The Heritage of Imperial Frontiers
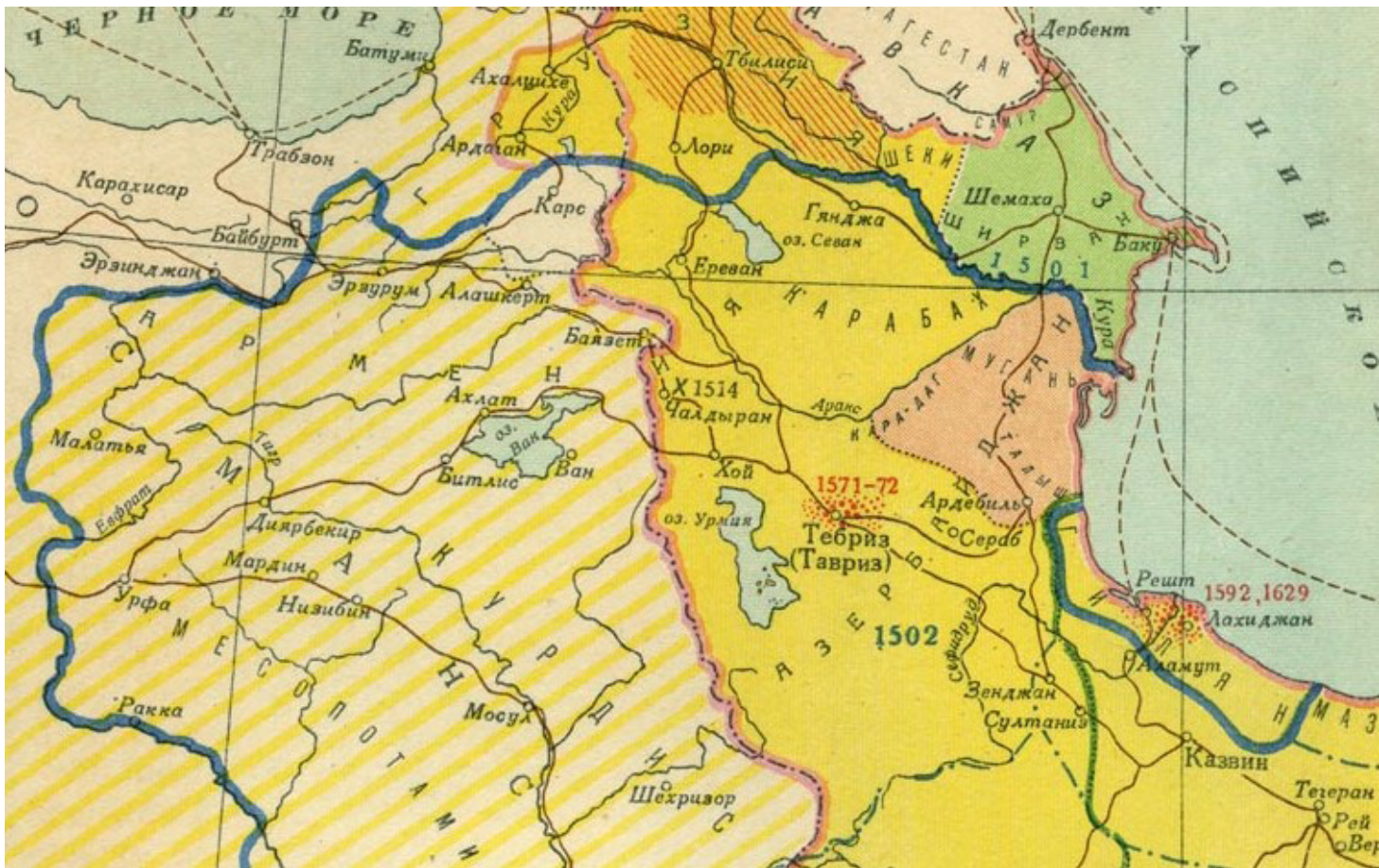
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Tracing the Armenian–Turkish border from imperial rivalries to the Cold War and its closure in 1993, this article shows how shifting frontiers transformed landscapes, populations, and everyday life. Through the intertwined histories of Akhurik and Margara, two villages divided by rivers and barbed wire, it reveals how borders functioned not only as lines of separation but also as spaces of contact, memory, and contradiction. Drawing on local oral histories, the article explores how migration, informal exchange, and Soviet-era silences shaped perceptions of "the other side." It examines how border infrastructure, such as railways, bridges, and checkpoints, became instruments of power, survival, and hope.

Introduction

The modern Armenian-Turkish border acquired its strict contours and political status as a result of the Treaty of Kars in 1921. However, it is rooted in the centuries-old boundary between the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian empires, which fostered distinctive characteristics on each side, widening differences that were initially quite insignificant. The shift in imperial borders and zones of control disrupted established regional patterns, whether through the displacement and resettlement of ethnic and religious groups, the realignment of ecclesiastical authority, the emergence of new architectural styles, or even differing standards for railway gauges — each factor created a unique clash.

The frontier corresponding to the modern Armenian-Turkish political divide was delineated in 1555, as a result of the Peace of Amasia between the Ottoman Empire and Iran, which defined the imperial borderlands with the Akhurian River and the Aras mountains (at the heart of the Armenian highlands) serving as the primary demarcation. It also partitioned the Armenian populace into two main spheres of residence: Ottoman (also called Tachkahayastan[1]) and Persian (later known as Russian, Eastern Armenia, etc.). The Araks River remained within the frontier zone of the Ararat Plain, as the frontier between the empires ran a more southerly route — along the

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[1] The term *Tachik* was originally designated an Arab tribe in Mesopotamia. In late medieval Armenian sources, it evolved into a general ethnonym for Muslims before eventually becoming a specific appellation for Ottoman Turks. From the 19th century to the early 20th century, the terms *Tachik* (Turk) and Tachkastan (Ottoman Empire or Turkey) were standard Armenian references. During this period, Tachkahayastan served as the linguistic equivalent of the English "Turkish Armenia" or the Russian *Turetskaya Armeniy*a (Турецкая Армения).

