outcome they seek to explain.

The position taken in this study is broadly consistent with the social constructivist<sup>6</sup> proposition that identities are largely malleable and constructed, while elites play a role in manipulating and fueling ethnic animosities. Substantial sections of the project build upon the ethnosymbolic approach<sup>7</sup>. I use the ethnosymbolic perspective to highlight the importance of conflicting narratives of territorial belonging and to consider how competing historiographies were integrated into collective memory, as well as the 'feedback mechanisms' through which elements of elite discourses appealing to ethnic identity succeed and resonate among the population. However, the thesis does not extensively utilize or frame the discussion in terms of the traditional primordialism/constructivism opposition in nationalism studies for three reasons. First, the analytical distinction itself is no longer clear-cut. Most primordialists would now recognize that not everything about ethnicity is stable and fixed, while constructivists have begun to find evidence that in some cases people are intuitively inclined to think about ethnic groups in essentialist terms (Gil-White, 2001: 519). Second, both of those approaches to nationalism studies tend to see nationalist outcomes from the perspective of ideas and forms of discourse rather than collective action<sup>8</sup> and conflict process. Consequently it is difficult to explain how identities are related to action and why nationalism is often generated through action more than prior to it. By bringing in 'perspectives from below' and examining the dynamics of interaction and participation in ethnic violence on the ground I show how many ordinary people became nationalist as a

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<sup>6</sup> The constructivist approach is not a single paradigm and different variations of theories can be found under this umbrella.

<sup>7</sup> See chapter 2 for a more detailed consideration of the ethnosymbolic theoretical literature.

<sup>8</sup> On this point see also (Beissinger, 2002: 10-11; King, 2010: 59).

result of mobilization. Third, the thesis considers the wider theme of unintended consequences and unforeseen contingencies in conflict development which has been overlooked by nationalism theories.

In the field of conflict studies an influential branch of research in the understanding of mobilization is built around Gurr's (1970) idea of the activation of discontent resulting from relative deprivation. Gurr extended the idea of frustration-aggression from individual to societal level. His study of political violence refers to 'all collective attacks within a political community against the political regime, its actors – including competing political groups as well as incumbents – or its policies' (Gurr, 1970: 3). Relative deprivation is defined by Gurr primarily in psychological terms as a group's 'perception of the discrepancy between...its value expectations and... its value capabilities' (Gurr, 1970: 24). The key source of relative deprivation considered in the literature is the extent of economic inequality in a given society. In other words, at the core of this theory lies the idea of a perceived gap between what a group believes it should receive and what it believes it will receive. This framework, thus, seeks to explain the incidence of political contention (rebellion and violence are the most frequently analyzed outcomes in this body of literature) with reference to individual psychological states aggregated across groups or societies. The premise is that if enough people in a given society feel deprived in relation to a perceived state of well-being, the probability of violence will increase.

The rational choice perspective looks at the incentives the individual has to mobilize. According to scholars working within this tradition, groups are formed by self-interested individuals. It is this emphasis on the individual that makes this category analytically distinct from structural and social-psychological theories. The choice of political

strategies used by nationalist movements results from a rational calculation of the perceived costs and benefits of various courses of action. Rational choice can thus be seen as an attempt to introduce utilitarian considerations to the study of collective mobilization. Consequently, violence is a display of collective rationality – ‘...groups employ violence strategically as a means to produce their joint goods’ (Hechter, 1995: 62).

In a similar vein, Olson’s pivotal *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) stressed the rationality of actors weighing up possible choices as the central element of collective dynamics. Olson argues that because movement goals provide collective goods individuals would be unlikely to endure the risks involved in participating as they would eventually benefit from the collective actions of others. This factor renders the use of grievance or resentment at the individual level somewhat suspect and incomplete. The perspective explained collective action as the sum of strategic decisions by individuals who could only be induced to join a group through incentives or punishments and sanctions suffered as a result of the failure to join. Olson’s work led rationalist-oriented political scientists to focus on the micro-foundations of collective action, and to turn from specific forms of contention to develop a general law intended to cover all forms of collective action.

For Russell Hardin the central problem in ethnonational mobilization is that of coordination (Hardin, 1995). Mobilization is treated as a tipping process motivated by peer pressure – the more people join a given movement the more pressure they exert on others into joining. Group members mobilize for political activity in the expectation that selective rewards will drive their fellow members to do the same. Proponents of the rational choice perspective are correct to stress the importance of incentives to the study of individual activism. Any

decision to participate in collective action invariably involves some crude calculation of the actual and potential costs involved. Individual decisions are indeed, as Hardin suggests, influenced by the actions of those around them, both as new actors become engaged and as previously engaged actors alter their strategies.

One of the factors that is not captured by this framework is that the efforts of individuals to contribute to the collective cause also vary significantly across participants in terms of the type and intensity of involvement, the repertoire of action within a particular movement and other parameters. More importantly, the debate over the rational/irrational nature of ethnonational radicalization and violence does not fully account for the dynamic nature of events that gradually build up towards activating ethnic boundaries and setting violence in motion. It is arguable that violence is precipitated by a sequence of events embedded within a context of symbolic references which render these events meaningful for the members of a particular ethnonational community (but not necessarily for outsiders). Utilitarian theories are particularly weak in accounting for the relationship between identity and action, specifically the question of how ethnic identity influences behaviour and orientations that lead to conflict. By limiting itself to the issue of incentives, punishments and strategic calculations the rationalist perspective fails to offer any substantive analysis of the role of ethnicity and the mechanisms which activate specific components of ethnic identity. Addressing the issue of why and how this activation occurs in some cases but not in others requires a detailed historico-cultural interpretation. Hechter (e.g. Hechter, 2001) does recognize the importance of cultural components but by treating unequal development as a key explanatory variable he tends to subordinate the study of ethnicity to other structural factors.



At the opposite end of the rationality-structure spectrum are those explanations of ethnic conflict and collective mobilization which minimize the role of agency and stress the primacy of the broad social, political and economic variables. Researchers working in this framework focus on the role of state structures in tactical group choices. Drawing on the realist tradition in international relations that emphasizes the search for security as a primary result of state anarchy Barry Posen, Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis have applied the lessons of the 'security dilemma' to the study of ethnic conflict. Structuralists attribute the emergence of ethnic conflict to the consequences of the breakup of the central authority in a multiethnic state. According to this line of argument, inter-group hostility becomes threatening in a state of anarchy and drives opposing groups into defensive solidarity to gain political advantage (Jervis, 1978; Posen, 1993; Snyder and Jervis, 1999). One community, the argument runs, will take actions to enhance its security, which, in the general atmosphere of mutual mistrust, will automatically lead to increased insecurity of the other communities creating an escalating circle of insecurity.

The application of this approach to ethnically-centered struggles has a number of weaknesses. Firstly, as Laitin (1993) and others have pointed out, ethnic conflict differs markedly from interstate conflict in being identity-centered. Secondly, and in close connection to the first point, by emphasizing only the physical dimension of security and neglecting its cultural side structuralists tend to overlook the ways in which real and perceived threats to the identity of an ethnonational community affect both the tactics of groups directly involved in conflict and some of the actions kin neighbouring states might take in response to the ethnic strife. One of the most challenging aspects in dealing with the security concerns of an ethnonational group is that it is rarely

confined to the boundaries of a single state. Due to the intricate and close relationship between the community in the homeland, in neighbouring kin states and in the diaspora it is usually the case that when one part of the group is in danger it also influences other parts. This more inclusive approach helps to acquire a better sense of the overall picture of rebellious activity. From this perspective, the security dilemma in ethnic conflict is closer to a perceptual than a structural security dilemma and is unlikely to arise solely from an anarchical situation alone (Kaufman, 1996: 112). The discussion of security in the broader context has only recently been developing in the literature (e. g. Roe, 2001; Kaufman, 1996).

Efforts by one group to strengthen its cultural security can be perceived as offensive and threatening to other groups which respond with their own demands for cultural preservation. Cultural concerns often reinforce the structural aspects in the escalation of conflicts, since distinct communities fear physical destruction as much as they fear a demise from cultural decline and perceived potential extinction. Traditional accounts of the security dilemma offer no convincing explanation of why individuals often value the cultural **and** physical survival of the group higher than their own physical security, i. e. why they choose to fight even in the presence of feasible alternatives, like assimilation or subordination to the dominant ethnic group.

A partial modification of this lack of cultural considerations inherent in structuralist theories is offered by Donald Horowitz (2000: 166-84) in his synthesis of rational and socio-psychological elements. His emphasis on intergroup competition, contests for relative group worth as the driving forces behind ethnonational mobilization provides an important corrective to the non-cultural nature of the perspectives considered above, as well as to purely grievance-based explanations. By rooting

ethnic contestation in a comparative evaluation process and the quest for symbolic recognition of group status he provides a fuller explanation of mass behaviour and the psychological ground for ingroup solidarity. According to this perspective, cultural differences are important not because of their intrinsic value but to the extent that they impact on matters of perceived prestige, as well as how, in the perception of the respective groups, being different equates to being better or worse. When culture becomes the basis for comparison, the cultural mechanism for conflict is ignited.

In response to the limited predictive and explanatory utility of some of the above literature a core group of social movement theorists have introduced a more nuanced analysis of political and institutional dimensions to the accounts of the roots of mobilization. In parallel and somewhat similarly to the key developments and debates between major schools in the fields of nationalism and ethnic conflict, theories of social movements have undergone a number of paradigm shifts from mass behaviour to resource mobilization, political process and identity-centered conceptualizations. In the past, social movements tended to be seen as relatively marginal and largely irrational forms of political expression, while areas of related research tended to follow traditions of the prevailing paradigms in social science. Social movements were initially analyzed in line with the structural and socio-psychological causes of mass mobilization (Parsons, 1951; Smelser, 1962; Davies, 1962). It was generally thought that structural strains or constraints produced enough psychological discomfort (sense of isolation and impotence) to induce collective action which provided empowerment, belonging, and a sense of control. Major arguments tended to focus on socioeconomic deprivation, and the consequences of political or psychological distress. Structural functionalism provided some insights

fundamental to social movements and collective behaviour. From Parsons to Smelser, however, functionalism continuously stressed the difference between collective contentious activity occurring outside of the system or in exceptional situations of strain, and regular behaviour in the social system, with the latter corresponding to standard individual behaviour rationally defending his/ her interests according to accepted values. Actions not conforming to this regular rational model were thus left to be categorized as deviant and often implicitly or explicitly irrational.

In response to some of the sociopsychological explanatory difficulties, resource mobilization theory challenged the earlier assumption that irrationality, poor economic and social background, anomie or a combination of those traits are the hallmarks of activism. Instead, it put forth the idea that movements were rational, logical, organized responses of collective action (Zald and McCarthy, 1977, 1990). Thus, resource mobilization theory concentrates on attributes of particular social movement *groups*, rather than individual psychological states or macroeconomic indicators. The crucial insight of this perspective is that, if a social movement organization faces a resource deficit, deprivation will not be sufficient to translate grievances into social mobilization. RMT stated social movement organizations (SMOs) were needed to enable strategically directed and sustained activism. Charles Tilly's work (Tilly, 1978) provides some of the earliest ideas on resource mobilization theories. Oberschall, who also uses it to examine a variety of social movements, describes Tilly's and his own analytical framework:

Group conflict in its dynamic aspects can be conceptualized from the point of view of resource management. Mobilization refers to the processes by which a discontented group assembles and invests resources for the pursuit of group goals. Social control refers to the

same processes, but from the point of view of the incumbents or the group that is being challenged' (Oberschall, 1973: 28).

SMOs could evolve into organizational models very similar to other bureaucratic entities found in institutionalized politics because of their inherent efficiency, infrastructures, formal institutions, resources, internal community organizations, and division of labour capabilities.

This perspective still had a very strong structural component; and it did not take into account the relationship between structural and agency-oriented components, as well as the role of identity and symbolism in enabling mobilization.

For the proponents of the political process (or political opportunity) framework political context becomes decisive in activating the potential for mobilization (Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1978; Kriesi et al., 1995). The term 'political process' became especially popular following the publication of a study by Doug McAdam on the civil rights protest in the United States (McAdam, 1982). The central concept in this perspective is the political opportunity structure defined by Tarrow as 'the dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success and failure' (Tarrow, 1998: 76-7). The political opportunity structure is an important analytical tool to understand the success or failure of nationalist activity. It represented an advance beyond the relative deprivation theories that, as mentioned above, dominated the study of ethnic mobilization from the 1970s onwards and such transformation is evident in three ways. Firstly, it recognized that grievances alone are not a sufficient precondition for political action. In other words, although grievances vary across time and space, variation in this criterion cannot explain the scope of mobilization. In addition,

grievances alone fail to fully explain the timing and dynamics of nationalist movements.

In contrast to grievance-based theories of conflict eruption, political 'opportunity theory argued that while grievances can be relatively constant, social movements emerge only in particular circumstances. Instead, disparate political structures favour distinct forms of political behaviour. Secondly, it acknowledged that the origins of mobilization cannot be understood without reference to the broader environment, in which it is embedded. Thirdly, by uniting subjective and objective dimensions of opportunity it can to some extent capture the gradual and dynamic broadening of the opportunity spectrum as actors themselves contribute to shaping the space around them. Since this confrontation is typically vis-à-vis the state, this school has traditionally looked to signals emanating from the state in their search for evidence of an expansion or contraction of political opportunities. The primary hypothesis is that relatively stable features of the political environment fundamentally condition political behaviour and thus 'significantly affect any polity's patterns of contention' (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 1996: 24; Tarrow, 1998: Chapter 5).

According to this line of thought, political opportunities act as a filter for the transformation of mobilization induced by structural preconditions into political action. Contentious politics emerges when changing political opportunities -such as decline in state capacity for repression, the opening of institutional access, the fragmentation of political elites, and the availability of new social networks and external actors- create incentives for social actors to mobilize. The tolerance, accessibility, and responsiveness of states determine the extent to which people can organize and act collectively. This perspective centers not on movement internal dynamics but on the goals of those excluded from the

polity to gain recognition as legitimate actors and their interactions with the dominant political regime. Protest is, thus, directly related to actors' positioning within the system.

At the same time while this school acknowledged that political opportunities emerge and change partly through the dynamic transformation of the historical, political and cultural milieu, they hardly provide the analytical tools with which to explore the expansion of political opportunity. It remains underspecified or at least insufficiently specified on this process. It is undeniable that the trajectory of mobilization and whether or not such mobilization leads to violence is often contingent upon the channels of participation open to actors, as well as on the capacity and willingness of the dominant group to embrace and deliver their demands. It should be noted that this school seems to say that favourable political opportunities are conducive both to movement emergence and the sustainability of its success over time. While a great deal has been written about the factors influencing movement formation, less consideration has been given to the ways in which change and transformation happens once they are on the scene. It is arguable that the treatment of movement emergence and success as part of the same favourable external environment fostered by a similar set of opportunities is not always justified. As some critics have rightly pointed out, the literature is often characterized by the additive enumeration of political opportunities (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999) rather than a consideration of the interaction between these factors which may vary in intensity depending on a particular context at different points in time.

Studies in this area have some commonality with rational choice, since the recognition that movements respond to external conditions implies, at least to some extent that they are strategically motivated

actors. But by concentrating on the individual pure rationalists tended to isolate their object of analysis from the larger political system. Rational choice and political process models share a broad focus on the rationality of individual and group action within an institutional context. Both understand collective action as the sum total of normal rather than unusual political acts. Hetcher's argument comes very close to that advanced by political process theorists when he asserts that 'institutional barriers to collective action affect the set of strategies available to nationalist groups' (Hetcher, 2001: 128-9). This is not particularly well-suited to increasing our understanding of the magnitude of mobilization and demobilization mechanisms within a specific ethnonational community.

A key area of research related to the rise of violent mobilization focuses on the so called repression-mobilization nexus, that is state dealings with violent protest. There has been a vast range of theoretical and empirical explorations of the interaction between challengers and the state. What emerges from these studies is that challenger mobilization generally induces some form of repressive response (e. g. Lichbach, 1987). Although there is a consensus within the literature that the level of repression the state brings to bear on movements is influential in determining the nature, scope and outcomes of contention, the findings with regard to the precise relationship have not been entirely clear. The main hypothesis advanced by scholars who focus on the dynamics of ethnic relations is that indiscriminate repression against an ethnic/national group generates more antagonism and violence among the members of the groups that are subjected to this violence than does a judicious and targeted used of public-order measures.

Tilly (1978: 39) was one of the first scholars to identify a curvilinear relationship between repression and protest. While low levels of



repression can make protest obsolete by allowing challengers to use institutionalized routes in voicing their demands, extremely high repression can hinder the development of social networks among potential challengers. It is in the middle range of cases where mobilization is most likely (Gupta, and Sprague, 1993: 301-39; Dudley and Miller, 1998: 77-96; Muller and Opp, 1986: 471-87). In such contexts challengers have the opportunity to organize, the cost of collective action is not prohibitive, but there are still considerable constraints to participation in nonviolent avenues of action. At the same time the analysis of nationalist contention shows that the effects of repression can be quite diverse. Repression is sometimes effective, sometimes counterproductive, and sometimes makes little identifiable difference. Whereas earlier work treated dissent and repression as uniform phenomena, Lichbach (1987) argued that the state's actions should be assessed in terms of both repression and accommodation; likewise dissident behaviour should be analyzed in terms of the cost-benefit calculations made by 'dissident entrepreneurs' (Lichbach, 1987: 266) (protest leaders) according to a rational actor model.

Several studies have cast doubt on the reliability of the U-curve thesis. The opposite argument relates to the backlash hypothesis which argues that 'harsh coercion accelerates protest' (Francisco, 1996: 1182). In particular, repressive events that are perceived as unjust have the potential to generate backlash against those seen as responsible and, thus, lead to greater movement mobilization. The backlash approach is based on a more dynamic framework distinguishing between long-term and short-term effects of repression on protest. It predicts that extremely severe coercion decreases protest temporarily but increases it in the long-run. The reasoning behind this relationship is that intensive and indiscriminately applied state repression diminishes the additional

costs of protest and leaves challengers no other choice but to respond with severe resistance. Repression stimulates the switch from nonviolence to violence particularly when the net opportunity cost of violence is small. There are at least two steps in the switching process. First, there is an emotional reaction to repression by classifying it as unjust causing outrage and heightening an individual's desire for security. Second, there is a decision on how to deal with this emotion, based on a calculation of the costs and benefits of violence. While emotions are micro-level mechanisms motivating the recourse to violence, they are moderated by the opportunity costs of rebellion, which in turn, are weighed against the intangible rewards from a violent response to repression.

What emerges from these somewhat contradictory conceptions is that repression alone will not produce a predictable response – context and conditions matter. For example, in his study of contentious activity in the post-Soviet space during the late 1980s–early 1990s Mark Beissinger (2002: 333-5) shows that repression did not have any systematic influence on the occurrence of backlash protests. In particular while the power of a sense of unjust repression was one of the most robust mobilizers throughout this period, groups differed significantly in their structural capacity to mobilize in the face of repression. When considering the patterns of state-challenger relationships it is important to recognize that the scope of feasible state responses is bounded critically by both the nature of its abstract preferences and its existing capacities. Whether or not nationalist demands are accommodated depends largely on the resilience of political structures and the political choices made by ruling elites.

State capacity could be seen as a function of two dimensions: the level of institutionalization of central authority as expressed by the

specificity of the regime and the degree to which leaders are prepared to accommodate the demands of an oppositional movement (Kohli, 1997: 329-30). In this reading, given scarce political power and economic resources, it is inevitable that ethnically based movements will emerge, but they will just as inevitably decline if they obtain substantial concessions from the state. The nature of the established political structures combines with the prevailing norms of governance and the cohesion of the ruling elites to determine the accommodative capacity of a given state. Unaccommodating leaders in the context of both weakly and well institutionalized states are most likely to provoke militant struggles for recognition and self-determination. Jack Snyder (2000: 74-9) also emphasizes the mutually reinforcing influence of the adaptability of elite interests and the strength of political institutions. Inadaptable elites together with weak institutions are hypothesized to trigger the emergence of exclusive forms of nationalism. Somewhat similarly, in their study of four Western European societies Kriesi and his coauthors (Kriesi et al., 1995) concluded that the degree of inclusion/exclusion is one of the main parameters determining the propensity of specific actors and groups to employ violent strategies. In particular, movements are more likely to opt for violence in states based upon exclusion than in those relying upon inclusion. Sustained avoidance or suppression of nationalist demands by the central authority will over time only exacerbate the explosive potential of the underlying problems.

The interaction between state capacity and collective claim-making is also a key theme in C. Tilly's work *The Politics of Collective Violence* (2003). By collective violence Tilly means 'social interactions that directly inflict physical damage result in part from the coordination of among the persons who perform the damaging acts' (Tilly, 2003: 15). High-capacity regimes exert extensive control over available means of

coercion, which places significant constraints upon the opportunities for militant rebellion and means that the agents of the regime are more likely to intervene in majority-minority relationships, if violence breaks out. By contrast, in low-capacity regimes rival coercive centers are regularly formed and the lack of the means to suppress them creates an extremely favourable environment for the formation of oppositional movements (Tilly, 2003: 41-52). The dynamic unfolding of responses to actions taken by the authorities, challengers and their opponents highlights how the creation of new political conditions brought about by such responses in turn triggers shifts in the goals and forms of contention. Political context partly reflects conscious decisions of particular actors but at the same time these decisions cannot be fully evaluated without regard to their anticipated consequences within a given context.

From the late 1980s social movement literature has started to take into consideration ideology, identity and framing whereby grievances and identity boundaries were conceptualized as socially constructed within a collective interpretative context (Snow and Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 1986, Melucci, 1989). Social movements were seen as the centers of the negotiation and formation of collective identities. With the 'cultural turn' motivated at least in part by the recognition of the need to rethink and complement grievance-based explanations a new wave of analysts has become interested in the role of ideology and identity in the mobilization and legitimation strategies of social movements. This trend of research attempts to account for how participants are provided with specific schemes of interpretation that contribute to constructing the legitimacy and goals of a particular movement. The work of David Snow and Robert Benford provides much of the theoretical background to this approach.

More recent analysis in this domain has thus moved towards explanations of the construction of meaning and the formation of political identities. This perspective describes how the cognitive orientations of individuals and the ideological frames of a movement are fused together. Successful framing depends on frames bearing an internal logical consistency and congruence with audiences' everyday lived experiences, perceptions and beliefs. Movements interpret relevant events by highlighting certain objectives and values while blurring or discounting others with the intention to mobilize potential adherents and win popular support. The model incorporates through a constructivist perspective an explanation of cultural and identity sources of movement rationale. The frames approach provides a useful tool for the analysis of schematic stereotypes and collective beliefs that give meaning to participation in nationalist collective action, particularly in terms of how specific ideas resonate at the popular level. In contrast to pure constructivists who interpret framing as implying that elites are free to push their followers to support almost any claims they make in order to further their own material self-interest (e. g. (Ballentine and Snyder, 1996: 5-40) social movement scholars argue that frames must relate to the shared experiences and self-understandings of the populations which the appeals address. Frames achieve greater success if there is a 'connection between the discourse on a particular issue and the broader political culture of which it is a part' (Gamson, 1992: 135). This line of thought points to one set of mechanisms crucial for radicalization processes but leads to questions of why and when they become effective. Zald crucially suggests that the relationship between framing and political behaviour should not be seen as unidimensional but as working in both directions with frames structuring social action and being

structured by it (Zald, 1996: 269). This perspective, thus, serves as a certain interface between structure and agency.

In sum, it appears that the explanatory power of each of the frameworks discussed above is weak when taken in isolation. Theories of nationalism are too general to explain variations in specific outcomes, the static measure of individual rationality, as well as structural anarchy is insufficient to analyze participation in nationalist activity as an affective, emotionally charged and dynamic process, as well to do full justice to the plurality of mobilizational mechanisms, while the political opportunity school does not differentiate clearly between factors contributing to movement emergence and endurance and does not always allow for specificity in the manifestation of opportunities in particular contexts. A theoretically multifaceted explanation can facilitate a fuller appreciation of ethnonational mobilization in general and the trajectory of the conflicts in question in particular.

In the 1990s a number of authors attempted to build a consolidated approach to ethnonational mobilization. Works by Gurr (1993), McAdam and his coauthors (McAdam et al., 2001) and Lichbach (1998) provided important theoretical insights – the first via a synthesis of relative deprivation and resource mobilization approaches, the second via an expanded political opportunity framework and the third via a combination of political opportunity and rational choice approaches. What these studies suggest is that the grievances of the deprivation school (Gurr, 1970), the relative group status of socio-psychological approaches, the community-level organizational capacity central to the resource mobilization perspective, the identity construction of the nationalism literature all contribute to the generation of radical political action. There is a growing consensus that these approaches are not

mutually exclusive but should complement each other, as they address different issues and scales of analysis.

The approach adopted here recognizes a certain degree of fluidity and ‘constructedness’ of the main categories discussed above while maintaining a focus on the factors and processes that affect their resilience and persistence. The structural and historical context(s) create the initial parameters within which collective action takes place but they are not entirely predetermined. Instead the immediate environment and strategic considerations indicate the extent to and the direction in which these underlying parameters will be realized and/or will shift during the mobilization process. Actors continually adjust their strategies in response to emerging opportunities and/or constraints presented by the specific situation(s) they face.

The theoretical challenge posed by the fact that salient political cleavages are often ethnic ones is to explain why and how violent outcomes relate to this particular category. Some authors suggest that the violent politicization of ethnicity and the intentional construction of antagonistic collective identities presents a form of legitimation for ethnic entrepreneurs who use ethnonational radicalization against a rival group to build a constituency by way of identity-based mobilization (e.g. Gagnon, 2004). Undoubtedly, certain powerful and charismatic political leaders may incite others to act violently and significantly contribute to increasing the salience of antagonistic identity constructions, which promote conflict between groups over cooperation. Without disregarding or denying the insights of the ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ literature this study attempts to argue that to identify a social construction is not necessarily to point to a conspiracy by intellectuals, populist elites or states. The

power of construction is extremely rarely, if ever, concentrated in the hands of one actor. Nationalist boundaries are continually (re)constructed through complex decisions, decisions which are in turn fundamentally influenced by situations and opportunities, cultural and political élites and rewarded or punished by controllers of resources (primarily states but also organized identity groups).

Nationalist claims are made in a tensely interdependent field of competing actors and strategies of legitimation. First, identities themselves develop and transform through interaction with others. The awareness of being different from any entity, whether it be a state, or a group comes from a recognition of that entity and its attributes. The formation of identities, thus, relies primarily on comparing one's attributes with those of another. Second, contentious political activity consists of patterns of relational interaction. Interethnic relations are inherently dynamic and it is precisely this dynamism that should be recognized as one of the key contributory factors to defining their specificity in each particular socio-spatial context. While historical accounts sometimes describe events in terms of interactions, social science has been relatively slow in moving away from rationalist and structuralist paradigms. Yet those perspectives that lack an interactionist component have great difficulty explaining divergent (violent/non-violent) behaviour of different nationalist groups within the same territory or the choices and transitions between non-violent and violent strategies at specific points in time (see Chenoweth and Lawrence, 2010 for a recent comparative discussion of how and why violence erupts).

This study suggests that many of the weaknesses of the existing interpretations of the conflicts under investigation arise from the absolutization of single theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. For example those interpretations that read ethnic



preferences from identity categories and take for granted the link between the ‘intrinsically’ ethnic nature of the respective nationalisms and conflict tend to recognize the importance of ethnicity in particular socio-spatial environments but largely disregard that it is contingent and constantly in a process of contestation and / or (re)construction. Likewise, those, predominantly constructivist, approaches that deny the historical authenticity and/ or contextualised efficacy of ethnic categories and suggest that nationalist outcomes flow logically from the ideas, identities and/or (as in rationalist approaches) interests of political actors tend to be poor at addressing how and why appeals to ethnic identity become intelligible and resonant to wide social constituencies.

This study shares with some recent sociological research the emphasis on the primacy of process and contextuality in analysis and an attention to explanation that seeks to avoid both structural determinism and pure voluntarism. As Mustafa Emirbayer notes, the choice between substantialism and relationalism constitutes a ‘fundamental dilemma’. The question is whether ‘to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static ‘things’ or in dynamic, unfolding relations’ (Emirbayer, 1997: 281). Thus, in ontological terms the literature could be divided into substantialist approaches, which break the social world down into entities, and relational approaches, which regard social interaction as the starting point for critical examination. Largely substantialist conceptions of nationalism, ethnicity and identity tend to conceive of these phenomena as entities or properties of entities (groups or states), which attributes more uniformity to them than is found to be true under empirical scrutiny. While relational understandings of ethnic conflict and nationalism are not

entirely new<sup>9</sup>, many theoretical perspectives have tended to rely on a rather deterministic view of causation, thus overemphasizing a structural logic and missing the role of contingency in political life, as well as the interdependency of human actions within and across spatial contexts.

Nationalist movements are always shaped by the actions of opponents, and other participants in the system. Actors not only interact, often strategically, at each point in time, they learn over time from past interactions and from information communicated to them by others. The perspective offered in this study stresses that nationalist activity is embedded in cultural contexts, social networks and intersubjective relations of reciprocity and that the understanding of these dimensions is crucial to account for temporal variation and shifts within and across nationalist movements. By conceptualizing conflict and violence as processes rather than unique events I also attempt to relax the unitary actor assumption, which is quite common in the literature. When actors are assumed to make the collective decision to radicalize and take up arms at one specific point in time with no alternatives available, scholars generally tend to downplay the differences between the initiation and escalation/ expansion of conflict. This analysis is grounded in historical context attempting to combine an evaluation of the importance of process with an appreciation of the enabling and constraining impact of social settings, that is the wider environment in which nationalist activity is situated on the level, form and direction of collective action. Nationalist movements vary significantly in terms of their microstructures, and one of the key dimensions to assess in this regard is how collective needs, demands and perspectives of the movement constituency relate to the structural environment to influence the

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<sup>9</sup> See e. g. (Brubaker, 1996). For one of the earliest understandings of ethnicity as defined not by inner substances but by changeable outer boundaries see (Barth, 1969).

expressions of dissent, resistance and claim-making. This study does not share the analytical position that ethnic conflict is a ‘myth’ (Crawford and Lipschutz, 1998)<sup>10</sup>. Similar explanations commonly ignore the extent to which ethnicity and ethnic frames of interpretation have been and continue to be compelling for large sections of the populations. In this sense I agree with Pal Kolsto that the key point should be not be the inherent quality of events but how actors perceive them, and the historical, cultural and institutional contexts through which such events are viewed and interpreted (Kolsto, 2002: 7).

As has been mentioned above, a strong polarization of perspectives has impeded the development of richer understandings of ethnicity and nationalism, as well as the unfolding dynamics of the political behaviour of ethnonational groups in the two cases under consideration. Most studies concentrate either on how the state reacts to the activities of its people or on how the people make sense of the state. Whilst the former tend to be weaker at assessing the resonance and effectiveness of elite discourse with the general population, the latter generally lose sight of the significance of the state, as well as cultural and political elites in the (re)production of these discourses. On a more general level, failing to recognize the multiple complexities that result in conflicts taking the form they do, might lead to the institutionalization of policies which in turn have an adverse effect on the populations concerned. This study attempts to bridge the divides mentioned above and recapture a more complete and nuanced understanding of conflict evolution mediated through specific historico-cultural and temporal contexts. In so doing it

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<sup>10</sup> While the simplistic view that ethnic conflict is a ‘myth’ is based on a purely instrumental conceptualization of ethnicity and reduces conflict to socio-economic forces, I do recognize the significance of prior cultural materials and processes. In particular, national myths can be utilized for two main purposes: 1) mass mobilization through references to common symbols, shared historical heritages and common future aspirations; 2) legitimation of political elites’ status and political authority (see e. g. (Kaufman, 2001; Hutchinson, 2005, Githens-Mazer, 2006, 2008). See chapters 2 and 5 for a more detailed analysis of the symbolic dimension of the conflicts in question.

highlights the utility of process-centered analysis in addition to variable based approaches to explaining nationalist movement activity. The next section discusses the main analytical perspectives on the development of the NK conflict and outlines how the interpretation taken in this study will build on some of those approaches.

### **Key issues in research on NK: an evaluation of competing explanations**

Each of the three approaches discussed in the theoretical section of this chapter finds some echoes in the literature on the conflict in question. The convergence of the Soviet Union's collapse, Armenian and Azeri independence, and the rise of the NK movement gave many historians, political scientists, and sociologists fertile ground to study the roots of the hostilities. There is a widespread agreement in the literature that it has a clearly visible nationalist and ethnoterritorial component – the dispute is over who has the legitimate right to the territory and this right is seen as the crucial attribute of fully fledged nationhood. Within this general consensus, however, interpretations differ when identifying the key triggering factors that were responsible for its escalation into a militant struggle in the late Soviet period. In the 1990s there was an upsurge in the number of academic works looking at the NK conflict from a historical perspective. The majority of these publications, especially those by Western journalists and scholars was largely factual in nature and dealt with the historical roots of the conflict (Sunny, 1993; Dudwick, 1993; Chorbajian, 1994; Dragadze, 1989). This is understandable given the enormous role played by history in legitimizing the demands of both sides. A number of studies explored

the possibilities of peacemaking from the perspective of international law (Cornell, 1997) and conflict regulation (Fraser et al., 1990, Rutland, 1991). At the same time this emphasis on the factual side has led to a noticeable lack of complex theoretical conceptualizations. It should be noted that although some scholars do tend to look to multiple factors in the discussion of the escalation of the conflict in the late Soviet period, which might make it hard to divide the literature on the subject into neat subfields, prioritization of a particular set of factors over others is often seen in scholarly debates.

The first category of explanations used to account for the nature and course of contention in NK while acknowledging that ‘ethnic pride and territorial sovereignty are the two themes that dominate all others in the conflict’ (Dragadze, 1989: 69) commonly offer a grievance-based interpretation and tend to put economic grievances at the heart of the analysis (Dragadze, 1989; Goldenberg, 1994). It is argued that objective reasons – the economically underdeveloped status of NK within the Azeri SSR, the reluctance of the center to allocate the funds and resources necessary for economic well-being during the Soviet era, discriminatory language policies (the imposition of Azeri as the language of education), political and economic discrimination of the Armenian population in both Azerbaijan and NK were largely responsible for the escalation of the conflict. These scholars capture some of the key underlying conditions and triggering factors for collective mobilization but do not specify the mechanisms that translate these grievances into action. Perhaps, more importantly there could be a very large number of grievances that have the potential to be used as mobilizing instruments (Zald and McCarthy, 1987: 347-92). The long list of grievances to choose from makes it hard to identify the causal primacy of individual factors and weakens the power of using grievance

as the basis of explanation. I argue that as far as NK is concerned, grievances rooted in historical antagonisms, as well as real and perceived interethnic inequalities clearly directly influenced the trajectory of the movement's development and the continuous support for collective action once it was underway but these factors do not account for the timing and internal dynamics of the movement.

The second line of argument commonly discussed in relation to the conflict in NK and in the former Soviet Union more generally deals with the determining influence of the ethno-federal structure of the Soviet state in which administrative division was based on ethnic criteria and, thus, failed to provide outlets for free participation in political life. According to this perspective, the politicization of ethnicity triggered by Soviet institutional legacy together with the launching of substantial reforms during the Gorbachev era allowed local elites to evoke and skillfully manipulate historical memories and intercommunal grievances during the political struggle that followed the Soviet collapse. Following the lead of constructivist theorists a number of scholars – including Rogers Brubaker, Yuri Slezkine and Ronald Suny emphasized the ways in which the process of nation-building was decisively shaped by Soviet nationality policies (Roeder, 1991; Bunce, 1999; Brubaker, 1994; 1996; Slezkine, 1994; Suny, 1993).

Instead of diffusing ethnic identity the institutions created in an attempt to forge a new civic political identity, *homo soveticus*, helped to strengthen and perpetuate ethnic territorial identification among non-Russians. Institutionalists hold that the creation of stable territorial units defined in terms of nationality prevented the formation of horizontal civic bonds across society and gave political entrepreneurs the territorial, material and symbolic resources to organize violence. Several authors have applied this line of explanation to NK (Zurcher, 2007; Koehler and

Zurcher, 2003). Swante Cornell also points to the significance of the autonomous status of NK: ‘...the autonomous status of the province... carried with it the political institutions to channel secessionist sentiments’ (Cornell, 2000: 41). The institutional explanation goes some way towards exploring the ways in which institutions contribute to structuring political behaviour but can hardly account for the underlying causes of conflict escalation. When trying to predict the occurrence of nationalist protest based solely on the existence of institutional pre-determinants one is frequently at a loss. First, it fails to consider why ethnonational mobilization can be latent or blocked despite the presence of favourable institutional preconditions. Second, it underestimates competing claims and emotional attachments to a single territory that are seen as mutually exclusive and remain a key source of the hostilities.

The third – structuralist line of thought predictably puts the conflict in the context of a broader process of state disintegration and prioritizes the collapse of the state which led to a crisis of legitimacy and eliminated the restraining effect of Soviet power: ‘Defense and internal security were the prerogative of the federal center and its collapse left the successor states without any meaningful institutions that could have claimed the monopoly of violence... The weakness of the old, dying Soviet state was paralleled by the weakness of the new, emerging independent states’ (Zurcher, 2007: 213). By showing how nationalism arose in the period when the political space expanded this account offers a means of explaining the timing of radicalization. The nationalist movement(s) crystallized against the background of a deepening awareness of the crisis of Soviet power. The weakening of the center was one of the key favourable factors which allowed the communities to struggle for national recognition. However, as with institutionalist analysis, state weakness only establishes a broad frame of reference for

analyzing some of the conditions conducive to radicalization but does not provide a sufficiently specific understanding of the variation between violent and non-violent outcomes. In addition, for this case a purely structuralist analysis does not stand up to scrutiny, as the tensions within the region predated the period of state weakness. If one accepts that the dispute over NK would not have happened without the anarchy emerging out of Soviet collapse it is hard to explain the fact that the first indications of instability and hostility were visible long before the iron grip of the Soviet state started to loosen.

It should be noted that in the context of studies dealing with the former Soviet Union, structuralist arguments, i. e. those emphasizing weakening state capacity overlap significantly with institutionalist interpretations. Both address the background factors that enhance the likelihood and incentives for mobilization. While institutionalists stress that the nature of institutions promoted separatism, pure structuralists tend to discuss how actors respond to real and perceived state weaknesses in the struggles for national recognition, as well as the diminished capacity and willingness of the state to assert control over its territory. In what follows I use the term ‘structural’ in a broad sense, that is to describe and analyze the conditions that favoured the radicalization of the conflict in question in the late Soviet era – what is commonly referred to as the ‘Soviet legacy’.

It can be argued that in general theoretical approaches to the study of ethnonational mobilization in the post-Soviet space and Armenia-Azerbaijan in particular have tended to rely on the traditional structure-agency dualism. On the one hand, the emphasis on the historical legacy of the Soviet era mentioned above (Roeder, 1991, 2007; Cornell, 2002; Hale, 2000) means that the causal status of the mechanisms employed by elites remains relatively low compared to the structural legacies that



distinguished the wide universe of late and post-communist societies. Undoubtedly structural and institutional factors, most notably, the salience of the Soviet experience especially its political, economic, cultural dimensions and institutional structures in particular the dominance of the Communist Party and the highly centralized nature of decision-making and policy implementation play an important role in Armenian and Azeri mobilizations. However, a purely structural-institutional analysis commonly ascribes this mobilization to factors external to the group, thus devaluing the community as a source of autonomous power and agency. On the other hand, some of the recent literature on the conflict treats it as an elite-led phenomenon. The choices of elites have been investigated most closely by those (e. g. (Gorenburg, 2003) stressing divergent (violent/ non-violent) outcomes in similar starting conditions in the post-Soviet environment.

With regard to to ethnonational mobilization in Armenia, NK and to a lesser extent, Azerbaijan the role of elites as ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ – elite actors who are able to frame a grievance in ethnic terms and unite the community around it – has received particular attention by (Melander, 2001) and (Caspersen, 2008, 2008a) amongst others. These accounts take issue with unitary, homogenous actor treatments and suggest that fixed conceptions of the ethnic identities of the parties to the conflict obscure the driving force of radicalization as the product of power struggles between opposing elites and competing visions about how a political community should be developing. According to this view, intra-community conflict correlated strongly with inter-community radicalization, and ethnic tension helped advance the socio-political projects of some groups over others. The emphasis on elites represents an important alternative to the structural determinism and allows to consider how rival leaders within the same group compete to articulate

their strategies to protect collective interests, as well as to define ‘similar’ situations in subtly different ways. It is certainly necessary to recognize that by early 1990s the conflict transformed from a pure national liberation struggle to a movement of liberal urban elites whose primary agenda became the achievement of independence seizing of state power. At the same time these perspectives tend to ignore the group itself as an agent of mobilization. In addition, such analyses concentrate on how within community divisions affect tactical choices and decisions, and generally fail to explore why audiences are receptive to particular types of messages over others or the conditions under which political elites’ appeals to ethnonational rhetoric are reflective of widely held communal beliefs.

Another approach to explaining the course of ethnonational mobilization puts broadly cultural, behavioural and socio-psychological variables at the heart of the analysis. In this vein, Abrahamian (1990, 1995, 1997) stresses the discursive, symbolic and ritualistic aspects of radicalization. While recognizing that Armenian and Azeri mobilization emerged in a particular social, political and economic context in the late Soviet period, this approach tends to see collective mobilization as part of certain patterns of practices and meanings which belong to and are produced by a specific cultural logic. Taking culture as the central component of movements it analyzes mobilization as largely a cultural struggle between different traditions and outlines how national models of aggressive behaviour were shaped by myths and images of heroes of the traditional Caucasian epic. This perspective can be useful in analyzing how pre-existing cultural patterns are instrumental in the formation and transformation of ethnic boundaries. At the same time it tends to assume the direct translation of culture into political action.

Laitin and Suny (1999) and Laitin (2001) use demographic and linguistic data to demonstrate that the major urban centers in Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK were culturally vibrant and heterogeneous, with a high degree of cultural and linguistic penetration and assimilation between the two communities. From such accounts the authors derive their conceptualizations of the escalation of the conflict based on rationalist assumptions. It is suggested that the start and continuation of military struggle could be attributed to the fact that elites in the national homeland were prepared to make credible commitments to the Armenian population that they will pay extraordinary costs to support their compatriots (Laitin, 2001: 853). The relative power of an outside protector state, thus, becomes decisive in lowering the potential risks of involvement in collective action, as well as creating incentives to initiate and continue fighting. The rise of Armenian and Azeri nationalisms stemmed from strategic considerations. Both Armenian and Azeri communities were confident that overwhelming support would be provided by the respective kin states even if this forces them to accept associated costs and risks.

This approach has the benefit of stressing that ethnic kin states and diasporas which crosscut national boundaries play an important role in the production of violence. With few exceptions (e. g. Saideman and Ayres, 2008; Panossian, 1998; 2001; Koinova, 2011) transnational connections is an aspect that is often overlooked by other models. The emphasis on domestic structures tends to overlook the extent to which cross-border networks can contribute to the emergence and success of collective action. In addition, the rational choice model, as applied to NK seems to leave some space for ethnic solidarity. However, if a rational cost/benefit calculation even underpinned by support from powerful external patrons is the only driving force behind violent

mobilization at least two questions remain unanswered. Firstly, the mechanisms and sentiments fostering collective solidarity that motivate the communities in the external homelands to support their co-nationals remain underspecified. The only factor that is mentioned in this context is that ‘the expected payoffs for war are less than the homeland’s costs’ (Laitin, 2001: 856). The impact of shared cultural backgrounds and meanings (memories of victimization, historical experiences) is not considered. The role of the external homeland(s) is too narrowly conceptualized in terms of their instrumentalism. Secondly, by focusing on the external dimension this perspective disregards the ways in which mobilization can be triggered by a combination of changes in internal and external environments.

Another subfield for examining the conflict has been a comparative approach looking at the issue within the framework of other conflicts in the region, such as the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian (Tchilingirian, 1999; 2003). This perspective pushed forward the idea that ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet Union have a number of common aspects – all are byproducts of Soviet nationality policies and use grievances to perpetuate the hostilities. In the context of unfulfilled aspirations for political transformation and in the absence of effective new institutions to replace the old ones the dissatisfied minorities had to search for alternative ways to bring about social transformation and pressed for autonomy. The examination of the sources of conflict between the titular nationality and other, non-titular groups, of how minorities became minorities not in terms of absolute numbers but because they were no longer identified with the dominant nationality provides an interesting vantage point on the initial polarization between the parties. At the same time the insights of the approach focusing on majority-minority relations alone are limited

because it is very difficult to show that the development of Armenian nationalism was a specific reaction to Azeri maltreatment during Soviet rule, although it was clearly crucial in influencing Armenian collective memory. A direct correlation between the level of oppression and the intensity of political and cultural claims can hardly be demonstrated. The national liberation project developed not just because Armenians thought the titular group (Azeris) was treating them unfairly. In reality, both sides had a certain understanding of fairness and rooted the legitimacy of their claims in historical arguments.

One of the strands in the literature emphasizes the perceptions of insecurity developed in the context of mutually exclusive territorial claims: 'In a sense the sole determinant of the conflict is a security dilemma based on fear, or one could say, on the development of nationalisms mirroring each other, fuelling and directed against each other and scarcely able to develop without each other' (Cornell, 1999: 55-6; Dudwick, 1996). The strength of this approach is in its recognition of the impossibility to treat nationalist mobilization in fixed insular terms. Rather than seeing nationalism as the quest for the adequate expression of a single cultural identity its relational character is acknowledged. However, the interactional nature of movement formation is not limited to the ethnic other the nationalist community is in contrast with. The process of radicalization ties together disparate actors in different locations, including but not restricted to state agents, society-level actors sharing the ideas, values and goals of those involved in armed struggle, regional powers. It is, thus, too simplistic to state that the development of the conflict can be explained in a deterministic manner, that is only as a reaction against the tactics of the ethnic opponent. In addition, in 1987 when the movements in Armenia and NK started the anticipated scale of reform in the Soviet Union was not so

great that the Azeris could easily flaunt Soviet security guarantees. At the time the power of the Soviet government was still present, though weakening. Thus, the notion of the region as one of ‘emerging anarchy’ is not entirely accurate.

A final category for assessing the NK conflict includes research putting greed rather than grievance at the heart of the analysis and incorporates publications dealing with the correlation between the development of the conflict and the transfer of oil from the Caspian region (through Azerbaijan) to international markets. Within this analytical perspective are Mary Kaldor’s paper ‘Oil and Conflict’ (Kaldor, 2007) and Charles Blandy’s *The Impact of Baku Oil on Nagorny Karabakh* (1997). While it is for the most part agreed on in the literature that the economic aspect seems to have accentuated the conflict rather than initiated it, both Kaldor and Blandy emphasize the impact of economic factors and the ways in which oil revenues might encourage renewed fighting, the economic windfall causing an arms buildup that enhances the possibility of a military solution. Explicit in such arguments is the idea of postnationalist politics, where elites are preoccupied with issues of power and economic gains rather than nationalist considerations and ideology.

Representatives of Armenian and Azeri scholarship commonly center on the question of territory and approach the issue from the point of view of their respective communities – that is only one of the parties without showing the capacity or willingness to recognize the legitimacy, let alone value of alternative conceptualizations. In other words, if the author is ethnically Armenian (s) he usually tries to prove that NK has historically been the autonomous space for Armenians, the conflict is the continuation of organized Turkish-Azeri attempts to dilute NK of Armenians and the end of NK subordination to Azerbaijan is a matter of

the restoration of historical justice (Donabedian and Mutafian, 1989; Manasyan, 2005). In this reading the contestation is closely linked to broader Armenian traditional themes, such as suffering, injustice, the chains of all foreign (and particularly Azeri) hegemony, the forced migrations of Armenians and the eternal Armenian statehood question<sup>11</sup>. If the author is Azeri the reverse is generally true and the radicalization is attributed to unjustified territorial pretensions of both NK and Armenia in respect of Azerbaijan (Kocharli, 2004; Sultanov, 2001; 2004; 2004b). While in recent years some studies have attempted to present a balanced picture of the roots of the hostilities (Yamskov, 1991; De Waal, 2003; Geukjian, 2005; Tchilingirian, 1999), there is still a clearly observable trend to concentrate on historical research with the aspiration to ‘prove’ opposing historical and/or territorial claims. Local researchers tend to use the past as a pulpit from which to establish the legitimacy of one political and constitutional programme over another. As a result of this almost unavoidable bias very few publications have systematically examined from a neutral perspective the totality of structural, political, economic, cultural, historical, territorial and ethnic dimensions, as well as the complex interactions between them at each specific point in time. It is increasingly difficult to find any common ground in history or culture or to concede to the ‘other’ any positive role. Historians and experts from both sides give opposing versions of the conflict. Koehler and Zurcher rightly point out that ‘the object, the parties and the timing of the conflict themselves are strongly disputed’ (Koehler and Zurcher, 2003: 145). As mentioned above, some of the more recent studies in this area can be classified as multidimensional as they modify some of the assumptions of the earlier works.

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<sup>11</sup> See chapter 2 for an elaboration of these points in the Armenian context.

For example the ‘rationality of fear’ framework incorporating rational and emotion-based aspects and developed initially by de Figueiredo and Weingast (1999) was recently applied to the NK conflict by J. Fearon and D. Laitin (Fearon and Laitin, 2006). They suggested that the perception of fundamental threats made it rational for the opposing groups to fight to cleanse the republic of the ethnic other. Cornell (2000) and Kaufman (1998; 2001: 49-84) attribute the escalation of the conflict to the **combined** presence of factors related to willingness and opportunity to mobilize, thus attempting to address the weaknesses in structuralist and rationalist conceptions.

Thomas De Waal (2003) discusses a combination of rationalist, grievance-based and emotional elements. He further points that the conflict cannot be considered only in the framework of political or socioeconomic problems. History and identity - or, rather misguided and dangerous ideas of history and identity - played a more important role. He writes: ‘The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict makes sense only if we acknowledge that hundreds of thousands of Armenians and Azerbaijanis were driven to act by passionately held ideas about history, identity, and rights.’(De Waal, 2003: 272). De Waal is certainly right to stress the crucial role of the past in understanding the perceptions and motivations of all the parties. Like Ronald Suny (1993) and Laitin and Suny (1999), Waal emphasizes that Armenians and Azeris had amicably coexisted in NK under Soviet rule. When stressing the peaceful nature of interethnic relations in the Soviet era these authors seem to be somewhat dismissive of the fact that even then Armenians continuously expressed discontent, although in non-violent forms and never accepted the subordinate status of the NK territory. From a theoretical perspective, Waal’s approach appears to be closest to a constructivist one in that he does not attribute the escalation of the conflict to ‘ancient hatreds’. In line with



constructivism he sees the power of ideas, myths and prejudices about identity and nationalism as the key to understanding the nature of Armenian-Azeri relationships. At the same time his conceptualization differs from a purely constructivist position in one crucial respect. Unlike pure constructivists, Waal does not maintain that the conflict can be fully and adequately explained solely with reference to power struggles between competing groupings and clans, who used the ideology of extreme nationalism to strengthen their economic and political positions within patronage-based networks: ‘Another wrong assumption is that the conflict was basically triggered by top-down politics... That the vast mass of these ideas were dangerous and delusory does not make them any less sincerely felt’ (De Waal, 2003: 272-3). Thus, while acknowledging the role of political actors and especially intellectuals in forging a common identity centered on the exclusion of the ethnic other he does not dismiss the fact that the roots of the hostilities lie at least partly in genuinely held and contradictory conceptions of territorial and national belonging.

Stuart Kaufman (1998, 2001: 49-84) makes a somewhat similar conclusion. Neither economic problems (Armenians rejected a package of economic benefits offered by the Soviet authorities in the beginning of the conflict) nor insecurity (the Soviet Union was relatively stable) caused violence and subsequent war. Instead Kaufman views ethnic conflict as a continuous process of escalatory behaviour. While grievances, ethnic symbols, a history of past domination and military capacity increase the willingness of ethnonational communities to engage in violent rebellion, they are not sufficient to trigger a full-scale war. Crucially, however, when both groups perceive an ethnic threat based on the actions of the opponent violence breaks out, which eventually justifies the perceptions. Blending together key elements

from rationalist, structuralist and culturalist approaches the symbolic politics theory holds that if three preconditions - hostile myths, ethnic fears, and political opportunity – are present, ethnic war results when they lead to rising mass hostility, chauvinist mobilization by leaders making extreme symbolic appeals, and a security dilemma between groups. While his account is a moderately constructivist one Kaufman also refers back to some essential human characteristics and patterns of interaction: ‘Cultural tendencies toward collective group self-defense, while not in the genes, are evolutionarily favoured’ (Kaufman, 2001: 25). His theory, thus, occupies a middle position between purely constructivist and primordialist accounts. Crucially for an integrated model of ethnic rebellion ‘if any of the three processes are missing... war can be avoided’ (Kaufman, 2001: 25).

With regard to NK, Kaufman denounces the idea that the real cause of the conflict lies in historical grievances: ‘Prejudice, fear, and a hostile myth-symbol complex can create a contest for dominance and interethnic security dilemma’ (Kaufman, 2001: 82-3). Armenian ethnic identity with the highlight of its ancient history and memories of genocide collided with the Azeri one focused on its territory and statehood: ‘What made the situation so fiendishly hard to manage was not existence of ethnic minorities, or even the tragic history of the two groups, but the way of historical myths and hostile attitudes led them to insist on mutually exclusive political goals’ (Kaufman, 2001: 206). In this sense the modern construction of Armenian and Azeri identities based on selective interpretations of past experiences and a history of oppression was primarily an intellectual project for political entrepreneurs and does not in and of itself provide a fulfilling explanation for the making and radicalization of ethnonational politics. This construction did, however render a repository of myths and

symbols that could be mobilized and refined for political purposes. Thus, on the one hand, Kaufman does not accept the notion of the search for the supposed true, objective origin of ethnic identities on either side. On the contrary, he is concerned with the way in which political claims are grounded in and articulated through specific narratives of oppression, history and identity. On the other hand, he does not maintain that histories of wrongs suffered were merely a discursive construction created by ethnic entrepreneurs. The mobilizational potential of the symbolic elements stemmed at least in part from their rootedness in the collective memories of the communities concerned.

Rauf Garagozov (2006) also stresses the destructive role of specific ‘schematic narrative templates’ about past atrocities rooted in collective memories in shaping Armenian and Azeri perceptions of their histories and of each other. However, he tends to overemphasize the role of elites by suggesting that ethnic entrepreneurs only need to revive the templates of ‘memory politics’ at any point to start a conflict. Saideman and Ayres (2008) concentrate on the international isolation, as well as material and emotional costs incurred by Armenia as a result of its unconditional commitment to supporting its co-ethnics in NK. At the core of their paper is the question why despite high losses and negative economic repercussions ‘Armenia represents the most successful...and intractable case of postcommunist irredentism’ (Saideman and Ayres, 2008: 99). They are interested in explaining the reasons behind Armenia’s choice to violently reclaim the territory of NK inhabited by its ethnic kin, while many other Eastern European regions with internal boundary problems remained at the margins of the waves of mobilization. The authors attribute the willingness of Armenia to reunite with NK to a whole host of factors rooted in domestic politics, most notably the power of mass nationalist sentiments, the image of a ‘martyr’ nation, the belief in

antiquity and the close relationship between the territory and national identity (Saideman and Ayres, 2008: 94-5). By taking into consideration the role of historical discourses, territory and mass nationalism based on exclusivist assumptions this account improves realist assessments of territorial conflict and expansion, which tend to explain irredentism primarily as the result of security dilemmas and power politics (e.g., (Lieberman, 1993; Posen, 1993). It also provides a more comprehensive basis from which to understand the motivations of actors resistant to territorial losses regardless of the associated costs.

A more dynamic account of conflict development has been recently provided by (O’Lear and Whiting, 2008). Although not directly concerned with the course of the radicalization process the authors correctly point out the need to compare the content of Armenian and Azeri identities, as well as to study the differences in the respective nation and state-building processes in specific territorial contexts. The aim here is to identify how ‘nations and states utilize, operate within... or aim to control physical space’ (O’Lear and Whiting, 2008: 189). In this model the fundamental variations between a strong state, weak but cohesive national identity in the case of Azerbaijan vs. a weak state and strong but diffused national identity in Armenia account for the actors’ unwillingness to be flexible in the negotiation of institutional solutions.

This study builds upon the more complex interpretations by comparing and contrasting in a more systematic manner Armenian and Azeri courses of action (as influenced by memories, the degree of development of social networks, the presence/availability of mobilizing ideas, the degree of cohesion/rivalry among elites), which can help to avoid one-sided interpretations evident in much of the literature on the subject. Particular attention is paid to how the reactualization of

competing understandings of ethnogenesis combined with the structural impact of Soviet nationalities policies to generate ethnic tension and translate into political mobilization. My perspective also acknowledges and privileges the standpoints of the activists themselves, which have generally been underrepresented in academic literature. Analyzing the dynamics of state-activist communication as part of a feedback driven process, within-movement competition and the shifting balance of opportunities and threats, particularly in the late Soviet context, allows for a more nuanced examination of how gradualist platforms of action are replaced with radical repertoires in specific spatio-temporal environments.

One dimension that will not be considered in this study is the role of diaspora actors and transnational linkages. While I recognize that diasporas can have a significant influence on the course of nationalist agitation, I have chosen not to focus on diasporas in this research, primarily because for most of the time periods under investigation interaction between diaspora organizations and domestic protagonists remained rather limited. In particular, in the case of NK, ‘the diaspora did not understand the scope and direction of the nationalist movement in 1988’ (Koinova, 2011: 349). Thus, my lack of attention to diaspora involvement should not be taken as a general statement on its impact on local politics overall, but as a reflection of the fact this category of actors was not of central importance during specific time spans<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of how the Armenian diaspora became more actively engaged in the NK conflict in the post-independence period and started to exert a radicalizing influence on domestic developments, especially after the war, see (Koinova, 2011). For a consideration of the transnational dimension in the Northern Ireland case see e. g. (Maney, 2000).

## **Chapter 2**

### **NK in a historical context**

#### **Introduction**

The first aim of this chapter is to explore the selective use of history in political action. By examining what each side includes in its history it is possible to also look at how each account implies certain forgettings. The ways that are used to structure different historical narratives become clearer once we compare the two sides' (Armenian and Azeri) views. The (re)appropriation of the past for the purposes of the present, the quest to rediscover, reclaim, reinterpret and defend historical and cultural traditions in the broadest sense has been a common phenomenon in nationalist struggles: 'In order to create a convincing representation of the 'nation', a worthy and distinctive past must be rediscovered and appropriated' (Smith, 1997: 36). This process is closely intertwined with the political sphere and can be used for political purposes, including mass mobilization and the legitimation of elites' status and authority (Kaufman, 2001). Drawing primarily on ethnosymbolic interpretations of ethnicity (Armstrong, 1982; Smith, 1986, 1999; Hutchinson, 1987, 2005; Kaufman, 2001; Ross, 2007, Coakley, 2004) that stress the importance of historical continuity this chapter aims to show how conflicting historical narratives on NK, contrasting perceptions of the past and arguments about nationhood translate into the reality of political mobilization. The role of intellectuals in shaping and supporting the national project partly by utilizing and integrating an array of historical and social 'facts' into an authoritative discourse will be emphasized. Long before the active phase of the movement for reunification and the resulting conflict, scholars (primarily, historians, archeologists and

political scientists) on both sides have engaged in an intense competition over the ‘indigenization’ of history as a way of encoding national identities and authenticating the desired changes in the region’s boundaries. Through a particular interpretation of historic, archeological and cultural material intellectuals supported and legitimized mass political mobilization, which eventually integrated this historiography into collective memory. A debate over the past became an important cultural resource when the conflict escalated.

Over the years leaders extensively drew upon the historic themes to lay the foundation for the creation of a nationalist movement, harness a powerful identity narrative and (re)activate ethnic discourse. Intellectuals on both sides were directly engaged in the production of scholarly works with predominantly cultural motifs, documenting cultural and political claims to the territory. Both sides have used history to:

- legitimize their grievances;
- find ‘uncontestable’ evidence to demonstrate that their ideas and arguments are founded on what they see as ‘objective historical facts’;
- justify their struggle on behalf of pre-existing nations, referring to the (pre-Soviet) era of cultural and political flourishing.

The second aim of this chapter is to discuss the background factors that favoured the radicalization of the conflict in the late Soviet era comprising what is commonly referred to as the ‘Soviet legacy’. Political and cultural aspects will be addressed. Introducing the Soviet legacy helps to explain that the nationalist movements in Armenia, NK, and, to a lesser extent Azerbaijan, did not emerge entirely spontaneously in the 1980s. Rather, they were part of an ongoing cycle.

Given the mismatch in the arguments and rhetoric of both sides to the conflict, which will be discussed below my purpose is not to provide a definitive and exhaustive account of the historical background to the conflict. Instead I focus on some of the key themes that have historically been influential in the formation of the respective identities to be able to show how these themes evolved to be used as legitimization strategies during the active phase of the struggle. Political claims became grounded in, and articulated through, specific narratives of history, territory and identity, which taken together worked to provide answers to the two critical questions in the case at hand – the question of ethnic borders and ethnic membership. Partly because the authoritarian nature of the Soviet system did not allow for an open discussion of grievances or open competition for status, prestige and power, such battles were concealed in the form of academic debates over history and ethnography (Shnirelman, 1996; Cheterian, 2008: 38). Equally limited were the opportunities to engage in public debate over modern history. As a result, debates on medieval and ancient history intensified. Studies produced in the ‘host republics’ were designed to undermine the opponent’s claim to legitimate nationhood. Meanwhile the opposite side came up with completely different conclusions and implications.

Popular interpretations attest to the internalization of historical ‘facts’, which do not necessarily fully reflect an empirical historic and/or geographic reality. Before the conflict took to the streets it was fought in the minds of the ‘chosen few’. As an ethnographer puts it: ‘Everything started with ‘kitchentalk’. Armenians and Azeris went to libraries, read about NK and then tried to convince the other of their view. It was like an intellectual mind game’ (author interview with Lev Perepelkin, 8 July



2008, Moscow)<sup>13</sup>. This level of ideas is therefore particularly significant for understanding the late and post-Soviet political contest, as well as how the conflict came to be defined in ethnic terms. This chapter, thus, outlines the origins of Armenian and Azeri national identities, as well as the discourses, which continue to inform the dynamics of ethnic relations. The examination of these themes is presented here not as an original contribution to the region's history but as a necessary, and inevitably brief, introduction to the complex developments that shaped the self-perceptions of the respective groups.

A lot of existing publications dealing with historical themes concentrate on one of two dimensions. On the one hand, as mentioned above, the essentialization of history on both sides has meant that historical retrospect remains the most salient research interest for local authors. On the other hand, many works by Western scholars tend to put overwhelming emphasis on the enabling or constraining role of Soviet institutional structures. There is a consequent need to compare and contrast, from a more balanced perspective, the key cultural-symbolic and historical motifs to understand the resilience of ethnic and cultural affinities of both elites and masses. On the whole, the argument in this chapter builds upon and supports the general theoretical (ethnosymbolic and ethnic conflict) literature, and some literature on NK (e.g. Shnirelman, 1996; Cheterian, 2008) about the crucial role of nationalist intellectuals in the selective reappropriation and reinterpretation of the past within the political sphere. However, by paying particular attention to competing perceptions and self-positionings at the non-elite level and applying D. Horowitz's (2000) analytical focus on the psychological

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<sup>13</sup> All the interviews in Armenia, Azerbaijan, NK and Russia were conducted in Russian. All translations from Russian, including those of quotations from interviews and other sources, are my own.

significance of interpretations of relative group status I attempt to move away from the concentration on powerful social actors alone. The (comparative) analysis of such intergroup fluctuation, especially its operation below the elite, helps highlight how subjective evaluations of socio-economic placement, homeland status, shared sentiments of mass traumas and culturally embedded narratives can take on a dynamics that sometimes corresponds to but is also separate from elite intentions.

The boundaries of the region known today as Nagorno-Karabakh (the toponym Nagorno-Karabakh, 'black garden', has been in use since the 13<sup>th</sup> century) have repeatedly shifted depending on conquests, territorial and administrative divisions and the relationship between the major powers dominating the territory. Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the list of foreign dominations has included the Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Ottoman Turks and Persians. The history of the Transcaucasus is one of overlapping expansion and power competition mainly between Turkish, Persian and later Russian empires, as well as the efforts of small units within the territory to resist political domination. The peoples living in the region found themselves repeatedly taken under the control of one or the other of the major powers. This turbulent history of border shifts inevitably has had an impact on the experiences and identity formation of the respective populations. Being subjected to centuries of foreign domination meant remaining virtual hostages to their larger and more powerful neighbours.

Since the early 1920s this mountainous, predominantly Armenian-populated enclave has been contested between Armenians who sought the territory's reunification with neighbouring Armenia and Azeris, who strove to maintain its status as part of Azerbaijan. The roots of the conflict date back to the dissolution of the Russian empire and the

formation (for a very brief period) of independent Transcaucasian states in 1918. Both peoples view the region as their historic homeland. Both have simultaneously argued for their right to control the territory and point to the long-lasting presence of their ancestors within the territory to justify their claims. Both sides have also defended the need to protect themselves from their opponent by employing the homeland as a shield against the ‘aggressive other’. At the same time the struggle has been not simply over territory and self-determination but also over the exercise and interpretation of national identity as the area holds a special significance for Armenian and Azeri national consciousness. Material and cultural grievances have been developing against the background of a central issue to the conflict – the constant sense of historic injustice that the NK Armenians as well as the Armenians in Armenia proper harbour about Azeri rule over this territory. The recurring Armenian agenda to redeem and integrate NK was an important source of tensions and antagonism between the two Soviet republics and radicalized policies of repression and discrimination against Armenians inside Azerbaijan, as well as against Azeris inside Armenia<sup>14</sup>.

The NK dispute, like most conflicts, is multidimensional but one of the key issues is that the parties have divergent viewpoints on this piece of land and each attempts to construct and communicate a public narrative of the conflict based on vastly different elements. In this sense

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<sup>14</sup> The 1979 census is generally considered the most reliable of the available (Soviet era) sources with regard to the size of the minority in each state, as it was conducted before substantial population flows triggered by the conflict began (e.g. Unusov, 2000). According to the 1979 data, there were 475.000 Armenians in Azerbaijan (around 8% of the total population) and 161.000 Azeris in Armenia (around 5% of the total population) (cited in Unusov, 1998:2). However, even these figures probably underestimate the real numbers. According to one of my interviewees, who had done some research on the Armenian minority in Azerbaijan, by 1988 450.000 Armenians lived in Baku alone, while mixed marriages totaled 80.000 (author interview with Julieta Verdyan, retired schoolteacher from Kirovabad (Azerbaijan), now living in Yerevan, 17 July 2008, Yerevan). Some respondents cited a figure of 250.000 Azeris living in Armenia in the mid-1980s (e.g. author interview with Mahammad Maharramov, Deputy head of the Department for Problems of Refugees, IDPs, migration and work with international organizations, 16 January 2009, Baku).

the conflict is not only a struggle for physical control over territory but also a moral battle for ‘ownership’ of that territory. The only idea that unites the two positions is that the history of NK dates back to ancient times and that it represents the birthplace of modern civilization. As a former senior official in the Armenian political establishment and activist of the NK movement attests: ‘... there are two truths in this conflict – the Armenian and the Azeri one. The reality, however, is totally different. It is somewhere in between’ (author interview with David Shakhnazaryan, 30 July 2008, Yerevan). The predominant Armenian view portrays the conflict as a struggle for national survival justified by a shared history of oppression and genocide. The main Azeri interpretation stresses the importance of abiding by international standards and preserving its territorial integrity. My intention in the next sections is not to give an assessment about which narrative is historically more accurate. Rather I aim to compare and contrast the main components of Armenian and Azeri identities. This comparison helps consider, from an outsider’s perspective, the debates over NK’s ethnogenesis and the competing claims to indigenous habitation.

### **Armenian identity<sup>15</sup>**

The collective identity of Armenian nationalists has its roots in the historical legacy of resistance to all foreign, and especially Turkish, domination that had been the prevailing theme of collective existence in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the modern era, the Ottomans and the Russians/Soviets were the most significant foreign powers that helped shape Armenia’s national character. This identity was a complex

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<sup>15</sup> For general overviews of Armenian history and/or its relationship to NK see e. g. (Balayan, 2005; Babayan, 2007; Seyranyan, 1997). For overviews written by Western scholars see Suny, 1993; Libaridian, 2004).

combination of religion, ethnicity, collective historical memory, deeply felt grievances and the perceptions of threats from ethnic others, which, arguably, can partly explain the dynamics of the resulting ethnic strife. The perception of threat is a function of the perceived capabilities and aggressive intentions of the ethnic other(s) and is composed of threats not only to the physical security of the group, but also to its identity (e.g. Kaufman, 1998, 2001).

Armenian historians generally trace the origins of the Armenian nation to the ancient Uratians. In 330AD Armenia adopted Christianity and claims to be the oldest Christian nation in the world. Throughout much of its history Armenia has rarely been united as a single political entity. For a long period (16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) its territory had been divided between the Turkish and the Persian Empires. This dependence instilled a sense of vulnerability which the passage of time has hardly diminished. At least five elements should be mentioned as having a significant impact on Armenian self-perceptions and self-representation:

1. Mythologies of religion contributed to the formation of a national culture and became indispensable components of Armenian national identity. Being surrounded by mainly hostile Muslim countries and living under the yoke of foreigners, Armenians have always fought to preserve their religion and culture and have always felt threatened by any designs to eradicate their national identity. Looking to the West for help proved to be frustrating. This fact distanced the Armenians to some extent from the West, as well as providing them with a feeling of being distinctive and having a unique mission of guarding the gates of the Christian world. In addition, the Armenian Church, although administratively divided over the centuries served as the basis for uniting Armenians.

2. Linguistic distinctiveness. The Armenian language, which constitutes a separate branch of the Indo-European branch also contributes to the perception of uniqueness.
3. The Genocide of the Armenian population that occurred between 1895 and 1920, and the loss of its historical lands (Western Armenia – modern day Turkey) resulted in a victimization of the nation and the emergence of a diaspora spread around the world. The recognition of the Armenian Genocide over the years has become the indivisible part of the Armenian Cause (*Hay Dat*) where the achievement of historical justice and the restoration of historical territories of Armenia are central. The NK issue gradually became a component of this broader struggle for historical justice.
4. A lack of an indigenous institutional history of statehood and state building. As a consequence, ‘statehood’ and ‘statelessness’ function as important explanatory categories to understand Armenian identity. Armenians often use their long history of statelessness to account for their fears, insecurity and sometimes passivity. This component could also be described as a fear of independence given Armenia’s geostrategic location between competing powers (Libaridian, 1991: 4). The special place of NK in Armenian national consciousness is at least partly due to the fact that (according to Armenian historiography), despite being caught between more powerful external political forces NK, unlike Armenia, has always managed to maintain a certain degree of independence and to preserve its statehood.
5. Another key historical event that has left a strong impact on the formation of Armenian self-representation was the emergence and rapid fall of the First Independent Republic of Armenia (1918–1920). This historical fact is important not only because that was a unique period of independent statehood, but it was also the first democratic experience of

Armenia at the beginning of the 20th century. First as a part of the anti-Bolshevik Transcaucasian Federation, Eastern Armenia declared its independence in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1918. The government of Eastern Armenia was dominated by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Within two years the country's leadership had tried to build a democratically governed republic by establishing basic state institutions and holding parliamentary elections. After two years of independence, however, the Russian Red Army occupied the country turning Armenia into a Soviet Republic in November 1920.

The issue of NK represented a synthesis of all aspects of Armenian national problems – firstly, it was a legacy of Soviet nationality policies and in accordance with the spirit of *perestroika* initiated in April 1985, it was seen by participants as one of the strongest challenges to those policies – a ‘test-case for perestroika’. Secondly, NK was attached to Azerbaijan which represented the traditional enemy – Turkey given the lingering effect of the 1915 Genocide in the Ottoman Empire on Armenian national consciousness; the population was forced to migrate and exposed to various cultural pressures that led to an existential crisis, therefore the problem of cultural survival was acute. Finally there were some (real or perceived) interethnic inequalities and allegations of discrimination against the Armenian population are common (see below).

## **Azeri identity<sup>16</sup>**

While the Armenians have a long-standing and strong sense of identity based primarily on shared linguistic and religious elements, the Azeri perceptions of self-identity and self-representation are more difficult to pinpoint than that of the Armenians. The Azeris did not have a common language or religion until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Aukh, 2001; Swietochowski, 2001), and their sense of identification developed in accordance with the powers that had ruled them: Turkey and Iran. A shared Azeri identity gained momentum in the early 1900s resulting from economic cohesion and the rise of an intelligentsia brought about by Russian influence, and, simultaneously, Islamic, Persian and Turkic aspects of the collective identity reinforced a desire for political autonomy (Swietochowski, 1985). Unlike Armenians with their heightened sense of vulnerability, uniqueness and isolation from the outside world, Azeris have always had the perception of belonging to larger entities and larger communities – Muslim and Turkic<sup>17</sup>: ‘Azeris saw themselves as an integral part of a common Caucasian cultural space, and could easily live in NK, Armenia or Azerbaijan. They did not feel enclave existence in NK’ (author interview with Jivanshir Akhundov, 7 January 2009, Baku).

The history of NK played an important role in helping Azerbaijan to solidify a national identity against Armenia’s attempts to reincorporate territories which it considers to have been artificially separated by Stalin. Like the Armenians, the Azeris have tried to prove that the region is a cradle of their national culture. Azeris themselves have origins in Turkic communities moving to the area, and Mongol and Indo-European

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<sup>16</sup> For general overviews of Azeri history written from more impartial perspectives see (Hunter, 1994, 1997: 437-40; Swietochowski, 1985; Altstadt, 1992). For overviews having a strong anti-Armenian component see (Sevdimaliev, 2004; Mustafaev, 2008; Nagdaliyev, 2006; Mardzhanly, 2010; Mamedly, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> See (Furman, 1998: 122-3) for observations along similar lines.



influences shaped Azeri language and culture (Leeuw van der, 2000: 19-20).

Like Armenians and Georgians, Azeris also enjoyed a brief period of independence between 1918 and 1920. From the first days of its existence, the Azerbaijan Republic claimed certain disputed territories, including NK and stated that Zangezur, NK and the Lake Sevan basin as being, historic regions of Azerbaijan. The Azeris argue that the rivalry between Armenia and Azerbaijan started in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when Russian conquerors deported the Azeri population of the region and settled in Armenian migrants, mainly from the Ottoman Empire and Iran. According to the Azeri interpretation, Tsarist administration used forced Armenian migration to the region as a means to impose Russian control over Azerbaijan (Kazymbeyli, 2009: 166-8). Citing Tsarist population records, Azeris maintain that the population of NK had been overwhelmingly Muslim prior to the forced mass migration of Armenians from around the world. Azeri sources state (citing Russian records) that the total population in Transcaucasia kept increasing throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reached one million 300 thousand in 1918 of which one million migrated to the region in mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Shavrov, 1911: 60, cited in Khalilov, 2000: 3). Thus, Armenians were not a majority in NK until mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

For both peoples the main task in making their claim is to locate the first stages of their ethnogenesis as far back in history as possible Both are appealing to different periods in their pasts, and disregard everything that does not fit into their system of arguments. In this sense the narrative put forward by each group presents a ‘universal history, the only one with a *real* claim...’ (Keating, 2001: 31, emphasis added).

From the perspective of Armenians residing in Armenia proper, there is a deep tie to the territory based on both the historical assertion of it rightfully belonging to Armenia and on the dynamics of the conflict being framed in terms of defending the rights of Armenian co-ethnics wrongfully subsumed within the Azeri state. The critical uninterrupted link between the Armenian nation and NK transcends any Azeri assertions to the contrary. From the very beginning of the struggle for NK and the emergence of a nationalist movement, perceptions of current events were coloured by an understanding of the past and, conversely, a particular reading of the past greatly influenced the ways in which the present was seen and understood.

The core of the historical dimension of the dispute concerns the identity of the ancient inhabitants of NK and whether Armenians or Azeris are the ethnic descendants of Caucasian Albanians, who had inhabited the Transcaucasus in ancient times, and therefore can legitimately claim the right to the territory based on that long-lasting presence in the land. The dispute began with the publication of *Azerbaijan in the Seventh to Ninth Centuries* (1965) where an Azeri historian, Ziya Bunyatov, questioned not only the legitimacy of Armenian territorial and cultural claims but also the identity of NK Armenians. The contestation centers on the ethnic composition of the Albanian Kingdom.

Since the Albanian Kingdom occupied most of the territory now covered by the Azeri Republic, Azeris have represented it as the precursor of the contemporary Azeri state and the Azeri people as the direct descendants of Albanians. In later writings Bunyatov claimed that NK Armenians were not true Armenians but ‘Armenized Albanians’ (Bunyatov, 1987). A proportion of Albanians had gradually been ‘Armenized’. Consequently, for Bunyatov and his students Azerbaijan can claim to be

the legitimate heir to the land and culture of NK, as its present occupants are in fact the descendants of ethnic Albanians. In other words, in Azeri historiography NK is an ancient land of the Caucasian Albanian civilization (Akademiya Nauk Azerbajjanskoy SSR, 1962; Mamedova, 1986; Aliyev, 1989). Even the Armenian churches and monasteries, tomb stones on the territory of NK are in reality the creations of Caucasian Albanians and should therefore belong to Azerbaijan.

For Armenians the point of Azeri assertions is clear – to minimize Armenian rights to NK and undermine the sense of kinship between NK Armenians and their kin state. Armenians, tend to label such works ‘falsification’ and consider them to be part of an aggressive deliberate campaign to appropriate their history and culture. A recent conference in Yerevan on Caucasian Albania and its legacy summarizes this line argument well when stating that ‘the monopolization of the ethnocultural heritage of Caucasian Albania is an integral part of the Azeri state’s falsification of Transcaucasian history’ (*Golos Armenii*, 11.09. 2007). For Armenians Azeris were introduced to the Caucasus with the invasions of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and are therefore ‘newcomers’ to the region (e. g. Official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the NK Republic, section on NK history).

Armenian historiographic interpretations focus on those periods in NK history when it was under Persian or Russian vassalage as a separate principality. Semi-independent Armenian princes governed most of NK, mainly in feudal, patriarchal arrangements, until the early nineteenth century when imperial Russia annexed the region from Persia. Until that time, ethno-territorial boundaries had remained relatively fluid, accommodating seasonal land use patterns of Muslim pastoralists migrating between mountains and plains. Through the century of tsarist

rule, however, NK became linked administratively with richer areas to the east – the agricultural plains of Ganja and the oil fields of Baku.

With growing integration came the crystallization of national identities: territorial boundaries became increasingly fixed and policed; tsarist administration exercised its presence through taxation, education, and land reform. Armenians tend to represent the governors (meliks) of NK Armenians as the key actors in the liberation struggle and resistance to Turkish and Persian yoke. The earliest heroes of the liberation struggle, it is argued, turned NK into the center of Armenia's Russian orientation and a symbol of Armenian proximity to Russia based on a sense of Christian fellowship (Academiya Nauk Armyanskoy SSR, 1988: 12-13; Javanshir, 1959: 118-19; Babayan, 2007: 6). Armenian historians have generally downplayed the significance of the presence of alien powers in the territory and stressed the continuity and autonomy of Armenian princes. The inclusion of eastern Armenia within the frontiers of the Russian Empire is seen in Armenian historiography as a pivotal point, since at that stage 'Karabakh became even more the political, cultural and, subsequently, the revolutionary center of Armenia' (*Armenian Document Sent to Kremlin*, cited in Devlin, 1988: 2). Even under Russian rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century NK Armenians were particularly close to the Tsar and had considerable privileges when applying for state positions and military service. In Armenian collective memory NK epitomized Armenian desire for independence and loyalty to Russia. While other parts of Armenia were conquered and disputed by alien invaders the relative autonomy of NK served as a reminder of Armenian former power and glory. Resisting a chain of foreign invaders ensured a continuous Armenian presence in NK. It is very difficult to establish the 'true' historical record, which has become virtually inseparable from the nationalist narratives.

These claims are significant because they provide the symbolic and political discourse through which the conflict is portrayed. Their wide acceptance in the respective societies together with their (re)enforcement in academic circles in the mid and late Soviet period also make them powerfully resonant – a feature upon which the leaders consistently draw. It should be remembered that while purporting to describe the origins of the conflict with regard to objective historical ‘facts’, these narratives also serve to construct it as a dyadic opposition between groups defined in absolute terms. Indeed these historically centered debates have provided a rhetorical space for the (re)construction of ethnic identities, as nationalist scholarship has re-examined distant historical periods to justify contemporary claims, (re) presented the region’s past through an ethnic lens.

At least two points are worth noting. First, certain elements, for example, the once prosperous and substantial Armenian community in Baku and other Azeri cities tend to be excluded from the history of Azerbaijan. Similarly, the history of Armenia downplays or ‘forgets’ to mention the presence of Muslim population, in the territory of contemporary Armenia before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this sense, the case provides another example of a more widely recognized nationalist strategy centered on (re)focusing national identity on a specific bounded subset of a nation’s cultural and historical experiences (Kaufmann, 2008: 451). Second, demographic change was undoubtedly an important consequence of the Russian conquest of the Transcaucasus in 1828. In the first few years after the beginning of Russian domination the proportion of Muslim population declined by a third (Bournotyán, 1996: 72). At the same time for strategic and economic reasons the Russian authorities encouraged the resettlement in Eastern Armenia of Christian Armenians from Persia. Some authors suggest that the goal was to create

a buffer zone between the Russian territory and the Muslim states of Persia and Turkey (e.g. Mamedova, 2003: 57-8). Whatever the underlying motives, an Armyanskaya Oblast' (Armenian Province) was created by special decree to accommodate the Armenian population. The result of such policies was a rapid increase of the Armenian population from around 20% before the conquest to nearly 50% by 1832 (Velichko, 2007 [1904]: 146).

Thus, there was an obvious (constructed) clash between Armenian and Azeri versions, and little possibility of dialogue, at least under the conditions of competition for power, as well as the privileges associated with indigenous status, created by the Soviet regime. As two of the leading Azeri historians recently argued:

If three generations had been living on this territory, then this can already be considered indigenous population... Even taking into account that Armenians were relocated there at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they can be acknowledged to be an indigenous population. They have the same rights to that land as anyone else. Someone would make a historical journey backwards as far as one thousand years, others – two thousand years... From the viewpoint of ethnopolitics, this is totally irrelevant. All anthropological studies have revealed that Armenians and Azeris, who had lived on that territory, had developed a close anthropological affinity. In ancient times, the migration of the population had not followed a pattern, a new ruler came to power, and exercised his dominance both economically and ideologically (author interview with Rasim Musabaev, 10 January 2009, Baku).

The category of 'indigenous people' is a relative notion. Strictly speaking, neither Armenians, nor Azeris are an indigenous population in Transcaucasia. Both of them had come from somewhere some time ago, it is just a question of establishing that time. We have our own myths about it, just like Armenians have theirs. Our myth reveals that Armenians are aliens who came to Transcaucasia from other parts. Very many Armenians migrated to Transcaucasia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it would be wrong to assert that all of them are migrants. So I always try to persuade our political scientists and politicians not to

treat history too frivolously (author interview with Arif Unusov, 12 January 2009, Baku).

Another commentator writes of the period immediately preceding the establishment of Soviet rule that ‘...nowhere is population more mixed than in the Caucasus...Of the nine administrative regions [in the Transcaucasus] only one is ethnically homogenous (98% Georgian)... All the others are home to various nationalities, including Russians’ (Nemanov, 1921: 273).

The unstable environment caused by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution created an opportunity for the Transcaucasian states to gain independence, although it was short-lived and lasted for only two years. At this juncture, the status of NK being unclear, its Armenian majority voiced a desire to join Armenia which along with Georgia and Azerbaijan had newly declared their status as independent republics. When the Soviets subsumed both entities in the 1920s the borders of each were redrawn. It is the Soviet-era borders that have persisted and were disputed later. At the time the delineation of territoriality was imposed by external agents and events with republics’ borders being arbitrarily redrawn as a result of administrative decisions made by the Soviet regime. Borders and associated political and administrative boundaries were established in a very haphazard manner, which not only ignored existing ethnographic realities but also contradicted religious, linguistic and cultural affinities.

In July 1923 the Caucasian Bureau of the Communist Party (Kavburo) issued a decree assigning NK the status of an Autonomous Oblast’ (Region) within the Sovietized Republic of Azerbaijan. At the time of annexation Armenians constituted 94,8% of 158,000 inhabitants (Department of Statistics of the NK Republic, cited in Barsegov, 2008:

659). For the next 70 years NK remained an enclave within Azerbaijani jurisdiction. Even by Soviet standards the situation in NK was an anomaly as it was the only separate administrative unit hosting a minority living on the borders of its ethnic kin's Republic.

Although 1988 is usually cited as the starting point of the nationalist movement both in NK itself and in Armenia it is at least arguable that prior processes substantially influenced the content and form of later upheavals. In other words, the historical roots of what is commonly called the NK problem do not coincide with the year 1988 when the first mass demonstrations in support of reunification with Armenia began. For Armenians the question of NK has always had both proactive and reactive aspects to it. Proactively Armenians saw its reunification with the Armenian Republic as an essential step towards rebuilding a dispersed nation. Reactively Armenians sought to remedy what they perceived as a persistent pattern of political and cultural discrimination that had emerged during Soviet domination. In a small scale random sample survey (N=120) conducted by the author in Armenia in July 2008 60% of respondents identified rectifying a historic injustice as the most important component of the NK cause<sup>18</sup>. In this connection, it can be suggested that NK's experience in the Soviet era contributed to the escalation of ethnic tensions, as (perceived) economic underdevelopment, cultural discrimination and oppression significantly contributed to the desire of Armenians to liberate themselves from the rule of Baku.

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<sup>18</sup> Given the small sample size I aimed to explore in some more detail the responses of people whose experiences could allow to complement in-depth interviews.



### **NK during the Soviet era: a polarized socio-political context?**

Most academic accounts of NK during the Soviet rule, especially those written by Western scholars stress the latency of nationalist aspirations in that period. These conceptualizations generally emphasize either

- 1) the rapidity, explosiveness and unexpectedness with which NK became a hot spot in the late 1980s (together with the unexpected and unpredictable nature of events in the Soviet Union more generally) (e. g. Beissinger, 1996: 105-6) or;
- 2) the durability of nationalist sentiments which would inevitably reawaken sooner or later (e. g. Markhedonov, 2008: 2).

The Soviet period provided the institutional and ideological context that facilitated the preservation, development and (re)enforcement of territorial identities. Soviet nation-building strategies attempted to ensure peaceful coexistence of diverse ethnic groups, resolving the problems associated with nationalism. Soviet policy on nationality promoted the development of what it saw as ‘backward’ nations and implemented *korenizatsiya* (indigenization, nativization) which was seen as an antidote to Russian political hegemony under Tsarist rule. Lenin saw the essence of the national problem in the ‘development of a core-periphery colonial relationship between the Russians on the one hand, and the non-Russians and their homelands on the other’ (cited in Chinn and Kaiser, 1996: 25). In an attempt to reverse this relationship the central government took measured and deliberate steps to enhance the identities of titular and other non-Russian nationalities. This policy involved the sponsorship and encouragement of the institutionalization and codification of nationhood at the sub-state rather than at state-wide level by implementing affirmative action to foster local intellectual elites. It is now widely accepted that Soviet policy paradoxically

combined two trends. On the one hand, national cultural production and representation was promoted within the limits of Soviet power, on the other hand, the merging of Soviet nations and the shaping of a community free from ethnic/national attributes was attempted (Saroyan, 1997; Suny, 1993; Altstadt, 1992).

Thus, the federal structure of the Soviet Union made it necessary to adapt the official ideology of Marxism-Leninism to local conditions. The promotion of local cultures followed the famous Soviet slogan ‘national in form, socialist in content’. The division between the formal institutional structure and the real mechanisms of power constituted an important part of the Soviet political system (Brubaker, 1996; 1994: 17-48; Martin, 2001; Slezkine, 1994). The façade was represented by a quasi-federal, quasi-democratic constitution that put power in elected parliaments and even formally allowed Soviet republics to secede. The real mechanisms of power were in fact strictly centralized and not based on democratic practice. Territory was increasingly identified with a singular, titular nationality. The history of the place became identified with the titular nationality that lived there, not the history of all the peoples who lived in the territory. Its status as an ‘indigenous’ community was recognized by it being the only legitimate holder of state level authority within a defined territory. Territory was thus nationalized and nationality territorialized, which of course created the problem of dissatisfied minorities. In practice this meant that those members of a titular nationality who happened to reside within the territory to which the nationality was tied enjoyed a system of benefits including, for example, quotas in higher education. Azeri (perceived) inability to accommodate the needs of the other ‘non-titular’ groups residing within their borders served to confirm and reinforce Armenian fears and vulnerability based in part on the idea that Baku was unfit to govern the

territory and a poor guarantor – indeed a threat – to its security and prosperity.

It is difficult to argue that NK Armenians were structurally disadvantaged under the Soviet system in a part of the USSR, which was not particularly resource rich. Although NK Armenians lagged behind Armenia in terms of some indicators of economic and social development, it consistently remained above Azerbaijan and some other poorer regions, as well as above average for the Soviet Union as a whole. The table below summarizes some indicators.

**Table 4**  
**Comparative indicators of social development**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Azeri SSR</b>	<b>NK</b>	<b>USSR</b>	<b>Armenian SSR</b>
Availability of hospital beds (per 10000 persons)	97.7	101.7	130.1	86.2
Availability of public libraries (per 10000persons)	6	13	4.8	4.1
Percentage of children covered by nurseries (%)	20	35	57	39
Percentage of children attending	74.3	92.5	78.2	87.8

primary school (%)				
Availability of housing per person (square meters)	10.9	14.6	14.9	13.7
- in cities	12.2	14.6	14.3	13.1
-in countryside	9.2	14.6	16.1	15.0

**Source:** *Bakhinskiy Rabochiy*, 17. 03. 1988 (cited in Shukurov, 1990: 87)<sup>19</sup>.

Even if some economic indicators were behind Armenia and/or other republics it is very difficult to ascertain whether the (very limited) economic underdevelopment of the region was the result of a conscious decision of Baku or general incompetence of the ruling elites and inflexibility of existing economic structures. The extent to which Azerbaijan had the administrative and ideological resources to pursue proactive strategies in the region could be questioned.

It appears that the dynamics of NK's development should not be assessed solely in the framework of republican processes. It depended crucially on the interplay between regional, republican and union-level scales of power with the latter ultimately proving decisive: 'Our demands grew, while opportunities within the Soviet system remained

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<sup>19</sup> My aim in citing these indicators is not to give a definitive assessment of their accuracy but to consider how they impacted upon psychological perceptions of relative group status among NK Armenians, and how this data relates to/ has been woven into an overarching Armenian (historical) narrative. Most Armenian publications accentuate the disadvantages and injustices committed by Azeris during the Soviet era. Balancing Armenian claims about deliberate and widespread discrimination is particularly difficult, since the figures can themselves be contradictory. Armenian sources tend to concentrate only on those areas where NK did lag behind Armenian and (only marginally) Azeri SSRs. See e.g. (Academiya Nauk Armyanskoy SSR, 1988: 45-55). By contrast, Azeris tend to stress how very little variation existed in a cultural or political sense, between NK and Armenia: 'We used to be cosmopolitan back then [in the Soviet period]... I did not feel any difference between Armenia and NK....When I came to Stepanakert it felt like I found myself in Armenia' (author interview with Rizvan Bayramov, 13 January 2009, Baku).

limited' (author interview with Karen Oganjanyan, 21 July 2008, Stepanakert, former secretary of the NK branch of the Committee for reunification (Krunck). From this perspective, it could be argued that republican policies only kept in line with the political climate of the time and came to reflect Soviet federalism's contradictory tendencies, which gave very limited space for national expression. In any case the specific status of NK – an Autonomous Oblast', which was nonetheless fully accountable to the Azeri-dominated republican government in Baku and could not act autonomously simultaneously enhanced the availability of organizational resources, and increased the sense that mobilization is fully legitimate. The hierarchical structure also created (perceived or real) inequalities around which to mobilize (Hechter and Levi, 1979).

Available general economic development indicators for NK also show a steady growth. For example between 1973 and 1988 the overall volume of industrial production increased 3 times, while production in agriculture increased 1.5 times (*Izvestiya*, 25.03.1988). On the whole, the data provides very limited evidence for (real) socio-economic grievances as a source of confrontational strategies. The next section will examine the politics of oppression (perceived or real) by the host republic as a key ingredient generating ethnic tension. The demographic 'engineering' carried out by the republican authorities from the 1970s onwards will be considered as one of the major manifestations of the various (real and perceived) restrictions that had dominated NK society during the Soviet era.

### **Demographic trends**

Armenians from Azerbaijan (mainly Baku) and NK often speak of the 1970s as the time when the crystallization of the image of the Azeri as the alien other started. Heidar Aliev's rise to power in Azerbaijan is

widely recognized to have had a strong impact both on NK and on the entire Azeri Republic, as his policies translated into tighter and more systematic forms of control. His rule witnessed an emergence of new processes and an intensification of existing ones. Chief among the new processes was the influx of Azeri settlers, which altered not only the demographic situation in the region but also the very social and cultural fabric of NK society. The following table illustrates the main demographic trends over the Soviet period, as well as natural population growth:

**Table 5 The population of the NK Autonomous Oblast’ (according to the 1989 census) and population growth**

	<b>Armenians</b>		<b>Azeris</b>	
<b>Years</b>	<b>Actual number</b>	<b>Population growth compared to the period before (%)</b>	<b>Actual number</b>	<b>Population growth compared to the period before (%)</b>
1921	128060		7594	
1939	132800	3.7	14100	77.2
1959	110100	- 17.1	18100	27.6
1970	121100	10	27200	51.1
1979	123100	1.6	37200	36.7

**Source:** (Barsegov, 1989: 101, cited in Mahmudov and Shukurov, 2005: 71; growth calculations compared to the period before done by Mahmudov and Shukurov).

We can see that the absolute number of Azeris grew steadily increasing from 7594 in 1921 to 37200 in 1979. This was the prevailing dynamics both in NK itself and in traditionally Armenian populated cities of Azerbaijan, like Baku, Kirovabad and some others, which Armenians always considered to be their homeland. Population figures show only a slight decrease in absolute numbers of Armenians (from 128.060 in 1921 to 123.100 in 1979). These changes could be attributed to fluctuations in out-migration and slow natural growth. The idea of a sharp decline in the absolute size of the Armenian population is, thus, not supported by census figures. Two more significant and persuasive factors appear to have led Armenians to believe that their physical and cultural survival was under threat – a decrease in the relative size of the group compared to ethnic ‘others’ and very rapid population growth of the Azeris. While Armenians have suffered a small decrease in absolute numbers over the entire Soviet era, the percentage of the population as a whole and relative to Azeris fell from 89.1% to 75.9% between 1926 and 1979 (Moutafian, 1994: 142).

Locally initiated affirmative action policies propelled members of the titular nationality into high-status positions and encouraged them to entrench politically and culturally. These policies involved the indigenization of university student bodies as well as of key political and economic positions, as Azerbaijan tried to bolster its own nation-building project. According to my Armenian respondents, very few Azeri families had permanently resided in the Azeri capital prior to the 1970s when there was an influx of Azeris from rural areas and educational institutions began catering for Azeri population. Eyewitnesses emphasize their perception that this was not a natural process, rather it was government-initiated and sponsored, which

magnified the (subjectively felt) threat. As one of my interviewees from Baku recalls:

I never saw a single Azeri in our city prior the 1970s. When Aliiev came to power he started issuing decrees to the effect that only rural population was to be accepted to universities... Before Aliiev there were many Armenians, Russians, Jews and only 2-3% Azeris in university departments and then everything turned upside down (author interview with Aida Asbekian, 15 July 2008, Yerevan).

The ethnodemographic shift was increasingly apparent in the 1970s such that by the late 1980s it became conceivable, from an Armenian perspective, that the once overwhelming Armenian predominance in NK would disappear in the foreseeable future. Armenians claimed that the demographic change occurred due to deliberate efforts of Azerbaijan to relocate Azeris to NK and ‘bloodlessly de-Armenize’ NK by forcing Armenians out. According to Armenian intellectuals, republican authorities in Azerbaijan devised and directed two methods of the deportation of Armenians. The first covert strategy consisted of changing the demographic balance in the region and was carried out gradually by creating conditions that force NK Armenians to out-migrate. The second one had at its core the repression of any nationalist movements in the territory, should they arise (e. g. Movanisyan, *Golos Armenii*, 04.03. 2008; Manasyan, 2005: 73-4). The demographic shift represented a direct threat to the physical survival of the Armenian nation in a vital region of its historical homeland. As the former President of the contemporary NK Republic asserts: ‘The inclusion of NK within the borders of the Azeri SSR put the Armenian people on the verge of extinction’ (Goukasyan, *Karabakhskiy Kourier*, 2006: 17).

From an Armenian perspective, active Azeri discrimination against the Armenian population of NK would have eventually driven them out of the region altogether and Armenians would have lost the territory



forever. Geographically the smallest Soviet Republic Armenia lost land and population to many of its neighbours throughout its history. The predominantly Armenian populated southern regions of Soviet Georgia were handed over to Georgian administration. The overwhelmingly Armenian populated Nakhichevan received the status of a protectorate within the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan back in 1918, while NK with its Armenian majority was turned into an autonomous region under the jurisdiction of Baku. These territorial adjustments were hardly comparable to the devastating loss of the whole of Western Armenia and parts of Eastern Armenia to present day Turkey.

From this perspective, it is understandable that any demographic changes in favour of the titular nationality brought to the surface the fate of Nakhichevan, where Armenians had constituted the majority in the 1920s but only a minority of 5.8 thousand people remained by 1970 and this number was declining progressively (All Union Census, 1970, cited in Barsegov, 2008: 660). The link between the current situation in NK and past events in Nakhichevan was frequently made by Armenian intellectuals. The connection in the minds of many Armenians between NK and Nakhichevan as part of a single historical process of depopulation is also apparent in numerous petitions sent to Moscow during the Gorbachev era. For example Suren Avazyan notes in his petition to Gorbachev in March 1988 that ‘if 80% of Nakhichevan’s population was Armenian in 1913, today Armenians constitute only 1.5% (of the population). In NK the Armenian population has been reduced from 95 to 80%’ (Avazyan, 1988: 3).

The underlying insecurity of NK Armenians was based on the idea that if the population growth continues, NK runs a very real and serious risk of ‘Nakhichevisation’ (e. g. Melik-Shaknazarov, 2009: 49-53). The long-term political objective of the Azeri authorities was to solve the NK

issue by applying a very simple formula – ‘No people – no problem’ (author interview with Aram Sarkisyan, 14 July 2008, Yerevan). That plan would—if successful—end up with the annihilation of Armenians in their historical homeland. The persistent policy of what they saw as deliberate depopulation and neglect would eventually force Armenians out of their homeland creating the opportunity for Azerbaijan to preserve the region for itself.

On the one hand, it is undeniable that elites in Azerbaijan embraced the nationalization project which promoted through formal policies and informal practice ‘the language, culture, demographic preponderance, economic flourishing or political hegemony of the core ethnocultural nation’ (Brubaker, 1996: 9). Former President Heidar Aliev admits: ‘I tried to increase the number of Azeris in NK... I agreed to open a university there but *only on the condition that there should be three sectors in it – Armenian, Russian and Azeri*’ (Aliev, in *Bakhinskiy Rabochiy*, 22. 07. 2002, emphasis added). On the other hand, although members of the republican elite strove to use indigenization as a means to gain a competitive advantage over outsiders this strategy did not necessarily restrict Armenian upward mobility. All Party officials in NK except for the Party chairman were Armenians. Armenians also continued to occupy key positions in educational and cultural institutions.

It should be noted that when Baku assumed authority over NK it saw an already well-developed Armenian nationalism, at least among the intelligentsia. By contrast, for Azerbaijan the state largely preceded the nation and was the source of legitimacy (Dudwick, 1996: 433-9). A distinctive Azeri identity developed only with the onset of the Soviet period. Preserving territorial integrity became the focus of the creation of solidarity and social cohesion. The desire to homogenize political

space could, thus, be seen as an attempt to overcome and compensate for a still underdeveloped sense of nationhood. At the same time there is no evidence to suggest that the policies of the Azeri authorities were directed specifically and deliberately against Armenians. Rather it was aimed at enhancing the presence of the titular nationality, and could equally have been somewhat hostile, for example, to Russians or any other ‘outsiders’.

In addition, the official population figures are not very reliable, as those Armenians who (temporarily) left Karbakh and went to work or study in Baku or Yerevan) did not always cancel their house registration (*propiska*) (author interviews with Ali Abbasov, 7 January 2009, Baku, Kerim Kerimly, 6 January 2009, Baku, Jivanshir Akhundov, 7 January 2009, Baku). Thus, the data is likely to reflect some Armenians who remained formally registered but did not actually live in NK, which means that the absolute number of Armenians was (probably) lower even during the Soviet era, and the demographic decline was not as sharp as Armenians themselves like to portray.

The present context lived as a result of the past does not exist based solely on the historical reference but also through the act of continuously reliving and remembering the past as a dynamic progression into the future. In a population with the historical experience and collective memory of the Armenians the people’s priority became not only to preserve the identity they have struggled to hold on to but to constantly reassert its dominance within a particular politico-cultural space. In addition, the fears of annihilation to a certain extent expressed Armenian anxiety about their own cultural survival. A crucial factor that led NK Armenians to conclude that their national survival was threatened was the lack of cultural autonomy.

On the one hand, the special status of NK within Azeri SSR meant that its people were legally guaranteed the right to develop their own language and culture, as well as to be educated in their native language in the framework of the regional curriculum. The Azeris appealed to a similar conception of rights to argue for greater economic and political autonomy within the all Union context. On the other hand, autonomy bred a sense of being *underprivileged* when compared to groups who were represented by union republics. Political and cultural autonomy meant that local elites enjoyed a limited degree of freedom in formulating policies and were ultimately dependant on Azerbaijan (and the Soviet state) for major decisions in political and cultural life. A key element affecting the dynamics of the conflict, especially in the context of Soviet nationality policies is the fluctuation in intergroup perceptions relative to each other. It is revealing that, as mentioned above, when affirming NK's status as a 'forgotten land' both economically and culturally Armenians constantly compare its development to Armenia and the Baltic states. At the same time they forget to mention the fact that NK's development was actually better than some regions of Azerbaijan.

Even though the economic and social conditions in NK were not particularly prosperous, it should be noted that this situation was hardly unique to NK – many other Soviet regions were in a similar (or much worse) position during that period. However, the policies of the host republic were seen as a manifestation of a deliberate policy of discrimination. As Horowitz (2000 [1985]) has emphasized, it is not actual disparities among groups along socio-economic lines that matter in the polarization of ethnicity but a comparative evaluation of group worth approached on the basis of a 'positional group psychology'. This perceptual differential between Armenian and Azeri communities both

in NK and in Azerbaijan while not in itself sufficient to explain the evolution of collective action in the respective societies can nonetheless help to account for how changing attitudes and dispositions breed feelings of resentment and hostility leading to increased politicization and radicalization. Subjective comparisons of intergroup esteem are particularly strong in cultural and identity politics due to the vital importance of these areas in psychological aspirations to public validation (Horowitz, 2000: 218). Intercommunal politics depends heavily on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, securing privileges that accompany inclusion and overcoming or mitigating the penalties that accompany exclusion. The provision of material and symbolic goods, like admission to educational institutions, access to employment opportunities, the prestige of the ethnic group, its relative power and autonomy within the polity are all indicators of the benefits of inclusion groups seek to protect or secure. Inclusion in turn confers an important symbol of group worth – ‘identification with the polity’ (Horowitz, 2000: 185).