Aras Mountains and Mount Ararat — leaving the entire Ararat Plain within the Persian domain.[2]

Despite temporary alterations due to a series of Ottoman-Persian wars at the end of the 18th century, the border consistently reverted to its former contours by the time it was inherited by the Russian Empire at the start of the 19th century. Following the annexation of the Sultanate of Shoragel (a small political entity in the territory of the modern Shirak region) in 1805, the Russian Empire gained control over most of the frontier along the Akhurian River. In 1828, the Russian Empire conquered the Khanates of Yerevan and Nakhichevan, expanding into the Akhurian River basin and reaching the foot of Mount Ararat. As an outcome of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, Russia captured Kars, Ardahan, and Kaghzvan, pushing the border further west. During Armenia's brief period of independence between 1918 and 1920, most of the former Kars Province was incorporated into the state until

Map 1 | Political map of the South Caucasus During the Dominance of Ottoman and Safavid Empires (16th-17th centuries) (Source: Vsemirnaya istoriya v 10 tomakh [World History in 10 Volumes], vol. 4 (Moscow, 1958). Chapter XXII Gosudarstvo Sefevidov (The Safavid state) http://historic.ru/books/item/f00/s00/z0000029/map26.shtml).

2 Vsemirnaya istoriya v 10 tomakh [World History in 10 Volumes], vol. 4 (Moscow, 1958), p. 568. Chapter XXIII: "Narody Kavkaza i Sredney Azii v XVI i pervoy polovine XVII v." ["The Peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia in the 16th and First Half of the 17th Centuries"].

the Treaty of Alexandropol in December 1920 set a frontier virtually identical to the current Armenian-Turkish border. The final demarcation was ratified in October 1921 by the Treaty of Kars.

These political upheavals radically transformed the borderlands, resulting in large waves of migration, drastic shifts in the ethnic and religious makeup of the population on both sides of the border, and the successive development and decline of culture, everyday life, and communications.

Migration Between the Empires: The Border As a Segregation Line

The Peace of Amasia in 1555 designated a neutral zone between the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran, which encompassed almost the entire Kars province. The population in this area declined sharply as a result of the scorched earth policy employed by the warring parties. The destruction reached even greater proportions after the new Ottoman invasion in 1578 and throughout the subsequent wars that raged until the signing of the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639. During the same period, Shah Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty carried out a mass deportation of Armenians deep into modern-day Iran affecting the entire vast territory on both sides of the contemporary Armenian-Turkish border.

A series of clashes and wars between the two hegemons, also driven by religious factors (the official status of Shia and Sunni Islam as the basis of authority),[3] led each side to populate the border areas with the most loyal groups possible to partially compensate for demographic losses. On the Persian side, the border area was populated by various Turkic tribes of the Shia faith, while on the Ottoman part, Sunni Kurds were settled. The islamization of Armenians and Georgians, driven by political and economic pressures, also played a key role, leading to a gradual increase in the Sunni demographic in the region.

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[3]   In the Ottoman Empire, Sunni Islam was the dominant religious tradition; following the conquest of Egypt and Arabia in 1517, the sultan assumed the title of Caliph, establishing himself as the formal leader of the Sunni world. Conversely, in Safavid Iran, the ruling dynasty and the Qizilbash tribes — the foundation of its power — were adherents of Shia Islam, a branch they systematically propagated among the Muslim populations of Iran and the Caucasus.

In the beginning of the 19th century, the waning of Shia-Sunni conflict and Russia's growing involvement in the region reversed this trend. From the end of the 18th century, the khans of Yerevan began to involve virtually all Muslim migrants, including Sunni Kurds from Ottoman territories, in their resettlement policy. This coincided with the exodus of the population from the territories of the South Caucasus — conquered by the Russian Empire — to the Ottoman Empire. In particular, following Russia's capture of Georgia and neighboring khanates (1801-1805), the local Karapapakhs moved out of Borchalu and settled in the Ottoman territory of Kars, subsequently making up a significant portion of the region's population, including the northern part of the Armenian-Turkish border.

It should be noted that in territories depopulated by war and the deportation of the Armenian people, the resettlement of Armenians was also part of the policy employed by local Muslim authorities. During the 17th century, the governors of the Yerevan khanate carried out campaigns in the Ottoman territories for this purpose. Even the region's weaker political entities, such as the Kingdom of Kartli, employed resettlement strategies to bolster their influence. In the 17th century, they encouraged the settlement of the Ashotsk region, incorporating Ashotsk, Childir and Javakheti in the ecclesiastical province of the Sanahin Monastery, which was part of the Kingdom of Kartli. Despite this, Nader Shah plundered these regions, forcibly deporting the population of the Khorasan province and destroying the last indigenous Armenian community in the northern part of the present Armenian-Turkish border.
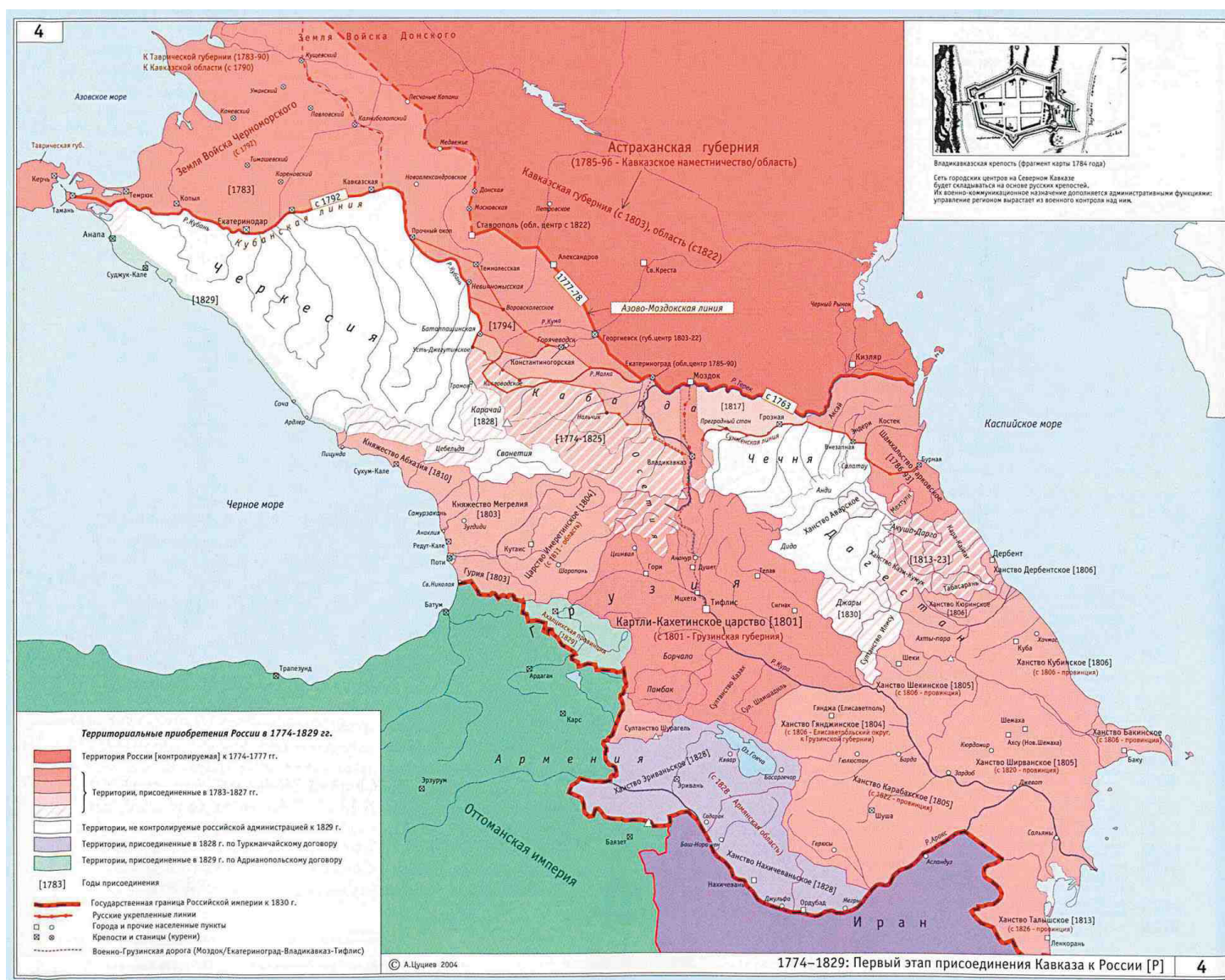
The imperial wars of the 16th-18th centuries resulted in the almost complete depopulation of the western part of the modern Armenian-Turkish border and the near-total disappearance of Armenian settlements along the future divide from Ashotsk to Yervandashat.

The Russian Empire and the Deepening of Segregation

The Russian Empire's southward expansion, marked by the annexation of Shirak (1805) and the occupation of central Armenia (1828), further

exacerbated the fragmentation of the ethno-religious landscape on both sides of the Akhurian River. This shift added a new dimension: Christianity. As the Muslim inhabitants retreated from the territories conquered by Russia — namely Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki — to seek refuge in the Ottoman or Persian Empires, the Armenian population on the opposite side of the frontier emigrated en masse into Russian-controlled lands. This occurred most notably in 1829 when nearly the entire populace of the Pashalik of Kars crossed to the eastern bank of the Akhurian River, settling in the largely depopulated Shirak plain. The urban dwellers of Kars established themselves near the fortress of Gyumri (Alexandropol since 1837), while the peasantry relocated to the villages of Shiark and Pambak. Among these migrants were also Greeks, who settled in Gyumri as well as in the villages of Alkilisa (also known as Baytar, and Hovtun since 1991) and Bayandur.
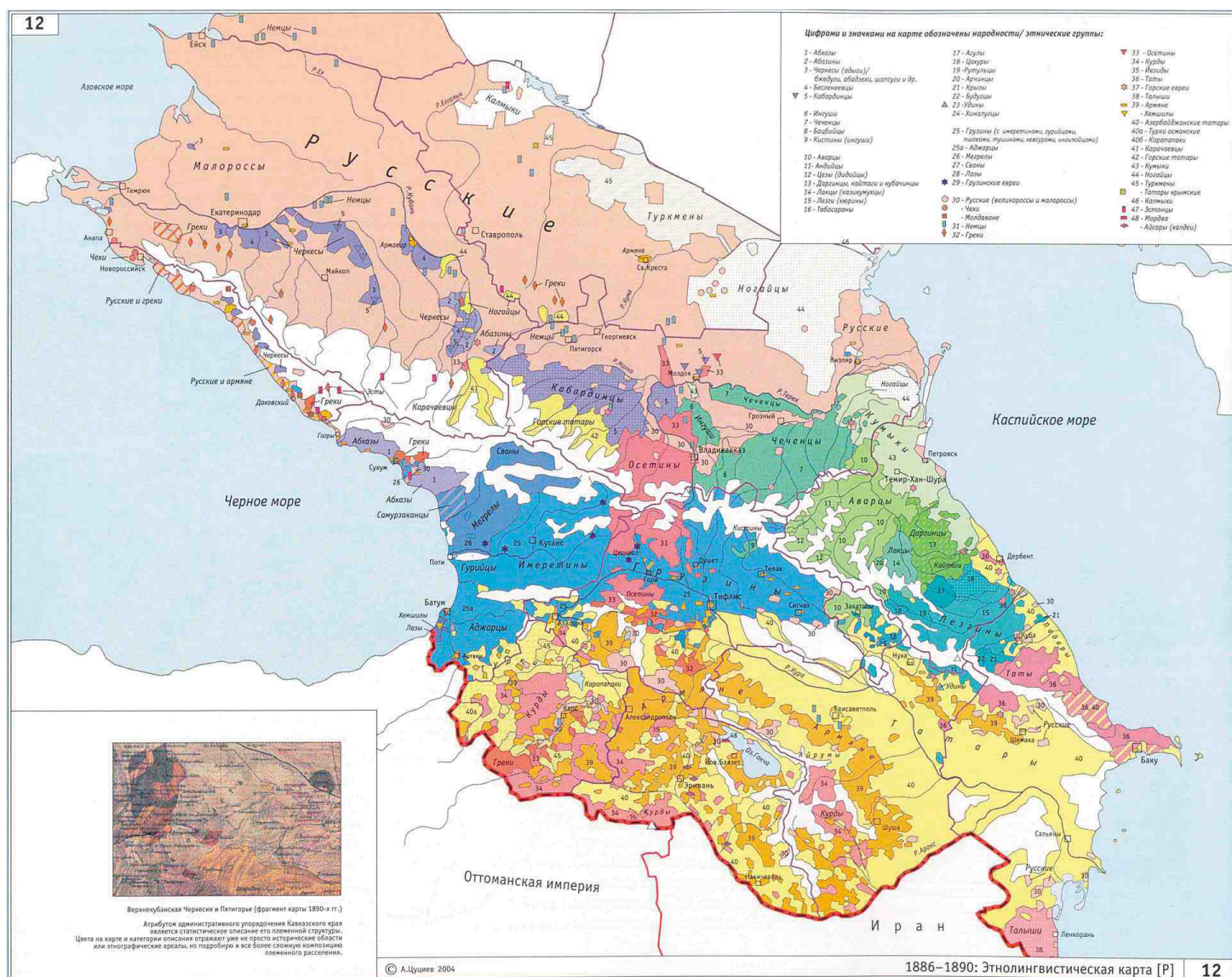
Map 2 | The Political and Administrative Landscape of the South Caucasus, Late 18th—early 19th Centuries (Source: Arthur Tsutsiev, Atlas of the Ethnopolitical History of the Caucasus).