The policies of Azerbaijan that were perceived to undermine Armenian cultural presence in NK included the following:

- 1) the construction of a distinctly Azeri cultural space through the destruction of Armenian historic monuments: ‘Some Azeri leaders could give an order to shoot at Armenian cultural monuments. There were instances when Azeris shot at the monuments of the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Gandzasar’ (Author interview with Stepan Grigoryan, 28 July 2008, Yerevan);
- 2) a progressive isolation of NK from Armenia proper primarily through the blockage of cultural communication. These policies had the cumulative effect of enforcing a muted quiescence among the majority of the population while forcing others to leave the region altogether.

Resistance became largely defensive, cultural ‘victories’ were often sought in seemingly small but symbolically significant matters, e. g. the right to name places was contested. Far from being simply national in form these developments served to focus the discontent of Armenians (both in NK and in Armenia) all the more sharply and resulted in instilling a heightened territorial consciousness that had a very tangible goal – reattaching a separated part of the homeland. It should be remembered that NK Armenians did enjoy the right to primary and secondary education in Armenian, and educational and cultural institutions were allowed to function fully.

Thus, it is arguable that the core of the matter was not a struggle over material resources and not so much a fight for the recognition of Armenian culture, although the perceived lack of means to cultural self-expression remained a key grievance. Most importantly, after nearly seven decades of Soviet rule Armenians did not accept Azeri rule as legitimate and feared its long-term consequences, which they imagined would be the loss of their identity.

Based on Armenian accounts alone it is too easy to envision NK Armenians as an unwanted ‘element’ whose very presence hindered the construction of Azeri nationhood. According to this interpretation, NK Armenians had no other choice but to seek separation from Azerbaijan to avoid ‘oppression’ and eventual cultural obliteration. The empirical evidence, however, is rather mixed. Even though the rights of the autonomous region were limited, the institutional and cultural framework for the (re)enforcement of specific territorial identities remained in place. The Armenian public perceived NK dependence on Azerbaijan as entirely illegitimate, and all Azeri policies, regardless of their actual intention were seen through that lens.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has considered how ethnocentric historiography legitimized the claims of both majority and minority in the conflict (e. g. Tishkov, 1997: 1-12). In fact at the initial stages of the movement for NK not only reunification with Armenia but also social and cultural concerns, like environmental protection and an increased volume of publications on Armenian history became the foci of intellectual attention and the main themes through which the wider population was mobilized. At the same time the existence of grievances alone is clearly insufficient to account for the nature and timing of collective action in NK, as well as the dynamism and vigorous social activism that distinguished the national movement, at least during its early phase. I question the sufficiency of those accounts that are detached from the territorial context (e.g. Kaldor, 2007). I emphasized those aspects of Soviet nationality policies that were of significance for the formation, maintenance and /or weakening of Armenian and Azeri identities. I attempted to show that the structural environment mattered in so far as it defined the parameters of what was (not) allowed in internal politics. One of the most important elements of this environment was the competition for status and prestige, whereby to have a higher status in the hierarchy of Soviet nationalities required ‘proving’ a long historic presence, developing and distributing their versions of history and culture.

On the whole, the examination of the Soviet era alone confirms the findings of elite-centered research on collective action about the decisive role of strategies pursued by elites, primarily intellectuals, even when deep ethnic grievances are at stake. Although the Soviet Union had firmly institutionalized ethnonational identities the politicization of boundaries between groups, the categorization and redefinition of

relationships in that period (e. g. indigenous vs. newcomer) was not self-evident. But without ‘people’s perception of an existence-threatening force...people are unlikely to respond to the national agendas... of intellectuals’ (Bowman, 2003: 320). The need for physical and psychological security in that period was one of the key elements directing the attention of the nation’s intellectuals towards the past out of which out they tried to construct ‘uncontestable’ evidence against future threats to their collective existence.



## **Chapter 3**

### **The dynamics of politicization in NK: towards mass movement mobilization**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter explored how Armenians and Azeris have used history to legitimize their grievances through particular interpretations of historical, archeological and cultural materials. I showed that the assertion of the ‘righteousness’ of the positions of both parties had taken place largely as a competition between ethnohistories, which affirmed ‘natural’ ties of the respective ethnonational groups to the contested territory through specific accounts of ethnogenesis and historical continuity. I also dealt with Soviet nationality policies in the pre-Gorbachev period.

This chapter aims to consider the ‘constitutional’ phase of the development of the Armenian national movement. The first section builds upon the discussion in chapter 2 to explore some of the reasons behind the divergent trajectories of mobilization in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the late 1980s. While the unfolding of Armenian nationalism in NK and Armenia has been subject to different and competing interpretations, the emergence of the Azeri counter-movement has been frequently presented as overwhelmingly reactionary and seen as inevitable. The virtual absence of contentious activity outside institutional channels in Azerbaijan in the mid to late 1980s has been rather poorly theorized. Even those works by Western scholars that touch on this aspect tend to proceed on the assumption that the muted and weak patterns of Azeri collective action constitute yet another example of defensive mobilization which explains the different

dynamics. This general path is quite widely recognized and detailed in the literature on ethnic conflict<sup>20</sup>. While I do not deny that Azerbaijan's political revitalization took place partly in response to the resurfacing of Armenian demands, I suggest that it is too simplistic to see Azeri nationalism as entirely reactionary and defensive. The divergent socio-psychological profiles of the parties and the related deeply embedded patterns of domination, subordination and resistance are particularly crucial for understanding the variations in degrees of 'emotional investment' (Melucci, 1996: 98) in the conflict in the late 1980s. I argue that higher levels of political activity in Armenia and NK were due at least in part to the presence and availability of three key dimensions: 1) (relatively) extensive social networks dating back to the Soviet period; 2) symbolic resources (and political opportunities to develop them); 3) ideas about the Armenian national project that resonated more widely among the population. By contrast, in Azerbaijan these factors were not entirely absent but much less pronounced which undermined the ability of the Azeris to take full advantage of the political opportunities, leading to initial passivity and lower levels of mobilization. Each of these factors in isolation has been discussed with various degrees of precision and detail in the literature on ethnic conflict but their combined effect in specific spatio-temporal contexts has been overlooked and has not been analyzed for this particular case.

The second section introduces the 'permissive' context of Gorbachev's reforms, as they relate to the present discussion and attempts to show that context does not predetermine political activity but defines the range of strategies available to agents. They adapt their behaviour on the basis of both the outcome of previous action and perceptions, awareness of context in terms of the constraints and

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<sup>20</sup> See e.g. (Gelvin, 2005: 93-100; Crighton and Iver, 1991) for comparative evidence.

opportunities this imposes. Strategically-oriented activists modify their tactics to maximize their mobilization potential in a given political and social environment. When asking the Soviet regime for reunification, as well as cultural reforms, leaders chose to adopt a language grounded in the Soviet experience (socialist internationalism, inter-ethnic friendship, cooperation with and loyalty to the central state). Similarly, the ideas used to mobilize the Armenian population or to prevent Azeri counter-mobilization in the 1980s can only be understood against the background of Soviet nationality policies (e.g. the implications of being considered indigenous in terms of status, prestige and resources in the Soviet hierarchy). In particular, the Armenian movement developed largely in response to changes in political context and within an environment that was the least unfavourable to challenger groups. It also depended partly on its temporal location in a broader wave of protest activity. Armenians in both Armenia itself and NK emphasized attachments to their ethnic identity and determined their actions in accordance with the new circumstances.

I also explain how group perceptions about the possibility of institutional change were grounded not only in the call for democratization, greater participation and openness but on the correlation between their claims and the (largely rhetorical) commitment of the authorities to rectify the mistakes of the past. The reforms and more importantly the ideology and discourse which accompanied them offered a unique opportunity to attempt to eliminate the existing state-regional hierarchy. In this connection, the issue of the ‘legal file’, which was and continues to be used as a justification for nationalist demands, will be discussed. The consideration of this factor in addition to the broad spirit of democratization provides a more nuanced understanding of opportunity (which can potentially account for variations in the levels

of mobilization in other Soviet contexts) and of how actions and discourses were structured in response to the openings that specific acts and pronouncements of government provided. The emphasis on changes in the discursive environment that were associated with *perestroika* and how they impacted upon specific instances of ethnonational activism modifies the exclusive focus on reforms as structural openings for contestation evident in much of the literature on post-Soviet ethnonational resurgence (e.g. Zurcher, 2007: 211-5; Suny, 1998: 460-3). The next section looks at structural and institutional facilitating/constraining factors. Their significance, especially in the overall Soviet context, has been discussed (e. g. Beissinger, 2002) but the *dual* role of cultural institutions as both bases and catalysts for mobilization has been downplayed. In general, I argue that although structural, institutional and cultural contexts may explain Armenian and Azeri vulnerability to conflict, there is a causal disjunction between conflict and violence. Violence should be seen as an outcome emergent from developments within the process of mobilization, therefore academic treatments of the conflict should pay greater attention to the timebound nature of particular expressions of nationalism in a shifting political environment.

On the whole, the evidence supports top-down theories of conflict radicalization which see it as the result of intentional elite behaviour but this does not entail a purely voluntaristic approach (e.g. Snyder and Ballentine, 1996; Snyder, 2000; Gagnon, 2004). Elite interests are affected by a system of constraints and opportunities, and the process also acquires its own momentum which restricts the elites. As I will attempt to show in the next two chapters, elite power and their success in neutralizing challenges to their authority from within the group and maintaining at least a semblance of community cohesion depended

partly on their ability to link the pursuit of objective interests (such as, for example, the improvement of the socio-economic situation), past traumas and sacrifices with contemporary struggles and future ventures in an overarching narrative. Tirza Hechter rightly notes that ‘perceived and traumatic shared experiences under certain conditions might lend themselves to divergent interpretations and conceptualizations. In such situations it is possible that major ideologies...dormant in the specific society would be rediscovered and even born anew’ (Hechter, 2003: 455).

**The differences in Armenian and Azeri contentious activity: The legacy of the Armenian Genocide, social networks and resonant ideas**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Soviet nation-building strategies attempted to ensure peaceful coexistence of diverse ethnic groups, ‘resolving’ the problems associated with nationalism. One of the most important facets of this policy, which is particularly relevant to the present discussion, was the creation of national historiographies and, in some cases, allowing public commemorations of past events which gradually revitalized a vocabulary of protest and a set of symbolic resources that could later be drawn upon by people involved in contentious collective action, especially in the absence of alternative effective communication channels. In this connection, one key point that affected Armenian readiness for mobilization and to a certain extent gave them an advantage over Azerbaijan in terms of mobilizational resources was that in 1965 the Soviet authorities permitted the official commemoration of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. A monument was also erected in memory of the Genocide. Official commemorations constitute both culturally-provided opportunities and symbolic resources

for collective action (Peaff and Yang, 2001: 552). They contribute to shaping public opinion and focus discontent among the citizens.

Many people, especially intellectuals in Armenia retained a strong sense of identity that predated Soviet rule, and the memory of the Genocide formed an integral part of that identification. The trauma was transmitted from the survivor generation to their descendants. However, prior to the 1960s mention of this tragic page in Armenian history and the lost lands of Western Armenia (modern Turkey) was largely confined to a very narrow domain of selected intellectuals, as well as the relatives of Genocide survivors and excluded from the wider public discourse. Earlier with the Stalinist prohibition of unsanctioned public expressions and spontaneous forms of mass participation, Armenians had turned their memories of the national tragedy inward with commemoration and remembrance taking place in the home, among small circles of trusted friends and family. As a result, only those families whose members had lived through the Genocide and were directly affected by it had heard and internalized stories of the survivors. The director of a local NGO in Yerevan recalls: ‘My family had not suffered in the Genocide, so we never spoke about it at home or commemorated the 24<sup>th</sup> of April [anniversary]... I first learnt about the Genocide in 1965 when I was at university’ (author interview with Jasmin Telyan, 31 July 2008, Yerevan).

‘The main source of knowledge about the Genocide were relatives’ (author interview with Larissa Alaverdyan, 18 July 2008, Yerevan).

In the context of Khrushchev’s ‘thaw’ and the relative political relaxation there was at least one factor which mitigated the traditional Soviet reluctance towards open Armenian displays of remembrance. The Genocide was perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks and subsequently denied by the Republic of Turkey. Any treatment of the Genocide inside

Armenia was constrained by the trajectory of the development of Soviet-Turkish relations, with domestic politics being subordinated to both the ideological climate of the time and foreign policy priorities. It was constantly stressed in official Soviet rhetoric that the modern Republic of Turkey was distinct from the Ottoman Empire, it was a completely different country and that its relationships with the Soviet Union as a whole should be built within the ‘Marxist-Leninist ideological framework of internationalism’ (*Pravda*, 1961: 3). For example, shortly before the official commemoration of the Genocide was allowed Khrushchev called the Turkish leader Kemal Ataturk a companion of Lenin in an interview (cited in Dolbakyan, 2005: 3). On the one hand, the Soviets strove to ‘redirect Armenian nationalist feeling towards Communist goals’ (Kilboyrne-Matossyan, 1962: 36). In general, the Soviet Union was a society, where large-scale remembrance ceremonies and public rituals were not allowed. On the other hand, the Soviet authorities permitted and even encouraged the limited use of local nationalism if it did not contradict their political agenda. If local nationalism could easily be directed at foreign adversaries, then one could expect to see quite a wide range of concessions. The Armenian case is a good illustration – Armenian nationalism could easily be directed at the Soviet foreign adversary at that time – Turkey. In cases where the (potential) local nationalism did not conveniently coincide with the Soviet goals, the concessions granted to local nationalism were very selective.

The fiftieth anniversary of the events (24<sup>th</sup> April 1965) when at least 30,000–40,000 mostly young people marched through the streets of Yerevan calling on everyone to join them is widely recognized as the first instance of spontaneous mass politics in the country (e.g. Suny, 1993: 186, 228; Terjanian, 13.09.2009). Shortly after commemorations

were officially sanctioned (partly under pressure from some Armenian Communist party officials) and started to take place annually. The ‘opportunity structure’ arising from Soviet tolerance of carefully channeled expressions of Armenian nationalism played an important role in the revitalization of the memory of loss and had several distinct consequences (see also Panossian, 2006: 320-2).

Firstly, it meant that after 1965 nationalistic forces—mostly mediated through culture and history— were resurrected and became more visible in the public space in Soviet Armenia. While there was still no green light for independent social activity, the very possibility of holding demonstrations and commemorative ceremonies on the anniversary of a key event in Armenian history, was an important source of political and cultural regeneration. Secondly, the annual commemorations were largely responsible for the fact that Armenian nationalism did not take on anti-Soviet tones until much later (from mid 1988). Only the Ottoman Turks were the object of hostility at this stage. Although there is a lack of direct data available to assess Armenian attitudes towards Soviet rule during the period, the absence of an all encompassing and well-organized dissident movement, in contrast to other union republics (for example, the Baltics), seems to support this conclusion. Thirdly, public awareness of the Genocide as a key cultural marker of identity increased (author interview with Jasmin Gevondyan 14 July 2008, Yerevan; Balayan, 1999: 131). For the first time in addition to the traditional stories told among those families that lived through the Genocide, the personal experiences of survivors started to be passed on to the younger generation in a systematic manner – primarily through literature, but also through memoirs, annual commemorations. Literary and scholarly work on the Genocide became more common. This theme was reflected in the literary works of P. Sevak, O. Shiraz, S.



Kaputikyan and R. Kochar amongst others. Discussion of the Genocide was no longer confined to the private sphere but became an integral part of public discourse interweaving the public with the private realm and incorporating personal histories into the national narrative. Given the traditional affinity between Turks and Azeris in Armenian national consciousness, the opportunity to discuss matters related to the Genocide, its recognition, as well as the return of lost lands publicly and without any fear of retaliation at least partially provided cultural and ideational preparation for subsequent anti-Azeri mobilization, although in an unintended fashion. Many activists of the movement of the late 1980s have linked their own political awakening to the surge of national feeling associated with 1965 (Dolbakyan, 2005; Khechoyan, 2005). In this sense, the commemorations transcended the specific temporal contours of the 1960-s Soviet Armenia and became a key part of the Armenian ‘cultural grammar’ during the active phase of the NK conflict.

By emphasizing the role of the commemorations I am not insisting on the purely constructed nature of the categories and events involved in the process of identity formation (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). The heightened sense of vulnerability found among Armenians and an awareness of their tragic history is due at least in part to the small size of the republic and its geographical position at the crossroads of intersecting and often competing outside interests. However, a degree of institutionalization of memory during the Soviet era contributed both to shaping short-term reactions to subsequent events and influencing their outcomes. The commemorations made a much wider range of social actors fully aware of the details of these events and reinforced the latent memories, which were now ready to come to the surface under

when triggered by contingent events.<sup>21</sup> This was reflected fully during the anti-Armenian pogroms in the town of Sumgait. Although such public occasions were short-lived and tightly controlled they provided the setting for spontaneous celebrations of identity and belonging.

It could be argued that the absence of this degree of awareness of past events in Azerbaijan (although they also experienced what they now consider to be Genocide in 1918) and the absence of any propaganda partly accounts for why ordinary Azeris were unprepared for the campaigns of Armenians, as well as for anti-Azeri riots in 1987 and 1988. The Azeri sense of identification developed in accordance with the powers that had ruled them: Turkey and Iran. A shared Azeri identity gained momentum in the early 1900s resulting from economic cohesion and the rise of a very narrow circle of intelligentsia brought about by Russian influence, and, simultaneously, Islamic, Persian and Turkic aspects of the collective identity reinforced a desire for political autonomy (Swietochowski, 1985). This specificity affected Azeri perceptions of interethnic relations. While there were major interethnic clashes between Armenians and Azeris prior to the establishment of Soviet rule in the region, the traumas of the Azeris as a result of these experiences did not become part of the Azeri national narrative, as the Genocide did in Armenia.

The contending elements of an unconsolidated national identity made it difficult to evoke, particularly among a mass public that was unaccustomed to thinking about itself in terms of ethnicity. Nationalist ideas found among a very narrow circle of cultural elites were very slow

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<sup>21</sup> Interviewees who mentioned the importance of the April 1965 events and/ or stressed how these served as an impulse towards increased awareness by placing the issue of the Genocide at the forefront of their individual and national consciousness include Aram Sarkisyan, Larissa Alaverdyan, Jasmin Gevondyan, Ghegam Baghdasaryan amongst others. Many also recognized its contribution to individual decisions to engage in sustained collective action in support of nationalist goals.

to spread to the public. Those of my interviewees whose relatives had suffered and who were directly exposed to the autobiographical memories vividly recalled their grandparents' stories. Oral histories of the atrocities committed by Armenians were transmitted in the families affected but did not enter the wider public discourse. As one interviewee attests: 'The Azeri people are distinguished by a short historical memory. No one even remembers that Northern and Southern Azerbaijan, which was a part of our territory had been separated' (author interview with Ramiz Sevdimaliev, 5 January 2009, Baku; also Kerim Kerimli, 6 January 2009).

At the same time under Soviet rule 'the Azeris were not allowed to mourn the victims and even to remember why they should be mourned' (Smith, 2001: 53). Given the spirit of internationalism and brotherhood with the Armenian people during the Soviet era any official recognition of remembrance was actively discouraged. In contrast to Armenia, Azeri nationalism would have been directed against Armenians and Russians, not the Turks due to the close identity ties Azeris (were perceived to) have with the Turks. This factor left a very small margin for expressing Azeri nationalism within the official Soviet framework. As a result, nationalism remained largely a taboo in Azerbaijan.

This specificity and the lack of spontaneous mass activity associated with such occasions could be seen as partly accountable for the passivity of the Azeri population at the initial stages of the Armenian movement and its slow response to Armenian contentious action. Both in Armenia/NK and Azerbaijan the history of the late 19th century national awakenings and the brief periods of the existence of independent republics (1918–1920) along with the repressions of the early Soviet era provided the broad common contours that shaped the collective memories of the respective national communities. Both Armenians and

Azeris had ethnocultural histories from which to draw their identities but the extent of the resonance of these memories and their images differed between the two groups. The resulting divergent patterns of contentious politics need to be accounted for.

In Armenia reunification with NK had always been the key identity reference and the dominant source of elite legitimacy that, when invoked, resonated widely among the population. For the Armenian population both in NK and in Armenia proper the source of agitation came from inside the polity and was an integral part of the national project. Some authors have pointed out that the internal cohesion and unity of NK Armenians, while not complete, seemed to have been strengthened by their shared experience of enclave existence (Caspersen, 2008a: 364). By contrast, the NK conflict served as a catalyst for the process of Azeri self-identification which had been latent during the Soviet period. In Azerbaijan the resonance of the idea of NK as a ‘national’ territory remained conspicuously weak and failed to produce an effect equivalent to that in Armenia. Its transformation into an issue that commanded public attention and (relatively) widespread support came primarily as a consequence of a reaction against a perceived external threat.

Another factor that appears to have influenced the differences in Armenian and Azeri potentials is the availability/ strength of preexisting social networks, that is ties between individuals that are united by the same ideas and interests. Sayers and Meyer (1999) have emphasized that a hostile environment forces movements to turn from tackling external challenges to activities inside specific groups to maintain micro-level solidarity that can, when the conditions are right be transformed into a macro-level nationalist narrative (see also Malesevic, 2011: 143). This within group work becomes important for the continuity of the pursuit of

collective action and the battle to survive ideologically during the periods when political structure remains closed.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, throughout the period of Soviet domination NK Armenians struggled for their rights in different ways depending on the political constellation of any given period and the opportunities that were available to them. NK Armenians continued to call for change in the region's political status, be it through clandestine agitation, acts of civil disobedience, or periodic appeals to Moscow by prominent intellectuals. Although the 1988 movement was the first sustained case of mobilization in Armenia and NK, it was hardly the first attempt at collective contentious action. Major attempts at mobilization of challenger groups had occurred in the 1920s, 1940s and 1960s but were swiftly suppressed by authorities. The reassertion of Armenian national aspirations and their crystallization around NK occurred each time there was a change of leadership at the center.

Authorities at all levels prevented attempts to raise the issue of interethnic relations. Those groups of intellectuals who appealed to local, republican and most importantly central authorities were persecuted and eventually had to leave NK. Nevertheless even these failed attempts show that a culture of resistance was taking shape before the 1980s and organizational networks were being developed within the NK region. These networks directed by several intellectuals from NK were instrumental in arranging petitions to Soviet authorities and securing support among prominent Armenians in an attempt to generate a favourable climate for putting pressure on the authorities to take their problems seriously. In 1974 the National Unity Party, an underground Armenian nationalist organization that demanded the return of Nakhichevan, NK and Western Armenia and the formation of a united independent state, was uncovered and its members were tried and

imprisoned (Suny, 1993: 187; Panossyan, 2006: 323-4, Libaridian, 2004: 29). The active repression of dissident nationalism by the Soviet authorities meant that Armenian nationalists were unable to pursue their demands beyond occasional petitions and letters of protest. Public discussion during most of the Soviet era was limited and restricted to a narrow academic audience. Academic institutions and research centers were also circles where intellectuals gathered and privately discussed national issues. The outside world and even Armenians in the diaspora hardly knew where NK was on the map. Although the region was small and relatively resource poor, it was endowed with human resources, which would prove crucial in providing the organizational basis of the movement. NK intellectuals also reportedly coordinated through underground cells the shipment of Czech weapons (De Waal, 2003: 16-8).

Thus, in Armenia and NK the networks of the *perestroika* period were mostly constituted by political and social actors who had remained committed to the pursuance of collective interests over the years and had accumulated valuable acquaintances at various levels of authority: ‘We had always had a naïve idea that a man close to the ‘tsar’ would help solve any problem....We fought to enlist on our side the opinion of any well-known Soviet person’ (author interview with Stepan Grigoryan, 28 July 2008, Yerevan). A certain personalization was partly due to the fact that civil society and independent institutions outside the control of the state were not allowed in the Soviet system. In this context on the one hand, activism was confined to the initiatives of small groups of individuals. On the other hand, such early clandestine initiatives gradually grew into group involvement on a larger scale and created the ground for the emergence of a broader nationalist movement.

By contrast, in Azerbaijan the presence of informal social networks that would give currency to national ideology was much more limited. Although the Azeri elite came to political maturity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and did some intellectual groundwork among the lower strata of society (peasants and workers) it did not manage to create an equally well developed network of informal radical groups that could later form the core of a single movement. As one of the participants attested, ‘there was absolutely no ground upon which to forge a national democratic movement apart from one or two informal organizations, which were controlled by the Communist Party’ (Agaev and Alizadeh, 2006: 57; author interview with Zardusht Alizadeh, 5 January 2009, Baku). While in Armenia there was continuously one or another underground organization functioning, very few such organizations existed in Azerbaijan. This made it harder to take advantage of the opening political context when it came about. The co-founders of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan established towards the end of 1988 listed a lack of professionalism and a weak sense of national identification as the main reasons for the movement’s late development (author interview with Arzu Abdulaeva, 7 January 2009, Baku). While the movements in Armenia and NK were formed out of a number of highly committed individuals united by the NK issue, the Popular Front in Azerbaijan was an organization comprised of activists with divergent interests and goals. Brought together largely by opposition to republican communist mode of rule, the Front found itself increasingly divided internally by competing interests, which resulted in its gradual splintering into a number of factions. Glasnost’ and *perestroika* did not mobilize the Azeris, at least not to the same extent as it did the Armenians.

### **Emerging opportunities in a restructured Union**

There is a broad consensus in the literature that reforms introduced by a previously inflexible regime propelled opposition to the weakening Soviet hegemonic control system and galvanized the idea of national self-determination (e. g. Furman, 1998: 123; Zurcher, 2007: 211-5; Tchilingirian, 1999; Suny, 1998: 460-3). When Gorbachev came to power in 1985 he called on Soviet citizens to play a more active role in the life of the country. Striving to animate a stagnating economy and unresponsive political institutions he unexpectedly unleashed waves of ethnic activism in various parts of the USSR, and this cascade of mass mobilization was particularly prominent in the South Caucasus. The reformists were unable to foresee the full impact of the political transformation on ethnic assertion and how this reform ultimately encouraged various ethnic groups to promote their agendas, as well as to question the hitherto dominant, single and unified Soviet historical, thereby undermining the basic legitimacy of the system. Such transformations went far beyond what Gorbachev had envisaged when he initiated the reforms, and soon it proved increasingly hard for Moscow to control the course of events<sup>22</sup>. The reforms initiated by Gorbachev and aimed at democratizing the state had created strong contradictions. As the shock-waves of democratization initiated from the top of the Soviet state reached the bottom of society the legitimacy of the system as a whole was increasingly questioned.

With the onset of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) the activists renewed their efforts towards establishing a network that linked local concerns with official structures of Soviet power by sending letters to Moscow and Gorbachev specifically, by compiling lists of

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<sup>22</sup> On the 'spillover' effects of the events in Eastern Europe and repercussions for the (weakening) Soviet ideology see e.g. (Kramer, 2004).



petitions and door-to-door campaigning. The Armenian national movement began with requests to the Soviet Union for membership in a manner by which they would no longer be subordinate to Azerbaijan. The meetings and mass demonstrations of what came to be known as the NK movement emerged from an Armenian ecology campaign (Geukjian, 2007; Dudwick, 1993). An early public demonstration occurred in Yerevan in October 1987, when two to four thousand people gathered in Yerevan's central square demanding the shutdown of the Nairit synthetic rubber plant. Environmental dangers of annihilation came to be strongly associated with previous threats through the rhetorical metaphor of genocide.<sup>23</sup>

The first phase of the contemporary conflict started in the autumn and early winter of 1987 when a petition with some 75,000 signatures requesting the transfer of the region to the Armenian SSR was sent to the Central Committee (CC) of the Communist Party (CPSU). The activity arose in a coordinated but decentralized fashion with a representative in each of NK's regions operating separately and establishing links with Yerevan under the orchestration of some key participants. Activists circulated from village to village obtaining signatures and identifying cultural and economic issues that gave voice to popular grievances.<sup>24</sup> In Yerevan an informal group of eleven intellectuals united in a NK Committee that led mass demonstrations and strikes taking place on a quasi-daily basis throughout 1988.

Although Moscow failed to respond to the request immediately Armenians had reason to hope that their demands for justice would be received favourably. From November 1987 to February 1988 three

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<sup>23</sup> This rhetoric prefigured the subsequent demonstrations in response to the massacres in Sumgait by treating threats to the well-being of the Armenian nation as an instance of potential genocide. See chapter 4 for a more detailed analysis of this topic.

<sup>24</sup> See chapter 2 for an elaboration of popular grievances against Azeri rule.

separate Armenian delegations from NK visited Moscow lobbying for the transfer of the region. They were carefully listened to by the Soviet authorities and reportedly given assurances that a settlement was under active consideration (Rost, 1990: 135; author interview with Zori Balayan, 28 July 2008, Yerevan). These groups held meetings with senior Party leadership in Moscow, including the Nationalities Issues Department, the vice-president of the Supreme Council, Pyotr Demichev, who was also a member of the Politburo. For the first time a Politburo member was meeting directly – without intermediaries from Baku – with NK delegations. At this stage of the evolution of the conflict, the gradual ethnic mobilization of Armenians should be perceived in the context of the reformist policies of Gorbachev and the political rehabilitation of previous Armenian ethnocultural demands. These hints of progress created a widespread impression that the center was sympathetic to Armenian demands and that only ensuring mass support was required to fully resolve the problem. According to a Soviet news report, during the February 1988 protests in Stepanakert ‘rumours were being circulated that Moscow was nearly in favour of it, all that was necessary was to voice the demand more resolutely’ (*Izvestiya*, 1988: 3).

Challengers interpreted the (relatively) positive cues from the liberalizing political environment and used their newly formed organizational networks to launch protest campaigns. As one of the participants in Armenia recently recalled:

As everything was in the hands of the Kremlin, the consent (to reunite NK with Armenia) looked a mere formality... We were sure that the movement was being encouraged, that it was part of the designs of the party and government... For me Moscow was the head. And we were not going to jump over the head (author interview with Larissa Alaverdyan, 18 July 2008, Yerevan).

The reforms introduced by the central regime provided an opportunity to redress the historical injustice committed by Stalin when he handed NK over to Azerbaijan in 1921:

The fresh wind of *perestroika* has opened the way to freedom for NK Armenians... Using the Leninist principle of the self-determination of nations, which is the key principle of the Soviet Constitution, we ask to transfer the NK Autonomous Oblast' (NKAO) (*Pis'mo Nagorno-Karabakhskikh armyan delegatam XIX Partkonferentsii*, 1988: 4).

For movement participants their call for self-determination did not necessarily entail the dissolution of Soviet authority nor was it specifically directed against the center, at least at the initial stages. The first wave of nationalist agitation did not advocate independence but simply requested a reconsideration of existing borders within the boundaries of the USSR. Unlike most nationality struggles in the Soviet Union, which were directed towards secession from the outset, the Armenian movement both in NK and in Armenia was strongly supportive of the preservation of the Union and of Gorbachev's leadership in the early phase. The majority of those involved in the movement saw their activities as a 'test case' operating within the revised parameters of power set by *glasnost*' and *perestroika*. The adversary against which the Armenian activists organized was Azerbaijan with its practices, which were seen as discriminatory, not the Soviet political system.

Andrei Sakharov, one of the key supporters of Armenians among the intellectual elite based in Moscow coined a famous phrase, which characterized the struggle for NK as 'the touchstone of *perestroika* and democratization' (Zolyan,1992 :3). This took hold as the movement's unofficial slogan. The central authorities refrained from any negative pronouncements or repression and seemed to be viewing this activity within acceptable limits as being in line with the *glasnost*' campaign.

Gorbachev concluded that ‘existing economic, social, ecological and other problems should and will be resolved in the spirit of the politics of *perestroika* and renewal implemented in our country as a whole’ (Gorbachev, 1988: 2). In fact, some scholars (for example Shireen Hunter) argue that Moscow encouraged the activity of the informal networks and circles, since they were not seen as a serious threat to authority and as a way to weaken conservative cadres in local communist organizations (Hunter, 1994: 34-5).

*Perestroika* raised genuine hopes at the grassroots level that justice could be achieved by attracting the attention of the central authorities and then backing a given claim with legal arguments and mass support. It is in this broader context of new self-liberating ideas that the activists saw an opportunity to redress past injustices and to change NK’s status rectifying what they saw as Stalin’s arbitrariness. The subjective evaluation of risks and benefits associated with protest seemed overwhelmingly favourable and the prospects of success very high especially after Gorbachev’s speech in April 1985 where he stressed his commitment to political and economic renewal (Balayan, 1999: 132; Shakhnazaryan, 1988: 1; author interview with Maxim Mirzoyan, 22 July 2008, Stepanakert). The perception of the righteousness of their actions and a belief in an inevitable victory provided the emotional background against which collective action unfolded. They believed that the prospect of success was better than they had so far seen in their lifetimes. Participants recall feeling a powerful and unprecedented unity, which transcended social and interpersonal differences.

The relatively relaxed and inclusive context of the mid to late 1980s raised expectations. There were several reasons for the absence of anti-Soviet mood at this stage. These included pro-Russian sentiments related to the image of Russia as a saviour from foreign oppression found

among Armenian population and influenced by decades of Soviet rule, a somewhat naïve belief in the integrity of Gorbachev's pronouncements and a strong restorationist component – activists did not seek a complete transformation of the existing social order as much as its reorientation along national lines. Self-perceptions of Armenians should also be considered when explaining their support for restructuring within the constitutional framework of the Soviet Union.

The existential justification of Soviet rule in Armenia remained strong and was based on the idea that without the protective umbrella of Soviet power the very existence of the Armenian nation would be in doubt. It was largely linked to a particular interpretation of history which emphasised that the Soviets had saved Armenia from complete destruction by Turkish forces and preserved Armenian physical security. Most Armenians considered their inclusion in the Soviet Union as a relatively strong guarantee against Turkish aggression (Panossian 2001: 157). The inclusion of Armenia in the Soviet Union permitted at least a formal national and cultural self-expression (Dudwick 1997: 76). These attitudes were hard to change, especially as they had become deeply entrenched over decades of Soviet institutionalisation and propaganda. The process of the replacement of this dominant narrative with a different one where Armenia could be presented as relying on its own forces and independent from outside patrons proved very slow. At the same time the leaders both in NK and in Armenia clearly exploited the opportunities presented to them and voiced their demands within the official discourse.

Not only during the preparatory phase but also during the active phase of mass demonstrations which started in February 1988, when according to different estimates between half a million and a million people out of the three million population participated (e. g. Malkasyan,

1996: 5; Kharmandaryan, *Golos Armenii*, 23. 02. 2008), the demonstrators overtly showed their solidarity with and support for the center by carrying posters with pro-*glasnost*' slogans and portraits of Gorbachev. Among the slogans were: 'Gorbachev, the great people of small Armenia have faith in the (Communist) Party... We salute the first instance of mass participation of Soviet people in the life (of our country) which has become possible thanks to *perestroika*' (Ananyan et al., 1988: 4). The Armenians framed their demands in the language of 'internationalism' and 'interethnic friendship' insisting that far from pursuing narrow nationalist goals their efforts to regulate the relationship with their neighbours would contribute to the cohesion and solidarity of the Soviet state: 'The solution of the NK problem in the spirit of Leninist principles of the self-determination of nations is *perestroika*. Those opposed to that solution are enemies of *perestroika*, *glasnost*' and democracy' (Sarkisyan, 1988: 5).

The display of loyalty towards the central authorities had partly a strategic nature. For many decades throughout Soviet rule the slogans of internationalism functioned in the official propaganda to deny the existence of tensions in the multiethnic Soviet state. In this specific context leaders used the language of Marxism-Leninism in a calculated manner to signal to senior officials that they were not challenging the authority of the state but seeking through constitutional means a clearly defined border change. The emphasis on transformation within constitutional parameters was one the key parts of the (publicly declared) principles, which underlay the activities in NK and the solidarity movement in Armenia. A key activist recently recalled:

One of the most interesting aspects of the movement [in NK] was its ideological platform. That was something new... All the leaders had a good knowledge of the history of our people, its psychology and they

knew that the Armenians were attached to the Soviet system. One had to organize the movement...in such a way that people would not be afraid of taking part in it...We came to the conclusion it had to be conducted under the flag of *perestroika*. One had to declare that this was not so much a national liberation movement but one under the *perestroika* banner... We took the principle – constitutional movement – and life itself dictated its forms to us (author interview with Manvel Sarkisyan, 31 July 2008, Yerevan).

The elites engaged in articulating a political and legal case for the transformation of the existing system of boundaries through official channels of authority discussed above (letters, petitions to formal structures of authority, appeal to legal arguments and documents). Undoubtedly, some activists genuinely believed that a constitutional change within the reformist framework was the only conceivable option. At the same time it also had a strong strategic component in that it was intended to secure a position of legitimate political representation and full recognition for the leaders, as well as to achieve the maximum resonance with target audiences.

For Gorbachev the desire for reform extended to an acknowledgement of the mistakes of the past, in particular Stalinism and denunciation of ‘ideas... that were deviations from Leninist policy’ (cited in Kaiser, 1992: 188). His call to return to the Soviet foundations could support a claim for changing NK Armenians’ subordinate status, as initially they had been promised different political arrangements than the autonomous institutions they eventually received. In April 1920 Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs Chicherin informed Lenin that it was necessary to ‘establish peaceful relations with Armenia’ (cited in Barsegov, 2008: 463). For the purpose of reaching a compromise, disputed territories, including NK should remain under Russian provisional authority rather than be handed over to Azerbaijan or

Armenia. Shortly after NK was declared a part of Soviet Armenia. However, in July 1921 the decision was reversed as a result of what Armenians interpreted as a deliberate strategic step by Stalin and a ‘serious violation of the Leninist principle of self-determination’ (Grigoryan, 1989: 2). They tend to disregard the fact that Stalin was excluded from voting when that decision was taken. According to dominant interpretations, this decision was a major manifestation of Moscow’s policy of ‘divide and rule’ (e.g. Nies, 2007). Some commentators suggest quite convincingly, based on transcripts of conversations between Bolshevik leaders from July 1921 that Georgian Bolsheviks opposed the transfer out of fear that it would create a dangerous precedent for other groups and encourage ethnic secessions across the volatile Caucasian region (cited in Derlugian, 2005: 186)<sup>25</sup>. In addition, locating Karabakh close to one of the key industrial centers at the time – Baku might in part be explained by the firm belief that enhanced industrial development would solve all problems, although in practice Armenia too remained relatively prosperous economically throughout the Soviet era.

In 1988 Armenians framed their demands as a restoration of the same Leninist principles which, they argued, had formed the ideological basis of the Soviet state: ‘Leninism is our guiding star’ (Sarkisyan, 1988: 5). By referring back to Lenin they attempted to legitimize their claims through one of the few Soviet leaders whose moral authority had not been challenged and whose precepts were constantly mentioned at the official level as models for reform. By contrast Stalin was an acceptable target for criticism because it was he who (allegedly) made the historic decision to hand NK over to Azerbaijan and ignored the interests of the

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<sup>25</sup> This argument is particularly convincing, as the real and perceived threat of the ‘contagion effect’ seems to have remained one of the key motivating forces behind central authorities’ behaviour throughout the period of Soviet rule. See chapter 4 for some evidence.



Armenian people. In Armenian discourse the contrast between the claims of Armenia and Azerbaijan to NK was equally clear-cut – constitutionalism vs. oppression, which can be seen in the following statement:

The violation of the Leninist principle of self-determination is the result of the perverted thinking of the enemies of perestroika and democracy... Stalin is the agent of counterrevolution...he created Azerbaijan and gave the Azeris the freedom to quietly destroy the Union and perestroika (Eremyantz, 1988: 3-4).

Presenting the problem in oppositional terms gave an apparent clarity to a constitutional issue. If Gorbachev was committed to rectifying deviations from Leninist ideals he was bound to approve of their campaign, especially after his promise of a ‘new beginning in Karabakh’ (cited in Devlin, 1988a: 2).

The documents related to the early Soviet policy in the Transcaucasus form part of the so called ‘legal file’, which has been consistently referred to by Armenians throughout the development of the movement. It is arguable that the issue of the legal file has two dimensions, which are relevant to the present discussion. The first one is what could be called a *realpolitik* dimension and refers to the real collection of documents (e. g. the letter of Chicherin to Lenin and the decisions of the Kavburo). The second aspect includes the construction of a legitimizing discourse around it. For example, on the one hand, it is true that when Azerbaijan declared independence in 1991 it formally refused to be the successor to the Azeri SSR (Manasyan, 2006: 73). On the other hand, the way in which this refusal is also (re)interpreted to offer a justification for NK’s liberation from Azerbaijan is yet another illustration of how legal and rhetorical frameworks can be intertwined to contribute to shaping the perspectives of (potential) supporters.

After the perceived go-ahead from Armenian lobbying efforts in Moscow the first mass protests took place in the center of Stepanakert in mid February 1988 and a week later in Yerevan. At this particular stage it is quite hard to distinguish between the strategies of the movements in NK and in Armenia. The emotional ties of solidarity between NK Armenians and Soviet Armenia played a decisive role in enhancing the mobilization campaign led by the nationalist intelligentsia. For them it was the Armenian cultural community that had been threatened by separation since the 1920s and what was needed was the protection of Armenian identity against incorporation into Azerbaijan and assimilation. They worked with a high degree of cooperation sharing a common sense of belonging. Baku and local officials were unable to disperse the crowds and their loss of control over the situation became increasingly apparent. Every day more participants joined, motivated by a combination of factors – peer pressure, curiosity, contemporary grievances and an acute perception of historical justice. The numbers soon became mythologized as people received inflated and second-hand estimates of more than one million (*Urmala*, 21.08. 1988).

The very fact that the mass gatherings were allowed and not cracked down on was remarkable. The right to demonstrate was formally guaranteed by the Soviet constitution but it was well-known that such mass gatherings were rarely tolerated considering, for example, Soviet support for the suppression of the Solidarity movement in Poland and demonstrations in Lithuania and elsewhere. Fear of retaliation by the authorities gradually diminished as the size of the crowds increased<sup>26</sup>. The passivity of the authorities during the demonstrations thus exposed for the first time the vulnerability of the regime being unable to deal

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<sup>26</sup> Some commentators rightly see this sudden passivity as a sign of a deeper decline in the repressive potential of the state, where ‘institutional capacity to repress...invariably exceeded the mobilizational challenges which institutions faced’ (Beissinger, 2002: 333).

with this particular attempt to stretch the limits of the acceptable and to undermine the longstanding myth that the ‘nationalities problem had been solved’. The activists recall the sensation of self-liberation they felt from the first major demonstrations:

Once in 1988, my wife and I were walking along the Opera Square and saw that about 100-200 people were standing and talking about NK. I was then astonished that they were not being dispersed or killed. I said to my wife then: “We are witnessing a historic event. In this country where people coming to a mass rally are shot to death right away, these people are standing, talking and they are not even dispersed.” This quite amazed us (author interview with Stepan Grigoryan, 28 July 2008, Yerevan).

In addition to mass gatherings in Yerevan and Stepanakert a network of committees was formed, mainly through workplaces. Through locally elected representatives these networks exchanged news outside of the demonstrations, disseminated information about the situation to the wider public and organized the collection of signatures in favour of reunification.

### **Structural and institutional facilitating factors**

It has been pointed out in the literature that structural facilitation factors such as, demography, size, the possession of national institutions affect the ability of elites within the group to take advantage of event-generated influences (e. g. Beissinger, 2002: 156). In this connection, it is worth noting that Armenia was one of the most ethnically homogenous republics of the Soviet Union which contributed to a significant indigenization of central political structures in the Armenian Republic. In NK, despite the presence of some representatives of the titular group (Azeris) in positions of power, Armenians still controlled many key positions within the region’s institutions and formed

majorities in the main urban centers. Thus, Armenian movement(s) did not share the structural limitations of weakened urban networks or a diminished linguistic base of, for example, the Central Asian context.

In addition to possessing institutionalized cultural assets in the form of national literature, language, symbols, press, education Armenians were aided by the virtual absence of resistance to their activism from the local authorities. Armenian Communist authorities occupied a structurally ambiguous position. As ethnic Armenians, they strove to rhetorically affirm their identities as part of 'the people' and therefore did not substantially interfere with the movement's development or repress its members. As part of the Soviet state-Party system they also had to respect the interests of the center. The movement organisers tried to pressure rather than confront the local authorities into speaking out in Moscow. Nevertheless their failure to openly show signs of support intensified the anti-government stance of the activists. Armenian officials did not make the resources of the Party and the state available to movement participants, but did not assume a position of uncompromising obstructionism either, which was advantageous given the lasting psychological legacy of authoritarian rule with its suppression of alternative opinions.

At the same time, as has been mentioned earlier, institutions played a dual role. On the one hand, the possession of institutions permitted the Armenians and Azeris to promote their political claims and their vision of history. Cultural institutions, such as state university, museums provided a forum for the advancement of the ideological justification for such claims through their own interpretation of history. Clearly, without an institutional base they would have found it far more difficult to articulate their concerns both within and outside of Soviet political structures. On the other hand, attempts to limit or remove those

institutions were a catalyst for mobilization. For example, the publication of historical works challenging Armenian versions of history provoked a furious reaction among Armenian intellectuals based in the Armenian State Museum. Thus, the formal institutions served as both base and catalyst for national activism. As Jack Snyder puts it in his consideration of the causes of war, ‘the effect of each element can be understood only in the context of the rest of the system’ (Snyder, 2002: 34).

## **Chapter 4**

### **From ethnic conflict to violence in NK**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter analyzed the differences in Armenian and Azeri trajectories of collective action. I showed that in Armenia the advance of nationalism served as a basis for (relative) elite consensus and prevented the emergence of intense intra-elite struggle at the early stage of the movement for NK (1987–mid 1988). The consensus was over the ‘mission’ of the postcommunist elite to resolve the NK problem – a task which the old communist functionaries were widely perceived as unable to accomplish. Since 1988 the internal balance between the ruling and emerging counter elite shifted fundamentally in Armenia. The mass movement legitimized its leaders in advance and gave them the power to negotiate with the then ruling elite. This ‘forward legitimation’ significantly reduced the chances of conflict between the old and new elites. By contrast, the Azeri political scene was highly fragmented, while a certain degree of social cohesion came about because of the presence of a clear external enemy. In that context, growing elite disunity thwarted attempts to reach a common position on the growing Armenian mobilization. Azerbaijan hardly had the social networks and independent activism of underground organizations, such as existed in NK and Armenia. In addition, unlike Azeris Armenians continually used narratives of sacrifice, suffering and martyrdom as paradigms for defining identity and politics. As a result, the NK issue and the rich repository of symbolic representations associated with it resonated much less widely across Azeri society, which partly accounted for lower levels of national activism.

The aim of this chapter is to trace further development and radicalization of the conflict within a broadly elite-centered model to explain the ascendance of a particular strand of radical nationalism over its alternatives as a development taking place within a particular political and institutional context rather than predetermined. There is little doubt that intellectuals and their perceptions played a key role in shaping the conflict. The nationalist intellectuals had at least two qualities necessary to exercise leadership and to become the definitive political force in a short time: first, the rejection of Soviet egalitarian ideology by referring to nationalist ideas and second, the capacity to claim leadership over a body of thought, past political struggles and an institutional framework. One of the key arguments on which the movement's leadership justified its activity and subsequent desire to lead the country to independence were the memories of the First Independent Republic (1918–21). Referring to the nation in the pre Soviet period as well as to the intellectual tradition and cultural institutions that had developed in the Soviet era allowed them to act as credible and legitimate leaders in the eyes of the masses.

Rather than seeing violence as the 'natural' progression of ethnic conflict within the context of raised expectations (Kaplan, 1993) I argue that radicalization should be understood as a contingent outcome of developments in the wider cycle of mobilization beginning in the 1980s. Ethnic conflict was not contained within institutional channels, taking the form of riots, paramilitary activities as well as a discursive ethnicization of violence by perpetrators and third parties. Rather than any 'inherent' radicalism in Armenian and Azeri nationalism(s), the (relative) extremity of the nationalism that followed needs to be seen against the backdrop of contingent factors, a shifting context of incentives, constraints and idioms of nationalist politics.

A central component in the radicalization which has been surprisingly underestimated in the literature on NK is the first use of force. It is the deportations of the Azeri population from Armenia in 1987 and subsequent anti-Armenian riots in Azeri populated towns there which triggered the initial explosion that caused a series of chain reactions and precipitated political confrontation into armed conflict. Yet the impact of these deportations on the collective emotional orientation of the Azeri population in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and their role in visibly violating ‘previously agreed upon tacit agreements between the actors’ (Alimi, 2011: 108) has been largely unacknowledged, especially in works written by Western scholars.

While recognizing the vital role of intellectuals and political elites in shaping the trajectory of radicalization I suggest that presenting elite and mass-level interests in entirely dichotomous terms tends to underestimate the complexity of the conflict. In addition, conflict situations are influenced at various levels spanning agency and structure, including but not limited to individual, communal, structural and institutional, and patterns need to be examined at all those levels. This research does not share the view that portrays individuals as motivated solely by self-interest and capable of acting with emotional detachment but considers beliefs and perceptions to be of critical importance when it comes to making sense of the actors’ behaviour (Ross, 2007; Bar-Tal et al., 2007).

In addition to focusing on crucial events it is equally necessary to study the more routine manifestations and practices of political behaviour. Extreme institutional weakness associated with the demise of the Soviet system of rule led to the intertwining of ‘national’ struggles



for self-determination and ‘personal’ struggles for power. In stressing the mutually constitutive role of elite agency and mass-level influences, rational calculation and emotion I do not seek to dismiss any single theory, rather I proceed from the observation that the optimum strategy is to draw selectively upon a combination of those theoretical approaches that most convincingly address the questions posed by a given case, to the extent that the case substantiates or refutes the predictions of a given theory it may be seen as having been confirmed or disproved.

A mixed theoretical approach that recognizes the mutually reinforcing role of agency and structure is particularly appropriate, since the NK issue itself is representative of the multi-dimensionality of Armenian nationalism. Firstly, it was part of the troubled legacy of the Soviet nationality problem; secondly, in accordance with *perestroika*, it was one of the strongest challenges to Soviet nationality policies; thirdly, the issue was symptomatic of the still pendant Armenian question born in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and perceived as such by Armenians in the republic and in the diaspora, and, lastly, it gradually turned into an unprecedented political incentive to win sovereignty and independence.

As the process of fragmentation and competition between elites (within Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as between Armenia and NK) gained pace, the ‘old’ actors, who had managed to take advantage of the relaxation of the political environment found themselves increasingly unable to shape the changing situation. The pattern of unintended and unanticipated consequences is in line with the observations made by scholars of historical revolutions (e. g. Sztompka, 1993: 319). In the NK case this pattern manifested itself in three main areas considered in this

chapter<sup>27</sup>. First, movement participants were not a united front<sup>28</sup>, although, as discussed above, a rather fragile intra-elite consensus did exist in Armenia and NK at the early stage (1987–early 1988). Here, in contrast to Azerbaijan, the early demonstrations generated a temporary unity. The vision of a unified historical experience popularized during this period for a short time brought rival community leaders together in support of an overarching cause. In fact, the leaders disagreed among themselves and with the public on strategy and the nature of interaction with neighbours. As the former head of the Russian mediation mission on NK (1994–96) notes, the fact that this conflict involves three different main players (Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK) is one of the features that sets it apart from some of the other post-Soviet conflicts (for example, in Georgia and Tajikistan) where, if we abstract from the wider context, the direct confrontation takes place between two sides (Kazimirov, 2009: 21). With time the older and in some ways less radical elites came to have much less of an impact within the nationalist movement(s). The second area is the dynamics of the communication of the activists on both sides with the central Soviet authorities. Largely through inadequate understanding and late reactions, the Soviet state allowed the situation to take on self-reinforcing aspects, which in turn made it increasingly difficult to control what was happening once collective action had progressed to a (violent) escalatory stage.