Thus, ethnic and religious disparities, which had long served as catalysts for imperial conflict, solidified demographic segregation through the settlement of loyalist groups along the frontier. Throughout the 19th century, the contrast between the left and right banks of the Akhurian River became increasingly stark. On the Russian side, a once-vacant territory was transformed into the most densely populated Armenian administrative unit in the South Caucasus: the Alexandropol Uezd. Its namesake capital became the largest city in Armenia, housing over 20 per cent of those then residing within the borders of today's Republic.

The abandoned Armenian villages in Kars were occupied by Kurds migrating from the south, a demographic shift that defined the character of the border's southern reaches to this day. Simultaneously, Muslim Armenians

Map 3 | Ethno-demographic Composition of the Region, Late 19th Century (Source: Arthur Tsutsiev, Atlas of the Ethnopolitical History of the Caucasus).

from Basen and Alashkert were resettled from Erzurum into deserted villages; both the proximity to the Russian border and the fertility of the soil encouraged this movement, leading to a partial restoration of the Armenian presence in Kars.

Russia's capture of Kars in 1878 initiated a new phase, pushing the imperial boundaries westward. Under Article 7 of the Peace of Constantinople (1879), Muslim residents of the annexed territories were permitted to sell their property and depart the empire within three years. Consequently, most of the Muslim population of Kars, including descendants of earlier migrants from Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, and even Dagestan, moved to the southern regions of the Ottoman Empire, making way for new settlers.

Unlike previous eras, when the Armenian migrants were the primary agents of resettlement in lands seized from Persia and the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire now pursued a policy of colonizing these new territories with diverse groups: Russians (including religious minorities), Estonians, Greeks, and others who were hostile to the formation of a monolithic administrative unit with an Armenian majority. As a result, the Kars Oblast became the most ethnically diverse entity in the South Caucasus. During this period, other marginalized groups also found a home in the region, including Assyrians, Yazidis, and a significant influx of Armenians.

Kars was transformed into Russia's primary bastion in the South Caucasus. Its integration into the wider imperial network spurred the construction of the Tbilisi-Alexandropol-Kars railway (1899-1900), and other vital links, alongside an urban development program following the conventions of imperial architecture.

The Russian Empire continued its territorial acquisitions until World War I, a period marked by large-scale expansion of transport infrastructure, including the narrow-gauge railway between Sarikamish and Erzurum. These links eventually served as the routes through which survivors of the Genocide reached the safety of modern-day Armenia. In early 1918, following the collapse of the Caucasian Front and the Ottoman offensive, the refugee crisis intensified; Armenians surged across the 1877 border, abandoning even those territories that the Ottoman forces had already breached.

The conflicts of 1918-1920 reinforced the long-standing trend towards ethnic homogenization within respective zones of control. Virtually no

Armenians remained in Turkish-occupied territories, while in Armenian-controlled areas, the Muslim presence almost entirely vanished, with the exception of districts such as Alagoz (Ashotsk). The deserted villages along the new border were largely populated by refugees, including from settlements directly across the river that remained "on the other side." Along the Armenian-Turkish border, a string of similar Armenian and Yazidi (the latter having fled the Kars region) enclaves emerged, while the opposite bank of the Akhurian River was entirely emptied of its Armenian inhabitants.

| The Soviet Era

The Armenian-Turkish border, established in the aftermath of the early 20th century conflicts, was gradually sealed following the Soviet occupation of Armenia, the consolidation of Stalin's regime in the USSR, and the subsequent deterioration of relations between the two countries. Although the 1920s witnessed a brief revival of inter-state engagement — reflected

in the restoration of rail links, the signing of various economic agreements, and the formal delimitation and demarcation of the frontier (1925-1926) — the geopolitical climate shifted once more in the 1930s. Tensions escalated during World War II and its aftermath, fueled by the Soviet leadership's territorial claims against Turkey and, ultimately, by Turkey's accession to NATO.

Extensive engineering barriers and barbed-wire entanglements were erected along the Soviet-Turkish border, accompanied by a tightening of border controls intended to deepen the isolation between the two neighboring states. In turn, the Turkish side implemented similar defensive measures on its own territory.

In the late 1940s, Turkey initiated the construction of the Erzurum-Kars railway and the reconstruction of the Erzurum-Sarikamish narrow-gauge line, which had been originally built by the Russian army during World War I. By the early 1950s, Turkey had completely overhauled the track from Sarikamish to Kars and the Soviet border, converting it from Russian broad-gauge[4] to the European[5] standard for safety reasons.

As noted in a 1952 report by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) regarding the Soviet-Turkish border and infrastructure:

"In the event of hostilities between Turkey and the Soviet Union, the 76-mile extension of the Russian broad-gauge track into Turkish territory would be an immense strategic advantage to the USSR."[6]

During this same period, medieval Armenian architectural monuments were destroyed or damaged, most notably monastic ensembles such as Khtskonk. From the 1930s to the early 1960s, regular rail service between the two countries remained suspended. According to the CIA report, rail travel across the boundary near Leninakan was limited to a few trains a week for the exchange of mail and for the use of diplomatic representatives.

Beginning in 1961, Soviet-Turkish relations entered a period of relative

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4 This refers to the 1520 mm broad-gauge railway, which was adopted by the Russian Empire and maintained by the USSR and all subsequent post-Soviet countries.

5 This refers to the 1435 mm standard-gauge railway, which is the most widely used system globally, predominant across Europe, Asia, North America, and other regions.

6 The Boundary between Turkey and the USSR.

thaw, which was signaled by the USSR's renunciation of its territorial claims against Turkey, a secondary round of demarcation and delimitation (1967-1973), the reopening of rail communication, and an intensification of trade and economic ties. In 1973, the two countries agreed to build the Akhurian Reservoir with a capacity of 525 million cubic meters. This project necessitated the evacuation of several Armenian villages and their relocation to newly established sites.

This dynamic — characterized by a strictly guarded border, membership in opposing military and political alliances, modest economic ties — persisted until the late 1980s. During the era of perestroika, the winding down of the Cold War significantly bolstered bilateral cooperation, leading to a surge in rail exports which reached 185,000 tons in 1989. However, the collapse of the USSR halted this momentum. In the wake of the Karabakh movement and the ensuing war (1992-1994), the Armenian-Turkish border was closed in 1993, and the rail service was once again suspended.

Thus, throughout the majority of the Soviet era, the frontier remained a closed zone, shaped by both geographical features (the Araks and Akhurian rivers, the Akhurian Gorge) and man-made obstructions, including a restricted border-zone regime, barbed wire, and constant military patrols.

Akhurik and Margara: Examples of Two Border Villages

Although the majority of the Armenian-Turkish frontier is defined by geographical features that inhibit cross-border interaction, certain segments have historically been traversed by transit corridors. Before the border assumed its current form, these were vibrant nodes of interaction, linking the region to the Kars-Alexandropol-Tbilisi axis and the lands beyond the Araks River. During the Soviet era, these locations functioned as the primary connection points with the Republic of Turkey: via the rail line at Akhurik or the road bridge at Margara.

How were these border settlements formed? What was the nature of past interactions with the opposite bank? How is this history preserved
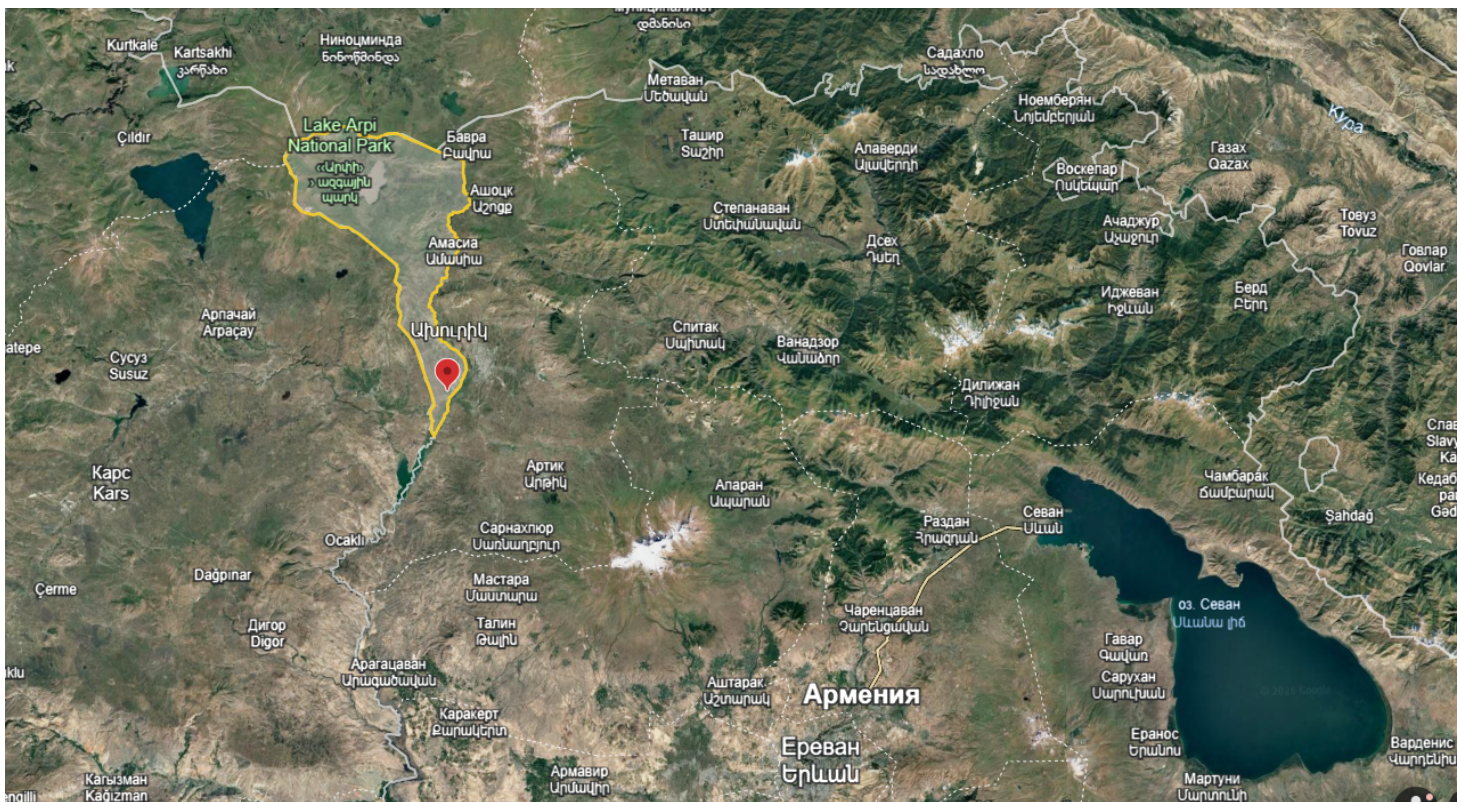
in local memory today, and how do the inhabitants envision the future of Armenian-Turkish relations?

Akhurik: A Sliver of the Kars Province in Armenia

The village of Akhurik is situated on the right bank of the Akhurian River, at the precise point where the Kars-Gyumri railway crosses the border. In addition to the rail link, there is also a road (Gyumri-Kars), which — should the frontier reopen— could become the shortest thoroughfare connecting Yerevan to Kars and the western regions of Turkey. The Akhurik junction served as the primary route to Kars under the Russian Empire, evolving from a dirt track into a railway line by 1900.

Akhurik — one of the communities within Armenia's former Akhurian region — was historically part of the Kars Oblast, as were all settlements on the right bank of the Akhurian River. It remained within Armenian territory following the events of 1920. After the Russian conquest of the Kars Province, Karapapakhs

Map 5 | Territories of the Former Kars Oblast that Remained Part of Armenia After the 1921 Treaty of Kars.

who had fled Russian expansion in the early 19th century, settled in previously depopulated villages. By 1886, Akhurik (formerly known as Karakilisa, or Turkish Karakilisa) belonged to the Molla Musa (now Voskehask) district of the Kars region, with a population of 410 registered as Karapapakh.