The third dimension concerns interethnic relations. The waves of mobilization, of which nationalist agitation is a part, deepen conflicts throughout society and political system and trigger changes in power relations between various sections of the political elite, as well as

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<sup>27</sup> See chapter 7 for an elaboration of how unintended effects in these dimensions compare to the Northern Ireland case.

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the divisions, especially between elites in NK and Armenia, focusing predominantly on the post-independence period see (Caspersen, 2008, 2008a).

between elites and challenger groups, as well as the radicalization of political actors. In the process, challenges to the dominant order are likely to intensify, while ordinary individuals embrace views and goals that had previously been considered inconceivable. I attempt to show that many members of non-elites turned nationalist only in the course of collective action, not before it had been initiated. They, frequently unwillingly, became part of the waves of mobilization that challenged and often altered the boundaries of the existing national order and were drawn into the interaction of various actors, who struggled over nationalist issues in institutional arenas and on the streets.

By looking at the issue from this perspective I aim to modify some of the assumptions of the purposive elite mobilization thesis (e. g. Snyder, 2000; Gagnon, 2004) which suggests that nationalist outcomes should be seen as the direct consequence of the intentional instigation by powerful individuals, namely dissident intellectuals and emerging elites, devised long before their action. The impact of deliberate elite orchestration – the perception of the NK conflict as triggered ‘from above’ by manipulative ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ is explicitly recognized in many post-conflict accounts ‘from below’ on both Armenian and Azeri side:

We used to have very amicable relations with each other... Whenever I am told that the conflict is complex, I always respond that in fact everything is quite simple. We did not want any enmity between the two peoples... interpersonal communication is very important... (author interview with Zakhid Abbasov, former head of the department of Culture and Tourism of the Shushi in the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan, refugee from Shushi, 15 January 2009, Baku.

We had good relationships with the Azeris... The elites are to blame for everything... They initiated all this... Ordinary people have got nothing to do with it (author interview with Aida Asbekyan, retired engineer, now deputy director of a local NGO, 15 July 2008, Yerevan).

Ordinary Armenians were on good terms with Azeris, we lived in peace... I had many Azeri friends, we had nothing to argue about...I still communicate with Azeris whenever I am in Moscow, and we always help each other on the road...The conflict was provoked by the elite (author interview with a driver from Yerevan, Yerevan, 13 July 2008).

I argue that the elite manipulation argument, while, being popular on the ground, does not tell the full story. Without denying the importance of elite influence, which features so prominently in many academic accounts of nationalism and ethnic conflict, I suggest that the transformation in the perceptions of ‘the other’ as ‘alien’ and the re-conceptualization of relationships with ‘the other’ as dangerous and untrustworthy at least on a micro-social level depends not just on elite manipulation but on the continuous redefinition of past and present situations through interaction with other members of the ‘in-group’ and partly through the continuous retelling of stories contained in rumours and other sources of unverified orally transmitted information, which are filtered through collective memories of past events.<sup>29</sup> The main categories of actors – the central authorities in Moscow, the elites of the titular republics (Armenia and Azerbaijan), the leaderships of the nationalist movements in Armenia and Azerbaijan and the regional activists in NK had not fully anticipated such all-encompassing popular participation and polarization of the population (see also Tchilingirian, 2003: 141). In this sense, the protagonists were ‘themselves transformed by the spread of nationalism’ (Vladisavljevic, 2011: 158). The increasing prevalence of highly exclusivist nationalist themes was at least partly the outcome of the snowballing spread of mobilization throughout society.

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<sup>29</sup> For a recent analysis of ethnic cleavages in the Ottoman Empire emphasizing how ethnic differences are politicized, become important and heightened as a result of conflict, rather than prior to it see (Bulutgil, 2010).

In addition to ideological proximity, emotional attachment and self-interest that encourage participation there are also catalytic events, which help to set in motion important processes of deep ‘collective interpretation, construction and attribution’ (McAdam et al., 2001: 228). These events have such a radical impact on the perception of a situation that mobilization ‘cascades’ (Beissinger, 2002: 156) may result. Ethnic collective action tends to exhibit a ‘wave-like’ quality rising and falling in response to specific events (Stroschein, 2011).

The first substantive section of the chapter explores the impact of the bloody events in Sumgait. Why focus on a single event? I argue that the Sumgait episode was a ‘transformative’ event (Sewell, 1990: 548), as it affected Armenian collective action in three main ways. First, it prompted a rapid and radical shift from within system requests to those directly challenging the parameters of the existing regime, as well as an attitudinal change from sympathy to mistrust and suspicion. Second, it expanded the symbolic meaning of NK as one of the key carriers of Armenian identity. Third, it intensified the process of the ‘cultural construction of fear’ (Brubaker and Laitin, 1998: 441) and strengthened the ethnic character of the confrontation in the minds of the participants. Using Donald Horowitz’s scheme looking at the disposition to secede and the likelihood for secession Sumgait could also be seen as the last in a series of ‘precipitants’ signaling to Armenians (both in Armenia and NK) that ‘the advantages of remaining in a unified state are much reduced and the costs of remaining seem seriously high’ (Horowitz, 2000: 244)<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> On the whole, given that Armenians (or at least factions within Armenian elites) strove to remain part of the Soviet Union until relatively late in the mobilizational cycle Horowitz’s scheme seems to correctly predict the dynamics of Armenia’s secessionism but mispredict NK’s secession from Azerbaijan. If we consider NK Armenians to be an advanced group in a backward region secession attempts should be late and ‘somewhat frequent’ (Horowitz, 2000: 258), while they occurred early

I start by situating the conceptualization of this event within broader theoretical debates in the literature on ethnic riots. I emphasize two main divides in this subfield – between the primacy of elite agency vs. mass phenomena and organization vs. spontaneity. Within that literature there are several key questions relevant to this study:

1. Are ethnic riots most often spontaneous or coordinated? To what extent can Sumgait be seen as an explosion of spontaneous action by uncontrolled and uncontrollable masses?
2. How important is any provocation and organization that does occur before riots? If it was a planned event what political forces had an interest in it?
3. Why do ordinary community members engage in ethnic riots?

The insights of the literature on ethnic riots are useful for understanding the Sumgait episode, since this literature offers competing explanations for the relative weight of different factors (social networks, power structures, manipulation efforts by elites) in the dynamic process of the production and involvement in such violence. To be precise, Sumgait should most likely be classified as a pogrom (because of the presence of one targeted ethnic group – Armenians and the destruction of property) and not an ethnic riot. Some scholars have recently emphasized that the term ‘ethnic riot’ refers only to instances in which (two or more) ethnic groups mobilize against each other simultaneously, rather than to any intense and ‘sudden’ instances of violence (e. g. Stroschein, 2011: 1).

I also consider the role of unverified oral stories in episodes of violence. In line with some recent sociological studies (e. g. Horowitz, 2001; Brass, 1996; 2003) I attempt to show that the process of how

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and were very frequent. See (Laitin, 2001: 845-53) for a broader critique of the application of Horowitz’s scheme to the (post)-Soviet context.

individuals are mobilized for collective action during an emerging socio-political crisis is not fully explored solely by identifying a possible political instigator. Instead nationalist agitation happens through the much less controlled and controllable emotional appeal of particular types of narratives, such as rumours. Such appeal also helps, even if for a short period, overcome the obstacles associated with class and ideological differences. Drawing on the example of Sumgait I argue that it is difficult to distinguish between leadership and mass level influences in the actual trajectory of specific violent events. Organized mobilization often shifts to a combination of more spontaneous acts, which take place largely in the complex and rarely analytically investigated area between leadership and impulse, orchestration and chaos. I aim to enhance our understanding of this area by considering some answers to the questions above. In addition to modifying entirely elite-centered accounts of local-level participation in ethnic conflict this discussion also expands the sociological work on rumour by examining the NK case where this particular aspect remains underresearched. The analysis in this chapter could also be seen as contributing to the literature on storytelling in social movements (Polletta, 1998; Fine, 1995). While social movement scholars have extensively investigated framing and rhetoric, not a lot has been written about how personalized movement narratives, especially those with symbolic connotations, sustain or change activism.

As mentioned previously, Moscow was the traditional target of mobilization of the aggrieved population in NK and Armenia in the non-violent forms of sending letters and petitions, the passing of quasi-legal acts and declarations within regional institutions of government, the publication of letters and articles in the regional press, meetings,

demonstrations and strikes. While these forms of mobilization had not been successful in bringing about the fulfillment of the maximum demands of the protesting groups – the readjustment of borders –they did succeed in laying the groundwork for the national movement(s). Gorbachev’s policies in the late 1980s fed national unrest in three distinct ways (e.g. Lapidus, 1989: 99-102). First, they permitted debate about previously censored issues introducing individual opinions into the public sphere. Secondly, liberalization encouraged grassroots participation in the political process resulting in the formation of a number of organizations – nationality and shared historical experiences formed a basis upon which to build these organizations. Finally, the economic weakness of the Union in the late 1980s compounded historical grievances with contemporary concerns, thus, contributing to rising discontent within this framework.

Initially Armenian activists did not fully take the Azeri political factor into account when they raised the territorial issue, since the Azeri national movement came into being largely in response to the perceived threat arising from Armenian activism and the perception of bias of the Soviet authorities towards Armenians: ‘At the early stage we did not regard the (NK) problem as an interethnic confrontation’ (author interview with Ashot Goulyan, former activist, now Chairman of the NK Republic National Assembly, 22 July 2008, Stepanakert). As discussed in chapter 3, Armenians understood their role to be limited to convincing Moscow about the justice of their cause and solving the problem in the spirit of democratization and *perestroika*. Later, as their anger turned towards the central authorities, the struggle started to be seen in the spirit of liberation from the repressive Soviet regime and the Yerevan-Moscow perceived dialogue turned into a triangular conflict over the control of NK. High officials in Azerbaijan were well aware of the



campaign of NK Armenians, even in its episodic manifestations during the Soviet era. For example, in 1969 H. Aliev noted that ‘activities of a nationalist nature are currently taking place in the NK Autonomous Oblast’.... Some sections of the younger generation are also under the influence of nationalistically minded individuals’ (Aliev, April 1969, cited in *Voskresenie* Journal, October 1991). Partly because of the continuous character of such efforts Azeri authorities got used to the fact that with the advance of *perestroika* Armenians sent to the central government in Moscow thousands of letters every day and for the most part did not see such campaigns as a serious challenge to their authority (author interview with Afrand Dashdamirov, former member of the CCCP (Central Committee of the Communist Party) of the Azeri SSR, now academic and Deputy Head of the Pan-Azeri Congress, 4 March 2009, Moscow).

On 20<sup>th</sup> February 1988 the official political organ of NK – the NK Soviet – adopted a resolution by the vote of 110 of a total of 140 deputies demanding to transfer the region to the Armenian SSR. The events that followed this decision were to become pivotal to the development of violent, organized activism in NK and Armenia and were later used by Armenians to exemplify the ‘inherent’ differences between the two peoples, as well as the kind of Azeri aggression which made Karabakhis determined not to remain under Azeri rule.

### **The Sumgait pogrom**

Given the centrality of the Genocide to Armenian historical experience, which has been discussed more extensively in chapters 2 and 3, and for a movement so affected by symbols of loss, suffering and isolation it is not surprising that an early episode of violence influenced subsequent discourse and shaped attitudes. Days after the decision of

the regional assembly violence in the Azeri town of Sumgait led to the death of at least 26 Armenians, according to official reports (e. g. *Izvestiya*, 03. 03.1988). In addition, at least 54 members of the local militia were injured (*Zasedanie POLITBURO TSK KPSS*, 29. 02. 1988). Armenians report a much greater number of dead – up to 450-500 (*Urmala*, 29. 06. 1989; *Tntesanget*, 11. 03. 1989) but to the best of my knowledge, no formal evidence or confirmation of these greater casualties has ever been produced<sup>31</sup>.

Local youth and unemployed people, mainly from other regions of Azerbaijan, were brought to the young industrial town (built in 1939 and granted city status in 1949), which suffered from extreme poverty and severe ecological degradation. By the end of 1980 approximately 20% of the industrial potential of Azerbaijan centered in Sumgait, and its industrial production was exported to more than 300 towns and cities across the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Aliev, 2009). It had been notorious for being a polluted site of numerous factories producing synthetic rubber and chemicals. The population of Sumgait grew steadily throughout the Soviet period - from 6400 in 1939 to 17200 in 1949, to 135100 in 1970. By 1988 the population reached 250,000 including 18,000 Armenians (*Obshaya Informatsiya po gorodu Sumgaitu*, 2010; Taran, 09. 03. 2010; *General'naya Prokuratura Resoubilily Armeniya*, 21.06. 2010). The rapid influx of Azeris contributed to the collective sentiment of the (minority) Armenian population that the Azeri national project to assert their dominance within a particular political and cultural space undermined the capacity of Armenians to lead a fulfilling existence since the perception of threat became part of everyday life. As an Armenian refugee from Sumgait expressed it:

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<sup>31</sup> Azeri historians also report 32 dead (including 26 Armenians and 6 Azeris) and around 400 wounded (Unusov, 21. 05. 1991, cited in Unusov, 2005: 69).

By the 1980s we were afraid to let our children go out at night.... We had not felt Azeri presence before but then the atmosphere grew very tense... They [the Azeris] represented the titular nation, they considered themselves the hegemony (author interview with Galina Somova, 21 July 2008, Stepanakert)<sup>32</sup>.

A single and simple explanation of the violent episode in Sumgait (27–29 February 1988) is difficult, if not impossible to provide. Any event of this nature is more of each group's collective emotional memory than common factual history. A definitive picture of the episode can hardly be reconstructed from incomplete and contradictory press and verbal reports. Violence continued for three days unhindered by Azeri police or Soviet troops, although Sumgait was located only 30 kilometers (around 18 miles) away from Baku. Much of what happened over the three days will never be fully known. Both sides offer their own interpretations of the facts, so that there are multiple 'truth versions' of the event. Any interpretation inadvertently follows the position defended by one side of the conflict or the other. Mutually exclusive truths of this highly emotionally charged episode have emerged, and its reconstruction is significantly compounded by the fact that hard documentary evidence is extremely scarce.

What is certain, however, and what seems to be accepted by both sides is that after Sumgait a political confrontation which was just taking shape turned into a more radical one. Before Sumgait compromises were conceivable, after that such a result became hardly possible: 'After Sumgait dialogue was no longer feasible' (author interview with Karen Oganjanyan, 21 July 2008, Stepanakert).

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<sup>32</sup> In this sense there is some usefulness to models that link ethnic solidarity, coordination and ultimately escalation to the subordination of one area of a country to others for explaining this situation (Hechter, 1975).

‘After the events the process of alienation between the two peoples was irreversible’ (Agaev and Alizadeh, 2006: 83).

Large groups of Azeri men reportedly armed with home-made weapons (such as sharpened knives) attacked Armenians in their homes and on the streets, looted and vandalised apartments, burnt cars and destroyed public buildings. Threatening leaflets had been reportedly posted on the doors of apartments housing Armenian families, and most local telephone service was cut off for several days (e. g. Shakhmuration, 1990; De Waal, 2003). At least two competing explanations for these events exist. The first is that, through force, Azeris now sought to compel Armenians to retract their resolution. The second is that Azeris were largely reacting to the belief that Armenians were physically harming local Azeris and would commit further acts of aggression if they were not stopped.

Whatever the exact composition and origins of the individuals who committed the atrocities it is doubtful whether the violence was a straightforward reaction of local Azeris to the campaign of NK Armenians.<sup>33</sup> Many reportedly saw the First Secretary of the Sumgait City Party Committee carrying an Azeri flag at the head of a mob attacking Armenian residences (Shakhmuration, 1990: 5-6; Kazarian, 1988: 1). In what follows I will review and attempt to critically apply to this particular case different frameworks for understanding the nature and mechanisms of ethnic riots. For the purposes of analysis I divide the literature into two broad explanatory strands: macro-level and micro-level theories. By macro level, I mean theories that analyze structural or

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<sup>33</sup> Erik Melander (2001: 59) has provided a useful outline of the various suspects – agents of the central authorities, the Azeri republican government, an autonomously operating KGB, representatives of Azeri organized crime, and –a claim made by some Azeri authors and occasionally Russian officials– extremist Armenian nationalists themselves. As a former Russian official recently asserted: ‘Certain Armenian entrepreneurs played the ‘Sumgait card’... In essence they used a tragedy to put on a show’ (Ilukhin, 09. 09. 2010). To the best of my knowledge, such claims remain purely speculative and have never been verified.

community environment and conditions and for the most part do not deal directly with individual decision-makers. By micro-level I mean those frameworks that operate at the individual level and focus on factors that influence a particular individual's decision on whether or not to engage in ethnic riot related activities, although naturally, some theories tend to posit mechanisms in which macro / structural conditions affect individual decision-making. I recognize that the differentiation between these two levels, while being useful analytically, is rather artificial. In fact, the broader social structures have to be traced within single (violent) events, and at the same time such events can be understood as embedded in historical and social structures. Although ethnic riots seem to evolve rather spontaneously, and are often perceived and referred to as 'sudden outbreaks' by the actors involved, bystanders and outside observers, they nevertheless require preparation and mobilization, and are therefore, to a certain extent, socially guided.

### **Macro-level theories of ethnic riots**

From a macro-level perspective, one possible explanation of the atrocities is that Sumgait was a 'riot-prone' location. It could be argued that Azeri refugees from Armenia who lived there having suffered at the hands of Armenians in their former homeland tended to be more hostile to Armenians than the average Azeri. According to this interpretation, conflict is perpetuated largely by the flow of refugees with stories of brutality that anger their ethnic kin. R. Lemarchand (1996: 60-1) provides evidence for the hostile refugees hypothesis in his study of ethnic violence in Burundi. There is some evidence to support this proposition in the case of Sumgait. It is well documented that the town was largely populated by migrants from poor rural districts of

Azerbaijan (e. g. De Waal, 2003: 20). As mentioned above, it was known as the ‘town of chemists’ for its industrial base, for being populated by individuals considered to be the lowest ranks of Soviet society - large numbers of paroled prisoners and criminals<sup>34</sup>, chronic unemployment and inadequate housing – many workers lived in factory residences. In addition, Azeri refugees from Armenia came to the area in two waves – in the late 1940s to make way for repatriation of Armenians from the diaspora and in 1987 because of a growing sense of insecurity for Azeris in Armenia (Unusov, 2005: 56-7). At the same time the presence and influx of refugees and the accompanying increase in tension is insufficient to explain the spread of communal rioting. Despite the presence of social strata which could be seen to be relatively easily instigated to violence, according to numerous testimonies, one can just as easily point to an atmosphere of interethnic tolerance and friendly relations, at least at the grassroots level.

The ‘violence causes violence’ hypothesis suggests that each riot strengthens existing fears and hatreds leading to a vicious circle of continuous rioting (e.g. Tambiah, 1996). Horowitz and others have demonstrated that once rioting has begun, larger numbers of participants will join, including a wider section of the community with no direct involvement in any preceding incidents. Subsequent riots often flow from preceding violence, as rumours and misperceptions abound. As Stanley Tambiah puts it, ‘ethnic riots form a series, with antecedent riots influencing the unfolding of subsequent ones’ (Tambiah, 1996: 214). Although, Sumgait itself did not have a history of violent confrontations, the violent episode in February 1988 was followed by similar incidents in other Azeri towns throughout 1988. In this sense it can be seen as the

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<sup>34</sup> According to some sources, around two thousand paroled prisoners came to Sumgait between 1981 and 1988 (Mamedov, 1994: 31-2, cited in De Waal, 2003: 32; Agaev and Alizadeh, 2006: 77).

first in a chain of continuous rioting. In addition, the constitutional campaign of Armenians in NK and Armenia proper<sup>35</sup>, which intensified immediately prior to the events in Sumgait undoubtedly raised the level of threat among some sections of the Azeri community. The ‘attribution of threat’ refers to the ‘collective perception that the fulfillment of another actor’s goals will negatively affect its interests or values’ (McAdam et al., 2001: 46-7). From this perspective, the episode could be seen as a response from those who saw a change in the status quo that would fundamentally undermine their interests and traditional cultural patterns as imminent.

The civic engagement hypothesis focuses on the broader social environment that allows riots to take place or prevents them from happening. A. Varshney suggests that routine interactions – either organized through associations that span the ethnic divide or unorganized through everyday contact – have a direct effect on diffusing tensions between the communities and reducing the likelihood of riots at the local level (Varshney, 2001, 2002). No tradition of such networks existed in this case. In a similar vein, an Azeri historian has recently argued:

Why did it not occur in some other city? Let’s say, in Baku? In cities with tradition there would always be a person held in high esteem who might come out and say: “Stop” and the mob would stop (author interview with Eldar Namazov, 10 January 2009, Baku).

Overall, macro-level theories provide some interesting insights on the environment that may avert or be conducive to ethnic riots. Arguments about the availability/ absence of civic associations and ‘riot-prone’ locations are relatively easy to test compared to those explanations that focus more on the individual level and should involve a ‘deconstruction’

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<sup>35</sup> See chapter 3.

to understand the meanings that individual actors attribute to their interactions with others. Yet it is the micro-level that helps understand what drives specific decisions on participation.

### **Micro-level theories**

In contrast to the frameworks considered above, which tend focus on the general structural conditions, either favourable or unfavourable to the outbreak of a riot, and show how riots are always dependant upon and entrenched in specific structural contexts, Paul Brass in his influential studies of communal violence in India models the actions of individual participants (Brass, 1996, 1997, 2003). He suggests that in some cases an institutionalised riot system involving a range of actors from politicians to criminals emerges (Brass, 1997: 208). Crucial to those networks are certain individuals who ‘take as one of their purposes the protection of the status, pride and interests of one community against presumed threats to them from another’ (Brass, 1996: 13). Brass concludes that communal riots in India were made possible by a prevailing discourse of Hindu-Muslim confrontation built up over two centuries and maintained by interested parties. Similarly, W. Berenschoft (2009) concentrates on how relations between various actors enhance ‘incentives and perceptions that motivate them to contribute to the rioting’ (Berenschoft, 2009: 421). From the ‘institutionalized riot system’ perspective, it is important to consider that one or two individual instigators have been mentioned in all accounts of the events in Sumgait even if their precise role is ambiguous. Although not ‘riot specialists’ in Brass’s sense of term, they contributed to attracting larger numbers to the confrontation by making direct appeals to violence.



In Benjamin Valentino's thesis small numbers carry out the violence and little societal support is necessary – all that is required is for the wider population not to physically oppose the killings. For Valentino, the search for the causes of killing should begin with 'the capabilities, interests, ideas and strategies of groups and individuals in positions of political and military power' (Valentino, 2004: 64). Horowitz writes that riots can be located anywhere along a spectrum of organization from highly coordinated to spontaneous (Horowitz, 2001: 225-6).

Many studies of communal violence tend to see particular cases of ethnic rioting as spontaneous eruptions of outrage at the barbaric stories found in rumours unsubstantiated unverified information. The increasingly accepted idea of the 'productive' aspects of rumour has made it a focus of attention in conflict studies in recent years (Appadurai, 1998; Brass, 1997; Das, 1990, 2007; Horowitz, 2001; Pandey, 2002). Anonymous rumours often exaggerate the significance of (relatively) minor incidents, bring about feelings of insecurity, reduce the perceived feasibility of peaceful solutions and increase radical attitudes within society. Rumours often play a central role during periods of acute insecurity. The horrifying content of some rumours stimulates a sense of urgency and makes non-violent alternatives seem hardly conceivable. In such situations groups may decide that their options lie not between cooperation and aggression but between aggression and victimhood (Weingast, 1998: 165). When escalation is viewed in this way, an initial violent incident ignites long-standing tensions between the communal groups. References to past and present intercommunal clashes and murders form a common feature of speeches for popular mobilization, which clearly reinforced popular Armenian anger towards Azeris, and vice versa. To the best of my knowledge, none of these stories had ever been documented or verified. For example, in the

sample of my interviews in NK and Armenia twenty five out of twenty seven mentioned the retelling of the story of the murder of an Armenian boy by an Azeri school principle in the 1960s as fundamental to their perception of insecurity. The boy's body was allegedly later deformed by the principle. The story also features in the memoirs of Armenian activists (e. g. Balayan, 1999: 135-7; Guruntz, 2002: 53-5). The story of this terrible cruelty was retold in Armenian families and passed through generations as an example of a killing motivated entirely by the 'ethnic otherness' of the victim.

There are multiple undocumented cases of Azeri tutors regularly abusing Armenian schoolchildren (e. g. Gevondyan, no date: 1), author interview with Jasmin Gevondyan, 14 July 2008, Yerevan). Even if subsequent analysis ever establishes those narratives to be fabrications – and Armenian and Azeri historiographies tend to have a poor track record when it comes to agreeing upon unilaterally accepted accounts of historical violence - it is necessary to view them as believable accounts for the victims, as well as for those members of the community who heard the testimonies being retold. Whether they are historically true or false the impact of similar narratives has to do with their capacity to be perceived as real by those who feel affected by them. An Azeri activist has recognized the centrality of such unverified stories to individual participation in communal riots and the ways in which they were taken to reveal or confirm very different 'truths' that make engagement in violent riots seem desirable, even necessary:

...In one accident four corpses of Azeris were found but where is the proof that they were killed by Armenians? Russians or Azeris themselves could have done it as well. However, everyone was already speculating about taking revenge on the Armenians... Another example, an Armenian man took the floor at a rally and said that in Nakhichevan his grandfather's tomb had been defiled and an Armenian had been beheaded. But no one had ever gone there to verify...whether such a

thing had really occurred. Or vice versa, an Azeri man in his speech asserted that in one region three Armenians had killed an Azeri national. But no one knew whether it was true or not. That's how it all began, and then it grew bigger like a snowball (author interview with Kerim Kerimly, 6 January 2009, Baku).

Similarly an Armenian activist recalls in relation to the events in Sumgait:

Rumours were growing like a snowball- someone was killed here, someone arrested there, and something else done in some other place...Rumours (about Sumgait) spread very fast...What people were telling was horrible... Often in reality violence is less than its perception... A thousand people retell one and the same story (author interview with Stepan Grigoryan, 28 July 2008, Yerevan).

Any community will contain different subgroups with varying identities and motives. As Horowitz notes, an 'amalgam of apparently rational-purposive behaviour and irrational-brutal behaviour forms the leitmotiv of the ethnic riot' (Horowitz, 2001: 13; Brass, 2003: 32). It is reasonable to suggest that many of the people became involved for a range of reasons, including the opportunity to loot and occupy victims' houses, a perception that the violence confirms the content of recent stories and the fact that no punishment was incurred by participants.

Ethnographers have noted that in situations of social disorder or crisis people are more likely to accept rumour as 'impoverished news' (Shibutani, 1966: 17) – information that in less uncertain and threatening circumstances they might be willing to reject as hardly credible (Pendelton, 1998: 69). The fact that rumour is distinguished by a lack of verified and verifiable information tends to strengthen the perceptions of instability and insecurity. This environment provides openings for rumour to emerge. Similarly, G. Elwert (1991) has emphasized that in

times of political turmoil rumor has the potential to contribute to the construction of mythology central to the widespread mobilization of nationalist movements.

The role of rumour should be considered in Armenian and Azeri contexts for at least two reasons. Firstly, it shows that radicalism is not just a matter of rational planning, careful organization and relative deprivation as dominant theories of conflict tend to assert. By its very nature the dynamics of ethnic collective action does not follow pre-determined trajectories, and emotionally centered interactions may significantly shape its course. Secondly, contrary to some elite-centered theories, (e. g. Snyder, 2000: 216-8) the Soviet media can hardly be accused of directly stimulating the conflict because when the agitation started the Soviet local and central press – which retained a total monopoly of information – attacked relentlessly any manifestation of nationalism insisting on the friendship of peoples. Even at later stages when local media started to strengthen, it was the lack of information rather than the dissemination of nationalist ideas that indirectly contributed to exacerbating ethnic tension. Rumours occupied a particularly significant niche in closed regimes where they combined ‘news’ with expressions of social anxiety. Rumours were also the means by which people shared, compared and transmitted information in response to ambiguously defined situations (Shibutani, 1966: 22-4).

In Armenia and Azerbaijan rumours played a dual role. On the one hand, they appear to have filled a genuine information gap where people knew that important events (such as Sumgait) were occurring but lacked reliable sources of information given the lack of data in official Soviet media. In this context individuals tended to speculate about issues that worried them, repeat and share with each other the stories that confirmed their fears. It should be noted that the lack of attention to oral narratives

in academic literature on the conflict could be explained by the fact that they remained at the intra-communal level and were largely excluded from the formal discourse through which both sides represented events to outside observers. On the other hand, a degree of selectivity demonstrated by nationalist elites in sanctioning and privileging one interpretation of interethnic relations over others needs to be recognized. Clearly, certain individuals significantly contributed to presenting some (relatively) isolated and insignificant disputes of the past as ethnic in nature. However, treating the emotional appeal of oral narratives as a simple instrument deployed by an unaffected political elite tends to set up a rather dubious opposition between the rational calculations of the political provocateur and the ‘hot’ emotions of the masses. Introducing clear intentions, rational motives and plans into discussions of specific episodes of violence underestimates the fact that obscurity is not only cultivated but also takes on a momentum of its own that ends up enveloping most actors. The tight control of all official sources of information by the Soviet regime combined with the relative weakness of local media at the time were primarily responsible for the distinctly powerful radicalizing impact of oral narratives in NK<sup>36</sup>. In addition, as traditional lines of everyday communication between the communities started to break down, rumours became the key method of disseminating scarce information.

In an attempt to understand the atrocities in Sumgait Armenians turned to history for explanation. The Genocide provided the most obvious framework within which these developments could be analyzed. The pogrom was made more comprehensible when viewed as part of the historical continuum of persecution by Turks. The implication was clear:

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<sup>36</sup> By contrast, the information milieu in Northern Ireland did not generate the same social uncertainty, while the gap between the official constructions of reality and activist understandings of it was narrower. See chapter 7 for a more detailed comparative analysis.

for Armenians what had happened in Sumgait could be nothing less than a contemporary manifestation of a policy begun at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Turks. The idea of a historical pattern was reinforced by the placards displayed at mass demonstrations after the events in Sumgait. The widespread perception was that ethnic cleansing, which had been carried out with such marked efficiency in Western Armenia almost seventy five years was now being repeated in the East:

What took place in Sumgait was genocide especially since the pogroms were perpetrated by the representatives of one nation towards another... That genocide had deep roots (Sarkisyan, 1988: 2).

... I completely identify Azeris with the Turks: In 1915 Turks committed the same acts as the Azeris later... Even the forms of violence were similar... I think it is part of their genetic memory (author interview with an Armenian activist, 17 July 2008, Yerevan).

These narratives provided an ethnic frame for the codification of acts of violence as ethnically targeted, ethnic in their causal structure and motivation<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that Azeris also increasingly speak of acts of Genocide committed by Armenians in relation to the outbreaks of anti-Azeri violence in 1918, and more recently in the town of Khojaly (around 6 miles north of Stepanakert) in 1992. Like the violent episodes in Sumgait and Baku (January 1990) for Armenians, Khojaly for Azeris has become detached from time and space, and corresponds to the generalized notions of resistance and suffering. Khojaly has become an integral part of the contemporary Azeri narrative tradition. According to recent estimates in Azeri historiography, in Khojaly 613 were dead, 150 went missing and 1275 were held captive (Suleymanov et al., 2006: 205; see also Garibov, 1992 for testimonies of survivors). Some sources report up to 1.000 dead (cited in Lieven, *The Times*, 02. 03. 1992). This figure is quite possibly higher than the number of real victims and might have been deliberately elevated to reinforce the perception of Azerbaijan as a martyr nation. While the Khojaly incident remains one of the key transformative moments in Azeri national consciousness, the visibly reciprocal nature of the Khojaly vs. Sumgait accusations also shows that identity and its construction or transformation can hardly be separated from the process of social and political interaction, particularly from the strategies of the 'other' the 'self' is in contact (and contrast) with. The constant competition between 'us' and 'them' that has converged in the self-representation of the two nations as martyr peoples is especially apparent at this stage given the (relative) similarity of the (pre-conflict) cultural and social fabric in Armenia and Azerbaijan. As one of my respondents expressed it, '...they [Armenia and Azerbaijan] are like twins changing roles' (author interview with Ali Abasov, 7 January 2009, Baku).

Sumgait transformed a past trauma into a (perceived) immediate threat. A particularly significant point is how it came to decisively shape Armenian discourse symbolizing all the injustices that Armenians had ever suffered in the hands of Azeris. Documenting the gruesome details became a means of summarizing this history and was a means of demonstrating how the events were the logical outcome of injustice in NK. What Brubaker and Laitin (1998: 441) call the ‘cultural construction of fear’ needs to be considered here. Narratives of outsider violence framed in cultural or historic terms offer political entrepreneurs opportunities to construct current struggles as ethnic and reap the rewards of sharper boundary delineation, greater group cohesion and raised levels of mobilization. The success of such framing strategies depends on their resonance with established narratives and beliefs among their target constituencies.<sup>38</sup>

Entrepreneurs seeking to ethnicize political discourse in the post-Soviet context were aided by the ubiquity of ethnic categorisations in Soviet society and the unquestionable legitimacy of ethnicity as an ascriptive identity. The Soviet system made ethnic politics a factor of growing importance in the internal institutional life, division of territory and resources. The hierarchy of ethnic groups was best expressed in political structures, such as positions distributed within the Communist Party leadership, the central state bureaucracy and the military establishment, where ‘indigenous’ ethnic groups tended to have more prestige, respect and power than ‘newcomers’ (Schnilerman, 2001: 4). In ways characteristic of ethno-nationalism discourse of the post-Sumgait period was constructed around a number of core dichotomies. At the heart of its representation of interethnic relations was the sharp

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<sup>38</sup> See chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion of the framing concept.

distinction between the ‘inherently’ irrational and violent national character of Azeris and Armenians as civilised people who would never harm others: ‘Azeris are the barbarians of the XXth century’ (Armenian population of Kirovabad, 1988: 2). ‘...the Armenian people never destroyed anything, they have always engaged in constructive and creative activities’ (Sarkisyan, 1988: 4).

In this context, the word ‘Sumgait’ signified the event itself (the brutal murder of Armenians), the context (Armenian victimisation, Azeri aggression and Soviet complacency), as well as the underlying paradigm of Genocide. Some slogans implied that Sumgait was part of a broadly coordinated strategy which they linked to Turkish expansionism: ‘The Sumgait Genocide – the test of pan-Turkic tactics’. Armenian elites used this event to argue that, aside from political or constitutional reasons, NK had no alternative but to withdraw from Azerbaijan to protect its Armenian population: ‘...the defense of NK’s 150,000 Armenians against a ‘second Sumgait’ became a supreme national priority, to the detriment of almost everything else’ (Zolyan, 1988, cited in Astourian, 2000: 23). Sumgait also sparked a massive flow of refugees. Within a month of the riots most of the Azeri population of Armenia (around 160.000) fled to Azerbaijan and the first Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan came to Armenia (Unusov, 2005: 48).

Because the violence in Sumgait happened straight after the beginning of an open campaign for ending Azeri rule over the territory it quickly became an icon of ethnic and religious difference. The deployment of narratives focusing ethnic fear is not to suggest unequivocally that the radicalization and violence that followed can be fully explained by such cultural constructions. We have no way of testing whether all individuals *en masse* believed that a ‘pan-Turkic threat’ against them was imminent. In addition, not all Armenians



subscribed to holding Azeris as a people responsible for the acts of isolated perpetrators. Nevertheless, fears and prejudices dominated public discourse and generated frightening rumours which in turn seemed to affect even the most self-critical and detached individuals. The perceived existential threat faced by both communities made some individuals emphasize the ethnic character of the conflict in confrontational incidents exacerbating the environment of tension. The response of the Soviet authorities was fuelling Armenian suspicions about the organized nature of the pogroms. Two battalions arrived in Sumgait only two days after the pogroms had begun.

On the one hand, many Armenians believed that the authorities in Moscow either instigated the episode or allowed it to continue to demonstrate to the people their vulnerability and to warn them against further reunification claims (Nolyan, 2001; author interviews, July 2008, Yerevan). On the other hand, for some Azeris the events in Sumgait represented an integral part of a conspiracy between the central government and Western agencies most notably, the CIA aimed at destabilising and ultimately dismantling the Soviet system of rule (Agiev and Alizadeh, 2006: 72-86; author interviews with Arzu Abdulaeva, 7 January 2009, Baku, Ramiz Sevdimaliev, Kerim Kerimly). Both Armenians and Azeris have hypothesised that the central authorities or anti-perestroika forces have engineered the riots to deflect the discourse from one of democracy to one of violence: ‘The goal (of Sumgait) was to strip Gorbachev of his power... ‘He is credited with having launched perestroika but look at what it has led to – a bloodshed and killings’ (author interview with Eldar Namazov, 10 January 2009, Baku). But it seems hardly plausible that they could have directly orchestrated specific episodes of violence.

### **The role of the media**

The perceptions of both sides were inflamed by the stance taken by official Soviet media. Brief articles covering Sumgait regularly equated perpetrator and victim without pronouncing in favour of one or the other while substituting real issues with formalistic phrases about enduring friendship between the two peoples in the spirit of internationalism. For the political elite the internationalist language offered imagery of interethnic relations that resonated with three key audiences. Firstly, it accorded with Azeri titulars' desire for stability and absence of serious unrest. Secondly, it resonated with non-titulars' struggle for non-discrimination. Finally, it projected a favourable image of interethnic harmony to the outside world. In the case of Sumgait the lack of openness and the concealment of casualties served only to bolster the problem's framing as an interethnic conflict in the minds of the participants. In navigating between the parties in this way Moscow was acting as if expecting and waiting for the situation to deteriorate. The day before Sumgait the Deputy General Procurator of the USSR appeared on Central television to report on an earlier incident indicating that 'as a consequence of ...riots two inhabitants of the Aghdam region fell victim to murder' and stating the names and ages of the two Azeri youths who had died. Without specifying who was to blame he vaguely attributed the deaths to the actions of 'isolated hooligan elements who resorted, obviously for the purpose of provocations to violations of public order' (Grafova, *Golos Armenii*, 13.04.1991; Katusev, *Izvestiya*, 20.08.1988).

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 1988 the official Soviet communist newspaper *Pravda* reported that '...a group of hooligan elements provoked disturbances in Sumgait... There were instances of outrages and violence. Measures have been taken to normalize life in the city'

(*Pravda*, 01.03.1988). No details were given about who were the ‘hooligans’ nor about the identity or the number of the victims. On 3<sup>rd</sup> March more information was provided: ‘Unstable and immature people who fell under the influence of provocative rumours and inflammatory talk about the events in NK and Armenia were drawn into illegal actions... Tragic events occurred and there were fatalities’ (*Bakinskiy Rabochiy*, 03.03.1988). These pronouncements were accompanied by occasional references to hot-blooded Caucasian passions in which all acts were somehow attributed to the same uncontrolled emotions. In a strong state, outbreaks of violence usually attract the overwhelming presence of security forces dedicated to the restoration of social order. The fact that the Sumgait perpetrators faced no censure from security agencies and were not punished severely contributed to delegitimizing the regime:

The only weapon against Sumgait is openness, complete and unconditional... Truth and justice even if they seem harsh... But the first newspaper articles, the first verdict show the expectations of the public are not being met. We are being fed with half-truth, half-openness and half-justice (Zolyan and Balayan, 1988:1; see also Grafova, 13. 04. 1991 for similar observations).

Armenian confidence in the ability of the center to act as an honest broker in the dispute was shaken. Within a very short period of time the pro-Soviet sentiments of the Armenian population were largely eroded and replaced by a sense of disbelief and shock. Many asked how their ‘own’ Soviet government could have allowed such a thing to happen. Thus, one key outcome of the Sumgait events was the near universal reversal of Armenian perceptions of the Union, which contributed to lending an enormous symbolic legitimacy to the national movement(s) both in NK and in Armenia:

...After Sumgait even the last careerist scoundrel stood side by side with us... all hopes pinned on *perestroika* started to wane... Sumgait is one of those turning points from which the unraveling of the USSR began (author interview with Stepan Grigoryan, 28 July 2008, Yerevan).

In the eyes of the protesters Sumgait signified the redundancy of prior patterns of non-violent Moscow-oriented protest. Vazgen Manukyan, a respected scientist and one of the organizers of the national movement suggested that the central authorities in Moscow had orchestrated the massacre out of fear of popular democracy:

The government is genuinely scared of our unity... They just wanted to intimidate us to stop the demonstrations from happening. They thought it was all being directed from somewhere... they just could not imagine that half a million people would interrupt the day-to-day business of their lives to express their bitterness at how they had been treated (cited in Malkasyan, 1996: 54).

Quite apart from the highly questionable image of Sumgait created by the central Soviet media, their overall misrepresentation and concealment of information proved to be a catalyst for the transformation of the movement over time – what began as a (non-violent) protest for (perceived) constitutional rights in the name of *glasnost* and *perestroika* became a forum for the exchange of suppressed information, then a rally for pan-Armenian solidarity against Soviet policies and Azeri responses, and finally, a platform for the growing pro-independence democratic forces. The spirit of the demonstrations changed from voicing support for the Armenians of NK to a struggle for the rights and survival of the Armenian nation as a whole. Early optimism gave way to anger in response to the objectionable characterization of the activists in the official press as ‘groups of nationalist extremists’ (*Pravda*, 21.02.1988). Demands for recognition intensified together with Armenian claims that their protests were misrepresented by the Soviet press. As with other aspects of the

movement, the construction of alternative sources of information began reactively as Armenians attempted to refute accusations about their actions and to compensate for the lack of correct information available to citizens. In this connection it is important to examine their response to official press publications in the context of the broader struggle to provide the 'definitive' legitimization of their grievances and activities. The distortion of information about the movement in the press acted as a facilitating factor for mass mobilization by shifting individual reasoning and making the protesters more perceptive of the demands advanced on behalf of the group.

One of the most telling examples of conflict with the press was in response to an article entitled 'Emotions and reason: events in and around Nagorno-Karabakh', which appeared in the official newspaper of the Communist Party, *Pravda*. The article attributed Armenian activism to the influence of 'Western radio voices', such as Radio Liberty, which had a stake in 'inflaming passions'. 'Anti-socialist elements' in Armenia were also accused of attempts to hinder democratization and *perestroika*, 'national egoism' and pursuing 'selfish interests'. The authors concluded by stating that the 'noble idea of reunification had a noticeable anti-socialist flavour' (*Pravda*, 21.03.1988).

Armenian resentment at 'half-truths and distortions' (Sarkisyan, 1988: 1) contained in such publications was particularly significant in the context of the transformation of popular attitudes, since Armenians felt they were confronting Soviet power because of the perceived power behind *Pravda* as the official organ of the Communist Party. Posters that appeared after the publication commented ironically on the Soviet manipulation of the truth and the consequent worthlessness of official information through ironic wordplays. Words were subtly altered so that *Izvestiya* (knowledge) became *bezvestiya* (lack of knowledge), *Pravda*

(truth) became *nepravda* (lack of truth). Thus, the creation of a particular media image of the movement distant from its ‘true’ politico-legal basis and authentic desire for historical justice had the effect of gradually eroding popular faith in the system and broadening opposition to the regime. Those attitudes which came about largely as a result of a moral shock at the reaction of the government to protest form as much a part of the movement’s identity construction and development as its initial lobbying efforts at the highest levels of authority.<sup>39</sup>

It should be reiterated that the issue of security, which the episode in Sumgait brought to the fore has a broader significance, at least in the Armenian context: ‘One group need not believe that the other really is aggressive, only fear that it might be’ (Lake and Rothchild, 1996: 51). It is possible to suggest that for some sections of the community the transformations initiated by Gorbachev triggered both hope and opportunity and a relative uncertainty at the pace, if not content, of reforms. In a period of change these sections chose to employ violence when peaceful resistance to the various substantial threats to their collective existence was perceived as no longer feasible. Similarly, it could be argued that the sometimes violent (re)actions of Azeris partly responded to the (perceived) gains of Armenians (like, for example, signs of support for Armenian delegations in Moscow, the passing of resolutions on NK in the local Soviet) and the long-lasting implications such gains could have for Azeri collective life patterns.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See chapter 3 on this period.

<sup>40</sup> For a similar line of argument in relation to Northern Ireland focusing on violence as a resistance strategy to key changes in the level of intensity of direct and relative threats, as well as to reform, see (Mitchell, 2011).

### **Central state-activist relations**

As discussed previously, independence did not become part of the agenda until after the Soviet state had persistently failed to play its role as the ‘benign ruler’. Armenian resistance to independence was generally voiced more in terms of fears about the future rather than satisfaction with the present – Armenians expressed fear that if they left the Soviet Union they would lose protection and suffer in the hands of more powerful and hostile neighbours. A crucial factor in this transformation was the perception of government partiality. From the beginning Moscow’s political moves and lack of clear tactics emphasized equal distance between the two (Armenian and Azeri) sides and led each side to believe at different times that its efforts would ultimately prove successful. As a result, both sides later accused the Union authorities of favouring one side over the other and of deliberately sustaining and encouraging conflict as a means of retaining control over the region. At different times each of the parties felt aggrieved at the perceived bias of the authorities or got a sense of empowerment from the apparently secured government support for itself. For example, given the authoritarian nature of the state, the absence of repressions during the first public demonstrations and the very fact that these activities were not banned gave Armenians the impression that they enjoyed unconditional approval from the center. The behaviour of the police also contributed to the perception of official tolerance of the demonstrations. At the same time the Azeri population became convinced that the Soviets were unduly favouring the Armenians.

Paradoxically, the idea of the NK campaign having been strongly supported and encouraged by external actors (whether they be the Union authorities or other ‘interested’ powers) is one of the few conceptions

that is shared by many Armenian and Azeri activists and analysts, despite their deep divergence on other fundamental issues. The search for the ‘true’ causes of the Center’s behaviour, the quest to uncover some deeper, hidden motives behind the authorities’ actions became a common feature. Such interpretations entail more than simply questioning the reasons for specific decisions but seeking to interrogate who is ‘really’ behind the actions, as powerful forces are deemed to be controlling events. The idea of outside orchestration is dominant in Armenian sources, as exemplified by the following quote:

The real impetus for the NK movement was not Gorbachev’s *perestroika* but an external force. For example the CIA had firmly decided to put everything at stake to destroy the Soviet Union, thus saving the planet from the communist plague once and for all. Several attempts had been made starting with the Uzbek SSR... They strove to find weak spots... The Tashkent scenario did not work and they remembered about NK...The NK issue was constantly on the Armenian agenda...It was the weak thread that was designed to lead to the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Gazaryan, 13.02. 2011).

An Azeri political scientist has recently expressed a similar preoccupation with the premeditated nature of the actions of the (external) ruling elites:

The process of the initiation of the Armenian movement was directed from outside... The promotion of the idea of ‘reunification’ could not have taken place without an explicit permission from the Union authorities (Ataev, 2009: no pagination).

Attempting to balance between contradictory obligations of redressing collective grievances and guaranteeing political stability and security in the context of weakening legitimacy meant that the only consistent element in the reactions of the central state was inconsistency. Moscow was faced with a serious puzzle. To accede to Armenian demands for reunification would have opened a Pandora’s box of other



long-standing grievances throughout the Soviet Union and could have been used by different groups to push their (similar) claims. One of Gorbachev's advisor's recalls:

...NK was the first sign of the explosive and destructive power of nationalism, if its spread is not stopped... We discussed the situation on numerous occasions and came to the only feasible conclusion that at present the readjustment of borders was not possible. This is a principle. If it is violated once, the door will be opened for multiple armed conflicts (Ligachev, 1999: 153).

The authorities tried to appease the parties and ended up alienating both. Whatever steps the Kremlin took, they backfired and progressively weakened its hold over the region. One of the options persistently put forward by some Azeri activists was the use of repression to avoid violent escalation. Until the end of 1988, perhaps, the central authorities would still have been able to resort to brute force on a large scale. However, on the one hand, given the high levels of mass participation in Armenia high-level repression could have transformed the military intervention into an unimaginable bloodbath. On the other hand, the failure to use force in a state which was still perceived to be highly centralized and authoritarian was taken by Azeris as a sign of unconditional Soviet support for Armenian national goals. Some intermediary options were being discussed within the walls of the Kremlin. It was reported that Politburo members were considering granting a higher degree of political authority to NK Armenians by making the region an autonomous republic with its own constitution and with Armenian as the official language, thus granting more symbolic and substantive attributes of stateness (Hovhanissyan, 1998: 41). Some dissident intellectuals in Moscow favoured a solution involving a referendum on a swap of territories which would see some Azeri populated territories of southern Armenia becoming part of Azerbaijan

in exchange for NK being reunited with Armenia (Sakharov, 1996: Chapter 5). However, the lack of understanding about the depth of ethnic problems combined with divisions within the party elite undermined the possibility of reaching a consensual approach: ‘The Soviet leaders did not devise any plan to resolve the NK issue... What was needed was a quick and adequate reaction... If they had introduced direct rule in early 1988, the conflict would not escalated to such an extent’ (author interview with David Petrosyan, political observer, 28 July 2008, Yerevan). The former Armenian Defense Minister comes to similar conclusions:

A widespread view is that Gorbachev had a specific scheme, because Armenians cannot comprehend how and why he could have acted in such a way as to trip himself up... When starting *perestroika* he ruined the old system but nothing was available to replace it... The situation was changing every day and he could not keep pace with it... The authorities underestimated the depth of the crisis [in NK] and did not fully foresee what it would lead to (author interview with Vagarshak Arutunyan, 31 July 2008, Yerevan).

In the case of NK, rather than taking decisive measures, Moscow first offered a 500 million rouble (approximately \$ 83.3 mln.) development package. This sum was intended to be used to improve housing, enhance school construction, Armenian language education and build a network of roads between Yerevan and Stepanakert. Armenians heavily criticized the decision, primarily since the funding had to pass through the hesitant Baku authorities. When these measures failed to remedy the grievances of the local population, NK was put under Moscow’s direct administrative control in January 1989. In the already extremely tense environment this move had the effect of deepening Armenian and Azeri suspicions towards Moscow and towards each other. The measure had the objective of putting an end to the impasse

between Armenians and Azeris over NK. Ten months later control was ceded back to Azerbaijan, which made the situation even more intolerable from the Armenian point of view. In reality there is no hard evidence to suggest that in the period from 1987 until the final collapse of the Union in 1991 the Soviet state or the military high command as institutions fully supported one of the contending sides.

The idea that the government had a direct interest in fuelling the conflict seems hardly credible in the absence of any documentary evidence and given that it would seriously undermine the goals of the reform process, and inevitably damage international reputation. However, in the end, the center's involvement amounted to partial satisfaction of both sides. Moscow's 'arbitration' indirectly encouraged both majority and minority activism, since it did not suggest that either was decisively wrong. This externally articulated 'mechanism' for resolving conflict could not therefore act as a basis for consensual and self-contained relations between majority and minority. The inadequacy of the arbitration efforts of the central government partly accounts for (and is simultaneously explained by) the fact that popular identification with ethnic nationality and the strengthening of the legitimacy of nationalism as a form of political authority outstripped identification with the Soviet state as an integrating vehicle or the capacity of state institutions to fulfill such a role. While the Soviet authorities were quite successful in incubating the discourse of nationhood, conflict regulation relied on external intervention and was dependant upon adjudication by the center. In effect this external reliance shielded minority and majority from direct negotiations with each other. The lack of lateral relations between the communities at grassroot and elite level was seen by some activists as a major obstacle to avoiding violent escalation (author

interviews, July 2008, Yerevan, Zakhid Abbasov, 15 January 2009, Baku).