Following 1920, Karapapakh communities continued to inhabit the villages of the Soviet Amasia District north of Akhurik, registering as Ottoman Turks in the initial Soviet census of 1926 (and later, from the 1930s onward, as Azerbaijanis, until their departure in 1988). However, they vacated Akhurik in 1921, coinciding with the Turkish military withdrawal from Shirak under the terms of the Treaty of Kars. In May 1921, they were replaced by Armenian refugees, mostly from the village of Vardenis in the Mush region.

Local residents explain this resettlement as follows: refugees from Mush were reportedly offered a choice between the Vedi region or Akhurik on the Turkish border. They chose the latter, harboring the hope that the border would soon open, peace would prevail, and they would be able to return to Mush more swiftly. Following Armenia's independence, many descendants made a "pilgrimage" to the Mush village of Vardenis from which their ancestors had been displaced.

Akhurik is also home to several families descended from refugees who fled Armenian villages in the Bash-Shoragel region (now Akyaka) which remained on the Turkish side of the line. During the Soviet era, state-sanctioned historiography moderately encouraged the public memory of Mush, Sasun, and the Genocide, whereas historical narratives that deviated from this grand discourse were treated fragmentarily. Consequently, the specific events that occurred in the Kars province in 1918 or 1920 — pertaining to Armenia's brief independence and territorial losses during the Armenian-Turkish War — were largely proscribed topics. These local micro-histories — an integral part of the refugees' historical memory during the Soviet era — were subsumed into the overarching framework of Genocide remembrance, with "forbidden" family memories expressed only within acceptable, albeit often distorted, ideological parameters.

Unlike the majority of the Armenian-Turkish frontier, where the dividing line is defined by the broad Araks River, or the Akhurian Gorge, the Akhurik segment is separated by a narrow stream. Until the 1990s, the entire borderland was cultivated and irrigated by the Akhurian Reservoir. Local

residents recall that while working in the fields, it was possible to chat with farmers on the Turkish side, who often observed the Soviet agricultural machinery with fascination. Occasionally, tools left by Armenian villagers would vanish; yet, as recalled by J., a resident of Akhurik, those same locals would pass on baling twine and other necessities to their counterparts across the river.

The socio-economic disparity between the Soviet and Turkish villages was particularly striking until the late 1970s, when electric lighting and, eventually, agricultural machinery appeared on the Turkish side. Conversely, the Armenian lands were extensively cultivated until the early 1990s when the pumping station was dismantled and ceased operation. In local oral histories, the shifting fortunes of both nations occupy a central place. While conditions gradually improved on the Turkish side, the Armenian side faced a decline, often associated with the rise of militarized groups and incidents of abduction in the early 1990s.

In the villagers' accounts, memories of the Armenian-Turkish border frequently overlap with recollections of Armenian-Azerbaijani interactions during the Soviet era. A notable feature of these accounts is that both Azerbaijanis and Turks are referred to as "Turks," a conflation largely driven by linguistic commonality. Until 1988, several Azerbaijani villages existed north of Akhurik in the Amasia region, the largest being Gyullibulagh (now Byurakn). V, a local shopkeeper, recalls that her family maintained relations with the Azerbaijanis of Gyullibulagh. Her memories reflect both the intensifying interactions between Armenian and Azerbaijani villagers in the final years of the Soviet Union, and the lingering undercurrents of mistrust even in the 1980s. The latter, for instance, was evidenced by a persistent apprehension regarding staying overnight in Azerbaijani homes. V. also recalls meeting uprooted women from Gyullibulagh in the early 2000s, at the Sadakhlo market on the Georgian border); they recalled their former lives with longing, mourning their lost homes and inquiring about the changes in their old neighbourhoods.

Such stories reveal two distinct layers of identity and perception. On the one hand, the unsettled relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, coupled with the historical trauma of the post-Genocide era, foster deep-seated scepticism about the normalisation of ties. On the other hand, the lived

experience of human contact during the Soviet period, the opportunity to understand "the other side" on a human level and the full weight of losing one's home, create a complex reality where various, oftentimes contradictory arguments are employed; mistrust and legacy of conflict coexist with genuine human sympathy for the tragedies faced by the other and an awareness that both sides have commonalities.

These contradictory impulses — mistrust and hope for a positive change — remain deeply intertwined. For example, during the 2007 debates in the U.S. House of Representatives regarding the recognition of the Armenian Genocide, a news report from Akhurik indicated that locals feared such a political move might provoke a military incursion by Turkey.

J. shares a story from the 2010s, during the "football diplomacy." A Turkish photojournalist named Eren visited Akhurik to discuss with the villagers about various aspects of Turkish-Armenian relations, including the potential reopening of the border. He was introduced to Mushegh, one of the village's oldest residents and a descendant of Genocide survivors. Mushegh categorically refused to accept Eren projecting a sense of collective culpability onto Eren. However, after persistent encouragement from his neighbors, Mushegh eventually agreed to talk to Eren, sharing the story of his family's murder and his own survival, repeatedly remarking that it was the "Turkish Erens" that had committed these acts. Ultimately, he befriended the journalist and welcomed him into his home with traditional hospitality. According to J., Eren expressed his condolences and, pointing to a slaughtered bull in the yard, said that he could not even kill a sheep, let alone a human being, and bore no personal blame for the past. This narrative functions as a parable within the rural worldview illustrating the difficult distinction between modern Turks and the perpetrators of historical atrocities.

V., the shopkeeper, also recalls her first contact with this group of journalists. Her old shop was called "Van," as her relatives were refugees from that city. This name caught the interest of a Turkish journalist, and that is how their relationship began.

The USSR-Turkey Railway and the "Stolen Sports Trousers"

The first station on the line entering Armenia from Turkey is located near

the village of Akhurik. Having been active since the 1920s and reactivated in the 1960s, the station operated at a time when the Turkish side had already converted its track gauge from the Russian to the European standard. Throughout the Soviet era, the Kars-Gyumri railway was reserved exclusively for the transport of mail and freight, including livestock, textiles, industrial equipment, although a singular tourist excursion was permitted during perestroika in the late 1980s.

Due to the differences in railway gauges, a facility for transshipment and bogie exchange was established within the Soviet Union. According to the recollections of Akhurik residents, many locals worked at this station, where cattle arriving from Turkey were transferred from Turkish wagons to Soviet ones. By the 1980s, a direct European-gauge line had been extended from the frontier to Leninakan (Gyumri), enabling cargo to reach the city without stopping at the border. The imported livestock was slaughtered, and the meat was used to produce sausages at the Leninakan meat-canning factory.