One particularly revealing example of the shift in the attitude towards the regime from sympathy to mistrust and rejection relates to the December 1988 earthquake in the Armenian city of Spitak,<sup>41</sup> which many Armenians believe, resulted from deliberate policies of the central authorities in Moscow designed to harm the Armenian nation. Even knowing that they live in a seismic zone many people did not accept the explanation of a tragic coincidence and started to speculate that Moscow had detonated subterranean explosives, which stimulated the earthquake as a punishment for the demonstrations (Rost, 1990: 126; Titizian, *The Armenian Reporter*, 06.12. 2008; Gregoryan, *The Armenian Reporter*, 06.12. 2008; author interviews, July 2008, Yerevan). To some this theory seemed to be confirmed by the government's slow reaction to the emergency. Gorbachev's visit to the United States the day the disaster struck fed suspicions about its artificial origins. To outsiders suggestions that the earthquake was part of the authorities' anti-Armenian campaign and the central government had deliberately planned and organized such a catastrophe are hardly credible. Yet the readiness to accuse the government reveals the deep sensitivity and suspicions many Armenians harboured that they constitute a special target for the authorities. The story about the earthquake fit and reinforced existing paradigms of victimization as in their collective memory Armenians have lived with constant and continuous threats to their existence, both as individuals and as a society. At the same time the aftermath and internalization of this event also evidenced the effectiveness of elite ideological discourse in contributing to shaping the ways in which Armenians perceived

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<sup>41</sup> The earthquake killed at least 25.000 people and left many more wounded or homeless (e. g. Ramirez and Peek-Asa, 2005: 48).

themselves. The earthquake was absorbed into a single historical narrative, which comprised massacres, genocide, environmental pollution, state discrimination and domination. In this context, the meaning of NK as one of the key carriers of Armenian identity also expanded to include the central state's complacency and (perceived) indifference: 'The issue is not just NK but the future of all our people' (Arutunyan, 1988: 3).

Thus, with time the situation in NK became highly resistant to change, and external elites were faced with the increasingly complex task of trying to address and minimize rather than negate the growing salience of the ethnonational cleavage. In this context it is difficult to retrospectively evaluate whether a particular set of actors (primarily, the Soviet authorities) could have effectively helped to avoid a conflictual path and prevented a strong 'ethnisation' of the perceptions and thinking of local protagonists. On the one hand, state elites became progressively restricted in their capacity to decisively shape and reconstitute the forms and structures of participation and interaction on the ground in a way that would be more geared towards the moderate end of the conflict spectrum. On the other hand, I argue that Soviet policy (or, rather, lack thereof) resulted in a missed opportunity in terms of facilitating a less extreme and exclusive form of nationalism. Below I briefly consider the dynamics of intergroup communication and the extent of integration during the Soviet period. This dimension is particularly useful in exploring the potential for political moderation and conflict diffusion, yet has not been given adequate attention in the literature. In this section I use extensive quotations from interviews to gain an understanding of the different perceptions of daily interethnic interactions before the active phase of the conflict.

The link between spatial proximity and close social contact has been well documented in survey data from different national contexts (e.g. Johnston, 1974; Bakke et al., 2009). With the exception of three or four towns and cities (and even those had some integrated schools), settlement patterns in Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK were mixed which resulted in a relatively high degree of interethnic interaction. On the whole, evidence on the ‘true’ nature of Armenian-Azeri ties at the everyday level is rather mixed. On the one hand, there are testimonies of genuinely friendly relations on both sides. An Azeri student from Agdam (a small town around 16 miles away from Stepanakert) whose family had been internally displaced as a result of the conflict recalls: ‘I do not remember my parents saying anything against Armenians...People from our village would often go to Armenian villages to work because they got paid more [there]...We had friendly relations’ (author interview with Zulfugar Agaev, 9 January 2009, Baku).

An Armenian who grew up in Baku has a similar reminiscence of everyday life in the Soviet era: ‘Relations between Armenians and Azeris were friendly...there were Azeri neighbours who helped Armenians’ (author interview with Sarasar Saryan, 23 July 2008, Stepanakert).

Such affirmations of harmonious coexistence are common<sup>42</sup> and are frequently contrasted, especially by ordinary citizens with the unexpected and brutal nature of hostilities and violence at the later stages of the conflict. On the other hand, these stories do not alter the fact that most people appeared to know perfectly well which nationality their neighbours had and that it could become crucial any time. In particular, some accounts point to a (latent) awareness and fear of the

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<sup>42</sup> See also (Grant, 2010; Krebs, 2011).

possibility of what Frank Wright has termed ‘representative violence’, where potential victims are chosen on the basis of belonging to a particular community (Wright, 1987: 11). One of my respondent’s recollection of her childhood in NK illustrates this perception:

My farther had a very good Azeri friend who lived in Azerbaijan...They interacted regularly through work. He used to come and visit us with his family. We stayed with them frequently too but my farther never allowed us to stay at his friend’s house overnight, as there had been cases of Armenians being murdered in sleep after a friendly meal with their Azeri friends (author interview with Rita Karapetyan, 25 July 2008, Stepanakert).

According to the vast majority of my interviewees, especially in NK and Armenia members of mixed marriages, which remained frequent throughout the Soviet period, were nonetheless regarded as outcasts by their own community, partly due to religious differences, and the fear of the erosion of religious identity.

NK’s geographical position also had an impact on the nature of interethnic attitudes when, compared to large cosmopolitan cities that were more spatially removed from (real and perceived) sources of tension. The former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the NK Republic and Advisor to the President on foreign policy issues recently summed up this distinction:

Relations [between Armenians and Azeris] have always been (and remain) very good outside the region... For example, in Russia they cooperate, make friends and help each other. Here [in NK] in a frontier region the tension has been quite strong but it is largely implanted...There is no inherent hostility, it is simply that certain conditions have contributed to forming particular behaviour patterns (author interview with Arman Melikyan, 18 July 2008, Yerevan).

Another activist makes a similar point: ‘In Baku we were on very good terms with Azeris... In Krabakh the situation was different...friendly

relations resembled a fine lace' (author interview with Larissa Alaverdyan, 18 July 2008, Yerevan).

In a small scale random sample survey I conducted in Yerevan and some neighbouring towns (N= 120) and Stepanakert (N= 61) in July 2008<sup>43</sup> the majority of respondents stated that Armenian- Azeri communication was frequent and friendly but responses varied widely when it came to explaining the nature of this friendliness, as can be seen below:

### **Armenia**

**Q. Did you know any Azeris with whom you had regular formal or informal contact (neighbour, friend, work colleague, family member)?**

Yes 55.5%

No 44.5%

**In your opinion, were Armenian-Azeri relations during the Soviet era friendly?**

Yes 82.4%

No 17.6%

**If yes, what, in your opinion, was the key to this friendliness?**

- constant (state) cultivation of a Soviet identity and the diffusion of the ideas of brotherhood and internationalism 68%
- authoritarian nature of the Soviet regime and fear to express true feelings 28%
- other 4%

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<sup>43</sup> As mentioned in chapter 2, given the small sample size the goal is not to be able to claim having a statistical sample of individuals who accurately represent 'their community'. Rather I aimed to explore in some more detail the responses of people whose experiences could allow to complement in-depth interviews. For logistical reasons it was not possible to conduct the same survey in Azerbaijan.



## NK

**Q. Did you know any Azeris with whom you had regular formal or informal contact (neighbour, friend, work colleague, family member)?**

Yes 69%

No 31%

**In your opinion, were Armenian-Azeri relations during the Soviet era friendly?**

Yes 33%

No 46%

Don't know 21%

**If yes, what, in your opinion, was the key to this friendliness?**

– constant (state) cultivation of a Soviet identity and the diffusion of the ideas of brotherhood and internationalism 50%

– authoritarian nature of the Soviet regime and fear to express true feelings 50%

While I do not wish to suggest that this data is in any way representative of the general public opinion in Armenia or NK it does seem to support at least two observations. Firstly, it is difficult to separate the effect of Soviet ideological construction, which aimed to generate a new internationalist consciousness, maintain a spirit of unity and cohesion from those cases of genuinely friendly interaction that were not the result of a deliberate state policy. In this sense, the protagonists appear to have absorbed facets of state identity discourse, while their attitudes and understandings of micro-level communication partly mirrored the prescriptions of the state. Secondly, the often not fully rationalized interpretation of confirmed and unconfirmed episodes of past victimization (which were a living memory in the minds of some people) constrained those members of Armenian and Azeri communities who strove to resist radical outcomes in an increasingly rigid and

ethnicized polity in the late 1980s. In this context any attempt to successfully manage (emerging) conflict and prevent it from taking on a self-reinforcing quality would have required politically astute and rapid decision-making which was not forthcoming from the Soviet ruling elites. The next section will consider how intra-movement change and competition affected the transformation of Armenian goals.

### **Intra-elite competition**

Very soon after Sumgait and the decision of the central authorities to allocate the development package to NK facilitating socio-economic improvement and strengthening cultural links with Armenia the public leaders of the NK movement began to change. The old strongly pro-Soviet intelligensia – writers, poets, scientists (e. g. Kaputikyan, Balayan) retreated and new intellectuals came to the fore, more uncompromising with Moscow authorities. This younger generation was more vocal towards the center and raised the problem up to a political issue between Moscow and the Armenian people. With time the activism transformed into a larger democratic movement advocating the country's independence. The NK Committee – the official organization created to give voice to Armenian grievances and eventually to create a vehicle for the democratization of the political system – cautioned the Armenian public against falling prey to a fear of a rebirth of Pan-Turkism.

Thus, despite the solidarity experienced by participants in the first demonstrations for NK, the platform of the younger sections of Armenian elites diverged quite significantly from popular ideas commonly expressed in public discourse. Another area of difference was the attitude towards Russia. The new elite emphasized its suspicions of Russians and argued strongly against traditional Soviet Armenian

thought, which glorified Russia and the Soviet Union as the key protector (s) against Pan-Turkism. One of the main representatives of this rather radical strand, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who became the first president of independent Armenia, wrote:

This mindset [the idea of Armenia being able to realize its full potential only under the shelter and protection of a strong state, like Russia] takes our nation toward moral slavery, and deprives it of the opportunity to become a political ally, which is the guarantor of success in politics. The concept of Armenia...as a factor in Russia's interests...is full of danger for the destiny of our nation' (cited in Hakobyan, 20.09. 2008).

At the same time some members of the elite continued to support the preservation of the USSR in whatever form, seeing Moscow as the main guarantor of Armenian interests, even if this role had been shaken by Moscow's (nationality) policy failures.

### **The politicization of the population**

One of the least researched and frequently overlooked, yet dramatic, far-reaching and lasting aspects of the NK and other conflicts is the gradual politicization of the population (see Tchilingirian, 2003: 143 for one notable exception). I suggest that the breakdown of everyday relations at the micro-social level and the transformation of previously accepted norms of coexistence, whereby people on both sides come to exclude each other from social interactions cannot be explained solely by considering the role of external and internal elites as instigators of ethnic rivalry. Major attitudinal shifts can hardly be accounted without reference to the (not fully controllable) waves of nationalist agitation. Mobilization also led to the radicalization of most political actors by

bringing contestation over historical, cultural and border issues onto the public stage whereas earlier such conflicts had been apparent only to a narrow circle of intellectuals.<sup>44</sup> Mobilization and counter-mobilization can polarize two communities by severing pre-existing ties between them. The emerging social crisis – the breaking up of old friendships and neighbourly relations – results in the politicization of the population:

With the outbreak of the conflict it began to be clearly felt that something was slipping away from the Azeri population. First, the former sincerity in interaction (between the two communities) started to evaporate. Second, a sense of fear and caution on both sides appeared. Third, came the incomprehension of events – who is orchestrating all that? (author interview with Ali Abasov, 7 January 2009, Baku).

This breakdown was largely an unintended consequence of high levels of mobilization and the spiraling of old and new conflicts across all sectors of society and the political system:

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1988 when we came back to the Institute after summer holidays we were told that the classes were cancelled for at least a month and that the Principal would have to make a decision [about our future], as studying in mixed (Armenian-Azeri) groups was no longer possible and was becoming dangerous (author interview with Ashot Gulyan, 22 July 2008, Stepanakert).

While limited communal collaboration and a degree of moderation persisted among some ordinary people, the transformation of actual behaviour taking place was not self-explanatory. Murat Somer writing on the case of Yugoslavia describes this social distancing as a cascading process that changes behaviour and attitudes and, once begun, is very difficult to stop. ‘Cascades’ are:

. . . self-reinforcing processes that change the behaviour of a group of people through interpersonal dependencies . . . Cascade models explain situations in which the individual’s incentives for taking an

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<sup>44</sup> See chapter 3 on this period.

action, holding a belief, or conforming to a norm depend significantly on the behaviour of others (Somer, 2001: 129).

Thus, the hardening of boundaries between the communities is best explained as a collective interaction process where the framing attempts of political entrepreneurs coalesce with incidents of conflict spreading across the population in a cascading fashion. As the Armenian and Azeri parties began to polarize there was a steady evaporation of the 'third space' which had existed in the form of limited dialogue between small initiative groups on both sides and constitutional means of addressing the problem.

In the second half of 1988 tens of thousands of Azeris left Armenia for Azerbaijan, there was also a flow of Armenian population from Azerbaijan. Adopting Mario Diani's terminology we can say that from then on each community's 'action was largely embedded within the...ethno-national cleavage of the region' (Diani, 2000: 398) and participants tended 'to draw their acquaintances from milieus directly connected to the core group they belong to' (2000: 394). Azeri and Armenian refugees partly provided volunteers for the local defense groups that started to be organized by both communities. The formation of these local defense groups laid the groundwork for the later development of Armenian and Azeri armed organizations.

The devolution of political authority to new republican political institutions that accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union was combined with a complete closure of institutional avenues of conflict regulation. The pursuit of such institutional avenues remained a possibility, even if very remote, as long as the weak and imperfect adjudication by the state was in place. Perhaps the most dangerous consequence of the fall of Soviet power was its loss of control over Soviet troops stationed in

Azerbaijan and Armenia. Some units of the army in Armenia reportedly participated, together with Armenian self-defense units, in the expulsion of Azeris from the republic. In Azerbaijan the 104<sup>th</sup> division of the Soviet army sold weapons and military equipment to Azeri militias. Armenia received arms delivered by Russian high military officers in 1991-1992. Azeri warlords also had arms trade contacts with Russian military. Both sides accused the former Soviet army of helping their opponents. Isolated clashes between NK Armenians and Azeris turned into a full scale war by early 1992, shortly after Soviet collapse.

### **Conclusion**

For elites engaged in struggles over national self-determination the earlier entrenchment of narratives of massacres and ethnic extinction which resonated with the intellectual construction of (perceived) historical precedents and ethnic injustices allowed to represent reality in terms of familiar preexisting models. Yet the strength of Armenian national identity and the receptiveness of the social terrain does not fully account for the success of mobilization or the rapidity with which a pattern of cultural, linguistic and relatively moderate reunification demands changed to more openly secessionist demands. The identification of ‘objective factors’ frequently associated with conflict situations also tells us little if we do not uncover the meaning of those objects to relevant actors. Rather it is the collective perceptions of failed state policies and the wider context of systemic crisis that, in conjunction with less contingent factors helps explain this transformation.

The weakening of the authorities in Moscow and its incapacity to play a decisive role in making political decisions led to a power vacuum within which anti-Soviet and pro-independence elites could come to the fore. Most of the sources of friction were there well before Gorbachev’s

rise to power and the launch of his reform project. It was largely the attempt at reform that destabilised the existing political arrangements, raised expectations among ‘peripheral’ groups and opened up space for new political forces to emerge and clash with Moscow and with each other. Yet at each stage violent confrontation may not have occurred or at least may not have been as intense had certain issues and actions not caused emotional responses in large sections of each community.

Emotional attachments to territory, frustration at (perceived) economic and political inequalities, fear of demographic domination, anger at previous violence and perceived injustices all appear to be driving mobilization and participation in the violence. Once the movement for NK became fully visible in the political architecture of the region, its repertoire of action and ideology progressively transformed as a new revitalised sense of ‘we’ was created and largely imposed from outside the movement, from the process of its interaction with the environment in which protest took place.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The dialectics of ethnic relations in Northern Ireland in the early 1960s**

#### **Introduction**

The civil rights movement (hereafter CRM) and the subsequent violent escalation in Northern Ireland has had a major impact on the political, institutional and ideological configuration of the region. For this reason it has continued to be the subject of different and sometimes conflicting historical and analytical narratives. This chapter aims to introduce the main interpretations of the CRM mobilization, while highlighting the need to move beyond narrative historical interpretations of events that fail to specify how transformations within a movement happen, as well as what brings about the success or failure of a specific nationalist agenda. A few exceptions aside (e.g. Bosi, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011; Smyth, 2006; De Fazio, 2009) the government-challenger interaction tends to be described rather than analyzed or explained. I analyze the transformation of extremely obvious and material concerns (discrimination in electoral practices, employment, housing, security laws and justice system) into collective action in the mid 1960s.

This examination also aims to critique some of the traditional interpretations of ethnonational activism in Northern Ireland that see it as rooted in changes in the socioeconomic environment and a natural reaction to real and perceived failures of Stormont and Westminster to adequately respond to and placate nationalist demands. Traditional models are largely based on the collective behavioural approach. The ad hoc explanation usually stresses a minority population's grievances



whose political expression has been oppressed in a state dominated by the ethnic ‘other’.

I argue that the nationalism that eventually emerged proceeded from a rational desire to take advantage of what the activists perceived to be an opening of opportunities, partly in the form of the fracturing of unionism and resulting uncertainty. Elites played a crucial role particularly in framing and promoting ‘the attribution of threat’ (De Fazio, 2009: 165)<sup>45</sup>. With time radical elements from both communities in Northern Ireland highlighted boundaries and made them more salient by differentiating social relations on either side more sharply from each other and increasing the extensiveness of shared representations of a group. The collective representation of events and actors is based not upon hard facts and uncontested evidence but upon continuous interpretative disputes between rival political entrepreneurs. In particular, leaders influence the way in which risk is factored into mass perceptions about collective future (Hale, 2008: 77). Building on these premises the chapter aims to consider the interactions and disconnections between elite strategies and opportunities presented by the shifting social, political and cultural environment. In so doing it critiques approaches that see radicalization as an unproblematic extension or evident aftermath of political mobilization. I advocate a perspective focusing more on the reciprocal influences between real and symbolic context transformations and redefinition on the one hand, and (changing) elite capacity to initiate, implement or resist intercommunal boundary shifts on the other.

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<sup>45</sup> See the explanation of this term in chapter 4.

## **Socio-historical background**

The partition of Ireland with the British royal ascent of the Government of Ireland Act in December 1920 ensured a division of the population of Northern Ireland between a minority – approximately one third of the population Catholic (predominantly nationalist) and majority (two thirds) Protestant (predominantly unionist) community<sup>46</sup>. The weakness of the Northern Ireland institutional system and its incapacity to channel demands and contentious issues directly depended on the nature of the regional ethno-political cleavage.

Politics in Northern Ireland historically had been marked by unionist control of the state apparatus. Coupled with the disadvantages tied to being an electoral minority, Catholics experienced economic disparities that ensured unionist governmental domination. The combination of fears of Irish irredentism, an unreliable British government and nationalist disloyalty sufficed to justify socio-political domination in the region through a strategy of what has been described as hegemonic control (McGarry and O’Leary, 1996; Smooha, 2001, 2005). Most of the region’s political parties reinforced sociopolitical segregation by constructing exclusive identities, facilitating and consolidating the ethnonational cleavage, as well as its crystallization in the political system. Initially proportional representation was introduced as a means of safeguarding minority rights for local and parliamentary elections (in the Local Government Acts of 1919 and the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 respectively). Only one set of local elections in 1920 and two general contests in 1921 and 1925 were held under the single transferable voting system. The Stormont regime abolished PR for local elections in the 1922 Local Government Act and for parliamentary

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<sup>46</sup> Because of the tight relationship that exists in Northern Ireland between religious identities and constitutional positions the labels ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ often imply a political ideology (‘nationalist’ and ‘unionist’ respectively).

elections in the 1929 House of Commons Act. The effect of this move was that Northern Ireland reverted to the plurality voting method with newly created single member electoral districts. The measure might not have targeted nationalists as such but aimed at the consolidation of unionist vote (Hadfield, 1989: 52). Unionists interpreted their loss of seats in the 1925 general election ‘if not as a defeat, at least a dangerous trend’ (Osborne, 1982: 140, cited in Coakley, 2009: 257).

Regardless of the underlying motivations behind the changes, the arrangement of the majoritarian electoral system seems to have sharpened and even institutionalized the systematic exclusion of the minority from the exercise of power at the national level. Most of concrete political decision-making operated quite autonomously at the local level, especially in areas of housing, economic planning and education. This was achieved mainly through the ‘endemic’ gerrymandering practice of redrawing the electoral boundaries and maintaining political control of housing allocation procedures. After 1945 the franchise remained restricted to ratepayers and multiple votes in local government elections were granted to business owners who were predominantly unionists (Whyte, 1983). This arrangement disenfranchised a large number of people (overwhelmingly Catholics), who would have been eligible to vote at the local level.

Discrimination against the Catholic population led to the emergence of a radically segmented society in which the two communities lived ‘parallel lives in a patchwork of small segregated areas’ (Bloomfield, 1998: 125): ‘What we were going towards at the time was the creation of an apartheid society. Separate schools, separate churches, separate workplaces, separate housing sites. That was not the way to go’ (author interview with Patrick McClean, 4 January 2010, Beragh). Marc Mulholland (2000a: 141) describes unionist attitudes towards nationalist

mobilization as ‘defensive rather than aggressive’. While gerrymandering and the general ‘defensive posture of cultural and political segregationism’ (Mulholland, 2000: 307) was publicly denied, some unionists privately recognized its existence. A former Minister of Home Affairs Edmond Warnock wrote:

If ever a community had a right to demonstrate against a denial of civil rights, Derry is the finest example. A Roman Catholic and nationalist city has for three or four decades been administered (and none too fairly administered) by a Protestant and unionist majority secured by a manipulation of the ward boundaries for the sole purpose of maintaining unionist control... It was defensible on the basis that the safety of the State is the supreme law (Letter to the Prime Minister from Edmond Warnock, CAB/9B/205/7, 13.11.1968, PRONI).

Proposals were introduced for ensuring fair housing allocation to ‘prevent the wholly indefensible approach of certain authorities’ (Conclusions of a meeting of the Cabinet, CAB/4/1414:2, 14. 11.1968, PRONI)<sup>47</sup>. The issue to consider in this context is not so much the extent of actual discrimination but the changing in the 1960s perceptions of those who came to believe that discrimination had exceeded its tolerable limits.

Scholars have analyzed the multiple mechanisms by which the hegemony has developed and unionist loyalty and unity were maintained. They included the restriction of the franchise; gerrymandering of electoral boundaries, preferential treatment of Protestants in employment and the allocation of housing; derogation of

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<sup>47</sup> The reality of discrimination within Northern Ireland was also recognized in Britain, especially by pressure groups that were highly supportive of the effective representation of the nationalist minority. The Secretary of the National Council for Civil Liberties upon which the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was later modeled acknowledged that ‘discrimination did exist, especially in employment’, and that ‘there was room for some reexamination of the electoral procedures’ (*The Irish Independent*, 15.03.1965). A report on Northern Ireland later concluded that ‘...the housing situation is very bad...in Derry housing is still where it was twenty years ago, people obviously live in as bad conditions now...’ (*Report on civil and social rights in Northern Ireland – an investigation by the Belgian League for the defense of human rights*, CAB/9B/ 205/8, February 1969, no specific date, PRONI).

civil rights, blocked upward mobility, unbalanced educational opportunities and the formation of a uniformed unionist police apparatus (Bew et. al., 2002; McGarry and O’Leary, 1996). One key area of the criminal justice and security system which was widely perceived by the nationalist community to constitute a major infringement on civil liberties was the Special Powers (Civil Authorities) Act of 1922. The Act elevated police powers to an almost emergency level situation. It gave the police and the Northern Ireland Minister of Home Affairs virtually unlimited authority to outlaw political organizations, ban public processions and assemblies, censor publications, search premises without warrants, detain and intern suspects indefinitely without charge<sup>48</sup>.

A second area of the legal system where nationalists had grievances was the absence of an independent judiciary. Judges at all levels were associated with the Unionist party and since qualifications for jury service were based on property, Catholics/nationalists remained generally excluded and Protestants/unionists formed the overwhelming majority on jury lists. Minority confidence in the judiciary as the independent vehicle for securing justice was lacking (Boyle et al., 1975: 11). It is not surprising therefore that one of NICRA’s legal experts argued in 1969: ‘Our people are afraid of the Courts: they believe the judicial system as it operates in the blatantly sectarian conditions of life here is loaded against them’ (*The Irish Times*, 02.12.1969, cited in Carlton, 1981: 228). Similarly, one of the activists has recently recalled: ‘It was difficult for Catholics to have access to the Courts... Many people did not recognize the Courts... We saw the Courts as a tool of

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<sup>48</sup> For a detailed examination of the provisions of the Act see (Campbell, 1994). For a discussion of the numerous instances of the invocation of the legislation to suppress the activity of Republican organizations see (Donohue, 1998: 1091-1102; Boyle et al., 1975: 14-15, 38-39).

unionism’ (author interview with Eddie Toman, 25 February 2010, London)<sup>49</sup>.

As is well documented little attempt was made to generate the loyalty and consent of the nationalist minority. The unionist government systematically excluded the nationalist community from participation in key political, social and economic arenas. Unionists tended to rationalize their hegemony by pointing to nationalists’ refusal to recognize and accept the foundational legitimacy of the post-partition northern state. Very little space existed for groups that did not align according to region’s ethnonational cleavage. As a consequence, observers labeled Northern Irish elections as ‘sectarian head-counts,’ and the political system as highly ‘parochial’ (Rose 1971: 65). The Nationalist Party was weak, fragmented and partly disadvantaged by the system reinforced by minority apathy. The political power of the party was also weakened by their frequent policy of abstentionism, even when they were elected to Parliament. This strategy remained ineffective and served only to bolster unionist mistrust. In the face of perceived external threats and internal disloyalty to the regime the Ulster Unionist party fostered solidarity across class lines.

At least four main issues of controversy can be identified in the literature on this period: 1) the extent of institutionalised sectarian practices in the 1960s; 2) the role of constitutional aims in the emergence of the CRM – that is the relative importance of internal

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<sup>49</sup> Some commentators (e.g. Prince, 2007: 73) have suggested that the nationalist minority refused to have recourse to law, as they wanted to provoke a confrontation with the Stormont regime. While this was true for some sections, the material and organizational resources required for lengthy litigation should also be taken into account, when evaluating the potential to redress grievances by legal means:

The nationalist community was not organized in such a way as to raise the kind of money that would have been necessary...We had no patience for the notion that we had to start about raising money and engaging teams of lawyers. We thought these matters were too urgent to be left to years and years and years of law cases (author interview with Denis Haughey, 7 January 2010, Belfast).

reforms versus broader ‘pan-national’ objectives and the extent to which those reforms were regarded by the nationalist community as a necessary first step towards constitutional change. Specific questions concern the scope of involvement of the IRA in shaping the strategies of the movement and the degree to which the activism can be described as ‘old nationalism’ in a new guise; 3) the extent and relevance of British government intervention for Stormont reforms; 4) the impact of international events and the mechanisms for transmitting this influence, as well as the importance of specific opportunity-level factors.

Disagreements over the above points reflect a broader divide between internal and externally-oriented analytical approaches to the conflict. For proponents of externally oriented explanations the key cleavage centers on competing conceptions of national belonging and political power. The two conceptions revolve around the aspiration to a united Ireland held by nationalists and republicans, and the goal of maintaining strong constitutional links with the United Kingdom advocated by unionists. This deep division pulls most members of society towards opposing poles of political reference and allegiance – Dublin or London. Internal accounts, by contrast, see the roots of the conflict in the variety of economic, political, cultural and institutional conditions *within* the province<sup>50</sup>. In line with such ‘inward-looking’ literature, the traditional explanation of the radicalization of the CRM in the late 1960s accords primacy to fundamental changes in the socioeconomic and political structure of Northern Ireland that led members of the nationalist community to challenge the state in order to achieve equal political and social rights (e. g. (Purdie, 1990). By this analysis, the nationalist community mobilized when the Northern Ireland

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<sup>50</sup> A detailed overview of the distinctions between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ explanations can be found in (McGarry and O’Leary, 1995).

state raised their expectations of change but failed to deliver on its initial promise.

### **The contradictions of O'Neill's 'bridge-building' policies**

The appointment of Terrence O'Neill who succeeded Lord Brookeborough as Prime Minister in 1963 marked a new era in Northern Ireland community relations policy, as he was the first Unionist leader who aspired to secure nationalist backing for the regime and adopted less overt forms of control compared to his predecessors. O'Neill represented the most liberal and reformist group of the unionist elite, which was interested primarily in the economic development of Northern Ireland rather than in the mere conservation of political privileges for unionists. 'O'Neillism', as it came to be known, represented an ideological stance that attempted to bring 'reform, reconciliation, economic and social equality' to Northern Ireland (Wichert, 1991: 87). For the first time in Northern Ireland's history reconciliation and an improved social and economic position for all citizens became the official policy.

Struggling to keep in check the growing popularity of the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) – the party with the potential to undermine the unionists with support across the ethnonational divide - O'Neill emphasized the relevance of economic well-being to face the downturn that followed the post-war economic boom. Being a proponent of industrial progress and enhanced collective wealth, he believed that rapid industrialization and job creation could solve most of Northern Ireland's problems by alleviating poverty. State and international investment in industrial infrastructure and the rationalization of administrative structures and planning provisions were also implemented through the establishment of a new Ministry for Development and a



Ministry for Health and Social Services in 1964<sup>51</sup>. The idea that Catholics would naturally seek greater integration within Northern Ireland and support the Unionist Party if given a chance to ‘live like Protestants’ by obtaining jobs and residing in better neighbourhoods resulted in a very superficial approach, which was hardly followed up by tangible reform. During O’Neill’s period in office claims of discrimination were generally contrasted, at least in the official discourse, with the need to improve community relations:

It seems... that a great deal of the trouble we have experienced has been due to a lack of communication between the governing and the governed... Let us not be so preoccupied with our remaining difficulties and bend our very best efforts to removing the remaining differences, which cause friction in the community’ (Stormont Papers, 17.12.1968: 28-30).

The basic tenets of O’Neil’s position included a commitment to self-help, vigorous promotion of trade and investment and the revitalization of a ‘physical and social environment, which was not good enough for this day and age’ (O’Neill, 1969: 42)<sup>52</sup>. O’Neill’s premiership, thus, revolved around two intertwined themes – increased majority-minority interaction and the creation of a broad industrial base. His inclusive economic doctrine of unionism grounded almost entirely in industrial modernization and social investment identified improvements in community relations as crucial to the success of the new economic

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<sup>51</sup> The newly formed Ministry of Development was allowed to implement planning projects broadly ‘in the interests of Northern Ireland as a whole’ (*Planning Circular*, 1965: 3). The move towards centralization of power through conferring many of the planning and administrative powers on the centralized authorities reinforced unionist perceptions that the functions of local government bodies as repositories of political patronage and pillars of unionist control would diminish. In this context local authorities argued that ‘local government should govern and should not be a rubber stamp for the central government’ (*Belfast Telegraph*, 28.10.1965).

<sup>52</sup> As mentioned above, physical segregation at the immediate neighbourhood and city/town level, as well as a separation of civic, religious and educational facilities had been a remarkable feature of communal coexistence throughout the Province. Thus, O’Neill’s long-term reform plans included housing and social integration to remedy what he called a ‘segregation of spirit which occurred as a direct result of separate education and separate lives’ (O’Neill, 1969: 14-15). See chapter 6 on the CRM’s tactical challenging of traditional spatial divisions.

strategy<sup>53</sup>. Unlike his predecessors, O'Neill freely expounded the rhetoric of liberal democracy, even if he sounded more like a reformer than he actually was. In his first five years in office O'Neill spoke openly of 'building bridges' and sought to gain support from the Catholic/nationalist community by engaging in a wide range of symbolic gestures and sporadic acts of goodwill. He visited Catholic schools and hospitals, recognized the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions<sup>54</sup> (Mulholland, 2000a: 34-7).

The effect of state intervention into planning and industrial development was to reinforce existing divisions. Most of the new industrial projects went to predominantly unionist populated areas of the region, while nationalist areas continued to suffer from severe economic degradation. The state might have had little control over the seemingly technical decisions of location which might explain its lack of practical action to reverse the trend. It was believed that such planning and development initiatives could still be effective in serving the long-term goal of bringing about dramatic improvements in intergroup relations. As the then Minister of Commerce remarked:

The aim of industrial development in Ulster was not only to create new jobs. We believed that by raising the general level of prosperity for everyone, by making it possible for all our citizens to have a secure job and thus a good house and a decent standard of living, the traditional

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<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that although the economic situation in Northern Ireland started to improve gradually with O'Neill's modernization policies, its economic performance was very weak and in decline during the period immediately prior to the accession of O'Neill. By 1961 unemployment was five times higher than in the rest of Britain. (Wilson, 1965: 21). It reached 7.9% in 1963 (Bew et al., 2002: 134) which was above the UK average ratio. In terms of the GDP per capita relative to the UK average Northern Ireland consistently remained the poorest region. Between 1951 and 1958 Northern Ireland's relative income per capita slipped from 65 to 61% of the national average and only between 1966 and 1973 did it converge from 63 to 71.1% of the national average (Brownlow, 2007: 71-2). Northern Ireland's growth was about 1% below par relative to a typical European region (Brownlow, 2007: 72).

<sup>54</sup> The decision was significant because it diverged from previous patterns and reversed Brookeborough's policy. The Committee was previously denounced by Lord Brookeborough as 'pro-republican' (Eamonn Phoenix, *The Irish Times*, 03. 01. 1995). By contrast, O'Neill strove to encourage participation of trade unions in the economic activity of the government by enabling them to engage in the new Advisory Economic Council and labour training programs (O'Neill, 1969: 63).

divisions in our community would soften and become blurred (Faulkner, 1978: 41).

But the nationalist community interpreted the inadequate industrial modernization of nationalist areas as yet another proof of the unequal and sectarian nature of the state. The insufficiency and (perceived as) contradictory nature of such industrial development and other planning initiatives which appeared to have the genuine intention of promoting economic flourishing and interethnic interaction are especially analytically interesting in a divided environment, like Northern Ireland. They also raise the broader issue of the constraints facing community leaders attempting to pursue the path of reform, economic development, political accommodation and/ or compromise. For example, the implementation of regional planning in the mid 1960s (the Wilson plan) seemed to have the effect of destabilizing intergroup relations, because it was seen by members of both communities as a hindrance and even a threat to securing economic opportunities, and, more importantly, maintaining communal identities. In this context the plan became not just a technical document but a (non-) persuasive story which those affected by it interpreted in quite vastly divergent and often conflicting ways. On the one hand, Catholic/nationalists viewed the regional planning as a new step in a series of attempts to degrade the region. On the other hand, many of the collective fears of Protestant/unionists were (re)ignited, in particular the loss of political economic, institutional and territorial control and perceived as increasingly real nationalist inclusion into the polity.

In 1965 O'Neill took his most courageous initiative by meeting Sean Lemass, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland, at Stormont – the

first meeting of this kind to occur since partition and by visiting Dublin shortly afterwards. Such moves undoubtedly had the dual effect of raising nationalist expectations and disorientating the unionist community, which considered his actions as disloyal to the United Kingdom, as well as stimulating controversy within the ranks of the Unionist Party. Some members feared the effect this decision would have on the rank and file perceptions and image of the ruling elite and started to demand assurances that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland would remain unchanged (Kaufmann, 2007: 26).

It is important to consider here internal unionist forces that opposed O'Neill's 'bridge-building' policies and some of the reasons behind uncertainty and disunity among unionist elites. Unionists constituted the majority of the population in the North and Catholic/nationalists were regarded by many as disloyal citizens who aspired to destroy the link to Britain and establish a united Ireland. A certain sense of superiority towards nationalists came from unionist privileged socioeconomic positions within Northern Ireland. This attitude had been reinforced by a variety of structural and historical circumstances. As a minority on the island as a whole, however, the unionist community had several sources of fear that contributed to a confrontational and frequently hostile attitude to nationalist political participation. The culturally mixed context of pessimism and defensiveness has been often noted in relation to Northern Ireland (e. g. Finlay, 2001: 3-20). Within Northern Ireland politics in general, and the unionist community in particular, invocations of 'loyalty', 'trust' and more often their opposites, 'disloyalty' 'betrayal', 'mistrust', 'untrustworthiness' and 'treason', have been central themes of its political and cultural life. Unionists' political mythology replete with images of siege and betrayal finds its roots not only in the presence of a sizeable nationalist minority in the North but

also in the demographic position of Protestant/unionists. Individuals have the opportunity to perceive their ingroup either as a majority or an outnumbered minority depending on the geographical frame of reference (Stevenson et al., 2007: 107; Crighton and Iver, 1991; Schaller and Abeysinghe, 2006: 617). The political geography of Northern Ireland in the wider context of North–South and British–Irish interaction were largely responsible for the fact that traditionally unionism has assumed a defensive position with an emphasis on maintaining Protestant unity against perceived external threats.

The British parliamentary system where the British Parliament retained ultimate sovereignty over Northern Ireland and had the power to abolish the government strengthened the sense of insecurity based on the perception that the British could pull out of the North leaving the unionist community at the mercy of a larger neighbour and threatening the existence of the Northern Ireland state (Cassidy, 2008). In a similar vein, M. Mulholland (Mulholland, 2004: 187-206) and G. Walker (Walker, 2004) have recently argued that the prevailing strategies (including discrimination) introduced and accepted by unionists to control the Northern Ireland minority denote the pragmatism and pessimism of unionism, stranded between perceived British indifference and the fear of loss of control to (Catholic) southern irredentism, not its supremacy. J. Todd (1987) has identified two main strands in shaping unionist identities and aspirations. The first entails a conditional obligation to ‘Greater’ British sovereign power. The second (loyalist) involves an obligation to the Ulster unionist community that perceives itself as a besieged group ultimately dependant on its own resources for its security. The challenge to the CRM emerged largely from the second mode.

In addition, the Protestant/unionist community seemed to have significant material and symbolic rewards in maintaining the status-quo. On the one hand, the structural-institutional configuration of the Northern Ireland polity was designed in such a way as to minimize perceived external threats. On the other hand, political structures provided a favourable opportunity to dominate and majority rule was seen as a natural and legitimate feature of democracy. Such structures allowed unionists to see the government as the legitimate representative of their interests and the defense of the government as fundamental to their identity and material well-being. The situation started to change in the period after the Second World War when the unionist government was forced largely by the defection of working class Protestants to the Northern Ireland Labour Party to accept the welfare state. The authorities also became increasingly aware of the shifting international environment where the creation of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights left the regime extremely vulnerable to new forms of criticism from its nationalist and labour opponents (Patterson, 1999: 113-4). This consideration encouraged officials to try and ensure that the government did not do anything which would allow it to be presented as 'sectarian' and discriminatory.

Such developments made many grassroots unionists deeply concerned that the welfare state and industrialization in areas like (London)Derry would upset the fragile demographic balance and undermine unionist control of border counties where nationalists constituted the majority of the population. Thus, even before the challenges of the CRM in the 1960s governing unionist elites found themselves under pressure from the grassroots for prioritizing material interests over ethnonational loyalties. The Unionist Party's alliance with the Conservatives at Westminster also undermined intra-unionist

consensus. The reforms of the 1960s further alienated many unionists from their political class and opened the space for an ultra-Protestant loyalist political agenda directed by Paisley. The timing of O'Neill's meeting with Lemass also appears to have heightened unionist fears of impending constitutional change (O'Callaghan and O'Donnell, 2006), which reveals the close relationship between political accommodation and constitutional transformation in the minds of many loyalists.

1966 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising against British rule in Ireland. The anniversary sparked widespread rumours of a republican invasion from the South compelling Stormont to seal off the border during commemoration events. Thus, O'Neill's reformist gestures and the (real or perceived) appeasement of the nationalist minority, the improved environment of North-South relations symbolized by the O'Neill-Lemass 'watershed' and lack of unity of unionist elites were among the constituent elements of the threat/opportunity balance that favoured the activation of the loyalist countermovement.

In addition to the tangible and deliberate socio-economic reforms, a number of unplanned changes were occurring, which caused growing concern among sections of the unionist community. An international ecumenical movement, which promoted a gradual integration of Christian religions was taking root (Nelson, 1984). For example a conference on the theme in 1961 concluded that 'denominations of Protestantism appeared to be much more conscious of the universalism that should characterize the Church than they were a generation ago' (*Irish Independent*, 27.06. 1961). In this context some Protestants feared being subsumed within the Catholic Church (Bruce, 2007). Another threat lay in the trend towards secularization, which could potentially change Northern Ireland from a Protestant society to a 'secular modern

society in which religious affiliation would be of little consequence' (Bruce, 2007: 92).

As with most divided societies, Northern Ireland's political history is to a certain extent a battleground where observers tend to legitimize/deny the aspirations and grievances of one group to the benefit/expense of the other. In a lively and extended debate Christopher Hewitt and Denis O'Hearn offered contrasting perspectives on the origins of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Hewitt (1981, 1983, 1985) put forward the idea that Irish nationalism among Catholics in Northern Ireland played a greater role in the emergence of civil rights rebellion than did systematic discrimination by Unionists. Challenging Hewitt's statistical analysis, O'Hearn (1983, 1985) concluded that Catholic grievances were real and served as the main source of mobilization. It appears that when proving their respective positions the subtle shades of a rather complex social process became sometimes reduced to black and white dichotomies. Discrimination did take place but what mattered equally was the subjective perception which was fed by the history of communal conflict, as well by the objective conditions experienced by Catholics after 1921.

A number of historical accounts, biographies and memoirs provide valuable sources of relevant information for the understanding of collective mobilization from the late 1960s to the early 1970s (Devlin, 1969; Arthur, 1974; Purdie, 1990; McCluskey, 1989; O'Dochartaigh, 1994). Much attention has been afforded to the genesis and development of the CRM and the repertoire of violent/ non-violent action it utilized in the late 1960s and afterwards. The CRM has been identified as crucial for developing an agenda charged with the objective of achieving internal reform and the democratization of the state, its transformation from within (Purdie, 1990: 2; Smyth, 2006: 106) or at a later stage its



complete overthrow (Prince, 2006: 856). This is why the emergence of the CRM whose mobilizing ideology embraced reformism and attempts to build bridges between sectarian differences was perceived as so threatening to the unionist majority. In the early 1960s highly heterogeneous networks of activists started to challenge the sectarian and discriminatory aspects of the state, in particular the hegemonic structure of the unionist establishment. Two main approaches have traditionally dominated the study of collective mobilization in the Northern Ireland context.

The conspiracy interpretation was especially dominant within the unionist establishment. According to this conception, by pursuing civil rights campaigns the IRA was seeking new means to reach the old nationalist objectives. The failure of civil rights leaders to endorse the constitutional position of Northern Ireland was taken as proof of the nationalist intentions of the CRM. It is true that some more radicalized actors in the CRM viewed a campaign of civil disobedience as the means to initiate an escalating cycle of state provocation and repression which would result in the unionist government's 'dictatorial face being unmasked' (Prince, 2006: 875; Prince, 2007: 8, 73). The assumption of these radicals was that street politics, by illuminating the injustices and brutality perceived as inherent to the state, would facilitate the alliance of the Protestant and Catholic working class conjoining to ensure that their interests would be best served in a new democratic Ireland (English, 2003: 89). Protest action could, thus, be seen as a way of creating space outside institutional structures of state via challenging the legitimacy of Stormont to exist in the first place.

At the same time it is now accepted that the view of the movement as a republican/ communist conspiracy was oversimplified (Purdie, 1988: 33-41) and it is not entirely accurate to portray the CRM as simply old

Irish nationalism in a new guise. Firstly, the challengers initially saw their primary goal as the reform of the state, not its abolition. What started to matter most for the nationalist community during that period was the improvement of their own economic, social and political standing in Northern Ireland. Secondly, evidence suggests that republicans and communists were by far not the only actors in key civil rights organizations (Purdie, 1988: 33). The thinking behind republican involvement in the CRM did not fully anticipate the resurgence of communal conflict and the opportunities which developed from that.

An armed ‘border campaign’ initiated by the IRA and lasting from 1956 to 1962 raised unionist fears. This failed attempt at ‘driving out the British’ showed the Dublin-based IRA’s incomprehension of Northern Ireland society and its inability to rally mass support. The border campaign was for the most part counterproductive, it reinforced unionist fears and did not increase the enthusiasm of the minority in the North. Traditionally resistance to the Northern Irish state had resided in republicanism, which denied the fundamental legitimacy of the state itself counterposing a united Ireland as its only goal. While there is little doubt that such an aspiration did exist within the CRM, it was not the organizing principle. The Wolfe Tone Societies established in 1963 to commemorate the bicentenary of Wolfe Tone’s birth provided important organizational and ideational resources for civil rights activism by persuading ‘hardline’ sections of republicanism to abandon the tradition of violence:

We had little support from the republican movement as such... Hardline republicans refused to attend our meetings... Some of us were saying: ‘Get them away from the guns’ and we were trying to show them a different way forward (author interview with Fred Heatley, 6 January 2010, Belfast).

Political openings in the aftermath of defeat encourage strategically oriented activists to test the limits of inclusion through policy-oriented protest. To a certain extent, the members of an ethnonational community face an advantageous situation in that both inclusive and exclusive responses to protest could be seen as advancing their aims (Maney, 2007). On the one hand, protest may prove successful in pressuring the state to increase institutional and economic opportunities, as well as cultural recognition. On the other hand, the negative repercussions of such potential power shifts often lead to states refusing to substantially and fully concede political, economic and cultural rights. These refusals, in turn, publicly expose the highly exclusive nature of the divided polity generating domestic and international support for ethnonationalist activists.

After the collapse of the (border) campaign (1956–62) constitutionally minded nationalists had realized the need to rethink their strategy, which would embrace social and economic issues. Instead of a socialist revolution the republican movement opted in the short term for immediate reforms and the gradual erosion of sectarianism, the reduction of communal polarization through a civil rights campaign. Whether seeking to advance social justice as an end in itself or as a means to constitutional change, proponents of a civil rights campaign agreed that any discussion of partition should be avoided. By non-violently pursuing demands for equal citizenship, republicans would deny Unionists the ‘Orange card’ (defense of Northern Ireland constitution against a violent challenge) that they had traditionally played to justify repression:

The leadership of the republican movement from the mid 1960s had given up completely on the whole armed struggle/ violence side of things. They were moving to a position where they wanted to mobilize people in a political way...There was an element of spontaneity but those who started to organize knew what they were doing. They had a

plan and they had already been involved in radical activities, like housing and fishing protests (author interview with Brian Feeney, 5 January 2010, Belfast).

The ineffectiveness of traditional nationalist forms of contention, perceived strategic advantages and identification with activists outside of Northern Ireland all contributed to the adoption of new forms of framing.

According to this new, strategically oriented perspective, a civil rights campaign could ultimately contribute to ending partition by either:

- 1) democratising the Northern Ireland state, uniting the working class, weakening the influence of unionist ideology upon the working class and/or presenting opportunities for building alliances with moderate Unionists, thus leading to the gradual legitimisation of nationalist activities or;
- 2) exposing the inability of a sectarian state to reform itself, demonstrating its inherently irreformable nature and forcing the British government to reexamine its constitutional relationship with Northern Ireland, which would be a stepping stone towards Irish unity.

At the time most activists had settled into the realization that the long-term aspiration to a united Ireland needed to be at least temporarily sacrificed for the more immediate short-term pragmatic solutions to the minority's grievances and deliberately tried to downplay nationalist imagery and rhetoric:

The CRM was very careful to limit its objectives to civil rights and social justice and to put aside any talk of constitutional issues, the reunification of Ireland, any of that, because once those issues came up, the Irish national community and indeed the wider community was deeply divided about these issues (author interview with Denis Haughey, 7 January 2010, Belfast).

As Richard English rightly notes, ‘strong personal and ideological connections linking the 1960s IRA to earlier republican socialist thinking... provided a line of descent running through the alternative philosophy offered by the twenty-century Irish republican left’ (English, 2003: 87). The aim of this ideological section was to achieve working class agitation through a more gradual reformist grassroots strategy focused on civil liberties rather than armed insurrection. That tactics would, they believed, itself fundamentally challenge the sectarian framework which had kept Ireland’s two states divided<sup>55</sup>.

In addition, the (perceived) inadequacy of the Nationalist Party (the traditional representative of the Catholic/nationalist community) in assessing the constantly shifting social and ideological needs of the population led to its decline as a representative of minority interests. A range of newly emerging civil rights organizations started addressing issues that traditional political parties had failed to undertake: ‘This (the impotence of traditional nationalist leadership) – more than ancient hostility – seems to have produced the extra constitutional actions of 1968–9’ (Budge and O’Leary, 1973: 226). In the new context of the 1960s the party with its patronizing conservatism was widely seen as having failed to protect the nationalist community as a political force, since it did not manage to go ‘beyond the border’ of the constitutional issue, refusing to take part in unionist politics. Thus, pre-existing networks started to criticize both hard-line nationalist tactics and physical force republicanism.

Few rules regulated the grassroots membership of the movement with no special restraints or conditions to control the involvement of new members. Anyone was entitled to take part in meetings, debates and

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<sup>55</sup> The shift in republicanism was heavily influenced by Marxist economic principles, which affected their desire to rebuild the structure of Northern Ireland politics along an economic and class (left-right) rather than (perceived as) sectarian (Catholic-Protestant) axis (e. g. Johnston, 1967: 1).

final decisions. This inclusivity through informal cooperative ties, which made it difficult to distinguish clearly between various groups stemmed largely from the recognition of the political need to differentiate itself visibly from the dominant ethnic identity that was seen as homogenizing the region: ‘It was a real mixture of people and political opinions... We thought what we should do is try and make allies among broader sections of the community.... We sought to keep everybody together with common objectives’ (author interview with Edwina Stewart, 5 January 2010, Belfast).

‘People’s Democracy was an entirely open organization... If you were present at a meeting you were a member... Unionists came along as did many others’ (Vincent McCormack, e-mail correspondence with author, November 2009).

Thus, the CRM was not a centralized body but a loose affiliation of disparate campaigns with flexible boundaries: ‘It was very important for us that Protestants were represented, and they were in great numbers... It was a real melting pot of ideas, not a coherent organization’ (Kevin Boyle, e-mail correspondence with author, August 2009).

The key aspect of the campaign at this stage was the strategy of fluidity and constant ‘movement’ rather than any rigid and formal organization (Lynch, 2006: 278).

When the CRM appeared on the political scene in its ‘latent’ form the main actors in the political system had come to identify their interests largely in the continued exercise of their own roles perceived as a consolidation of their position. The CRM tried to go beyond the logic of politics being the mere preservation of the status quo and attempted to introduce a different type of grassroots activism which would have destabilised the relations between state and society by introducing a new way of achieving consensus. These forms of activity were aimed not so

much at producing disruption but at building fresh patterns of relationships that could not be contained within the existing social and political organization of Northern Ireland. The result was an innovative strategy of contention which combined non-violence with symbolic provocations, such as marching through traditionally unionist areas.

In addition, the issue of civil rights and equality between Catholic/nationalists and Protestant/unionists was emphasized by other political parties and organizations and debated across traditional distinctions, despite the fact that the Northern Irish political system had always been characterised by scarce interaction and rigid divisions with the social fabric of Northern Ireland hardly providing any ‘natural’ sources for dialogue. For example, the (NILP) channeled emerging claims and was quite influential in the support of local protest. Aaron Edwards (Edwards, 2007a, 2007b, 2008) has discussed modest but real success the NILP achieved in demonstrating the potential power for cross-community politics and ‘building up a non-sectarian labour culture during the 1950s and 1960s’ (Edwards, 2007a: 26). In January 1967 a broad range of organizations formally came together to launch the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). Its five point plan included the following aims (McClellan, n.d.: 4; NICRA, 1978: 20):

1. To defend the basic rights of all citizens.
2. To protect the rights of the individual.
3. To highlight all abuses of power.
4. To demand guarantees for freedom of speech, assembly and association.
5. To inform the public of their lawful rights.

These demands were not based on a single, coherent and elaborate ideological outlook. NICRA refused to be affiliated with any political party and attempted to function as an inclusive umbrella organization

bringing together all groups interested in civil rights and strengthening inter-organizational contacts.<sup>56</sup>

The ‘new Catholic middle class thesis’ has been the traditional explanation for the upsurge of collective action in the mid 1960s. This approach centers on fundamental changes in the socioeconomic structure of Northern Irish society and on the idea that the CRM was founded and led by a new Catholic middle class which emerged in the 1960s. The stratum was created by the extension of secondary and higher education to working class Catholics in the post World War II era (Rose, 1971: 98-100; Hirsch, 1988: 43-55; Arthur, 1974: 23; Cameron, 1969; Buckland, 1981). This transformation signified a generational change fuelled by the frustrations of a young elite with the inability and refusal of an inflexible regime to create sufficient political space that would placate minority demands. The 1950s proved to be a period of economic modernization and change.

Given the expansion of the British welfare state, nationalists were initially less concerned with the national question than with the fact that the new economic opportunities disproportionately benefited unionists. The introduction of the welfare state in Western European societies made the role of the state in directing economic and social life more transparent. The strengthening of relations with Westminster, also related to the welfare legislation, signified that Britain was to become the framework of comparison for the Northern Ireland political system.

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<sup>56</sup> The non-sectarian inclusive message of NICRA is evidenced by the wide-ranging nature of the affiliations of its executive committee members. The committee elected on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 1967 consisted of (McClean, n.d.: 4; *Irish Democrat*, 01. 11. 2008): Chairman: Noel Harris (Trade Unions representative); vice-chairman: Dr. Conn McCluskey (Campaign for Social Justice); secretary: Derek O'Brien Peters (Communist Party); treasurer: Fred Heatley (Belfast Wolfe Tone Society); public relations: Jack Bennett (Belfast Wolfe Tone Society); other members are Betty Sinclair (Belfast Trades Council); Billy McMillen (Republican Clubs), John Quinn (Liberal Party), Michael Dolley (National Democratic Party), Joe Sherry (Republican Labour Party), Jim Andrews (Ardoyne Tenants' Association), Paddy Devlin (Northern Ireland Labour Party), Tony McGettigan (no affiliation). Robin Cole (Unionist) was co-opted later.



In particular, British policies regarding the economy and social reforms in areas of health service, public housing, education, and employment affected all citizens: ‘If people had rights in London, in Birmingham and Manchester we were entitled to the same rights here. We were entitled to the same franchise opportunities, to the same voting rights’ (author interview with Ivan Cooper, 8 January 2010, London(Derry)).

This position had the effect of enhancing expectations for nationalists without creating any real institutional avenues for channeling minority demands and produced a cycle of frustration-aggression against the state establishment. The local government network was the agency through which welfare legislation was implemented in Northern Ireland. For this reason in the early 1960s it became the cornerstone of the CRM’s activity. As Michael Farrell has noted:

...the post-war free education system and the increase in university scholarships produced a much larger, better educated Catholic middle class ambitious, anxious to participate in politics and to end their second-class status. Free education and the welfare state also made them less anxious for immediate unity with the South with its inadequate social services, and more willing to work within the Northern system (Farrell, 1976: 238).

The above perspective, thus, sees the CRM as an integral part of a process of politico-economic settlement following the Second World War when the socio-political status-quo of the region started to come under threat. It is particularly useful in showing how individual incentives for mobilization interact with broader political and organizational processes. It could be argued that the nationalist community was opting out of irredentist politics and that many, especially in the lower middle class, had been moving towards an acceptance of British liberal democratic values since the late 1950s. For

some this change signaled the beginning of gradual Catholic assimilation into Northern Ireland. For example, Paddy Devlin remarked that ‘for the first time in forty years there was a spirit of compromise in the air. People from the two communities were more prepared than ever to live together in harmony’ (Devlin, 1993: 80).

Accounts focusing on socio-structural change consider the historical context of the region and its transformative potential for socio-political relations, but do not explain everything. As Tarrow states, ‘on its own structural change only creates the objective potential for movements and cannot overcome the personal inertia nor develop the networks and solidarities necessary to mount group action’ (Tarrow, 1989: 21). For this reason it is important to introduce other factors, including regime responses, external support, the actions of other states, the agents of social control.

The ‘growth of the state’ perspective has opposed the middle class hypothesis and argued the link between post Second World War socio-economic transformations and the emergence of a Catholic middle class cannot be easily established since: ‘firstly, expansion at the top end of the Catholic social scale has been balanced by an equally important growth at the other end. Secondly, most of the changes seem to have taken place before 1961 and not to have been directly related to improved educational provision after 1944’ (Bew et al. 2002: 142-3; Morgan, 1987: 108). This strand in the literature has stressed that even though the expansion of the Catholic middle class was one feature of the minority’s experience under Stormont, the other was a substantial rise in the proportion of unskilled manual workers (Bew, et al., 2002: 150-1). The available data on the class structure of both communities supports this thesis to a certain extent. The 1968 Rose survey found that 31 per cent of Catholic respondents identified themselves as working class

compared to 47 per cent as middle class. Among Protestants 29 per cent considered themselves to be working class and 52 per cent middle class (Rose, 1971, cited in Mulholland, 2010: 69). In 1961 22.1 per cent of Catholic males and 43.8 of females in work identified themselves as upper or lower middle class versus 32.8 per cent of males and 37.9 per cent of females identifying themselves as working class (Breen and Whelan, 1999: 321). The focus in this moderately Marxist perspective is on the impoverishment of the nationalist working class and a conflict over state resources as the key element of changes in the structural environment, collective action derives largely from the conflict over the control of economic resources, and is being shaped and principally determined by social structure.

Focusing on the link between the local and the global several ‘external’ studies have discussed how exogenous shocks, the knowledge of similar mobilizational waves in different locations (like the initially similar campaigns in the United States, as well as of actions outside of the immediate communities concerned) influenced their tactics (Prince, 2006, 2007; Maney, 2000). Some authors have pointed to the connections of the CRM with the wider global movement of the 1960s: the Black civil rights campaign in the USA, the anti-Vietnam war campaign and the students’ movements around the world. It was in this relatively ‘relaxed’ and inclusive context of the 1960s, which internationally opened new spaces for collective action mobilization, also changed because of the Cold War ‘thaw’ process of international and internal “depolarization”, that the emerging CRM network saw the opportunity to adjust the Northern Ireland political system. Somewhat similarly, Purdie suggests that the construction of the movement ‘reflected a fundamental concern with civil-libertarian issues which said

little about concrete grievances over discrimination in housing, employment and electoral franchise' (Purdie, 1990: 75).

This perspective stresses the fact that what provoked mass support for the CRM was a unique and very temporary fusion of 1960s ultra-leftism common in the international arena during that historical period with a much more rooted sense of ethnic exclusion and oppression, which saw the civil rights movement, however inchoately, as an opportunity for striking a blow at structures of discrimination but also potentially the northern state itself. These works see the struggle in Northern Ireland as a part of the wider international environment of the 1960s and stress the numerous international forces that shaped and affected the movement. It is emphasised that the events in Northern Ireland were influenced far more broadly and profoundly by the non-Irish world than had previously been suggested (Prince, 2006, 2007, Bosi and Prince, 2009). G. De Fazio in his focused comparison between Northern Ireland and the African-American struggle shows the similarities between the two movements in terms of exclusionary politico-institutional structures, initial mechanisms of mobilization (via legal avenues) and the perception of a fundamental threat by the majority population. He argues that in contrast to the American CRM, the (initial) commitment of Northern Irish activists to the principle of non-violence was rhetorical rather than substantive and this difference was largely responsible for differential outcomes (De Fazio, 2009: 163-85). For De Fazio the purely strategic use of non-violence and the failure of the Northern Ireland CRM to fully incorporate non-violence into its moral and political philosophy in the early 1960s represented the decisive factor in setting off the spiral of violence and repression that followed.

Recent studies in this area have also stressed the political claim-making as a culturally embedded process. It has been argued that rather than situated within a utilitarian framework where protest tactics are devised purely in order to achieve external political aims, the CRM and collective action associated with it represented internal meaning and symbolic value to facilitate a sense of group identity and solidarity (Smyth, 2006; Bosi, 2007: 41-3). For J. Smyth (2006: 106-23) the CRM pursued the double aims of agitating for political reform and mobilizing against the perceived cultural injustice, the non-recognition and exclusion of nationalist identity. He suggests that cultural injustice was more significant as a mobilizing factor than economic exploitation (Smyth, 2006: 106). Cultural injustice is understood here as going beyond the denial of legal and formal rights, and involving the non-recognition of difference and group identity. According to Smyth, the struggle for formal rights, such as 'one man – one vote' is insufficient to explain the willingness of nationalists to redress existing grievances at that point in time (Smyth, 2006: 109). The gradual expansion of a general culture of social democratic ideals, which contradicted unionist practices on the ground led to CRM activists engaging in a moral battle over the acceptance of the minority as equal citizens of a fully participatory democratic society rather than simply striving to improve economic conditions. This approach while stressing the centrality of (non)-recognition focuses on the inherent contradiction and conflict between the universalist principles of the Keynesian welfare state and social democracy vs. the particularist nature of state power in Northern Ireland. Universalist reforms were introduced into a particularist setting.

This perspective is useful for acknowledging that opposing nationalist traditions and claims to self-determination continued to shape mobilization even when they were not highly visible. It is generally

accepted that the CRM reflected the expression of a fluid collective identity centered on a common sense of commitment to the cause of social justice through a non-sectarian and non-violent message. In spite of the differences in the CRM networks its groups shared a particular conception of civil rights based on a different approach to the discrimination issues which was 'liberal rather than nationalist in form' (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 127). The failure of the unionist government's plans for inclusive economic and social modernization was a primary catalyst for more direct contentious activity. An era of tolerance towards the nationalist community was designed to produce a more flexible and responsive leadership that would not jeopardize the state of the Union (Arthur, 1987: 90-1). By promising an opening of the political system the announcement of reforms created incentives for nationalist dissent. As O' Dochartaigh notes, the concessions introduced by the unionist government were always granted 'just too late to really make a difference' (O Dochartaigh, 1997: 310). The response of the state, especially the police with its extensive security apparatus, forced an escalation of the protestors' actions. In this view mobilization can be seen as a 'logical consequence of the closure of every other channel to bring about reform' (Purdie, 1990: 78; Bosi, 2006).

Thus, the most commonly cited factors explaining the transformation of the CRM's message from a latent to a more radical one are the sense of grievance arising out of persistent discrimination, the introduction of reforms by a previously closed and inflexible regime, the rising expectations associated with these measures and the impact of state repression on the reformation of communal identities. The emphasis on the 'repression-mobilization nexus' means that combined analytical approaches are rarely pursued simultaneously in relation to the conflict. Most of the authors concerned with Northern Ireland nationalist

mobilization agree on the thesis that the failure of the government to respond adequately to the initial protests aimed at combating political and economic discrimination and bringing about social justice which were met with repression opened the door for the radicalization of mobilization and ethnoterritorial demands both in terms of reinforcing the motivation for individual participation (White, 1989) and setting off the cycles of violence. The closure of institutional avenues to redress grievances provided a major impetus for radicalization. State responses to minority activism that galvanized collective identities, a defensive reaction against a repressive state is a key theme running through many academic and individual accounts of the events.

The apathy and inadequate responses to peaceful demands on electoral, policing and housing reforms together with confused (concession/repression) signals from the British state and a violent reaction of the loyalist community pushed the CRM into a radical change of tactics by late 1968-9 (McGarry and O'Leary, 1996: Chapter 4; Smith, 2006: 110-11). In sum, and at the risk of some reductionism, the following opportunity-related factors have been most frequently identified in the literature as fundamental to the emergence and development of the CRM:

- The changing nature of British–Irish relations. During the 1960s there was a political and economic improvement of relations between the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Several authors see this factor as important for the emergence of the CRM and argue that the beginning of a friendship between the Republic of Ireland and the UK enhanced the perception of a threat among sections of the Unionist community and raised expectations in Northern Ireland society. In 1962 both countries had applied to become members of the EEC. It has been suggested that these new forms of international relations have opened up

a communal friendship between the Republic of Ireland and the UK (e. g. Bosi, 2007: 45; McGarry and O’Leary, 1996: 155-6).

In addition, as mentioned above, the thawing of the relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland which began with the O’Neill-Lemass meeting of 1965 needs to be considered as a key transformation in the political environment of the region. Like the British government, the Irish government under Lemass sought to promote economic growth through increasing exports. A link was being made between the changing economic conditions, the growing pressures for economic modernization and the shift in attitudes towards the ‘border’ question:

When the Common Market becomes operative the border will have little significance...there will be free movement of men and materials north and south and in the whole Common Market area. One feels that the men who have been directing the border campaign have come to see this very clearly and that they have decided to leave the border to the fate of free trade... (*Connacht Tribune*, 17. 03. 1962).

Détente with the British government also became a priority during that period. A key participant has recently recognized the significance of economic considerations in bringing about a different ideological environment:

...when I look back on it now I think more important than anything we were doing were the economic changes that were happening. Southern Ireland had begun to open up to the wider world under the government at the time, to modernize the state, to attract foreign investment... There was a coming together of economic interests between Southern Ireland and Britain, and this made Ireland closer to Britain... Even the Conservative Party which had always been pronounionist started to see that Ireland was becoming a partner of Britain in the new Europe. So the British government whether Labour or Conservative had to balance between the North and the South in Ireland and not simply take the unionist side (author interview with Eamonn McCann, 8 January 2010, (London)Derry).



In a slightly different vein, C. Reeves (2004: 613-38) discusses the efforts of the Labour administration to create a favourable climate in the interaction between the British and Irish governments. His focus is on the ways in which symbolic gestures of the British government (the exhumation of the republican martyr Roger Casement and the return of the 1916 flag) contributed to improving Anglo-Irish relations while at the same time unintentionally stimulating republican sentiments in Ireland and, in the longer term, exacerbating conflictual tendencies in Northern Ireland in the 1960s. The focus on these aspects that have a substantive underpinning yet hold a high symbolic significance helps appreciate the constraining effects of symbolic acts and historical revivals on those who tried to reformulate ideas and practices, and overcome the rigidity of traditional ideological positions at the time.

- The election of Labour government in 1964 (Feeney, 1976: 8; Farrell, 1976: 243; Hennessey, 1997: 134; Bew et al., 2002: 144). Labour victory contributed to the perception of increased protest among CRM members and raised expectations, although the prospect of influential allies did not fully materialize, as Labour proved hesitant to involve itself in Northern Ireland.

- O'Neill's largely 'symbolic' and 'rhetorical' social reforms (Cameron, 1969; Purdie, 1990: 9-37; Farrell, 1976: 239-43): 'The accession of O'Neill in 1963 generated hope of change and, along with the Maghera Conference and the O'Neill-Lemass meetings, helped to create a climate among nationalists for greater cooperation and involvement with the Stormont system'. (Currie 2004: 68)

The lack of evidence of 'real' reforms from O'Neil's government is mainly emphasized by those who link collective action to a process of modernization and expansion of education (the 'Catholic middle class' thesis). The gradual revision in ideology and strategies did not lead to

effective governmental reforms, which might have produced support for O'Neill within the nationalist community:

The advance of O'Neill was an indication that people within unionism realized there was something unjust happening and they needed to address it. They were wise enough to know that if they did not address it there would be an outburst (author interview with Patrick McClean, 4 January 2010, Beragh).

At the same time nationalist claims were sharpened by the discriminatory practices of unionist local governments which considered these practices to be necessary to protect their vulnerable (often small) majorities and to strengthen their control over wide (and therefore perceived as threatening) nationalist minorities<sup>57</sup>.

- Unionist divisions (Coughlan, 1966; Ellison and Martin, 2000: 688; Mullholland, 2000; Greer, 2009a: 196-8). Several authors emphasize that O'Neill's 'building bridges' policy revealed clear evidence of conflict within the Unionist ruling elites. As mentioned above, unionism as a whole was undergoing fundamental changes designed to produce a leadership, which could guarantee the continuity of their rule. This lack of unity also contributed to the perception of a favourable environment for new forms of minority activism.

The numerous changes that occurred at the socio-economic and political level in the Northern Irish polity mirrored the fact that the

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<sup>57</sup> Three specific decisions aroused strong emotional responses among large sections of the nationalist community and were perceived as an impetus to direct action. The first was the announcement of the intention to build a new city in the predominantly Protestant/unionist area rather than in the predominantly Catholic/ nationalist deprived west. The second was the project to open a second university in the predominantly Protestant/unionist region of Coleraine with no consideration given to the expansion of the Magee College in (London)Derry: '...it was the last of a series of acts which finally convinced the citizens of Derry and the west of "Ulster" that it was the Government's intention to stifle the development of Derry in particular and west "Ulster" in general and to promote instead growth in the comparatively prosperous and unionist dominated Belfast- Coleraine-Portadown triangle in the hope of creating a redistribution of population in order to consolidate the Unionist position in "Northern" Ireland' (John Hume, *Derry Journal*, 08. 08. 1965). The third was the abandonment of plans to extend the M1 motorway linking Belfast to the west of the province.

environment outside Northern Ireland was transforming too. The Northern Ireland CRM – largely by virtue of it being a loose and heterogeneous confederation of constitutional nationalists, moderate Marxist republicans and leftist radicals – found much of its inspiration in the world beyond Northern Ireland, albeit from different and often contradictory sources. The 1960s saw many nationalists shift their allegiance away from the conservative and traditional nationalism of the previous generations to favour a more secular, inclusive and proactive form of nationalism that was compatible with social-democratic values.

For a number of members of the CRM leadership transnational events channeled and changed their understanding of the nature of sectarianism and of discrimination in the province. By joining in what seemed to some activists a worldwide movement they believed that social justice was achievable through a democratic transformation of the state from a largely reactionary unionist regime to a more pluralist system:

People genuinely did see the CRM back then as part of a global phenomenon... What was going on in Northern Ireland, in my mind, was not part of Irish history, it was part of something contemporary happening in the world... Putting all those things in a nationalist perspective would only diminish them... That was one of the reasons why I would have been against nationalism (author interview with Eamonn McCann, 8 January 2010, (London)Derry).

The ‘secondary’ issue of the border would be resolved peacefully and naturally, many hoped, if the unionist elite could be compelled to renounce the unfair practices that perpetuated its stronghold on local and provincial institutions. In the highly heterogeneous milieu of the CRM not everyone was attracted to the cross-societal diffusion of protest in the same way and by the same political actors:

In the 1960s we had still a very conservative society... Those of us who were radicalized by the 60s would have been a small number of

people. The vast majority of people who came out to support NICRA would not have been radicalized by student protests or the Vietnam war, but it had an influence on those of us who were developing strategy and leading the movement. So you had the mass movement which was in the main Catholic looking for equal rights and you had a lot of us who had started the struggle being influenced by the broader political context (author interview with Ann Hope, 12 January 2010, Belfast).

- The impact of the US civil rights movement in the 1960s (De Fazio, 2009: 163-4; Maney, 2000; Dooley, 1998; O'Dochartaigh, 1997: 23-5). The global interest in the issue of civil rights was perceived by some as a key factor for the growth of a 'new' movement in Northern Ireland and had a high symbolic significance.
- The student political mobilizations of the 1960s (Prince, 2006, 2007; Prince and Bosi, 2009: 149). During the second half of the 1960s, and especially after the riots of May 1968 in France, there was mass mobilization of students in universities throughout the world, particularly in France, Italy, Germany, Britain, and the USA. They were clearly attuned to and influenced by one another, resulting in the development and diffusion of antagonism against every kind of authority.
- The internationalization of political protest through an increasing role for mass media. The mass media could effectively contribute to attracting popular participation by gaining worldwide attention and reducing the time-space constraint. International publicity surrounding civil rights events also placed significant pressure upon the regime to enact reforms. Later as the demonstrations turned increasingly violent media coverage tended to focus more on the actions of protesters rather than their messages (Purdie, 1990, 1988: 140; Ruane and Todd, 1996: 126; Patterson, 2002: 202-5). Media coverage of political developments in Northern Ireland interacted with the goals and forms of

contention in ways that further accentuated the reform-conflict cycle. The legitimacy accorded to non-violent civil rights protest initially resulted in international publicity that jeopardised Stormont policy priorities. At a later stage negative publicity arising from repression of protest marches threatened to undermine the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the public both at home and abroad. Consequently, media coverage played a role in setting in motion a series of events leading to the escalation of violence.

One of the interpretations looks at the issues involved as the starting point for analysis. Thomas Hennessey (Hennessey, 2005) argues that the issues at stake started to change after 1968 when most of the initial grievance-based demands had been conceded – civil rights demands began to transform into national demands. Overall, the issue-driven explanation tends to assume that if specific issues (inside Northern Ireland) had been fully resolved the mobilization would not have escalated. This interpretation is not entirely convincing, as it fails to recognize the extent to which reforms failed to satisfy the CRM. In most accounts the inability and refusal of the Northern Ireland government to reform itself and to address existing complaints led to increasing frustration among Northern Irish nationalists, which spilled into violence. Some of the literature suggests that an underlying ethnic polarization had existed and was ultimately responsible for the escalation: 'With the benefit of hindsight, the surge of antagonism... might suggest that an optimistic view of community relations in the 1960s was rather superficial' (Dixon, 2001: 71). N. O'Dochartaigh argues that the 'civil rights campaign destabililised Northern Ireland by the simple fact of politically mobilizing the state Catholic minority, which had previously been quiescent'(O'Dochartaigh, 1997: 70). This approach would seem to suggest that the emergent escalation and crisis

was inexorably linked to the nature of the state itself. The Northern Ireland experience shows that models, which tend to implicitly or explicitly rely upon relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970) and other socio-economic models of protest (e. g. Davies, 1962) are quite simplistic and the actual process is much more complex.

As soon as political opportunities emerge and protests break the ground, the impact of popular protest on the political process is likely to be quite substantial. Due to the absence of regular channels of expression of discontent the dissatisfaction of the population accumulates to high levels over time. Once initial protests demonstrate the vulnerability of authorities or divisions in the leadership signaling that the risks associated with collective action have been reduced, discontent from various sources erupts in the form of non-institutional pressure on the leadership. By using civil rights ideas and non-violent civil disobedience the CRM enhanced its mobilizational resources and organizational capacities while heightening the vulnerability and receptivity of the unionist regime to its demands. Relatively high levels of intercommunal cooperation and the fluidity of interorganizational boundaries helped to take advantage of the emerging political opportunities. Loyalist use of constitutional and conspirational ideas as the basis for mobilization served mostly to increase support for its rival.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined how a growing number of protagonists in Northern Ireland started in the early 1960s to reconsider traditional nationalist values and attitudes searching for a new, more inclusive and pluralist definition of Irishness. One of the key avenues to achieving this aim was the conscious adoption and promotion by a section of civil rights leaders of previously 'foreign' concepts, such as decolonization,

radical democratic socialism and human rights. The identification of favourable opportunities for protest, while being useful for examining the emergence of dissent, tends to view the CRM largely as a homogenous, strategically oriented actor disregarding the plurality of approaches within it. In addition, the enumeration of opportunities does not fully consider the role of unionist counter-mobilization to turn the CRM challenge into a continuous cycle of violence-counter violence. This approach also underestimates the extent to which the policies of various state-level actors were affected by their understandings of the unfolding situation. In this context it is important to explain not just how Northern Ireland's communities became mobilized on an ethnic basis but also the politicization and shifts in the intergroup boundary<sup>58</sup>. This process was not self-evident and those who were politically active in the 1960s had not been directly socialized into a violently antagonistic environment. On the one hand, we need to know what sustained CRM mobilization throughout the decade. On the other hand, any credible interpretation of the movement's short life span, limited success and the (relatively) rapid erosion of any common ground that had existed should take into account how changes, divisions and lack of ideological unity within the movement itself led to its gradual radicalization and eventual disintegration. These issues will be the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>58</sup> For analyses of the dynamics of ethnic relations as boundary generation and (re)making see e.g. (Conversi, 1999; Tilly, 2004; Wimmer, 2008).

## **Chapter 6**

### **Protest politics in Northern Ireland: between the peak of mobilization and the disintegration of the ‘activist web’**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter examined the transformation of civil rights concerns (political, economic, legal) in Northern Ireland into activism from the early 1960s in the broad and loose coalition of the CRM which for a very limited time tried to bridge the opposite poles of the dominant ethnonational cleavage. I attempted to challenge those accounts of the period that stress an inevitable slide into violence from the start of the civil rights campaign. I argued that while the civil rights agitation ultimately heightened ethnic divisions, this intensification did not exhaust the range of opportunities and plausible political alternatives which would render it the juncture from which subsequent events developed. Being the product of a specific fusion of ‘transnational’ and domestic level opportunities the CRM represented at its early stages a genuine attempt to differentiate itself visibly from the traditional divisions of the Northern Ireland system. In this context protest became the primary extra-institutional means of generating leverage on behalf of deeply valued yet unfulfilled objectives.

This chapter aims to further trace the sequencing of processes between 1968 (the peak of CRM mobilization) and 1969 which marks the disintegration of the movement and the launch of an armed campaign. Protest activism previously restricted largely to struggles over relatively limited legislative, political and institutional reform, turned increasingly radical, involving maximalist demands for national self-



determination. In evaluating the trajectory of the CRM during this period this chapter seeks to address the following questions:

1. What were the sources of the movement's internal fragmentation and what effect did it have on facilitating or inhibiting collective action by non- state challengers?
2. How did the movement interact with other actors in the system and what did this interaction mean for the decisions on what strategies – violent or otherwise – were appropriate for achieving the desired objectives at different points in time and for the eventual demobilization of the CRM as a cross-community alliance?

While there is some recognition in the recent literature on the CRM that 'making direct causal links between ethnicity and conflict is more problematic than it first appears' (Prince and Warner, 2012: 5) the majority of the literature presents either narrative historical accounts of events or accounts positing a self-evident connection between the 'ethnicization' of identities and armed struggle. Based on the example of the CRM I attempt to show that explanations of collective action which argue that political processes result from general propensities of entities (such as institutions) or individuals are limited primarily because they do not take into account the (inter)-relational dynamics affecting how the aims and consequences of certain actions are perceived and / or misperceived by contenders at specific points in time.

### **Polarization as boundary (re)constitution**

A process of polarization followed the 5<sup>th</sup> of October march, when CRM activists seized the moment to advocate further political reforms. But this protest had a price for the movement as the event fundamentally contributed to creating a competitive situation in which its major groups started fighting for the same support base whose interests they wished to

represent. The latent ideological contradictions within the CRM became apparent changing the course of the movement. Protest politics also highlighted some of the pre-existing conflicts within the political class and initiated changes in power relations among the regional elites, thereby altering their strategic choices. Without subscribing to a purely structural deterministic line of argument, it is also worth noting that the complexity of the situation meant that political power was diluted and consequences beyond the (initial) intentions of those involved had a greater effect on political outcomes than a straightforward instrumentalist perspective would suggest.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the ways to evaluate the dynamics of the emerging polarization is by seeing it as a process of social boundary changes. Charles Tilly suggests that a social boundary is characterized by three elements: a degree of solidarity within groups on either side of the boundary, a form of interaction across the boundary, and a legitimizing discourse that makes maintenance of the boundary seem vital to those involved (Tilly, 2004: 214). Where polarization occurs we generally observe boosts to internal solidarity, regulation of interaction across the boundary and (re)creation of the discourses of group difference. Intercommunity boundary shifts can also translate into individual action insofar as they change how the perception of how a 'good' member of 'X' ought to behave.

The analysis emphasizes the shifting drivers of the agitation and the lack of intragroup homogeneity substantiating the proposition that the character of conflict is likely to change over time. The forces and ideas that are initially effective in securing widespread support of a particular constituency might not be identical to factors influencing further development of protest, while a movement's profile becomes increasingly centered around ethnicity. With the ascendance of more

radical factions divisions were mainly rooted in divergent views of the goals and strategies, although ideological differences also played a role. In addition, the groups did not simply become radical once a particular participation or anger threshold or ‘temperature’ was reached<sup>59</sup>, rather the turn to violence was the result of a particular confluence of specific interactive patterns among those protesting on the streets. At the same time the process produced alterations in both the goals and forms of contention. With fewer resources and organizational capacities at its disposal civil rights activism operating within the context of open anti-regime rebellion was less effective in generating pressure to advance its demands. I also look at the leadership component in an attempt to explain how the lack of long-term strategic decision-making led to radical ethnonationalism dominating the broader political environment.

Dominant explanations of the crisis typically tend to underestimate the role of contingencies, which might have changed the course of events. This chapter aims to consider how structural factors, transformative events, leaders and ideas interacted to produce the emerging polarization. Before analyzing the impact of these components on the evolution of the CRM it is necessary to reconsider briefly the ideational and identity-related backdrop to the Northern Ireland conflict. Understanding the ‘meta-conflict’ (McGarry and O’Leary, 1995: 1) over what this contest is fundamentally about has important implications for critically evaluating the extent to which the CRM should be seen as a missed opportunity and its potential to create a cross-ethnic alliance that could have provided (and for a short period did provide) a basis for an alternative politics of solidarity beyond the ethnonational cleavage. As mentioned in Chapter 5, for proponents of externally oriented explanations the key cleavage centers on competing conceptions of

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<sup>59</sup> On this point see also (Brubaker and Laitin, 1998: 426).

national belonging and political power. Internal accounts, by contrast, see the roots of the conflict in the variety of economic, political, cultural and institutional conditions *within* the province (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995; Whyte, 1990). The centrality of self-determination is not meant to completely disregard the significance of religious, cultural, socio-economic and other issues. Neither are these components entirely subjugated within an analysis of the contestation over partition and national self-determination. Defining Northern Ireland as a site of sovereignty and self-determination conflict conceives the Irish border the embodiment of historical differences between British and Irish nationalisms. Within Northern Ireland the ideational contradictions between unionism and nationalism are founded on contrasting conceptions of national identity and interpretations of the legitimacy of the border.

Throughout the 1960s membership of the main national based organizations grew steadily, the number of spontaneous groups formally independent from the national organizations and active locally increased; the CRM gained leverage against the political and social system which had been unchanged and virtually unchallenged since the formation of Northern Ireland in 1921. This dynamic activity was the product of communication, cooperation and contention amongst the various individuals, groups and organizations operating within the highly heterogeneous CRM. It is difficult to find a precise starting point, since a mixture of social and identity related processes defined its fluid and flexible organizational structure, ideology and repertoire of action.

In the first few years of its existence the movement appears to have managed to reduce the gulf between institutional politics and grassroots activism and, to a certain extent, the distance between nationalist and

unionist communities, as members of the newly emerging middle class came together with representatives of grassroots groups. Thus, on the one hand, at the early stages the CRM was capable of bringing together previously non-communicating clusters of actors characterised by divergent national-religious identities and social milieu. On the other hand, it failed to generate new forms of social relationships which could weaken the organizational and ideational bases of the dominant cleavages in Northern Ireland in the long term.

The internal membership of the CRM shows that in the beginning some members of the Protestant/unionist community cooperated within the movement and in the streets with Catholic/nationalists, which in a partial and incomplete way started to bridge the opposite poles of the ethnonational cleavage. At the same time since they remained poorly integrated within the CRM structure, Protestant/unionists were the first to demobilize once different organizations entered in competition for the recruitment of supporters and split along the boundary between moderates and radicals. The movement managed to hold together Catholic/nationalists and Protestant/unionists, as well as moderates and radicals only temporarily with visible splits along those ethnonational and sociopolitical lines. The network therefore soon disintegrated leaving its main participants split along the ethnonational and religious cleavage, and between radicals who converged under People Democracy (PD) leadership and moderates who were predominant in NICRA.

While PD strove to transform the fight for civil rights and reform into a wider struggle to destroy Stormont institutions, NICRA considered those institutions as the major channel for democratic change. In the early to late 1960s the main organizations comprising the CRM stood out for their inclusivity and largely shared common resources for the attainment of common objectives. They formed ties

and made the central committee of NICRA a (relatively) effective vehicle for constant coordination. In the late 1960s to early 1970s cooperation and mutual exchanges decreased, interorganizational differences strengthened gradually turning into open conflict. It was during this period that the (few) Protestant/unionists completely withdrew their support to the CRM and the web of protesters split.

If we accept that issues of national belonging remained crucial to the dynamics of interethnic relations, at least part of the failure of the CRM to sustain a long-term broad based coalition that did not regard ethnonational identity as the key facet of interpersonal relations and self-definition should be explained with reference to the zero-sum assumptions held by (some) members of the two communities. Key activists recently reflected on the difficulties of starting to organize the campaign for civil rights in the absence of unconditional support of all segments of the nationalist community and in the face of resistance of those who continued to adhere to a traditional interpretation of republicanism: ‘We did not get any help from outside... Hardline republicans refused to attend our meetings... They were fighting for a Catholic united Ireland... (author interview with Fred Heatley, 6 January 2010, Belfast). ‘To a certain extent anger among old Republicans who were wanting to go back to the old methods also played a role’ (author interview with Edwina Stewart, 5 January 2010, Belfast). Similarly, it is certainly true that hardline attitudes within the unionist block and unionist resistance played a role in blocking the advance of non-radical alternatives.

From this perspective, the prioritization by unionists of physical and constitutional security (pre)determined CRM’s radicalizing trajectory by militating against intercommunal cooperation, limiting and curtailing options. Unionist alienation was instrumental, acting as a catalyst for

delaying change, reversing policy implementation and transforming the context within which collective action took place. When taken to its extreme, however, this interpretation can through stressing the causal primacy of ethnonationalism underestimate the role of the movement itself in generating change as well as the reality of strategic choices influenced by contingent factors. As mentioned above, the CRM reached the peak of its mobilization in 1968 due to the (relative) success of its organizational structures and framing strategies. NICRA, DCAC and to a certain extent PD were the product of extensive and overlapping networks which merged the direct and largely informal activism of grassroots participants with the resources made available by a wide range of political parties and organizations.

By early 1968 the overwhelming perception within the CRM seemed to be that conventional channels of political participation were closed and an unconventional repertoire of direct action should be used to influence policy outcomes through the pressure of public opinion locally and internationally:

By early 1968 the frustration of those working for greater minority rights was rapidly growing. The uselessness of arguing, petitioning and otherwise attempting to reach unresponsive governments – both Westminster and Stormont – was all too clear. Needed were bolder strategies drawing attention to civil rights issues (Scott, 1972: 3).

### **The spatial dimension and the peak of mobilization**

As mentioned above, the CRM was dominated by competition in which some of its groups were fighting for the same support base. At the same time new waves of participants entered the movement exacerbating ideological differences and reformulating its tactics. CRM activists affected largely by police repression and countermovement violence chose to adapt their protest in terms of organizational structure and

repertoire of action to changes in the identity and ideology of the movement. The heterogeneity of views amongst civil rights organizations operating during this period needs to be emphasized.

In 1968 mass protest very rapidly became part of the Northern Irish political landscape. Yet there was no uniform or even majority view on the desirability of (disruptive and confrontational) forms of street agitation. The CRM leadership was driven by internal divisions between at least two major factions – those who strove to work within the Northern Ireland system with the intention of achieving socio-political and socio-economic inclusion and those who saw the campaign for civil rights as the key way to undermine the Stormont regime. Among this latter group there was a common perception that the dismantling of the Northern Ireland state would bring about the ultimate goal of (re)unification much more quickly, while others welcomed the (imagined) possibility of building a socialist republic capable of breaking down traditional divisions and overcoming both nationalism and unionism.

By 1968 the (perceived) apathy and incapacity of the establishment to address CRM's demands together with a favourable international framework of contention in the late 1960s brought the movement onto the streets and led to a change in its tactics, although substantial sections of the movement remained fully committed to the principle of non-violence. John Hume expressed the opinion of some key components of the CRM when he stated:

I would hope... that all people in the city ((London) Derry) will follow the instructions of the (Derry) Citizen Action Committee, which is clearly not to allow themselves to be provoked, nor not to give provocation to anyone... I would condemn any sectarian attitude or act by anyone in the city, and anyone who would do this, I would not regard them as a real supporter of the CRM.... I think the sectarian element is small on each side (RTE News, 20.11. 1968).



The moderate mobilizing message of the CRM was at the time consciously and strategically replaced by a more radical one, as a section of the movement intended to disorient the (opposing) elites and attract media attention. There was a realization among that section that waiting for the state to fully implement reform was politically naïve. Instead what was needed for change to occur was a new structure of resistance aimed at engaging and challenging the state in the same way as the state challenged the activists (MacStiofain, 1975: 143<sup>60</sup>). As Paul Arthur remembers in his analysis of the political environment in Northern Ireland, ‘press coverage increased 500 per cent between the first and second civil rights marches in late 1968’ (Arthur, 1987: 204). In this context, street rallies and (illegal) marching became a means to self-assertion that would provide space within the traditional cleavage structures. Individuals, groups and organizations joined together in sit-ins, pickets and especially protest marches and parades. While these are considered to be conventional forms of action and expression in the political protest literature, they are highly disruptive and have a particularly strong symbolic significance in Northern Ireland largely because of the segmentation of much of the territory into Catholic/nationalist and Protestant/unionist areas.

Social life is ‘organized in spatial routines’ (Sewell, 2001: 62) and the movement challenged traditional forms of the organization in a symbolic way by marching through both unionist and nationalist places. Some commentators (e. g. (Prince, 2007: 7) see this strategy as a way to intentionally provoke the authorities to get involved in defending the

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<sup>60</sup> Sean MacStiofain was one of the key figures in the Provisional IRA. Although he was opposed to the ‘new departure’ and the direction the leaders were taking the IRA in the early to mid 1960s, he went on to become intelligence officer under Cathal Goulding and later the first Chief of Staff of the Provisional Army Council.

marches, or to support sectarianism openly in front of the mass media, thus, undermining unionist hegemonic control at the local and international level. One of NICRA's key members later recalled:

In the spring of 1968 there was much rethinking within the NICRA's leadership; the tactics of Martin Luther King in America had been absorbed inasmuch that it was felt by some that only by public marches could we really draw world attention to what we were trying to achieve by normal democratic means (Heatley, 1974: 9).

Austin Currie, the then Nationalist Party MP for East Tyrone has recently outlined the two main reasons behind the decision to escalate the campaign to include forms of mass protest in 1968. First he had been told by the Labour Party MP Paul Rose that 'no British government will intervene to remedy injustice in Northern Ireland unless you people there force it to do so. Second, the demand for 'British rights' undercut unionist resistance to granting rights available to the rest of the United Kingdom (*The Irish News*, 21.06. 2008).

The CRM took to the streets and employed direct confrontational action during the summer of 1968. It was the first time that the heterogeneous web of activists visibly materialized on the streets in an organized manner. Austin Currie suggested the idea of marching after his participation in the 'Caledon Affair'<sup>61</sup>. At the Nationalist Party conference of 1968 he proposed that 'if justice was not forthcoming through normal channels, then it might be time to resort to other means – to civil disobedience' (cited in *Eye Witness Caledon*, 16. 05. 1979). At

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<sup>61</sup> In June 1968 a nationalist family composed of five members was evicted from a public-owned house in the town of Caledon, outside Dungannon, and a nineteen-year-old unionist woman was allocated a house in the same estate (Currie 2004: 89-98). Austin Currie then occupied the house of the nationalist family. His action received mass-media attention and vast publicity (Cameron 1969: 21-3). Later Currie commented on his perception of the far-reaching consequences and potentially destructive outcome of those events: 'I knew that an impact had been made because it was the first time when the so called national news from London reported discrimination in housing in Northern Ireland' (*Eye Witness Caledon*, 16. 05. 1979). 'At the time we did not realise what it would lead to but we had a pretty good idea. If you look over some of my speeches in the year before (1967) I ...suggested that we would have a more militant outlook in the future' (*World This Week*, 02. 02. 1972).

this stage the CRM was making a successful transition from a very loose association of groups created to publicize grievances to a movement able to attract a significant number of people throughout the region. As the movement took to the streets, the trend of demonstrations followed by (loyalist) counterdemonstrations was quickly formed. The counterdemonstrations established the template of loyalist dissent placing the police force between the two groups of protesters and reflected the undoubted dominance of Paisley as well as the lack of organizational capacity within the unionist right.

The events of 5<sup>th</sup> October when a mass march in (London)Derry was brutally attacked by police forces producing widespread feelings of indignation and moral shock galvanized the movement and made it more visible worldwide by attracting international support and transmitting civil rights issues in influential ways. The event itself triggered successive waves of mass agitation in the region and is widely recognized as a turning point in that it ‘marked the end of a period, when people would no longer be intimidated...’ (PRONI, D/3297/4: 3). A process of polarization and further radicalization followed 5<sup>th</sup> October providing a catalyst for public action. One of the participants characterised this particular event as ‘a baptism we did not try to avoid’ (John Burton interview, *The Day The Troubles Began*, BBC Northern Ireland documentary, 6 October 2008). One of the key aspects of the tactical nature of their course of action during this period was the careful evaluation of the spatial dimension of protest, in particular the continuous link between the location (s) of the marches and the political and socio-economic claims that accompanied them: ‘The marches just did not take place by accident in parts of Northern Ireland, the CRM targeted the location of the marches...they were carefully chosen places... so as to demonstrate vividly the extent of the injustices in

places with unionist city councils but nationalist majority' (author interview with Brian Feeney, 5 January 2010, Belfast).

It is however simplistic to assign a purely instrumental value to the decision to take to the streets when conventional channels of participation were perceived to be closing after multiple attempts at moderate pressure. Since space constituted the key domain of ethnonational separation in Northern Ireland the challenge facing the CRM with its cross-community aspirations was to 'encourage alternative readings of politics within which separation and an ethnosectarian logic are viewed as repressive and retrograde relationships' (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006: 6, cited in Nagle, 2009: 327). Marching for civil rights represented a strong connection with the international environment of social protest but it also related to the internal Northern Irish tradition of parading. Movement across territory was vigorously policed by the state and involved many different aspects of cultural and symbolic power. As Joseph Lee argues, public marches in Northern Ireland differ from 'parades in more normal societies. They were not...simple symbols of protest, bearing silent or even raucous witness to some grievance, real or imagined. They were directed against the self-respect of the other tribe' (Lee, 1989: 420). In marching through both nationalist and unionist areas the protesters attempted to appropriate as their own public spaces in the region, which had traditionally been viewed as particular kinds of places.

Neil Jarman comments on the way in which the strategy of marching for civil rights had a strong impact on the cultural environment in Northern Ireland by confronting 'head-on the loyalist belief that parading was largely the prerogative of unionists' (Jarman, 1997: 76). From this perspective, the civil rights marches were as contentious as any other explicitly political demand. They attempted to redefine in very

visible terms the power lines of the state and the social order it had maintained:

For while the loyalists insisted on their inalienable right to parade wherever and whenever they wished, this right was not extended to Catholics. Civil rights parades did not fit into the traditional polarities; but by challenging the authority of the Protestant state... they became immediately liable to be categorized as Catholic and nationalist (Jarman, 1997: 78).

Physical space historically reproduced ethnonational boundaries between nationalists and unionists. As mentioned above, marching was a central element of the identity of the unionist state. Given the importance of space to unionist and nationalist meta-narratives transgressing the boundary (between unionist and nationalist areas) became the primary means of (re)claiming dominance over territory and at the same time demonstrating the feasibility of a more pluralistic polity inclusive of unionists and nationalists.

After the march the then Minister for Home Affairs William Craig used quite extremist language to describe the protesters. Fearing a reemergence of republicanism he described the CRM as ‘bogus...made up of ill-informed radicals and people who see in unrest a chance to renew the campaign of violence’ (cited in Feeney, 1974: 30). The behaviour of the police fully delegitimized the political institutions of the region as nondemocratic and inspired the growth of organizations and groups around the world supportive of civil rights demands in Northern Ireland (Maney, 2000). Students idealising emotional and ideological bonds with the student movement around the world became more active. At the same time the images of violence alienated those unionists who had initially been sympathetic to the cause of civil rights.

Thus, from late 1968 the nationalist community started to reaffirm its (exclusive) identity. After the 5<sup>th</sup> of October march significant sections

of the nationalist community began to (re)draw exclusivist boundaries differentiating themselves clearly from the regime which was increasingly perceived to be oppressive: ‘The whole mood of the community now is for disobedience, and there is almost a total disrespect for law and order here’ (Eddie McAteer, (RTE News, 18.11. 1968). Only ‘at crucial moments the normally latent emotional/ideological contradictions inherent in these trajectories may become manifest, altering the course of the movement in the process’ (Aminzade and McAdam, 2001: 28). This shift does not mean that moderate activists had completely ended their involvement in the movement (although some did) but they were progressively losing the ability to exercise leadership effectively. The more moderate component represented by for example the CSJ and many members of NICRA was very cautious to use direct action tactics which in their view could lead to widespread communal conflict (as happened later). Radicals instead strove by raising a confrontational civil rights struggle to appeal to sections of the unionist working class in the name of abstract solidarity. Eamonn McCann recalls:

We knew that none of our Protestant contacts was going to march on 5 October – that would have been too much to expect – but we had real hope that the Socialist movement we were going to build after, and partly as a result of the march would engage Protestant support (McCann 1993: 39).

Soon after the 5<sup>th</sup> of October protest the People’s Democracy was formed. This was a student-led group, which tried to develop, even if naively, a student-proletariat alliance from below to initiate a bottom-up class struggle in the region. One of PD’s most influential leaders, Michael Farrell, described it as ‘not just a part of the Civil Rights Movement but a revolutionary association’ (*New Left Review*, 1969: 31).

In many ways PD represented the optimism of the younger generation, which perceived itself to be an integral part of the international wave of revolt and a transnational network fighting against oppression. One of the activists recently emphasised the significance of generational changes in the collective aspiration to disrupt the institutional equilibrium of the Northern Ireland system: ‘My generation was not going to take what they (the older generation) had to take’ (Paul Arthur interview, cited in Reynolds, 2008: 8). The emergence of PD was also in part a response to the brutal police reaction to the events of 5<sup>th</sup> October, which allowed a broad body of students to identify emotionally and ideationally with those repressed during the march: ‘In the wake of the (march in) Duke Street they (students) began to organise their opposition to the police tactics and their support for the CRM was rapidly gathering pace’ (McAliskey, 2009: 73-4).

It is important to note that the radical mobilising message, which started gaining momentum among segments of PD was at this stage quite clearly more resonant among certain groups and associations and sections of the community than others and the use of civil disobedience did not automatically entail an insistence on violence as part of their tactical repertoire. After an early PD march one of the demonstrators Ciaran McKeown stated:

There is only about fifteen per cent who are looking now to cause an instant reverse in public by means of rushing the barricades. The majority of students came out on the basis that it was a non-violent protest march, a demonstration in favour of civil rights. The majority of students in this university, I am quite convinced, are non-violent students (RTE News, 10.10. 1968).

To understand the way in which resonance shifts occur and the dominant frame for a group changes, it should first be noted that the resonance of frames can be broken into two main spheres – its breadth or the degree

of its acceptance among members of a group and depth, the degree to which an idea resonates with a particular individual. Because resonance depends on individual experiences, as well as on available information, and not all individuals in a group share the same experiences, and (perceptions of) information, not all individuals will accept the frame to the same extent – rather, some may give preference to competing frame(s).

Those who were more embedded in socio-political milieus antagonistic to the state seemed to be in favour of direct action, mainly the student population and parts of the nationalist community. Where a moderate and reformist message might have neutralised and potentially even discredited the framing efforts of CRM's adversaries and rivals, the radical one appealing directly to the traditional ethnonational divide (re)activated potential supporters of both communities along ethnonational lines, and ultimately convinced substantial sections of the Protestant population that the campaign was designed to serve an anti-unionist purpose. Bernadette Devlin commented on how the lack of experience and effective coordination undermined the ability of PD to direct the situation and seriously inhibited any attempts of the remaining moderate groups to promote inter-communal interaction: 'We started off without any political affiliations and with very little political awareness, they [PD] also started apparently with little knowledge of ordinary attitudes in the North. In fact, PD became the vanguard of Catholic bigotry' (cited in Feeney, *The Irish Times*, 15.09. 1970).

Eamonn McCann in an interview with PD leaders in April 1969 remarked on the progressively exclusivist nature of the CRM collective identity and its sectarianism during some of its initiatives:

The cry 'get the Protestants' is still very much on the lips of the Catholic working class. Everyone applauds loudly when one says in a



speech that we are not sectarian, we are fighting for the rights of all Irish workers, but really that is because they see this as the new way of getting at the Protestants (*The New Left Review*, 1969: 7).

### **Challenges to the (Northern Ireland) state**

In late 1968 the Northern Ireland government (largely under pressure from the Labour government in London (Rose, 2001: 118)) embarked on a series of reforms to redress the grievances of the CRM. The decision was taken with two audiences in mind. It is well-known that O'Neill was continuously worried about British opinion and pressure from the British government. As O'Donnell states: 'maintaining a good image of Northern Ireland in Britain and abroad appeared more important to O'Neill at this stage than did domestic opinion (O'Donnell, 2007: 265). Policy changes would be necessary to restore order and to avoid direct intervention by the British government. The other intended audience was the CRM itself. The unionist government had its own political opportunity structure and therefore a complete fallout with the CRM was perceived as potentially dangerous (Rose, 2001: 120).

The strategy (or lack thereof) which emerged in response to the CRM was that of mixed messages. The government sought to simultaneously admit that reform was necessary and state that the civil rights agitation was merely a disguised republican plot. The Unionist Party's manifesto clearly displayed this ambiguity resulting from the perception of an immediate threat:

The new attack on Ulster began therefore with a coat-trailing exercise described as a civil rights campaign...the name and claim of this movement carried untrue implications for everyone in Northern

Ireland has the same civil rights... The government quickly conceded several requested changes and procedural reforms. These changes will not alter anybody's civil rights (Ulster Unionist Party, 1969: 3).

M. Milotte for example highlights two main reasons that contributed to the ultimate failure of Protestant working-class cooperation – the definitive influence of influence of Ian Paisley and a lack of any effective left-wing organization (Milotte, 1984: 262). Roy Johnston makes a similar point when he notes that the opportunity to create a potential common ground between the two communities in Northern Ireland, at least in terms of social development, was missed (Johnston, 2006: 187). The CRM represented a potent challenge to the moral legitimacy and administrative capacity of the Stormont regime. In addition, the later embracement of street protests and demonstrations was to confront the state with unprecedented demands on both its logistical capacity and its moral and democratic authority. Highlighting both those points James Callghan, the then British Home Secretary, recalled the Unionist government's unwillingness to fund an extended police force beyond an extra 500 police officers (Callaghan, 1973: 17).

The reform package, which was announced in November 1968 and was intended to be fully implemented by 1971 (O'Neill, 1969: 107) included:

1. The reorganization of the gerrymandered and unionist dominated Londonderry Corporation as a Development Commission that would incorporate members of the nationalist community;
2. a recommendation to local authorities to reconsider their housing allocation procedure to make it fairer;
3. the appointment of an Ombudsman to investigate individual grievances;
4. the abolition of the company vote in local elections;

5. the abolition of the Special Powers Act when the authorities considered the security situation sufficiently favourable.