The railway left other imprints on the lives of rural residents. V. recalls that for children, the station represented a mysterious world where they loved to play various games. A track worker would allow them to play on the grounds and even climb into the locomotives in exchange for fresh spring water. However, one childhood game culminated in a significant accident; the children inadvertently switched the track points, causing a carriage loaded with sports trousers — a highly coveted "scarce import" — to derail. Local inhabitants took advantage of the mishap, looting a significant portion of the rare cargo. According to the villagers, Soviet authorities later arrested many and even imprisoned some on charges of theft. Despite this, the train accident became an opportunity for the villagers to "update" their wardrobes with fashionable clothing otherwise unobtainable in the USSR.

Prospects for Reopening the Border

When questioned regarding the potential impact of an open Armenian-Turkish border, locals often hesitate to answer immediately, trying to gauge the interviewer's political leanings. Domestic political tensions and polarization within the country, frequently centered on the normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations and reopening of the border, force them to exercise caution. A positive stance on the necessity of an open border is

sometimes stigmatised as "unpatriotic." For this reason, it is vital for the interviewer to establish a neutral rapport. After an initial interaction, including on issues unrelated to the subject, trust is established which lets the individual express his or her position more openly. Their outlook often blends apprehension regarding the normalisation of relations with both Turkey and Azerbaijan — noting that deep-seated historical enmity makes reconciliation difficult — with a counter-argument, suggesting that it is possible to exist as neighbors through economic cooperation and commerce, much like other nations.

V. says that Turkish lorries sometimes drive into the village by mistake. Unaware that the Armenian-Turkish border is closed, drivers rely on GPS coordinates for the nearest route to Kars and arrive in Akhurik only to find the path blocked. V. notes that while many Turkish drivers are initially afraid to get out of their vehicles, the villagers offer them water, juice, phone chargers, etc., which changes the drivers' attitude and disposition.

A recurring argument in favor of opening the border is that trade with Turkey currently flows through Georgia, enriching primarily the Georgian economy. Cautious optimism that it will benefit Armenia is often rooted in the belief that Armenians are enterprising and would quickly establish new connections. J. cites Kars as a precedent: "The whole of Kars was built by Armenians," he remarks, "it is identical to Gyumri, and if the border opens, we'll be able to exert more influence on them than they will on us."
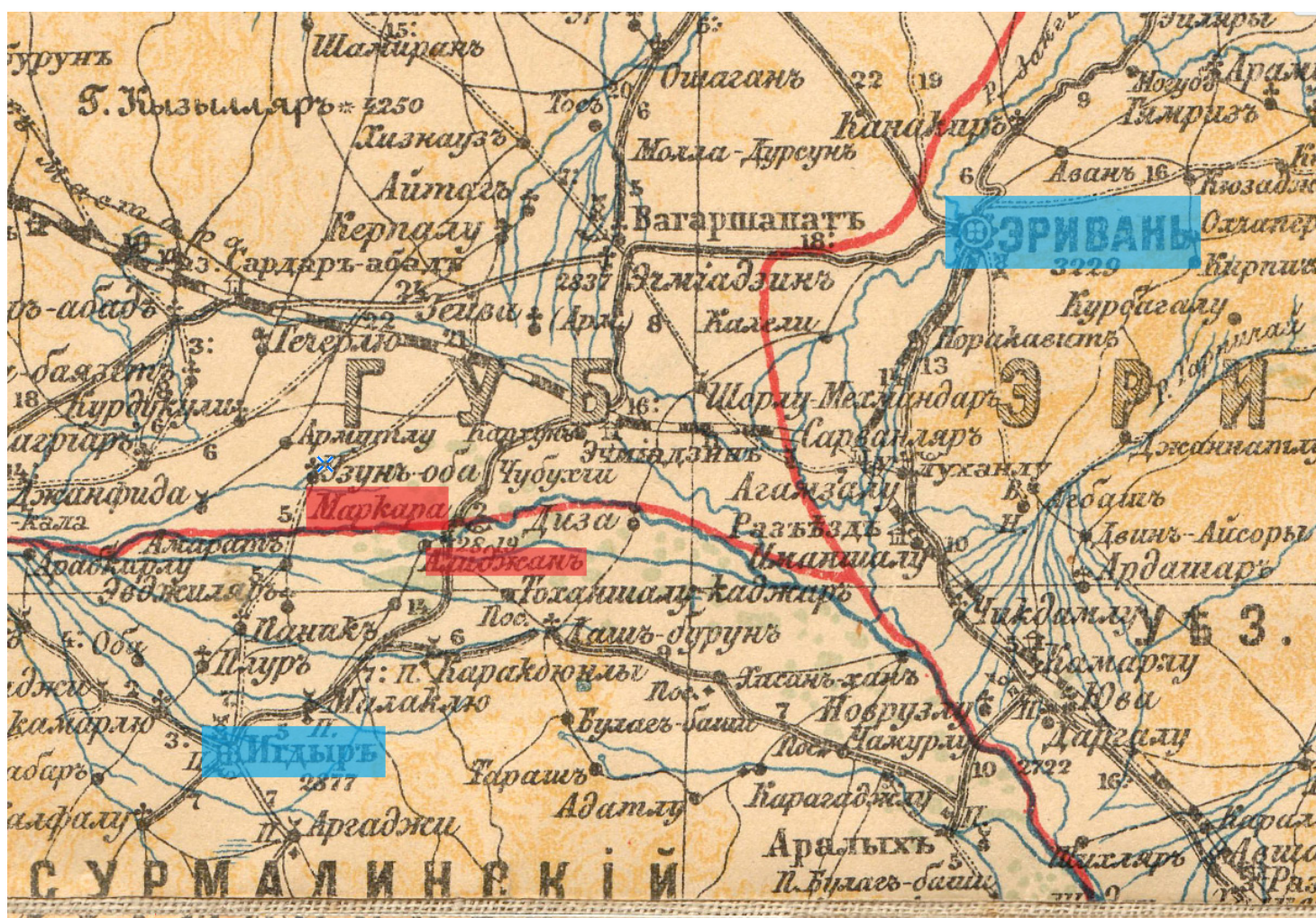
| Margara: Life At the Closed Bridge

Unlike Akhurik, whose geography is tied to imperial demarcation of the last few centuries and where the Soviet era communication with the Turkish side was maintained via rail, Margara sits on a relatively modern frontier. Until 1920, the territory south of the Araks River comprised the region of Surmalu — a province that had been under Persian sovereignty since 1555, part of the Russian Empire since 1828, and within the Republic of Armenia from 1918 to 1920.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Margara — or Margar's village, it appeared in official Russian records — was one of the few Armenian settlements remaining on the northern bank of the Araks River. According to local accounts, the original village was located approximately 2 km northeast of the current site, where an ancestral cemetery still stands. The present settlement was founded in 1810 by a craftsman named Margar, from whom the village takes its name. Its location was strategically important in the 19th century, the primary raft crossing over the Araks River on the road from Yerevan to Igdir and Bayazet, was situated here.