The reforms did not satisfy the original civil rights demand for ‘one man-one vote’ in local government elections (the property qualification remained so that one man could still have more than one vote), nor did they definitively eliminate the Special Powers Act or promise new housing. Universal franchise in local government elections was reluctantly conceded only in 1969.

The announcement of reforms received a mixed reaction from the activists, while many expressed disappointment that the ombudsman did not increase democratic representation, as his powers were not extended to the investigation of local government. The remote prospect of the abolition of the Special Powers Act was uniformly evaluated as a ‘confidence trick to appease the British government’ (*Belfast Telegraph*, 23. 11. 1968). No attempt was made to tackle job discrimination by strengthening legislation in this area, which provoked strong criticism, particularly from PD (Vincent McCormack, e-mail correspondence with author, 3 November 2009). The delay of solving fundamental problems of the divided community was also perceived as unacceptable: ‘The CRM was saying – we want something next week and not in the next 18 months...The moderates (within the Unionist party) were prepared to concede a few things but on their terms and when they decide... The Protestant buzz phrase was law and order and the Catholic phrase was justice. There is a gigantic gap here’ (author interview with David McKittrick, 2 July 2009, Belfast).

Nevertheless the moderate components of the CRM (primarily NICRA and the DCAC) supported at the end of 1968 the cessation of protest activity, even for a short period of time, to allow O’Neill’s reforms a chance. At the same time many radicals advocated keeping up

pressure on Stormont to meet outstanding civil rights demands, such as universal franchise in local government elections. From this perspective, the reforms did not undermine the activists' choice of the Northern Ireland government as a vital target of influence. They had a galvanizing effect on key segments of the CRM since the perception of the prospect of victory increased, encouraging further recruitment and narrowing the array of tactical choices. One of PD members Rory McShane recalls the decision to test the limits of the system and the (continuing) viability of radical strategies to carry out collective goals:

The fact that O'Neill's reforms started was an encouragement rather than a disincentive... it was a positive influence on us to continue to mobilize and campaign. Because we felt there was evidence of getting somewhere, we thought we should pressurize...further. That was the beginning but it was not enough so we kept pushing because the door was open (cited in Bosi, 2011: 133-4).

The evidence in this case, thus, supports Rasler's (1996) hypothesis that when concessions are only partial and/or procedural, group protest activity tends to increase in scope and intensity<sup>62</sup>. Following this logic witnessing the relative success of their opponent will also cause a surge in countermovement contention. With prominent moderates no longer participating in street politics, the protesters became more vulnerable to intensive repression, while the coercive propensity of the (Northern Ireland) state also increased. Some participants accept that the radicals, in fact, attempted to provoke the RUC into overreacting hoping that police repression now seen worldwide would have fundamentally undermined the establishment's authority (McCann, 1993: 35). Where nationalist violence provokes repression it can be utilized to wrest legitimacy away from the state. State reprisals have the potential to

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<sup>62</sup> A different version of the argument about the relationship between concessions and protest (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996) suggests that concessions granted to one side placate further dissident actions insofar as they respond to concrete and specific demands.

substantiate the idea that the nation is imperiled, as well as eliciting a belief in the justness of the (nationalist) cause and the righteousness of the struggle. The participants of the groups in favour of more disruptive and confrontational tactics did not necessarily fully absorb the collective identity of the CRM but shared a strong sense of antagonism towards Northern Ireland institutions. Reunification remained low on their scale of priorities but from their perspective, there was no time or space for any reform advocated by the moderates. Michael Farrell's conclusion captures the sense of urgency in boosting and achieving results in a struggle that had stagnated for some time: 'The border must go because it is a relic of imperialism... but it must go in the direction of a socialist republic and not just into a republic which *might at some future date become socialist*' (*New Left Review*, 1969: 42, emphasis added). After the Belfast-(London)Derry march in early 1969 (organized by PD) when brutal incidents, which occurred throughout were again given media and international exposure producing moral shock the nationalist community was increasingly being characterised by an exclusivist nationalist stance echoing the traditionally dominant divisions in the Northern Ireland political and cultural system.

Throughout his period in office O'Neill's twin priorities were the maintenance of Stormont power and London's financial subsidy which funded social services and infrastructural development (Greer, 2009: 233). The Northern Ireland government's political space and room for maneuver was effectively constrained by three forces – the CRM, the British officials and intra-unionist dissent. A unionist newspaper's editorial written after the peak of the events summarizes both O'Neill's dilemma and the extent to which his agenda was contested throughout the unionist community, including the Unionist Party itself: 'The crisis from 1968 ...was mishandled with disastrous results by two Northern

Irish governments the leaders of which submitted to blackmail from the streets and blackmail from Westminster' (*Ulster Times*, 1971: 1). O'Neill's new economic and ideological strategy might have in practice achieved less than it was intending to but its potentially far-reaching implications had an impact on the perceptions and, consequently, actions of all those involved.

Unionist resistance to British government and Irish nationalist aspirations significantly modified the context within which political actors operated. Perceptions of powerlessness and alienation constrained both Irish nationalists and British government officials. Several commentators have stressed the asymmetrical nature of the relationship between Northern Irish nationalism supported by successive Irish governments and Ulster unionism hardly supported by Westminster and largely ignored by British public opinion (e. g. (Aughey, 2006; Southern, 2007). According to this interpretative model, vulnerability inspires reactionary and volatile politics. Paul Dixon notes the fluidity of the unionist frame of mind in relation to their status:

During periods of high insecurity about their constitutional position, unionists have generally been readier to advocate more violent tactics, against both the state and republicans to achieve their strategic aim: defense of their position within the Union (Dixon, 2004: 139).

The all-encompassing process of political and economic transformation also aroused the fear of being downgraded in comparison to the nationalist community:

...It did not take them (unionists) very long to work out that in a country where there was not a lot to go round if you divided everything equally, there would be a lot less for them... they were not just worried about the Republic or Catholicism, it was also, I think, about self-interest (author interview with Ann Hope, 12 January 2010, Belfast).

It is, thus, largely the instrumental value of power that drove much of the unionist determination to retain control over the political system of Northern Ireland. However defensive, there was a certain logic to this behaviour from the standpoint of entitlement and economic security:

...Northern Protestants were extremely afraid that the CRA would take what they had away from them and give it to the Catholics... they were afraid that most Catholics saw CRA demands on housing as an attempt to seize Protestant houses and feared that Catholic local councils would behave in just as discriminatory a manner as the worst unionist ones (*Irish Times*, 30. 09. 1970).

At the same time the fear of becoming an oppressed minority and the corresponding desire to avoid this outcome stemmed not only from considerations of economic well-being but also from the perceived threat to the collective identity of the community. Republican involvement in the CRM and the decision of the activists to take to the streets allowed a large section of the unionist establishment to reaffirm the belief in the disloyalty of nationalists who were interested in overthrowing the state: 'It has all been aimed at undermining and destroying the Constitution of this country' (Harry West, Stormont debates, 30. 09. 1969, vol. 34, cc.75, cited in Farrington, 2008: 524). In addition, significant political and economic transformations in Britain led to the decline of the idea of a common 'Protestant family' whose interests and identity had to be protected (MacDonagh, 1983:139) contributing to unionists' perception of having been abandoned by their traditional 'patron'. As discussed in greater detail in chapter 5, insecurity, a sense of isolation from the British state and the imminence of an antipartitionist assault on the Northern Ireland state characterised the behaviour of the unionist grassroots. Such perceptions combined with resentment towards O'Neill's agenda provided the impetus for emergent militant loyalism.

Compared to O'Neillism which was distinguished by flexibility and ambiguity, Paisleyism as a radical protest movement offered clarity and certainty (Greer, 2009: 238). Through participation in Paisley's agenda many unionists were given avenues into public life (as well as the expression of opinions and unspoken fears) that would not have been available to them through the ruling party. O'Neill's mildly reformist approach to the traditional blocks in the unionist alliance alienated a substantial section of the grassroots unionist associations and party members who criticised measures that did not reflect the aspirations of their constituents. In addition, when eventually cornered into legislative reforms, O'Neill found a rather unsatisfied and unwelcome reaction from the CRM and was 'buying reforms at last year's prices' (Bloomfield, 1994: 100). The failure of O'Neill's policies illustrates the subtle but fundamental differences between grassroots feelings and elite analysis, which was largely due to the mismatch in perceptions of the limits of the acceptable. It has been suggested that the particular attraction of Paisley's style of leadership stemmed from his capacity to reassert old values staying faithful to the traditional unionist values and to represent himself as a powerful alternative to the 'compromising' establishment (Bevant, 2009: 325).

Although there is evidence to show grassroots unionist dissatisfaction with the general trend of policy and political events, this dissatisfaction was being mediated through the established institutions of the Unionist Party and the Orange Order. This meant that there appeared an obvious opening for someone like Paisley to mobilize people outside these institutions. Thus, it was formulated and articulated free of the traditional institutional restrictions (Greer, 2009a: 197; Farrington, 2008: 529). Importantly the agenda offered by Paisley did not lead to the formation or reinforcement of 'brokerage institutions' (Tilly, 2003: 35) –



organizations bringing about and forging linkages between elites and masses of different backgrounds and ideas. The appeal of Paisley's message focusing on hardline constitutional issues, his ability to represent them in terms of an imminent and irresistible threat and the traditional conflict between Unionism and Nationalism revealed the broader fallacy of the cross-community aspirations held by the CRM<sup>63</sup>.

The unionist community, which as discussed in Chapter 5, identified and affiliated, both culturally and historically its political activism with loyalty towards the regional institutions and political order, while believing that both its interests and identity could only be protected by the continued union of Northern Ireland with the rest of the United Kingdom, did not take part in the movement after the march of 5<sup>th</sup> October. It was evident that the CRM had not managed to recruit many supporters from the Protestant/unionist community. On the one hand, some Protestant/unionist groups displayed willingness and capacity to counter-mobilize fearing that a Catholic/nationalist gain would inevitably entail a Protestant/unionist loss. On the other hand, as discussed above, friction developed within the ruling party, whereby a part of the party stood against government concessions, which were perceived to be jeopardizing the status-quo<sup>64</sup>. Tension was evident between those who perceived maintaining the integrity of the state and restoring public order as the supreme priority and those who saw the need to introduce political and economic concessions to placate or compromise with the nationalist minority. Although the agenda shifted

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<sup>63</sup> The fragility and limited potential of the cross-community alliance is also captured by the evidence of the deep embeddedness of exclusive rather than hybrid ethnonational identities. In an oft-cited loyalty survey conducted in 1968 Richard Rose found that the vast majority of Catholics (76%) regarded themselves as Irish, while the majority of Protestants identified with Britain (39%) or Ulster (32%) (Rose, 1971: 208).

<sup>64</sup> For an examination of the various groupings within the unionist elite see (Mulholland, 2000).

in response to events certain individuals remained persistently identified with these competing positions.

Thus, the unionist response to the development of civil rights agitation was not uniform. While some members of the unionist elite (e. g. Robin Bailie, Edmond Warnock) tended to be quite assimilationist in their aspiration to rapidly introduce substantial reforms to prevent the escalation of the campaign, for a much larger group (e. g. William Craig, Brian Faulkner, Harry West) reform was dangerous and destabilising because the underlying motive of the nationalist community remained the dismantling of the state. What was (re) emerging was a reciprocal development of nationalist ideology, as two competing identities fought for limited political and institutional space. Militant loyalists found it hard to disassociate Catholic protest from radical activism, as, from their perspective, this community now mobilising in the name of civil rights and justice only six years before had logistically supported the IRA border campaign (Taylor, 1984: 62). The suspicions were supported by the mixed messages emerging from O'Neill's government.

As mentioned above, in a rather contradictory manner, the unionist government was granting limited reforms yet proclaiming their unnecessary nature and the bad will of those who were demanding change. The political climate, the tactics of the radical wing of the CRM, the weakness of O'Neill's strategic approach and confusion among the anti-O'Neill wing of the Unionist Party combined to give Paisley the opportunity to become the focal point of the unionist backlash during the late 1960s. Yet paradoxically the loyalist misrepresentation of the CRM ultimately contributed to what they feared even more – a new military republican campaign and allowed the partition issue back on to the political agenda. When the civil rights campaign turned into a law and

order crisis, it enabled loyalists to interpret the campaign in terms of a fundamental challenge to the state.

As one activist recently recalled:

The loyalist reaction was significant because of the leadership and the structure of the Protestant people politically and religiously. They were told and believed that they were under threat... I was lucky because I had friends and relations everywhere. But lots of people would see nationalists as the complete enemy, and lots of people within nationalism would see Protestants as the complete enemy (author interview with Patrick McClean, 4 January 2010, Beragh).

In many ways interpretative shifts within loyalism mirrored increasing tensions in the CRM itself (Bosi, 2006: 85-7).

### **Internal dynamics within the CRM**

The first wave of participants many of whom had been engaged in political activism prior to the 1960s retained a perception of hope that could have addressed their grievances. For the younger generation who got involved at a later stage and were generally socialised in a more hostile and perceived as oppressive environment in which it was harder to maintain the sense of optimism, disruptive forms of protest, including violence, was a natural way to resist outside attacks. The radicals who attempted to fight and overcome Northern Ireland sectarianism were among those who initiated confrontations and, to a certain extent, sectarian polarization. Whether or not conflictual and largely inexperienced leaders were authentic in their belief that marches could help combat sectarianism, they proved to be incapable of leading people in the streets, while the more moderate ideas were relegated to an inferior position in the ideological framework of the movement. The radicals, thus, believed change could be achieved through generating bottom-up pressure and lacked the experience of tactical sophistication

or strategic accommodation required of (effective) political leadership. The original leadership was constantly superseded by more radical groups who gave up moderation for active resistance.

As soon as they started to increasingly involve people in street politics, the CRM found itself unable to follow a single direction: 'Nothing ever became permanent policy... There was no way of developing a coherent set of ideas in that context. And that was very detrimental to political development' (Eamonn McCann, cited in Baclus, 2001: 12). At this stage CRM leaders were also less able to control the use of frames, which threatened the unionist identity and interests. The civil rights campaign was starting to be progressively redefined by new activists and opponents in terms of traditional nationalist aspirations and republican antagonism. Many 'traditional' civil rights leaders claimed that the activities of extremist groups and, in particular, PD aimed to divide the CRM along political, ideological and class lines in order to reorganise it with a different strategy and leadership:

Revolutionary extremists are now in complete control of the Civil Rights Movement in Ulster... The last straw for many moderates came when Mr. Frank Gogarty...announced that autonomy and the right of independent action by NICRA has been surrendered in the interests of common coordinated policy. 'In other words, surrendered to People's Democracy', says Mr. John McAnerney...who resigned as NICRA's secretary (*Daily Mail*, 11.09.1969).

In fact, moderates were increasingly frustrated by the negative image the movement assumed largely as a result of the lack of unity between its constituent groups:

We would never have gained in any circumstances, I think, mass Protestant support but we would have gained enough support amongst liberals and trade unionists... But unfortunately the whole thing came to be seen by many people in the North as a Catholic rights struggle (author interview with Ann Hope, 12 January 2010, Belfast).

...going more into the Protestant community... was very difficult with the way PD was pushing. (author interview with Edwina Stewart, 5 January 2010, Belfast).

In addition, activists who had mobilized under a different context in the early 1960s increasingly felt that they could no longer identify with the movement leaving their leadership positions. The intensely cooperating web of protesters that had attempted to bridge the opposite poles of the ethnonational divide based on informal inter-organizational linkages and on the overlapping membership of its activists was gradually dissolving. In the process of social distancing and the deepening of categories (such as ‘radicals’ and ‘moderates’ within and between communities symbolic and figurative borders were (re)drawn clearly inside the nationalist community where political violence for defensive purposes was not excluded. A leaflet issued by the moderate sections stressed how the promotion of a particularly uncompromising type of nationalism progressively closed alternative cross-cutting ways of addressing existing concerns:

The civil rights movement...has become essentially a movement for Catholic self-defense...PD has now become a much more closely defined socialist political group, having increasing common ground with republicanism, thus cutting itself from liberal student support (PRONI, D 3297/4: 1).

Those who supported direct and confrontational forms of protest thought that their strategy would facilitate widespread acceptance of nationalist community grievances but the situation soon became unruly and slipped out of control:

The issues raised by the CRM generated a lot of tension in society, heightened agitation and made it easier to launch an armed campaign. We did not do anything to provoke that campaign...but there were many young guys out there, who could not and would not be talked to, they

just would not listen (author interview with Denis Haughey, 7 January 2010, Belfast).

There is a connection certainly between the CRM and the armed campaign. It was the frustration of a lot of young people, particularly young disadvantaged Catholic working class people, it was their frustration at the CRM not being able to make more rapid progress, a more dramatic progress, which drove them into the arms of an armed campaign. It was also a response of the police force and the Northern Ireland generally to the CRM that produced a great deal of anger, which was expressed again by people picking up a gun (author interview with Eamonn McCann, 8 January 2010, Londonderry).

In March of 1969 four moderate members of NICRA Executive Committee resigned in protest against the growing influence of People's Democracy. Even PD member Bernadette Devlin recognised that 'the PD influx into the Civil Rights Association was seen by existing members as a sinister take-over plot' (Devlin, 1969: 147). The leadership was never able to give a strong direction to the movement it helped to create. Indicative is what Dermie McClenaghan recalls:

...some of the other activists were happily attached to the activity alone and would not have been interested in a group held together by anything more than that... To these the reason for the activity seemed obvious because the conditions encountered dictated the reason for the action and the nature of it, because it was obvious that normal advocacy had only the slightest effect or no effect at all... if decisions leading to actions...had been subject to a tight organizational framework, they may never have been taken at all (McClenaghan, 2009: 37-8).

Thus, the 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) of the CRM – communication channels and exchanges that facilitate intergroup and interorganizational cooperation began to break up as actors started to reinforce their different frames and identities. At the same time PD tried to face the process of demobilization through growing radicalization, while NICRA further moderated their objectives and strategies aiming at

the final institutionalisation of civil rights claims. This ideological divergence led to the ultimate disintegration of the movement. Higher rates of conflict (re)produced in the late 1960s not alternative cultural patterns but the radicalization of ideological positions already present – republicanism and loyalism. By the late 1960s the movement became highly factionalised and faced a number of challenges. The closing of political opportunities, the weakening of ties across organizations, resource competition, the lack of an effective leadership, contrasting collective identities and conflicting political beliefs served as sources of tension. It was at this stage that the main CRM organizations transformed into more formal and exclusive groups. They strengthened their internal structures, drew clear lines of division between each other and called members to concentrate on activities specific to their organizations while loosening old ties. On the one hand, NICRA and DCAC aspired to channel their claims inside the official institutions. On the other hand, PD distanced itself from NICRA trying to transform the movement into a vehicle for a socialist revolution and an All Ireland's Workers Republic:

'People's Democracy wanted to use confrontation politics to further the revolution' (Edwina Stewart, in (Stewart, 1996: 69).

Many of PD's statements, which laid out its key principles, recognized the ways in which it attempted to link revolutionary theory to practice and reasserted the belief that revolution was close:

The aim of the People's Democracy is the establishment of a socialist system of society in Ireland and throughout the world... The Workers' Republic... will work to create one unified community out of a synthesis of what is best in the different traditions in Ireland, rather than by the destruction of one tradition by another... The PD believes that the Workers Republic can only be achieved with the consent of the majority of the Irish people... and recognizes that a certain degree of

counter force may be necessary to carry out the wishes of the people (PD Political Programme, 29. 11. 1970: 1-2).

At the same time Protestant/unionists definitively withdrew their (quite limited) support and some Catholic/nationalists discontinued their participation in street demonstrations. From this perspective, the CRM ultimately failed to fully develop into a 'new social movement' (e. g. (Mazzoleni, 2004: 115-48) by shaping new types of collective belonging, which would break traditional cleavages. While the various groups have deeply altered the agenda(s) of the actors in positions of power (the Northern Ireland state, as well as the British and Irish governments), they have not managed to transform the base of the political system and the underlying ethnonational dualism in the region. Rather the activism ended up being embedded in the dominant ethnonational cleavage strengthening conflictual tendencies in community interaction and opening up the way for radicals on both sides to come to the fore.

From mid 1969 defensive resistance became the major preoccupation for those involved not only to protect nationalist neighbourhoods from attacks but also to (re)create and reinforce more solid patterns of solidarity to continue to mobilise under unfavourable circumstances, in the face of growing disunity and potential disengagement. The moral outrage and desire for defense justified the use of violence as a legitimate means of struggle (English, 2009: 82) and the new younger generation grassroots leadership 'was not averse to violence' (O'Dochartaigh, 1997: 41). Civil resistance replaced civil disobedience (Bosi, 2006: 94). Contacts across Northern Irish society were reduced destroying the ability of participants at the moderate end of the spectrum to foresee the consequences of actions.



This transformation led each of the groups to emphasize its own ideas and strategies to such an extent that they produced the final breakup of the movement. While a segment of the republican leadership remained committed to promoting reunification through nonviolent tactics aimed at democratizing Stormont, many in the rank and file of the nationalist community started to listen to militant republicans who had mainly exited to the political shadows after the border campaign. As one observer notes, ‘the men who brought the guns and were able to use them would have the key to the situation in the Catholic ghettos, and the initiative elsewhere’ (O’Brien, 1974: 177). Defense committees were formed and barricades set up creating ‘no-go’ areas in nationalist neighbourhoods. It is widely recognized that one of the critical tipping points towards the reemergence of the IRA in its traditional mode were the events of August 1969 when Protestant mobs and the B-Specials carried out armed pogroms in nationalist areas of Belfast and (London)Derry. Eamonn McCann captures how the aggressive public mood contributed to bringing about a clear shift to an anti-partitionist and anti-colonial frame with which the CRM was unable and unwilling to cope:

[From late 1969]... when people in the North were just raging mad at what was being done to the community the civil rights militants and left wingers generally had no prepared channels to try to direct that anger and no structure or organization to try to recruit people into, and no commonly accepted political ideas that we were trying to impose upon the situation. The one group that emerged, which had absolutely clear ideas, a clear explanation of what was happening – it was Britain oppressing Ireland and it was therefore necessary... to fight against Britain – the one group that came forward with that analysis and with an organization to give expression to that analysis was the IRA (Eamonn McCann, BBC Northern Ireland documentary ‘We shall overcome’, 5 October 2008).

Against this background armed struggle appeared to ‘bring results that were more tangible’ (Robson, 2009: 118-9). These quotes illustrate very well how radical leaders were able to, on the one hand, claim to successfully defend the vital interests of their constituencies. On the other hand, from then on the innovative in the Northern Ireland context civil rights message was overtaken by a narrative that stressed historical continuity with traditional themes (partition, British domination, victimization) and managed to reassert symbolic dominance within the polity.

## **Chapter 7**

### **NK and Northern Ireland: a comparative analysis**

#### **Setting the stage**

Although each of the conflicts considered in this study is in many ways unique, even when compared to the wider regional (Soviet and Western European) experiences, they also exhibit some common traits and patterns. In this context some general relevant features are worth noting. First, in both conflicts the outcomes of the movements were not what the core of the first cohort of activists intended. In Northern Ireland those who successfully overcame the obstacles associated with organizing in a (repressive but liberalizing) setting failed to achieve the objective of democratization of the unionist dominated local state. Armenians did not succeed in fulfilling their goals of the reassessment of Soviet political cartography and internal reform. Instead new forces entered the political stage contributing to a result that had not been intended by the initiators of the movements. Both patterns suggest that some factors which are significant for the emergence of ‘first actors’ (Petersen, 2001: 1, 33) may be less significant for the escalation of conflict.

Second, in both cases openings in the political environment led to an increase in protest activity due to a feeling of hope that exerting pressure in this way can bring about fundamental social transformation. While in Northern Ireland limited reforms were eventually implemented (reluctantly and largely under pressure from the British government), in Armenia and NK the openings proved to be ‘false’ in that they fell short of translating into substantive concessions or meaningful opportunities for fulfilling the movement’s goals. This chapter will attempt to compare

and contrast some aspects of violent escalation in the two cases with a focus on the dynamics of state-activist interactions, within-movement competition and the availability/ shifts in discursive, as well as substantive opportunities. Particular attention will be paid to the discursive dimension of the political context, as it is frequently underestimated in the literature. Comparative analysis is also important in revealing how activists' perceptions and strategies changed over time, as they interpreted and reinterpreted state responses. Similarly, state officials also interpreted activist tactics in the context of each movement's real and potential level of political disruption and threat to the integrity of the state. This type of dialogical analysis, which pays attention to the communication (or lack thereof) between political players as part of a feedback-driven process is consistent with the approach favoured by David S. Meyer (2004) and Vincent Boudreau (1996) in emphasizing the outcomes of shifting responses by both state officials and movement activists.

This chapter also makes some comparative observations on the role of state actors in the two cases. In this connection I argue that the confrontational strategies chosen by the parties were effective in politicizing constituencies but polarizing processes beyond the control of political actors intensified polarization, made moderation and accommodation difficult and fostered deadlock. Previously complex and non-ethnically centered interactions between multiple actors break down or are relegated to the background to the extent that it becomes difficult for individuals or groups to credibly claim neutrality, and it is even more difficult for 'external' political elites to lessen the distance between groups or activate other cleavages.

Without subscribing to an overly deterministic line of analysis this chapter does attempt to suggest that in both cases political capacity of

the state was highly constrained and the effect of its policies was often not fully intentional. Certain events and decisions seemed to have had a ‘downstream’, as well as immediate, impact in the sense of constraining and influencing later options and developments, which ultimately led in the respective populations becoming estranged beyond a point of no return. In addition, events on the ground and changes in the perceptions and thinking of local actors were occurring more rapidly than the authorities could have predicted and followed.

One of the key areas where substantial similarities can be found is the degree of involvement /passivity of external actors (states), which were nonetheless the key points of reference for the competing ethnonational groups. As one commentator on Northern Irish politics puts it, ‘...the limits of the northern state were always circumscribed by the interests and attitudes of political elites in Westminster’ (O’Broin, 2009: 210). Despite their increased involvement in the conflict the British authorities had gradually evolved both a policy and an ideology of containment that was designed to suggest that the root of the Northern Ireland problem lies exclusively in the inherently divisive nature of the respective identities. This perspective allows the British state to represent itself as an ‘external broker’ working to help the two ‘internal’ communities within Northern Ireland overcome and resolve their long-standing antagonisms. For the British the value of this policy, like the original partition settlement is that the insular nature of the conflict precludes any meaningful involvement of external actors. By separating Northern Ireland as a discrete unit of analysis this particular mode of dealing with and interpreting the Northern Ireland problem underestimates at least three salient points: first, the extent to which spatial and territorial issues are fundamental to the conflict, second, the ways in which its origins and dynamics can be traced to the level of the

two islands, and third, the ways in which such interpretations predispose towards an internally oriented analysis rather than one that would involve a more comprehensive and radical engagement of the British state.

While it can be argued that the Northern Ireland conflict is constituted by forces that extend beyond the boundaries of Northern Ireland and are inseparable from the wider structures of the British and Irish state system(s), the need to balance nationalist and unionist claims, to ‘appease two communities that have diametrically opposing aspirations’ (O’Malley, 1983: 205) has largely characterised British government attempts to deal with the Northern Ireland political situation. The response of the British government to the escalating situation in Northern Ireland was muted. The authorities seemed to hope that a system of devolved, albeit reformed government could continue. Ironically in contributing to forcing the CRM to take to the streets Westminster helped to destroy the non-interference convention.

Similarly considering the Soviet (mis)management of the NK issue and more specifically its overreliance on the social mechanism of brokerage is crucial to understanding the trajectory of the NK movement and the multifaceted environment that evolved parallel to and in interaction with the conflict. In both cases it would be more appropriate to view the behaviour of the competing ethnonational communities partly as a sign of their dissatisfaction with larger state polities (the British, Irish and Soviet states) which were (perceived to be) marginalizing them. The perception of prior injustices under Soviet rule has been a key factor in policies of ethnic redress in NK, policies seeking to ‘re-instate’ to what was perceived as the Armenian majority’s ‘rightful’ place at the center of cultural and political life. As mentioned earlier (see chapter 2), the Soviet institutionalization of ethnicity within

the framework of federal republics and the engraving of the link between territory and ethnicity through its extensive policies of indigenization had a key impact on the struggle for the (desired) readjustment of borders in the late Soviet period.

It is worth restating briefly the key features of the political climate in order to bring out the main differences. The argument for structural opportunities for both NK and Northern Ireland follows the general theoretical explanations of the components of openings that are conducive to the emergence of organized collective action (e. g. Tarrow, 1998; Oberschall, 1996). In relation to NK, Gorbachev's policies led to more open participation in the political process by groups outside the communist party. The previously limiting factors shaped by policies dictated by Moscow and interpreted and applied by the Azeri *nomenklatura* were transforming towards a more open arena for all citizens. These changes also destabilized political alignments allowing pro-reform elites to take the dominant positions in the regime. Those activists who once were beaten, jailed or silenced now found they could demonstrate more freely and could reach a wider public with ideas and demands, which formed the discursive core of the events of the late 1980s.

While Northern Ireland nationalists remained largely unwilling to integrate themselves within the unionist state, O'Neill was the first unionist leader who was perceived to have liberal tendencies. The post Second World War introduction of the welfare state which stood directly in conflict with the particularism of unionism gave rise to a new generation of activists, who were able to benefit from novel social and, most importantly educational opportunities. Having matured in that more universalistic socio-economic and cultural fabric some members of

the nationalist community were beginning to probe the foundations upon which unionist power was predicated in the 1960s.

The next section will consider how the initial agitations embraced what could be called a legalistic approach. Although the protesters in NK did not look specifically to courts, the initial phase of their struggle could be seen as legalistic in that they followed institutional and constitutional channels to advance their cause. They sought to expose injustice through a moderate repertoire of contention. This project, thus, defines a legalistic approach very broadly as one characterized by, but not limited to, institutional tactics, such as petitioning and lobbying state officials, bargaining over policy implementation and turning to courts for appeals. I argue that on the one hand, a more open legal opportunity structure may facilitate the adoption of legalistic strategies but will not undermine the protest dimension, as nationalist movements pursue multiple courses of action. On the other hand, a closed legal opportunity structure (or perception thereof) narrows down the range of tactical options available to the incipient movement channeling its efforts towards a more confrontational approach. What matters in the formulation of contentious tactics is not so much legal opportunities *per se* but rather its contingent degree of openness/closure, its modification over time and the activists' perceptions of those shifts (for an examination of the mismatch between objective and perceived shifts and threats see e. g. (Boudreau, 2005).

### **Constitutional/legalistic strategies**

As discussed in greater detail earlier<sup>65</sup>, in the mid 1980s Armenians understood their role to be limited to convincing Moscow about the justice of their cause. Moscow was the traditional target of protest of the

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<sup>65</sup> See chapter 3.



aggrieved population in NK and Armenia in the non-violent forms of sending letters and petitions, the passing of quasi-legal acts and declarations within regional institutions of government, the publication of letters and articles in the regional press, meetings, demonstrations and strikes. Armenia's long association and friendship with Russia reinforced the activists' (initial) loyalty to the Soviet regime and the conviction that NK would remain a part of the Union. One of my interviewees recently recalled:

When in 1985 Gorbachev proclaimed glasnost and perestroika, Armenians began to write letters to the CC CPSU every day, there was an absolute trust in the CC CPSU. Letters were written by the sackful. Armenians believed that if they explained everything, those at the top where the wisest people were sitting, would surely resolve everything (author interview with Aram Sarkisyan, 14 July 2008, Yerevan).

In Northern Ireland the struggle for civil rights initially focused on the issue of discrimination in public housing and jobs. For example, the Campaign for Social Justice launched in 1964 sought to expose the unfair treatment of the minority under Unionist rule through the publication of well-researched and clearly argued pamphlets, geared to both Irish and British audiences, petitioning and writing letters of complaint to Stormont and Westminster. In contrast to the independent legal recourse to federal courts in the US civil rights movement, the 'most obvious explanation for the failure of law and lawyers (to further civil rights in Northern Ireland) was the absence of any formal guarantees in the British and Northern Irish constitution of basic civil rights and the consequent lack of any tradition of civil rights litigation' (Boyle, Hadden and Hillyard, 1975: 10). In 1967 the Campaign for Social Justice brought a test case to challenge Stormont's decision to declare Republican organizations illegal and took it to the House of Lords. The latter determined that 'so broad a grant of discretion in

banning political organizations was lawful' (Rose, 1976: 277). This failure represented the 'final proof to the minority community that they could expect no aid from Britain in the struggle for what they regarded as their legitimate civil rights' (Hadden and Hillyard, 1973: 13).

In comparison to Northern Ireland, the legal opportunity structure available to Armenians in the mid to late 1980s was arguably more open, even if only marginally. Here it is important to distinguish between symbolic and substantive openings within the legalistic/constitutional domain. While it would be erroneous to idealize symbolic rewards and gestures of nationalist movement recognition, they can influence activist strategies by widening the array of options available to pursue the desired goals. In Northern Ireland a complete failure to find a way to redress some of the collective grievances through legalistic channels 'eliminated the last prospect of advance by constitutional means within Northern Ireland' (Purdie, 1990: 102-3). This closure constituted a daunting structural constraint to achieving the changes advocated by CRM activists.

Somewhat differently, Armenians faced symbolic openings, which enhanced their perceptions of policy influence. For example they could debate and put forward their demands within the regional organs of power (the regional Soviet). Their request for reunification was approved by the regional Soviet in February and then again in June 1988. Although this decision brought no substantive results, as it was later overruled by the central Soviet authorities, it was still important as a symbolic act of recognition of the justice of the Armenian cause. However, a certain degree of success in the institutional mobilization (even if within regional organs of power) only galvanized the activists and led them to pursue their demands and appeal repeatedly to higher levels of authority. Thus, the perception remained that channels of

appeal, which began as symbolic openings could develop real significance over time.

For this reason for a certain period (in early 1988) Armenians combined legalistic strategies (writing petitions, lobbying the authorities) with more direct forms of action (demonstrations). In Northern Ireland the switch to more direct forms of protest (marches, sit-ins) meant a move away from purely legalistic avenues due to the collective perception of their futility. However, in both cases this shift did not entail a complete break with legalistic strategies, due to the fact that the actions, although innovative in those particular contexts, were not, strictly speaking, illegal and the continued perception of the moral righteousness of protest: ‘We have demanded the minimum of what we are rightly entitled to’ (Eddie McAteer, Nationalist MP, *Belfast Telegraph*, 18.11. 1968).

### **State authorities, repression and discursive vs. structural opportunities**

Before moving to consider in greater detail the role of state authorities in the two cases it is worth noting that analysis is complicated by the fact that the state was not a unitary actor and should be considered at several levels. As some recent studies have pointed out, the question of who represents the state in Northern Ireland is not straightforward, especially since sections of the nationalist community perceived the Northern Irish state to be an extension of the British state (Cunningham and Beaulieu, 2010: 186; English, 1999: 96-7). The bulk of decision-making, as it affected the lives of ordinary citizens, was carried out at local level. The cohesion of the unionist alliance depended largely on the

semi-autonomous process of exclusion, and the localized nature of this process made the implementation of reforms demanded by the CRM difficult. The existence of two governments in London and Belfast and the unionist authorities' relative autonomy creates problems over the scope and definition of the state itself, let alone what the interests of the British state might be in relation to the territory. For Northern Ireland when referring simply to 'the state' I mean both Northern Irish and British state and distinguish between them in specific contexts. In the NK case, by the term 'state' I mean primarily the Soviet state, since the republican Azeri authorities lacked the authority, as well as ideational and institutional capacity to act with a high degree of independence.

As has been pointed out above, neither the CRM nor the NK activists faced a regime that was secure and stable in terms of support and legitimacy. The greater dependence of the Northern Ireland state on repression (even if it was applied inconsistently) was an indication of the precarious nature of its existence, though it was not immediately obvious to the minority, or indeed to the unionist establishment itself. While the Northern Ireland state did apply repression, albeit very inconsistently, one of the most striking features of the NK experience was the failure to employ the coercive forces available to the Soviet regime, especially given the fact that the resources of the movement were inferior to those of the government<sup>66</sup>. It is possible to argue that even with the liberalization of the Gorbachev era the unrest in Armenia and NK could have been quelled through the consistent and resolute use of force (see e.

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<sup>66</sup> The former President of Armenia (1998–2008), first President of the NK Republic (1994–1997) and one of the founder members of the NK movement for reunification Robert Kocharyan recognized the galvanizing impact of the absence of overt repression during the initial demonstrations. Kocharyan admitted that 'if the first rally had been met with KGB repression, he would have run home, shut the doors and blinds, and hoped that they had not noticed him' (cited in Derluguian, 2005: 192).

g. Kramer, 2003: 25; Medvedev and Chiesa, 1989: 247-8; Sakwa, 1990: 244 for such interpretations).

This failure clearly contradicts the conventional wisdom of how political actors making decisions in a strategic manner are assumed to behave. One way of thinking about state reactions to social challenges is to argue that different types of regimes have varying repressive potentials (Tilly, 1978; Marks, 1989). Yet authorities within individual states also apply repression selectively, and this important nuance can hardly be measured by a regime's general repressive propensity. I suggest that the ambivalent reaction of the Soviet authorities to the activism in NK and, to a lesser extent, the reaction of the Northern Ireland state to the CRM could be explained with reference to at least two interrelated factors. First, the authorities did not possess the experience of dealing with organized mass movements. Second, the discourse in NK and Northern Ireland focused on the priorities identified and/or accepted by policy-makers.

In relation to the first point, it could be suggested that the Northern Ireland state did not have a prevailing strategy for dealing with the type of claims originating from the CRM simply because they had not been made before, at least not in the same form as in the 1960s. When it had been confronted with labour claims, the Unionist government had tended to react by co-opting labour figures and agendas, via, for example, the Ulster Unionist Labour Association (UULA) and the appointment of John Andrews as Minister of Labour (Patterson and Kaufmann, 2007: 17-28). Both ideologically and strategically the Stormont regime was focused on the threat of irredentist nationalism and was unable to cope with demands for reform couched in the post-war language of social democracy.

The perceived threat to the Northern Ireland state was not simply a product of the unionist imagination or a ‘siege mentality’: it was real. The nationalist community did not accept the settlement of 1921 as legitimate or permanent. It was reasonable for unionists to expect a renewed challenge in the future, and they wanted to be ready for it when it came. Like most regimes based on a system of hegemonic control, the regime in Northern Ireland was in a state of permanent latent crisis. The systematic exclusion of the minority and its refusal to grant legitimacy to the state was offset by an extraordinary level of compliance and consent on the part of the majority which had pragmatic economic and cultural reasons for supporting the unionist regime. There was a fundamental contradiction at the heart of society as the aims and aspirations of both groups appeared to be incompatible. Nevertheless it took the unique challenge of the CRM which exposed the internal divisions within unionism and the structural flaws within London-Belfast interaction. In this sense Stormont was not (fully) prepared for this type of challenge.

Very small political groups and individuals in Armenia and NK who had been pursuing nationalist goals during the Soviet period within underground structures were ordinarily persecuted and jailed.<sup>67</sup> Given that independent activity outside state structures had not been feasible in Soviet society, the effect of such persecutions was to silence others. Thus, large gatherings of people discussing previously restricted issues represented a novel phenomenon. Such gatherings were also distinctive in the relationship they constructed (or perceived as possible) between the movement and authorities. The ‘spectacle’ aspect of initial demonstrations in the Armenian context, the intention of staging a performance has been noted (e. g. (Abrahamian, 1990; Dudwick, 1989).

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<sup>67</sup> See chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of this period.

Although demonstrations themselves rarely attain the desired collective goal, they seek to accumulate influence, convey resolve and (where the polity is unresponsive) raise the costs of disregarding the movement (Boudreau, 1996: 181). In a similar vein, Mark Beissinger remarks how the growing political space that had been made available to contest the state also showed the regime's vulnerability to the mass demonstration as a particular form of political action and contestation (Beissinger, 1996: 113). The following quote touches upon the unusual nature of this type of activism: 'It was a unique situation and the authorities were at a loss how to react... The first slogans of the rally participants were 'The Party, Lenin, Gorbachev.' (author interview with Jasmin Gevondyan, 14 July 2008, Yerevan).

In relation to the second element mentioned above, the specific legitimating discourse of the NK movement focused on the themes of *glasnost*' and *perestroika*, which was arguably one of the reasons for the center's inability to show a consistent reaction and the absence of repression during demonstrations. In this sense the Soviet-initiated transformation was an important element of the discursive opportunity structure, similar to the ways in which the language of social democracy helped legitimize the demands of the Northern Ireland CRM. The structural aspect of opportunities in both regions has been amply described and frequently over-emphasized<sup>68</sup> but the extent to which such opportunities were (re) created, perceived and used in discourse is somewhat neglected. My analysis suggests that these dimensions may be more central than is recognized in the empirical literature. In both cases the discursive opportunity structure allowed to gradually broaden and eventually breach previous parameters of acceptable discussion. Discursive opportunity structures provide sets of meanings that are

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<sup>68</sup> See chapters 3 and 5 for a more detailed discussion of this dimension.

challenged or accommodated by political actors. They inform the ‘legitimate forms of political organization, but also the means by which...actors can pursue their goals’ (Jenne, 2007: 11; Adamson, 2005: 554-5).

The argument is not meant to deny or undermine the fact that along with the perception and discursive use of new opportunities, there must be objective openings as well. In relation to the NK protests, Armenians – like the rest of the Soviet Union – believed and hoped that the time had come for fundamental changes. Their activism was closely related to the ills of authoritarianism being exposed:

...when the movement began we honestly felt that if we could just make the truth of our claims to NK known, those in power would react correctly... We knew everything was propaganda but we believed that Gorbachev would really change things (author interview with Sarasar Saryan, 23 July 2008, Stepanakert).

At the same time political entrepreneurs draw on specific ideas and concepts to (re)frame and publicize particular issues to a domestic and international public linking localized events and concerns to broader frameworks of meaning. Non-state actors present their goals in terms of an accepted discourse to gain what Shain refers to as ‘archetypes of legitimacy’ (Shain, 1989: 127-8). On such occasions protests that are ethnonationally rooted operate partly within (yet in tension with) official, prescribed politics, while their success and resonance depends on an affirmation – sometimes sincere, sometimes strategic – of existing channels of inclusion. This ‘rightful resistance’ (O’Brien, 1996: 3) is difficult to dismiss or oppose, as it is based on claims legitimated by official ideologies and the regime’s own policies.

It is important to note that Armenian intellectuals presented their demands as the inevitable outcome of Armenian struggle against



oppression and aggression and simultaneously attempted to demonstrate the congruence between Armenia's and Moscow's aims – those of *perestroika* and reform – to elicit the center's support. Drawing on the terminology and ideological precepts of Marxism-Leninism, as well as *perestroika* meant that the Soviet authorities felt unable to take any harsh, let alone repressive, measures because the issue was presented as a clear cut, ideal test case for system transformation. In this context outlawing the demonstrations, questioning their legality or the possibility of political accommodation in any decisive manner would have been widely perceived, by both domestic and international audiences, as undermining reforms. Not only were mass gatherings under the banner of *perestroika* one of the few structurally 'permissible' strategies, they were also chosen tactically through a contextually specific reading of how (symbolic) power against the regime could best be accumulated. As one of the participants has recently attested:

When police attempted to surround the demonstrators and was at the point of breaking them up, one of the demonstration participants put out a giant portrait of Gorbachev. We started to chant: "Gorbachev – perestroika – NK." This brought the police to a stop as they did not know what to do... The ideological conception of the rally participants, the fact that they were for perestroika, immediately broke the authorities' resolve. They did not know how to react and what to do (author interview with Manvel Sarkisyan, 31 July 2008, Yerevan).

As mentioned above, one of the options available to the Soviet authorities and persistently put forward by some Azeri activists later was the use of repression to avoid violent escalation. Until the end of 1988, perhaps, the central authorities would still have been able to resort to brute force on a large scale. However, on the one hand, the discourse of *perestroika* gave no ground to apply repression. On the other hand, the failure to use force in a state which was still perceived to be highly centralized and authoritarian was taken by Azeris as a sign of

unconditional Soviet support of Armenian national goals, thus substantially contributing to the hesitant position of the Soviet regime.

In Northern Ireland the discourse of social democracy was arguably used in a much less calculated manner than in Armenia and NK. However, it is important to recognize that the structural changes occurring in Britain, to a certain extent in Northern Ireland and other European societies in the post Second World War era were taking place against ideational and discursive shifts, as the universalistic principles of social democracy began to filter into public discourse. The reluctant acceptance of these principles under the Brooke government, at least in the economic and welfare spheres presented Stormont with serious challenges it could not meet. As the UK Representative in Northern Ireland (1969–70) notes, ‘It has been the existence of British-style democracy based on universal adult franchise which has guaranteed and perpetuated a most un-British style injustice towards the Catholic minority’ (Oliver Wright, PRO/DEFE/13/1397, 06.03.1970).

It was the establishment of the welfare state in post Second World War Britain that (re)created a socio-cultural framework through which traditional grievances could be mediated, as well as offering the possibility of articulating personal and collective perceptions of being treated as inferior citizens. By accommodating, however reluctantly, state intervention and the tenets of welfare reform, together with the implementation of welfare legislation the Unionist government had given the minority a crucial political, ideological and discursive opening through exposing ideological contradictions between the practices of the local authorities and social-democratic ideals. Material and structural changes in education, healthcare and social security, which set the foundations for a modern post-war welfare state in Northern Ireland were matched by the gradual acceptance of the social-democratic

culture. A new political discourse of rights, equality, democracy and reform was coming to the surface alongside nationalism, which had been dominant in the Irish context. In the context of emerging global revolt, political class struggle and rights-based activism a new generation was beginning to rethink its status and role in society by applying the rhetoric of equality and social justice to its own circumstances.

Within 1960s Northern Ireland, most of the ambitious goals and projects of O'Neillism were never fully realized, although the rapid contestation of the proposed reforms and the conflictual exchanges between the government and the multiplicity of actors was central to the dynamics of this period. However, the public articulation of such plans and the attempt at the construction of policies and value systems had a profound effect (on this point see also Mitchell, 2010). Debates regarding issues of distribution between the nationalist and unionist communities which may have otherwise remained hidden in the daily functioning of internal administration were highlighted and brought onto the public arena. It was the anticipation and heightened expectations associated with these changes even if they were not brought to fruition to which many participants – including civil rights activists and Paisleyites – reacted. The recognition and internalization of this new ideational environment by the challengers is partly evidenced by the fact that the protests were not intended to undercut the intended values and norms of O'Neill's programme itself, but rather their mode of implementation and the inequalities that might be generated in the process. In appealing to the British authorities and claiming 'British rights for British citizens' CRM activists attempted to assert the importance of the international border around the United Kingdom: 'The prime focus of the campaign was always Westminster's responsibility for good government in Northern Ireland' (*Socialist Voice*, 2008:1). Representing the UK as the

most appropriate framework for political contestation afforded them a measure of leverage on local developments and helped to emphasize a territorial and symbolic context within which unionist power was fundamentally diminished (O'Dochartaigh and Bosi, 2010: 418).

### **British and Soviet 'conflict management'**

In relation to the role of 'external' (British and Soviet actors), in both cases the practice of governing the territories appeared to be a recurrent source of problems for the respective ruling classes. Both the British and Soviet states have consistently sought to contain demands for Irish and Armenian self-determination respectively within terms acceptable to the constitutional status-quo. For the purposes of this discussion two points are worth noting. First, the ambiguity of both states' positions significantly contributed to the radicalization and persistence of instability in NK and Northern Ireland, in effect belying genuine attempts to reach some form of political accommodation. It could be argued that the inconsistency was based on operating policies of distancing from the conflicts, as well as crisis management. The short-term strategies attempted to discover ways to rapidly manage the crises and return to positions of distance. Each measure was a reactive response to specific predicaments. The existing structures proved incapable of mediating and resolving conflicts due to the absence of adequate channels and the refusal of the respective (external) states to use their positions as the superior constitutional and political actors to intervene. Second, the states' capacities to implement real transformation were constrained. They did not have a clear policy but at the same time, although a range of potential options existed, it was

extremely difficult to find one that could effectively improve the situation.

On the one hand, the agency of political leaders should be acknowledged and their failures and weaknesses given a substantial role. For example there is little doubt that Gorbachev's personal weaknesses played a role in the ultimately unresolved state of the conflict:

Gorbachev...was a very weak leader. In Soviet times, the personnel management system was constructed in such a way that allowed for commonplace individuals, who were conformists, to climb the ladder to the very top. Gorbachev's career is a vivid example of that. He tried to be pleasant to everyone ...and he was always hesitant, constantly maneuvering, he lacked the inward fortitude... He had no independent vision of his own of what was really necessary to accomplish. (author interview with Rasim Musabaev, 10 January 2009, Baku).

A KGB member responsible for nationalist issues offers a similarly agency-centered explanation for the paucity of Soviet policy and the fact that the authorities had not anticipated nor prepared for the possibility that the situation in NK might implode. His recollection is illustrative of the authorities' lack of experience of dealing with similar situations and lack of any deep understanding of local specificity:

I do not think any members of the ruling elite were seriously interested in the Caucasus...Both the Supreme Soviet and the Politburo knew that the conflict was smouldering... But no measures were taken until the first open demonstrations started...When people took to the streets of Stepanakert [capital of NK] with placards and red flags the Politburo decided to act as it knew best: if there is a problem, one should send people. It doesn't matter who, the point is to send someone...Razumovsky [Secretary of the CCCP] and the culture minister Petr Demchev were sent to NK for some reason...They had no idea how to talk to the demonstrators...We saw that they were very afraid... Razumovsky attempted to persuade the demonstrators to stop but the crowd refused...He left very rapidly...A complete inability to communicate with the protesters showed how far Politburo members were from the problems that the country was facing' (Lutsenko, in *Trud*, 01. 02. 2001).

It can be suggested that British policy-makers similarly failed to capitalize on the chances available to bring about changes in Britain's Irish policies and that opportunities for transforming policies were ignored in favour of a reproduction of a more familiar trajectory. Despite the claims of many unionists that Northern Ireland was a natural part of the United Kingdom, British policy-makers formed and altered their own policies in an environment specific to Northern Ireland. Different social, economic and political policies in areas such as defense, policing, security, education, welfare and justice were applied in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. This distinctiveness contributed to a belief that Northern Ireland was a 'place apart' from the rest of Britain, while the British government continually attempted to (re)establish a mode of governance that left it in control with the least amount of direct involvement: 'our policy is founded upon the belief that we shall get the best solution if Northern Ireland can handle its own problems' (PRO, CAB/129/141 C (69) 45, 05.05. 1969).

Northern Ireland is often thought of as a 'place apart' from the mainstream framework of British governance, both psychologically and in political terms.

Thus, it is arguable that before the late 1960s the authorities had deliberately insulated themselves from the province. At the same time once the process of distancing between the internal parties was set in motion, some signs of lock-in were brought to the surface<sup>69</sup>. In that context, almost any move was perceived by the actors on the ground as a proof of marginalization, exclusion and/or domination, all of which produced further alienation and hostility.

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<sup>69</sup> See the introduction for an explanation of this concept.

Political scientists have increasingly recognized how ‘what has happened at an earlier point in time will affect the possible outcomes of a sequence of events at a later point in time’ (Sewell, 1996a: 262-3). To put it differently, decisions taken in the past may limit the range of available options at subsequent points and in this way encourage the retention of original choices. Persistent patterns in political and social life can be ‘...difficult to reverse’ (Pierson, 2004: 21). For example in early 1989 (when the conflict became already relatively entrenched) direct rule was effectively introduced in NK for a short period (see Appendix 1). During this time a neutral representative from Moscow was making genuine attempts to bring about some sort of peaceful compromise through gradual restructuring, predominantly in the economic, but also in the political sphere. However, he was perceived by each side as biased in favour of its opponent, which effectively deprived him of the power to substantially change developments on the ground<sup>70</sup>. A political activist and one of the deputies of the Supreme Soviet commented at the time on the tension between the weakness and incompetence of political elites and the downstream, snowballing effect of certain events and policies, which made the situation highly resistant to change:

It is difficult to explain the lack of action both locally and at the center... The expectation that the crisis will be settled automatically once the parties have grown wary of arguing led to the fact that momentum was lost... *The situation in the Caucasus throughout the first half of 1988 was escalating very rapidly, and with every passing month it was becoming increasingly difficult to find and put into practice a just solution...The room for manoeuvre was limited* (Sheynis, 1988, cited in Zolyan and Mirzoyan, 1991: 54, emphasis added).

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<sup>70</sup> See e.g. (Sarkysian, 2009: 19; Mirzoyan, 2006: 72-5; Aliev, 16.12.1999) for testimonies of how direct rule was seen by both Armenians and Azeris as solidifying and promoting the interests and ‘hidden agendas’ of the other side.

There is a substantial strand within the comparative conflict literature, which offers state centered accounts of (ethnonational and civil war) violence. For example D. Laitin argues: ‘Immunity from civil violence comes with building states with the power and incentive to enforce the rule of law. Weak, incompetent states... are dangerous’ (Laitin, 2007: 22). It is well established that the relationship between the likelihood of violence and regime type can be frequently described as an ‘inverted U’: authoritarian and democratic regimes are unlikely to experience conflict, while semi-democratic regimes are much more conflict-prone, particularly, but not exclusively, if combined with regime change (e. g. Hegre et al., 2001). While weak states may be more susceptible to violent conflict than strong ones, Tarrow argues that ‘...if taken as a guide to action, the concept of state strength is somewhat wooden and lacks agency’ (Tarrow, 1998: 82). In addition, state strength/weakness is often a long-term, enduring condition, while violence typically erupts sporadically and at specific points in time (Lawrence and Chenoweth, 2010: 8). State strength, thus, intersects with the prevailing strategy of the state in dealing with contentious claims (see e. g. Kohli, 1997: 329-30).

Scholars have pointed out the significance of variation among states in terms of their ability to successfully penetrate and coordinate their domestic societies and the extent to which their policies embody consensus, legitimacy, effectiveness and stability (Huntington, 1968: 1; Mann, 1993; Ayubi, 1995). A state that exercises effective central power must create and maintain an internal consensus – within both the center and periphery – about the desirability of its role. Without such a consensus the center will be prevented from acting in a resolute manner when faced with peripheral actors’ attempts to change the status-quo. In a recent study of the radicalization of ethnic minorities’ behaviour in



Eastern Europe E. Jenne presents a rational choice centered model formalizing the interaction between minority representatives, their host government, central authority and an external lobby actor. She suggests that any decision on the part of the aggrieved group to mobilize against the state is driven by ‘perceptions of increased power vis-a vis the center’ (Jenne, 2007: 41). According to this perspective, the salience of ethnic issues in society and the perception of increased bargaining power is greatly enhanced by positive signals from the host and/or central governments<sup>71</sup>.

The sequences of contention encourage alterations between non-violent forms of collective action in the pursuit of goals that are not exclusively nationalist and violent tactics in the pursuit of fundamental political and social transformation with strongly nationalist objectives. Such sequences are particularly likely in societies where states lack either the ability or the will (or both) to fully incorporate ethnonational groups into the polity. Thus, a state that rules a deeply divided society faces difficult strategic choices when confronted with a challenger movement’s demands for economic redistribution, cultural and political recognition. First, lacking an ideological base in society that would guarantee its legitimacy and the capacity to penetrate society effectively means that it frequently resorts to coercion, which limits room for maneuver (Ayubi, 1995: 3). Second, receptivity to the challengers’ cause is widely perceived to be detrimental to the interests, prestige and sovereignty of the dominant ethnic group.

Those viewing reform-oriented protest movements and inclusive state responses to protests as having negative implications for their survival, authority and recognition are most likely to respond with

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<sup>71</sup> In addition to the absence of repression one of the positive signals for NK activists was the fact that the issue was being discussed in Moscow.

violent opposition (Beissinger, 1998; Tilly, 2002). Movement opponents attempt to pressurize states to shift their strategies away from inclusion towards reliance on exclusion. A state relying upon inclusion therefore runs the risk of losing its (frequently already weak) legitimacy in the eyes of the dominant ethnic group. State institutions seek to promote this hardening of boundaries among potential challengers by ‘turning boundaries into unquestioned features of...public life’ (Lustick, 1993: 44). Shifts in authority within the state trigger changes in protest activity from demands within the framework of the system to those directly challenging the parameters of the official regime and ultimately the (re) emergence of discussions of boundary transformations in the public domain.

Scholars have argued that the actions of state elites can be bound by the need to preserve confidence and legitimacy with multiple audiences who have divergent interests, expectations and perceptions (Block, 1977; Skrenthy, 1996). Legitimacy processes are further complicated by the reality that the state itself operates at several levels. Thus, the complicated empirical reality of state response to challenge is one where multiple actors matter. In addition, as relationships are established, the control of protest is not necessarily launched in a swiftly coercive linear fashion.

In looking at state elites’ attitudes towards Northern Ireland and NK, as well as the (lack of) elite control it is important to remember that, despite the existence of particular patterns of behaviour structuring the decision-making processes, one single and universally accepted theme of policy development is difficult to specify. First, various levels and types of influence can be identified, including:

- 1) Domestic opinion;
- 2) The prevailing economic conditions;

- 3) The changing political environment;
- 4) The character and private or public affiliations of individuals/agencies directly involved in the governance of the territories;
- 5) The costs and potential benefits of involvement: ‘We have a severe economic burden in Northern Ireland, but any help that the Westminster Government has given to the region will not gain the British Labour Party a single vote, because the Unionist Party takes all the credit for anything the Government have done’ (HC Debates, vol. 751, 25.10. 1967, cc1668).
- 6) Perceptions of the consequences of certain courses of action.

Second, it could be argued that what mattered in relation to Northern Ireland was not just how British politicians and officials formulated and administered policies but also the extent to which the structure of British policy-making constrained (or facilitated) certain policies. The absence of a sustained general strategy could at least partly be attributed to the fact that responsibility for Northern Ireland ‘was divided between the Home Office, the Ministry of Defense, the Foreign Office and, sporadically, the Cabinet Office’ (Arthur, 2000: 26). The existence of these multiple centers does not allow for an analysis of a unified Westminster-based decision-making process. In fact it is frequently quite difficult to determine how relevant an actor is to a particular event, decision or process. In relation to NK the decision-making was arguably more centralized largely because of the more hierarchical structure of authority in the Soviet Union. But the influence of different categories of actors (including external audiences) is still relevant.

The belief in the possibility of the reform of Northern Ireland sustained the pressure placed upon Stormont by the British Labour

government headed by Wilson and other organizations, which emphasised their desire to apply 'British' standards to social and political issues in Northern Ireland: 'We should press for an acceleration of local government...reforms to bring the system closer to that in Great Britain' (PRO, CAB/129/139 C (68)119, 25.10. 1968). The political environment provided a new focus for opposition to British policy in Northern Ireland, one that focused on the importance of human rights. The Wilson government itself consistently faced criticism from backbench MPs on Northern Irish policies. Such arguments concluded that the actions of the Northern Ireland government were (albeit partly) the responsibility of the British electorate. Complete inaction threatened not only a possible revolt by Labour backbenchers at Westminster but also a potential backlash at the polls, as nationalist minority demands resonated widely with British public opinion: 'Public opinion in Great Britain demands standards in Northern Ireland equal to those of the rest of the United Kingdom' (PRO, CAB/129/141 C (69) 45, 05.05.1969). In this sense CRM activists had succeeded in using British government dependence on public opinion to exploit Stormont's (primarily financial) reliance upon the British government. Labour's links, however weak they might have been, with the Northern Ireland Labour Party meant that the fraternal connection British Labour had to Northern Ireland provided it with an extremely critical view of the unionist administration. Thus, an anti-unionist analysis of the Northern Ireland situation was quite influential on the Labour side.

At the same time the scope of potential intervention was restricted by the need not to undermine the confidence of unionists, for whom stability and security were the very product of 'Britishness'. The British authorities showed a disposition to accepting the unionist veto on all policy changes that significantly threatened the status-quo in the

province. For example in 1968 Wilson argued against greater intervention by suggesting that MPs should not ‘underrate what has been done’ in Northern Ireland (HC Debates, vol. 765, 21.05.1968, cc.288). The aspirations of Irish nationalists have been consistently subordinated to the cooperation of Ulster unionists or the continuation of bipartisanship. Somewhat similarly, Moscow’s errors and inconsistencies could be partly explained by the willingness to maintain the perception of the desirability and appropriateness of its actions among several key audiences. The need to minimize the risk of becoming alien and incomprehensible to the Armenian audience was largely driving limited Soviet attempts to address Armenian concerns. At the same time the fear that the loss of control over NK would make Azerbaijan more susceptible to pan-Turkic ideas and to Shi’ite fundamentalism emanating from Iran could be argued to have contributed to the refusal of the authorities to consider making a centralized decision to take the territory away from Azerbaijan (Vaserman and Ginat, 1994: 350)<sup>72</sup>.

It could be suggested that actors persisted with policies adopted earlier to maintain credibility and present continuity of purpose. The cumulative effect of such choices was to influence the shape of later political developments by further politicizing identities and allowing the parties to pursue oppositional agendas dedicated to achieving maximal goals. The emphasis on the need to maintain credibility with different actors is not meant to suggest that the British and Soviet states or at least sections within the establishment completely failed to appreciate the difficulty of the situation on the ground, even though participants

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<sup>72</sup> An analysis of official statements and memoirs of Gorbachev’s advisors reveals that the fear of a potential spillover effect of boundary alterations also had a strong impact on state behaviour. In a ‘domino scenario’ other aggrieved groups could use such border changes to raise public awareness, further their agendas, exert pressure on the authorities and reorder national priorities to pursue similar results. See chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of this point.

questioned why the state would ever diverge from alignment with them, when ideological goals were perceived to be shared. This divergence significantly contributed to the actors' understandings of the tendency to ignore the underlying concerns of the population:

When in 1991 I met Primakov [a leading member of the Politburo] and had a 2.5-hour conversation with him, I asked him: 'How did you allow the NK conflict to grow to such an extent that it effectively caused a chain reaction?' Primakov told me: 'There, at the heights of power, that NK seemed to us just a small dot, who paid any attention to it? (author interview with an official, 14 July 2008, Yerevan).

The British government's attitude and perception of the Northern Ireland situation appears to reveal a similar pattern:

The whole point of the partition of Ireland was to make the problem go away. There was one guy somewhere in the attic who kept a benevolent eye on Northern Ireland...They thought they had washed their hands of Northern Ireland and solved it (Oliver Wright, BBC Northern Ireland documentary 'We shall overcome', 5 October 2008).

Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, a senior Stormont official in the 1960s emphasizes how 'the Wilson Cabinet also demonstrated at that time the lack of real knowledge and 'feel' for Northern Ireland which arose from decades of detachment' (Bloomfield, 2007: 20).

Until 1968 Northern Ireland remained low on the agenda of senior officials, the Home Office did not have any officials working exclusively on Northern Ireland or stationed there, and relied heavily on the Northern Ireland Civil Service and Labour MPs sympathetic to the CRM for information and advice. Defense Secretary Denis Healey spoke of 'lamentably poor communications between Whitehall and Stormont...resulting from generations of inexcusable neglect' (Healey, 1989: 343). Only one member of Wilson's Cabinet had visited Northern Ireland spending one afternoon there (Times Insight, 1972: 81). Most of the interaction between the officials of the two governments concerned

primarily the size of the national subsidy towards public spending in the province (Bew et. al., 2002: 152-4). This isolation from Northern Irish affairs was underpinned by a doctrine, which conceptualized the Home Office's role as representing Stormont's interests in Britain rather than monitoring its activities. A permanent Secretary of the Home Office had emphasized its functions 'to act as the official channel of communication between the governments of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, to ensure that Northern Ireland's constitutional rights are not infringed' (Newsam, 1955: 168).

As mentioned above, the minimalist and largely inadequate responses of the authorities do not imply that they had no understanding at all of the nature of power, as well the problems and relations of domination/subordination in the respective communities. James Callaghan recognized the 'illogical situation where...the Northern Ireland government was seeking to delay the introduction of reforms' (PRO, CAB 164/ 1334/1, 06. 11. 1968). Some of his statements at the time also touch upon how mutual fears rooted in specific local economic and historical circumstances contributed to the construction of conflict rather than cooperation as the pivotal axis for the (re) formation of collective identities:

...the fears of Protestants are very real and genuine. They are as real and genuine as the fears of the Catholics... and their sense of injustice. These things must be understood and, I believe, are understood increasingly in this country (HC Debates, 13.10.1969, vol. 788, cc62).

Gorbachev acknowledged that 'the problem of NK exists... It has become more critical, since the former Azeri authorities had not always treated the population in the spirit of Leninist traditions' (*Pravda*, 12. 12. 1988). '...the time has now come to concentrate on solving concrete economic problems' (*Bakinskiy Rabochiy*, 17. 02. 1988).

On another level, opposition from within the regime also contributed to influencing the assumptions and options on which the political establishment was structured. To many unionists the Northern Irish authorities seemed unresponsive to the social and economic challenges they faced. The Party's alliance with the Conservatives at Westminster combined with the domination of the higher ranks of the party by the landed and business classes, further strained intra-unionist relations. The competing demands of the CRM, the British government and the Unionist right wing (inside and out of the party) placed the Stormont regime in a restricted and unenviable position. The difficulty of selling a reform agenda to the grassroots of unionism highlighted just how far beyond the Paisleyite fringe the tentative liberalism of O'Neill was being rejected. Just as hard-line unionist ministers used the threat of loyalist countermobilization to press for repression of civil rights demonstrations, moderate ministers favouring reform used the threats of the imposition of financial sanctions by the British authorities and Westminster intervention to counteract the opposition. O'Neill and other ministers noted that Westminster could implement the changes unilaterally weakening the position of the devolved government (PRONI, CAB/ 4/ 1409, 23. 10. 1968). During a meeting in late October 1968 O'Neill told a unionist audience that 'people in Northern Ireland did not realise how utterly dependant they are on the huge sums of money from the UK government in order to enable them to balance their budget' (*Derry Journal*, 28. 10. 1968: 8).

In the NK case the resistance to reform from within the region was much less pronounced. Nevertheless it is possible to argue that the fact that old Armenian and Azeri communist elites felt threatened by Gorbachev's liberalisation policies and saw in the nationalist movements an opportunity to regain political legitimacy may have further enhanced



the potential for conflict. One of the hard-liner Politburo members, Egor Ligachev, recognizes in his memoirs that by as early as 1988 some members of the Communist elite were already attempting to hold back the trends set in motion by Gorbachev (Ligachev, 1999: 111). Internally, the leadership (the central ruling authority) was divided over the scope, depth and pace of reforms. The divide was between the reform-minded and the conservatives within the Communist Party (Suny, 1998: 454, Gorbachev, 1996). What neither of the camps was able to grasp was the extent of the structural weakness of the USSR. Gorbachev and his supporters themselves appeared to lack confidence about where the new reforms were leading.

The ‘old’ Armenian and Azeri elites (*nomenklatura*) were still very slow to use the ‘nationalism tool’ to stay in power and oppose the reforms initiated from the top of the Soviet state. The challenge of solving the escalating crisis *within* the state, while simultaneously addressing the demands of the challenger movement was arguably greater for Stormont than for the Soviet regime. Nevertheless both cases demonstrate that the issue of what course of action state authorities take is relative, better defined by the relevance of different audiences to political elites more than by particular rational interests. The state-challenger-counter-movement relationship may therefore fluctuate according to a state structure where the actors seek to operate according to the varying rules of legitimacy.

### **Generational conflict and intra-movement dynamics**

In the beginning of this chapter I suggested that one of the benefits of understanding ethnic conflict as a process is bringing in the time dimension, as well as helping to tackle two interrelated questions:

First, why is it that ordinary activists lend their support to specific modes of contestation at particular points in time? Second, what accounts for the shift from (relatively) sporadic short-term forms of contention to sustained, more wide-scope and long-term forms?

If the ethnic group is not a unitary actor and if a range of (violent/non-violent) strategies are potentially available, some factors that are significant for the escalation and expansion of rebellion may be less crucial for the decision to initiate ethnically centered collective action.

The collective identity of activists varies depending on the point at which they enter and their experience, ‘new actors joining an expanding movement bring with them particular sensibilities which become concrete in a specific set of objectives’ (Della Porta and Diani, 1999: 234). How does the political process become affected by the dynamics within a movement that is comprised of various actors with different, often conflicting ideologies, agendas and favoured modes of contention? It is possible to argue that the motivations and ultimate goals of those who joined later differed markedly from those of the ‘first actors’.

Many scholars have emphasized the wide diversity of elite interests within each ethnic bloc and the resulting intense intragroup competition as one of the key paths to ethnonational radicalization (Rabushka and Sheplse, 1972; Horowitz, 2000: 349-60). According to Donald Horowitz’s model of intraethnic party rivalry, ethnic ‘outbidding’ directs faction leaders away from moderation and political compromise. Outbidding prevails when elites have political and ideological space to shift within an ethnonational bloc (Horowitz, 2000: 359). I suggest that the situation in both NK and Northern Ireland does not correspond directly to the conventional model of ethnic outbidding but some useful insights can be gained from this literature about the process of factional competition that is evident here. The conventional ethnic ‘outbidding’

model predicts that *both* of the (two or more) ethnic parties coexisting within the same political and ideological space will be pulled away from the center ground and compete to promote increasingly extreme nationalist positions to sustain their support within the constituency. The ‘old’ elites in Northern Ireland and NK did not end up adopting a harder political line, they retreated after being presented as ‘out of touch’ with the changing reality and betraying their group’s cause.

Within a short period of time the NK protests, gaining overwhelming grassroots support expanded the goals of the movement to include liberalization in all areas of life, turning the resolution of the NK issue into a requirement of democratization at large. Also evident at the later stages of the conflicts was an increasing alienation of the respective communities from a state perceived as undemocratic and hostile towards their national identity. In Northern Ireland gradually very little space was left for the emergence of a shared definition of reality on civil rights and social justice themes. In NK a rising political elite started to contest national narratives as written by Soviet ideology and exercised by the Communist Party. The direction of the debate around NK was redefined in predominantly political terms, as an aspiration to independence rather than purely a legacy of Soviet nationality policies. At that point the NK issue became only one aspect of a broader struggle between Moscow, NK, Armenia and Azerbaijan. First circumscribed to the redress of a historical injustice, the meaning of the claim widened to sovereignty and democratization channeled through the appropriation of the notion of self-determination. At the initial stage (1987- mid 1988) there were no Armenian demands for sovereignty. The emergence of a new leadership meant a transition and the creation of a new structure – the Armenian Pan-national Movement (ANM).

The aspiration to achieve a wider set of political goals became dominant. Democratization and independence in Armenia itself were seen by that new cohort as necessary to produce positive results on the NK question. A new political elite born in contestation with the center built its legitimacy on a nationwide project of which NK was the key component. Shortly after March 1988 when the Soviet government made the decision to allocate funds to NK designed to facilitate socio-economic development and some cultural links with Armenia, the public leaders of the movement started to change. The old intelligentsia (Kaputikian, Balaian) retreated. The younger cohort of intelligentsia appeared more daring, vocal towards the center and succeeded in raising the NK issue up to a political (rather than purely nationalist) level.

In nationalist movements different generations experience political openings in divergent ways (Johnston and Aarelaid-Tart, 2000; Pilcher, 1994; Whittier, 1994). In both NK and Northern Ireland cases there are quite clear patterns of generational, as well as inter-elite participation and interaction. The bifurcation of the movements into (at least) two distinct groups can hardly be accounted for without reference to their generational divisions. As a key activist of the 'old cohort' recalls:

With the creation of the ANM, an absolute transformation of the NK movement took place. Among the tasks of the ANM adopted at the rally in August 1988, the reunification of NK and Armenia and the NK movement as such are absent. The focus was upon the liberalization of the economy, economic sovereignty and future independence. I believe that the ANM completely usurped the NK movement from August 1988, as it grew from a national-liberation movement into a liberal-democratic one (author interview with Larissa Alaverdyan, 18 July 2008, Yerevan).

A key supporter of the 'new line' reflects on the internal contrasts and interactions influencing conflict behaviour:

In what did the position of Igor Muradyan differ from that of Levon Ter-Petrosyan? Both said that the NK people had the right to self-determination. But Muradyan admitted self-determination in the framework of the Soviet Union. Ter-Petrosyan held that we had to self-determine ourselves through democracy, that is to say, democratization in Armenia and NK had to go in parallel to the NK movement. The ideas of independence and democratization were already being put forward. We contended that self-determination was impossible in the framework of the authoritarian system, as it did not count with anyone's opinion. How can we know what the authoritarian system will decide, to whom it will give the territories. Ter-Petrosyan says: 'It is Armenians that live in NK. They have self-determined themselves. They have the right to live as they want.' There is much less focus on the idea that the land is ours (author interview with Stepan Grigoryan, 28 July 2008, Yerevan).

In line with the anti-Soviet stance, they argued that Armenia's overreliance on dominant powers over the centuries resulted in a psychological barrier of the 'dependence on a third force'. This hurdle makes the nation handicapped and hinders the achievement of Armenia's independence. The younger leadership attacked members of the (old) intelligentsia, who have continuously supported Armenia's reliance on Russia as a buffer against the Pan-Turkic threat. Silva Kaputikian expressed a view shared among the old elite when she wrote that 'Russia remains our only salvation' (*Urmala*, 29.06.1988). By contrast, the ideological construction of the ANM's line centered around at least two consistent elements. First, Armenia needs to move away from reliance on external actors (Turks at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Russians at the end) and be self-reliant to enhance its security. Second, the expression of a community's subjective collective motivations (rooted in history, beliefs, identification with particular ethno-territorial frameworks) should not be allowed to prevent the people from reaching pragmatic solutions on political issues.

The arrival of Ter-Petrosyan to the NK committee in mid 1988 was instrumental in reviewing its strategy and expanding the movement's ambitions. In the period from January-February 1988 when the main public figures are Kapoutikyan and Balayan to mid 1988 the vocabulary shifted from that of a purely nationalist cause based on historical grievances, vulnerability and an exclusive historical right to the land to democratization and subsequently self-determination. The ANM made it clear that it would privilege democracy over nationalism, although these two concepts should be interrelated in practice, and that nationalism without democracy was perceived as dangerous and inefficient. In particular, it was argued that ethnonational ideology should be rejected as an obstacle to working towards the creation of a strong, secure and self-governing democratic state (Harutyunyan, 2006: 288). The old elite was eventually sidelined for being too nationalist, for them reunification remained the only issue that mattered, and all means seemed appropriate to achieve the objective. The new generation considered the political to be the most valuable means of action for Armenians that should be turned into an objective, an end in itself rather than a tool to achieve nationalist goals. It could be argued that the new elite was more radical even though only ideologically, as the ideas espoused seemed very daring both in the context of Armenian history as a whole and for that specific period. The once overwhelming call for unity of the Armenian people ultimately deepened internal conflicts. For example, local residents – Karabakhis – were regarded by 'true' Armenians (from Armenia) as 'not quite genuine' or 'inverted' (*shurtvatz hayer*) (Shakhnazaryan, 2007: no pagination), partly because they were 'too' loyal to all things Russian and generally felt more at ease speaking Russian than Armenian. Importantly, the victorious ANM soon saw its rather pragmatic position clash with a more radicalized public opinion in

NK and local NK leaders, some of whom, as the first president of independent NK Robert Kocharyan admitted, were preparing for an all out war to come (cited in Derluguian, 2005: 192). Interestingly, while the NK issue remained the cornerstone of Armenian internal security, a team of actors predominantly from NK who rose to prominence during the active of the conflict, almost completely took charge of the independent Armenian state (post 1991). They constituted the overwhelming majority of the political elite in independent Armenia<sup>73</sup>.

In Northern Ireland a ‘new generation of political leaders was emerging’ (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 126). Generational factors were central to the emergence of a new anti-sectarian inclusive collective identity of the CRM: ‘We believed that our generation...could be the catalysts in setting off a social and political revolution’ (Farrell, 1988: 13). In a recent contribution N. O’Dochartaigh argues that the ‘old’ cohort of militant nationalists faced great difficulty in asserting the primacy of the national over the local and regional scales of activity. The difficulty in maintaining a fit between the national and sub-national scales accounts for the relative weakness of the mobilization (2010: 163). Both cases suggest that treating ethnic communities as unitary actors obscures the dynamics internal to movements, that ethnonational solidarity is not unchanging and does not always guarantee unity.

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<sup>73</sup> See also (Papazian, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of the thesis is to analyze the unfolding dynamics of ethnonational contention and ethnic conflict escalation in both Nagorno-Karabakh and Northern Ireland. In this final section I summarize and draw together the arguments of this dissertation. I also revisit the main bodies of literature I have relied upon (on nationalism, ethnic conflict and contentious politics) to consider how a deeper appreciation of the empirical cases can contribute to theorizing in this field.

In this dissertation I argue that although each of the analytical perspectives considered here makes a significant contribution to the understanding of ethnic conflict processes, one should be aware of the limitations they entail, at least when taken in isolation. A considerable number of empirical studies concentrates predominantly upon a single dimension, or focus upon the interpretation of one of the sides to the conflict, frequently overlooking the overall dynamics. When conducting a qualitative longitudinal and methodologically pluralist comparative analysis of nationalist movement development and radicalization in NK and Northern Ireland I have applied a theoretically mixed approach that pays attention to processes, expressions of relations and interactions and timing. In so doing, I have concentrated upon the periods when intersocietal communication was gradually being reinterpreted and reshaped on an ethnic basis, which also became increasingly crucial to public discourse. By conceptualizing conflict development as a process heavily influenced by interactions within and between multiple arenas and demonstrating the importance of the process of political contention to fluctuations between political mobilization, attempted reforms, resistance and violence I illustrate how concepts from this field can



benefit ethnic studies but have remained until recently largely underused.

In connection to the NK conflict, I have argued that without examining the differences in Armenian and Azeri perceptions of the ethnic and cultural identity of NK and its cultural and political significance, as well as the competing attempts by group leaders to authenticate the ethnogenesis of their respective national identities in connection to the homeland, it is extremely hard to fully understand the roots of the conflict. Such conflicting perceptions and narratives continue to influence the capacity and willingness to compromise on both sides. In my view, the ethnosymbolic approach is useful in explaining how competing historiographies were eventually integrated into collective memories and the reasons why nationalist appeals resonated so widely among the population.

In looking at Armenian and Azeri experiences and structural and ideational sources of conflict during Soviet rule I have focused mainly on the factors, forces and circumstances that contributed to shaping Soviet Armenian and Azeri identities, as well as real and perceived grievances against Azeri rule in NK (Chapter 2). Here I have argued that the evidence regarding policies of cultural and demographic oppression of the NK population is rather mixed. Partly because of their potential implications for status and prestige in the Soviet hierarchy most policies of the host republic were seen as unjustly forced upon the region and limiting its capacity to pursue its individual path. Economic shortages in the region and unmet demands fed into the growing frustration over a Baku centered bureaucracy in which the vast majority of Karabakhis had restricted control. I further highlighted the impact of social networks and mobilizing ideas and memories on the (divergent) processes of national activism in Armenia and Azerbaijan during the ‘constitutional’ phase of

the movement for NK. At this stage the high level and intensity of such activism in Armenia and NK versus the relative passivity of the Azeri national movement should be seen largely as the result of the interplay between these three components.

A key argument of this dissertation (Chapter 3, Chapter 5) emphasizes that actors continually adjust their strategies in response to emerging opportunities and/or constraints presented by the specific situation(s) they face. The important task is to recognize the preeminence of strategic choices without neglecting the fact that elite flexibility in choosing courses of action and their capacity to maintain ethnic bloc cohesion, as well as continued widespread support for reform is significantly constrained by symbolic repertoires, self-perceptions, categorizations, facts and ideas that feed into the collective representation of the nation. This analysis, thus, modifies the predominantly rationalist and structuralist emphases found in those interpretations that center on the adaptability of (ethnic) elite interests (e.g. Snyder, 2000: 74-9).

NK generally features in the literature as a very clear case of an elite-driven nationalist mobilization (e.g. Melander, 2001; Caspersen, 2008, 2008a). On the whole, my investigation confirms that the emergence and subsequent ethnicization and radicalization of the movements in Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK can be seen as the top-down product of particular strategies pursued by elites and intellectuals at decisive and critical moments. I highlighted the ‘cultural construction of fear’, which intensified after catalytic events (e. g. Sumgait for Armenians, Khojaly for Azeris). I argue that for elites engaged in struggles over national self-determination the earlier entrenchment of narratives of massacres and ethnic extinction which resonated with the earlier intellectual construction of (perceived) historical precedents and ethnic injustices

allowed to represent reality in terms of familiar preexisting models. At the same time I suggest that the elite thesis is in some ways limited (Chapter 4). Even for those nationalist actors in Armenia and Azerbaijan who had tried to instrumentalize the conflict popular mobilization was shot through with unforeseen contingencies. In my view, one of the most underresearched areas is the transformation of interethnic relations.

This dissertation brings into focus the importance of unverified orally transmitted information for individual and collective mobilization into specific violent episodes, as well as for changing patterns of everyday interaction at the micro level. This perspective challenges the dominant interpretation of the entirely deliberate elite ‘marketing’ of ethnicity in the name of power and prestige (Snyder, 2000; Gagnon, 2004). The snowballing impact of rumours and other oral narratives (through interaction with other members of the in-group) on engagement in violent activism highlights unintended consequences in the trajectory of conflict development. It was the redrawing of boundaries in the course of escalation that made the subsequent war seem inevitable.

I have examined the opportunity/constraint/ threat context and resistance strategies to key changes in the level of intensity of direct and relative threats, as well as to reform. Key themes of this dissertation also include state-activist relations and the dynamics of within movement competition. Central state policy (or, rather, lack thereof) resulted in a missed opportunity in terms of facilitating a less extreme and exclusive form of nationalism largely due to the inflexibility of the ruling elites and the self-reinforcing impact of the development of the situation on the ground, which was quite rapidly excluding alternative options. As the respective populations radicalized partly in response to the violence they experienced, the ruling elites found it increasingly difficult to prevent a further escalation. In this context even measures that, from an

outsider's perspective, appear to have the intention to address the grievances and concerns of the competing constituencies (for example the socio-economic package allocated to NK by the Soviet authorities or the new planning initiatives proposed by O'Neill for Northern Ireland) are interpreted through the opposed historical narratives of the respective communities.

In the case of Northern Ireland case the dissertation has explored the process through which the initially reformist civil agitation was replaced by an ethnonationalist campaign, while its goals shifted from the reform of the Northern Ireland state to its abolition (Chapters 5 and 6). I have argued that situating the CRM in a complex network of power relations over time instead of concentrating on the socio-economic environment or minority grievances can contribute to revealing the ways in which it gradually acquired an ethnonationalist character. Here I have discussed the various deliberate and, more importantly, unplanned changes that have dramatically raised the level of perceived threat among significant sections of the unionist community forcing them to adopt largely defensive tactics.

Thus, in the first few years of its existence the CRM appears to have managed to reduce the gulf between institutional politics and grassroots activism and, to a certain extent, the distance between nationalist and unionist communities, as members of the newly emerging middle class came together with representatives of grassroots groups. While the constituent groups have deeply altered the agenda(s) of the actors in positions of power (the Northern Ireland state, as well as the British and Irish governments), they have not managed to transform the base of the political system and the underlying ethnonational dualism in the region. Rather the activism ended up being embedded in the dominant ethnonational cleavage strengthening conflictual tendencies in

community interaction and opening up the way for radicals on both sides to come to the fore.

In chapter 7 I have demonstrated that despite significant differences between my two case studies in political and cultural settings, ideological background, demographic balance and other traits, similarities can be found in how the mutually reinforcing arenas considered above, namely, within movement competition, state-activist relations and structural and discursive dimensions of the opportunity/constraint/threat context operated, therefore facilitating case comparison. In my view, each of the arenas had a distinct influence on the overall process, although their concentration and saliency depended on the historical specificity of the cases. In addition, I have stressed the temporal fluidity of ethnonational activism and the ways in which our understanding of ethnic contention would be deepened not only by a more rigorous examination of the actors involved but by the recognition of pluralism in even the most homogenous of conflict situations.

For both Northern Ireland and NK ideological and generational differences between various groups led to undercutting each other's strategies. While a degree of competition and the existence of different voices within an ethnonationalist constituency has the potential to benefit a nationalist movement, excessive competition may lead to moderate actors struggling to remain relevant and to avoid being marginalized and ultimately silenced. In this context violence can serve a double purpose – first, to weaken the ethnic opponent, especially in reaction to political decisions perceived as threatening and unacceptable concessions, and, second, to suppress critical political forces and voices within their own community. The group as a whole, which might have limited political leverage at the start of the conflict is, thus, projected into a more prominent role. For example, in NK former mid-level

bureaucrats and military leaders advanced to key posts in the NK Republic after independence (post 1994) and in this way could be seen to have ripped the benefits of the escalatory process. On the one hand, violent episodes and attacks can be one of the means to signal power and resolve in the hope to see the opponent back down and retreat from its claims to the disputed territory. On the other hand, they can be used to ‘outbid’ intra-group rivals (e.g. Stedman, 1997:5; Gormley-Heenan and MacGinty, 2008). Boundaries between formerly integrated groups are entrenched in the process; cooperation across boundaries becomes minimal, which has the effect of granting legitimacy to the radical nationalists’ cause.

Many scholars have linked agency driven intra-group friction to increased propensity for inter-group violence and a general ethnicization of politics (Rabuska and Sheplse, 1972; Horowitz, 2000 [1985]: part 3). The conventional ‘outbidding model’ predicts that ethnic parties will choose radical over moderate strategies in an effort to maximize support among voters belonging to a particular ethnic group (e.g. Rabuska and Sheplse, 1972: 83). Somewhat similarly, securing the success of a specific nationalist agenda requires operating in an interdependent field of rival strategies of legitimation. The elites’ desire for identification and recognition of their leadership position is closely related to legitimacy claims (Horowitz, 2002: 195). Whether or not a challenging faction is widely perceived to have a superior capacity to protect or defend the bloc it represents influences actors’ standing within a particular political and cultural setting. At the same time factions within each bloc attempt to strengthen the sense of exclusiveness by (re) activating symbolic references and selected ethnic ties.

In the two case studies considered in this dissertation more radical factions have ultimately managed to project themselves as the most

‘authentic’ representatives of their community, while casting other voices as ‘inauthentic’ or out of touch with grassroots reality and aspirations. In a context where the decisions and policies of state officials were progressively perceived as inefficient, as a failure and even as treacherous these leaders succeeded in promoting an uncompromising form of nationalism and assuming positions of authority within the respective national communities. This process led to the sidelining of those group members who had tried to reach across to the opposing community and to maintain cross-community ties, however weak they might have been. The struggles and disputes to become the legitimate representative of ‘the people’ and to establish the primacy of one out of an evolving array of competing narratives, as well as the impact of the political and ideological environment at a given point in time on the varying patterns of competitive interaction are often underestimated in the literature on ethnic conflict. The analysis of the political actors involved in such a competition and the deconstruction of their strategies highlights the various internal and external factors that lead to a certain narrative becoming dominant.

The theoretically mixed process oriented approach put forward in this thesis allows for a more comprehensive, nuanced and dynamic evaluation of ethnonationally centered collective action in Nagorno-Karabakh and Northern Ireland and potentially other divided societies. When adopting this approach I have critiqued one-dimensional interpretations and models that tend to underestimate the multilayered nature of contentious social, cultural, political and territorial issues involved, as well as the way in which those problems are perceived and frequently misperceived by the main parties. I have also challenged the undertheorized nature of the literatures on these conflicts by considering how these case studies confirm or moderate and refine the insights of the

wider comparative ethnic conflict conceptual field. I have examined, from an outsider's perspective, the positions of both sides to the conflicts in question and the often contradictory public narratives each of the parties has produced. Particular attention has been paid to uncovering participants' perceptions and their own perspectives on the choices and strategies pursued.

Drawing on a newspaper and archival investigation, as well as extensive semi-structured interviews this thesis has presented new empirical research on the mobilization, radicalization and ethnicization dynamics in the respective communities. The evidence casts doubt on strong versions of the 'ethnic entrepreneurship' literature. I challenge straightforward instrumentalist perspectives by highlighting the fact that the connection between developments and politicization of ethnic constituencies on the ground and elite conduct 'at the top' was not automatic. My argument suggests that the constraints facing elites within each ethnic bloc, as well as 'external' (state) leaders are built into the process of ethnic contestation. Overall, the thesis makes a strong case for greater attention to the limits of elite flexibility in eliciting uniform group preferences especially in terms of joining or supporting violent dissent. It challenges the idea that elites are entirely free to choose the path of radicalization, compromise or reform, and that ethnic bloc cohesion can be easily maintained simply out of common ethnic bonds.



## Appendix 1

### Brief chronology of the main events of the NK conflict

**October 1813** – NK formally becomes part of the Russian Empire.

**April 1920** – Bolsheviks take over power in Armenia.

**November 1920** – Bolsheviks take over power in Azerbaijan.

**5 July 1921** – NK declared part of Soviet Azerbaijan with a broad regional autonomy.

**7 July 1923** – A decree establishing the NK Autonomous Oblast' issued.

**October 1987** – demonstrations demanding the resolution of the ecology issue take place in Yerevan. Petitions on NK sent to Moscow.

**November 1987 – January 1988** – the first wave of Azeri refugees flee to Azerbaijan following interethnic clashes in the Kafan and Megri districts of Armenia.

**January 1988** – delegations from NK in Moscow meeting with Soviet officials.

**12–13 February 1988** – the first demonstrations demanding reunification take place in Stepanakert.

**20 February 1988** – the NK Soviet adopts a resolution demanding the transfer of the region to the Armenian SSR. A delegation from Yerevan comes to Moscow and demonstrations take place in Yerevan.

**26 February 1988** – key activists from Yerevan, Silva Kaputikyan and Zori Balayan, meet the Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow.

**27–29 February 1988** – pogroms in Sumgait take place.

**1 March 1988** – Krunk (Armenian for *crane*) Committee for reunification set up in Stepanakert.

**May 1988** – the new eleven member Karabakh committee created in Yerevan.

**15 June 1988** – the Armenian Soviet supports the decision of the NK Soviet.

**18 July 1988** – Supreme Soviet of the USSR reaffirms that NK should and will remain part of Azerbaijan.

**August 1988** – Karabakh Committee transformed into the Armenian National Movement.

**September – December 1988** – waves of Armenian and Azeri refugees following intercommunal clashes in towns across Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK.

**17 November – 5 December 1988** – demonstrations take place in Baku.

**7 December 1988** – a devastating earthquake happens in the Armenian town of Spitak.

**12 January 1989** – Special Administration Committee headed by Arkady Volsky formed in NK effectively introducing direct rule from Moscow.

**May 1989** – Armenians start to form (voluntary) armed defense groups in NK.

**11 September 1989** – the Popular Front officially registered in Baku.

**28 November 1989** – Special Administration Committee dissolved.

**13 –20 January 1990** – mass anti-Armenian pogroms take place in Baku.

**May 1990** – Armenian National Movement becomes the ruling party in Armenia following parliamentary elections.

**1991** – end of the USSR, Armenia and Azerbaijan declare independence.

**2 September 1991** – NK announces its secession from Azerbaijan and the formation of the independent Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR).

**10 December 1991** – A referendum on independence takes place in the newly formed NKR. NK Armenians vote in favour of independence.

**25–26 February 1992** – Azeri casualties following Armenian attacks on the town of Khojaly near Stepanakert.

**1992–1994** – full-scale war in NK and neighbouring territories.

**1994 – present** – conflict regulation phase.

**Sources:** De Waal, 2003: 287-97; *Fond Geidara Alieva*, 2006; Danil'yantz, 2011; Unusov, 2005: 68-76).

### **Brief chronology of the main events of the Northern Ireland conflict (1963–1969)**

**December 1920** – A devolved parliament and government for Northern Ireland established by the Government of Ireland Act.

**December 1956** – IRA begins ‘Operation Harvest’ (the ‘border campaign’).

**25 March 1963** – Terrence O’Neill succeeds Lord Brookeborough as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.

**1963** – Wolfe Tone societies formed.

**14 January 1965** – O’Neill meets Irish Taoiseach Sean Lemass in Belfast.

**January 1967** – Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association formally set up.

**20 June 1968** – the Caledon protest takes place.

**24 August 1968** – the first civil rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon takes place.

**5 October 1968** – civil rights march broken up by the RUC takes place in (London)Derry.

**9 October 1968** – People’s Democracy formed.

**22 November 1968** – O’Neill’s reform package announced.

**28 November 1968** – business vote in Stormont elections abolished.

**1–4 January 1969** – People’s Democracy march from Belfast to (London)Derry takes place. The march is attacked by loyalists at Burntollet Bridge.

**28 April 1969** – O’Neill resigns as Prime Minister and is replaced by James Chichester-Clark.

**August 1969** – loyalist pogroms take place in Belfast.

**December 1969** – IRA splits into Provisional and Official IRA.

**30 January 1972** – 13 civilians killed by British Army during a civil rights march in (London)Derry (‘Bloody Sunday’).

**24 March 1972** – prorogement of Stormont.

**Sources:** (Bew and Gillespie, 1993, McClean, n. d., *Conflict Archive on the Internet*).

## Appendix 2

### Interviews (including position of interviewee and date of interview)

Yerevan, Armenia (all respondents were involved in the reunification movement)

**Alaverdyan, Larissa** – state, public and political figure. Member of Parliament. Member, Heritage party. Member, Armenian Republican Council on Refugees. In 2004–2006 – Ombudsman in Armenia, 18 July 2008.

**Arutunyan, Vagarshak** – Lieutenant-General. 1991–1992 – deputy Chairman, Defense Committee of Armenia. 1999–2000 – Armenian Defense Minister, 31 July 2008.

**Asbekyan, Aida** – deputy Chairman, Armenian branch, Tsitsernak International Rehabilitation Center, 15 July 2008.

**Balayan, Zori** – political and public figure, writer. One of the leaders of the Karabakh Movement in Armenia. 1989 – member of the NKAO National Council, 29 July 2008.

**Gevondyan, Jasmin** – Chairman, NGO “Nerush”, refugee from Kirovabad (Azerbaijan), 14 July 2008.

**Dr. Grigoryan, Stepan** – Chairman, Analytical Center on Globalization and Regional Cooperation. Member of the ANM. 1995–1998 – Armenian Ambassador to the Russian Federation, 1998–2000 – advisor to the Armenian Home Office, 28 July 2008.

**Professor Manasyan, Alexander** – political scientist, Chairman, NGO “Academy of Political Studies”, 15 July 2008.

**Melikyan, Arman** – Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, coordinator of Civic Society Network “Refugees and International Law.” 2001–2004 – head of Permanent Representation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in Armenia. 2004 – NKR Foreign Minister. 2004–2008 – advisor to the NKR President on questions of foreign policy, 18 July 2008.

**Petrosyan, David** – political observer, Noyan Tapan News Agency, 28 July 2008.

**Sarkisyan, Aram** – Vice-President, World Armenian Congress. Head of Organizing Committee “In Defense of Nagorno-Karabakh.” Chairman, Democratic Party of Armenia. 1990–1991 – First Secretary of the CCCP of Armenia, 14 July 2008.

**Sarkisyan, Manvel** – independent expert, Caucasus Center. One of the leading activists of the Karabakh movement (in NK). Former advisor to the NKR President on political issues, 31 July 2008.

**Dr. Shakhnazaryan, David** – founder and Chairman of the Center for Legal and Political Studies (Concord), Yerevan. 1988–1989 – member of the leadership of the Karabakh Movement and Founder-Member of the Board of the Armenian Pan national Movement (1989–1993). 1991–1999 – Deputy of the Armenian Parliament, 1994–1995 – Head of the State Department for National Security in the Ministry of National Security. Special Representative of the President of Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict negotiations, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, 30 July 2008.

**Telyan, Jasmin** – deputy Chairman, Democratic Party of Armenia. Member, Organizing Committee “In Defense of Nagorno-Karabakh.”, 15 and 31 July 2008.

**Verdyan, Julieta** – executive Director, public and charitable organization Agazang Union of Armenian Refugees, refugee from Kirovabad (Azerbaijan), 17 July 2008.

### **Stepanakert, NK**

**Baghdasaryan, Gegham** – editor-in-chief, *Demo*, the first public newspaper of Karabakh, Member, NKR National Council, 23 July 2008.

**Grigoryan, Vera** – Chairman, Alliance of Missing Nagorno-Karabakh Warriors, 25 July 2008.

**Gulyan, Ashot** – 1992–1993 – senior expert of the Commission for Foreign Relations, 1993–1995 – assistant to the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, 1995–1998 – Head of the Department of Diaspora and Bilateral Relations in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, 1998 – Head of the Political Department of the Republic’s Foreign Ministry, 1998–2001 – Deputy Foreign Minister, 2002–2004 – Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2004–2005 – Education Minister. Since 2005 Chairman, NKR National Assembly, 22 July 2008.

**Karapetyan, Rita** – senior official, Foreign Ministry of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, in the late 1980s–early 1990s worked as a journalist in the newspaper *Sovetskii Karabakh* (Soviet Karabakh), 25 July 2008.

**Mailyan, Masis** – Karabakh political figure and diplomat. In 2001–2007 – Deputy Foreign Minister of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. In 2007 ran for president, 23 July 2008.

**Mirzoyan, Maxim** – member, NKR National Assembly. 1988–1989 – Mayor of Stepanakert. Permanent Member, Special Management Committee under Arkadi Volsky, 18 and 22 July 2008.

**Dr. Oganjanyan, Karen** – secretary, Krunk Committee. 1995–2000 – member, NKR National Assembly. In 2002, he was recognized as “a Man of the Year” by the Cambridge Biographical Center. Coordinator, NGO “Helsinki Initiative – 92”, 21 July 2008.

**Saryan, Sarasar** – Chairman, NGO Organization for NKR Refugees, refugee from Baku, 23 July 2008.

**Somova, Galina** – Chairman, NGO Russian Community of Nagorno-Karabakh. Refugee from Sumgait, 21 July 2008.

### **Moscow, Russia**

**Dashdamirov, Afrand** – former member of the CCCP (Central Committee of the Communist Party) of the Azeri SSR, now academic and Deputy Head of the Pan-Azeri Congress, 4 March 2009.

**Dr. Krivopuskov, Victor** – 1990–1991 – Chief of Staff, Operational-Investigations Group, USSR Ministry of the Interior in the NKAO. President, Russian Society for Friendship and Cooperation with Armenia, 11 August 2009.

**Dr. Perepelkin, Lev** – ethnographer, associate member, RAS Oriental Studies Institute, 8 July 2008.

**Dr. Zargaryan, Ruben** – advisor, Foreign Ministry of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, 8 July 2008.



## **Baku, Azerbaijan**

**Professor Abasov, Ali** – member of the Open Society Institute, Azerbaijan Soros Foundation Network, head of the South Caucasian Center for Culture, Peace and Dialogue of Civilizations, 7 January 2009.

**Abasov, Zakhid** – former head of the department of Culture and Tourism of the Shushi in the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan, refugee from Shushi, 15 January 2009.

**Abdulaeva, Arzu** – one of the founders of the first activist group forming the National Front of Azerbaijan (1989), one of the founders of the Social-Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, winner of the prize of the EU ‘For the promotion of democracy and civil society in Azerbaijan’ (1998), 7 January.

**Agaeu, Zulfugar** – student, journalist, refugee from Aghdam, 9 January 2009.

**Alizadeh, Zardusht** – Chairman of the Open Society Institute, Azerbaijan Soros Foundation Network, one of the founders and key members of the National Front of Azerbaijan, 5 January 2009.

**Akhundov, Jivanshir** – Head of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, 7 January 2009.

**Dr. Bakhramov, Jabi** – Deputy Head of the Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences, 6 January 2009.

**Bayramov, Akif** – refugee from Shushi, head of NGO ‘Chernobyletz’, 15 January 2009.

**Bayramov, Rizvan** – Head of Department of Cultural Heritage, Azerbaijan Republic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 13 January 2009.

**Guseinov, Vagif** – refugee from Shushi (NK), former mayor of Shushi (1988–1992), 15 January 2009.

**Hannum, Ofeliya** – refugee from Khojaly, now living in Baku, 8 January 2009.

**Isazade, Azad** – military psychologist, former head of the Information Department of the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan (1992–1994), 13 January 2009.

**Kerimly, Kerim** – President, NGO ‘Organization of Internally Displaced People’, refugee from Shushi, 6 January 2009.

**Dr. Kurbanov, Araz** – Vice-president, of the Institute of Human Rights, National Academy of Sciences, 5 January 2009.

**Maharramov, Mahammad** – Deputy head of the Department for Problems of Refugees, IDPs, migration and work with international organizations, 16 January 2009.

**Mamedov, Rashid** – refugee from Aghdam, 9 January 2009.

**Dr. Musabaev, Rasim** – Vice-president, Far Center of Economic and Political Research, former advisor to former President Ayaz Mutalibov on nationality policy (1991–1992), 10 January 2009.

**Dr. Namazov, Eldar** – President, NGO Public Forum for Azerbaijan, former advisor to Heidar Aliev (1993–1999), 10 January 2009.

**Dr. Sevdimaliev, Ramiz** – Head of Department of International Relations of the Institute of Human Rights, National Academy of Sciences, refugee from Armenia, 5 January 2009.

**Dr. Unusov, Arif** – Head of Department of Conflict and Migration Studies, Institute of Peace and Democracy, Baku, one of the members of the National Front of Azerbaijan, 12 January 2009.

## **Belfast, Northern Ireland**

**Professor Boyle, Kevin** – lecturer at Queen's University, one of the key members of the People's Democracy and the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, now deceased, e-mail correspondence, August 2009.

**Cooper, Ivan** – involved in the Young Unionists in the early 1960s, later secretary of the (London)Derry branch of the NILP. Chair of the Derry Citizens Action Committee, from 1969 Stormont and Westminster MP for the SDLP. Founder member of the SDLP, now retired, 8 January 2010, (London)Derry.

**Dr. Feeney, Brian** – commentator on Northern Ireland history and politics, former SDLP councilor.

**Haughey, Denis** – secondary school teacher in South Tyrone, member of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, Stormont MP for the Social Democratic Labour Party, now social and political activist, 7 January 2010.

**Heatley, Fred** – engineer, founder member of the Wolfe Tone Society, treasurer of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, now retired, 6 January 2010.

**Hope, Ann** – trade unionist, former secretary of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, now human rights activist, 12 January 2010.

**McCann, Eamonn** – journalist, one of the main activists of the (London)Derry branch of the NILP from the mid 1960s until the early 1970s, member of the Derry Housing Action Committee and the Derry Unemployment Action Committee, now commentator and civil rights activist. Member of the Socialist Workers' Party, 8 January 2010, (London)Derry.

**McClellan, Paddy Joe** – secondary school teacher, founder member and later Chairman of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, 4 January 2010, Beragh.

**McCormack, Vincent** – member of the People's Democracy, e-mail correspondence, November 2009.

**McKittrick, David** – author and journalist, 2 July 2009.

**Stewart, Edwina** – teacher, member of the Communist Party of Northern Ireland and of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, now retired, 5 January 2010.

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**Toman, Eddie** – member of the People's Democracy, 25 February 2010.

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