In the 19th century, the Margara pass evolved into the primary transport artery between Yerevan and Surmalu, eventually hosting the only wooden bridge across the Araks River on the Ararat plain. Throughout the Russo-Turkish wars and World War I, the bridge served as a major conduit for troop movements towards Bayazet and Alashkert as well as a gateway for the influx of refugees from Bayazet, Alashkert and Van. In late 1914, the

Map 6 | The Main Road Between Yerevan and Igdir (Passing Through the Villages of Margara and Alijan) at the Beginning of the 20th Century (Military Topographic Map of the Caucasus Region, 1903).

Armenian press was filled with harrowing accounts of endless streams of displaced people arriving in Margara and finding temporary shelter in the homes of rural residents.

On the southern bank, directly opposite Margara, lay another Armenian village, Alijan, which was originally larger than its northern counterpart (in 1831, Margara had 111 inhabitants, while Alijan had 120). Until the end of the Armenian-Turkish War in 1920, this bridge served as the vital supply line for General Dro's (Drastamat Kanayan) command on the Surmalu front. In November 1920, following the retreat of the Armenian army and the evacuation of the Armenian population of Igdir (Surmalu Province), Drastamat Kanayan ordered the destruction of the bridge to prevent the Turkish forces from using it for an assault on Yerevan.

The various duties imposed on the peasantry during that conflict, their assistance to the front and the sheer perils of war persisted in the collective memory. However, during the Soviet era, the political taboo surrounding the Armenian-Turkish War, forced these recollections to be woven into the permissible narrative of the 1918 Battle of Sardarapat (during which General Dro was actually stationed in Aparan). The adaptation of "forbidden" historical episodes into politically acceptable stories remains a defining feature of the national identity forged during the Soviet period.

Although the main bridge across the river was adjacent to the village, the frontier remained sealed throughout the Soviet decades. Locals believe that several factors — the presence of Surmalu refugees, the village's border location and a traditionally high level of education since the Tsarist era — made Margara a particular target for Stalin-era repressions. In the 1940s, the village was encircled by barbed wire, and a checkpoint was set up at the entrance. The restrictions imposed by the regime shaped a unique culture of vigilance; as the villagers joke, if a stranger enters the community and speaks to anyone, law enforcement will show up within minutes.

In 1945, Turkey once again destroyed its segment of the Margara bridge to prevent a possible invasion by the Soviet army amid the deteriorating relations over the USSR's territorial claims. Tensions remained high until the early 1960s. The concrete bridge that still stands today was built in 1963-1964. According to local accounts, multinational brigades from various Soviet republics participated in its construction. During the Soviet era, the

bridge was used only for rare diplomatic and administrative exchanges and for the repatriation of border violators.

K., a former history teacher, recalls that in the Soviet period, every child in the village knew that they had to keep a close eye on the river; in the event of spotting a border violator, they would immediately report it to adults and border guards. K. herself received awards from border guards for such assistance. Locals do not remember any freight or motor transport crossing the Margara bridge during the Soviet era.

It was only in 1980 that construction began at the border crossing with the aim of opening freight traffic between the two countries. However, the project was never completed due to another decline in Soviet-Turkish relations. From 1991 until the border was closed in 1993, humanitarian aid from Syria was passed to Armenia via the crossing point, as were several diplomatic missions, including an Armenian delegation on its way to the 1992 Black Sea Economic Cooperation summit. According to some villagers, a large consignment of cattle was also illegally sold across the bridge in the early 1990s, but other villagers deny this occurred.

Thus, despite the existing infrastructure, the Margara bridge has not been in regular use since 1920, although it had previously facilitated active communication between Yerevan and the Surmalu Province. During the Soviet era, residents of Akhurik were not encouraged to contact Turkish villagers, although it was not uncommon to exchange baling twine, cigarettes and other small items while working in the fields. However, such contacts did not occur in Margara due to its geography (the wide riverbed acting as a dividing line), terrain characteristics, and stricter border control.

Margara's residents could make sense of what was going on in the village of Alijan across the river by the loud voices they heard; the sound that stood out the most was adhan, the call to prayer. Both in Margara and Akhurik, inhabitants note that until the 1970s, Alijan did not even have electric lighting, and living standards there were noticeably different from theirs. Now, the locals observe active development on the Turkish side, which causes apprehension for many.

In early 2025, as Russian guards left the Margara border post and the adjacent section of the Armenian-Turkish frontier, the Armenian flag was

raised there. A few months later, the Turkish side also raised its flag. During heated discussions in the village center, various opinions were expressed, including the belief that the Turks were afraid of the Russians and for this reason did not raise their flag — a situation that now has changed. According to another view, this is a sign of the imminent opening of the border.

The examples of Margara and Akhurik, despite interesting similarities, reveal more striking differences. In Akhurik, where economic conditions are more difficult, positive perceptions associated with the opening of the border prevail to a greater extent than in Margara; the latter, unlike Akhurik, never witnessed a partial opening of the border or any contacts with the villagers on the other side during the Soviet years. At the same time, in both cases, historical memory was predominantly based on the Soviet model or discourse that also nourished certain national narratives. In both instances, the polarizing political rhetoric within Armenia affects the villagers' assessment of the past, present, and the future. Any positive stance regarding the open borders is seen as a potentially dangerous position that could be criticised both within the community and beyond. This is why villagers prefer to listen to different opinions for quite a long time, ensuring they will not be judged before expressing their points of view — which then often prove to be more bold and far-sighted.

J. from Akhurik, who was in favor of opening the border in the belief it would have a positive impact on Armenia, initially tried to frame this as the patriotic approach; as the opposing sides are both Armenian, it means one's position cannot harm the nation. A heated discussion broke out in Margara over these issues, with the participating villagers mostly defending opposing views until some of the participants declared their support for the opening of the border, which shifted the direction of the debate and the number of supporters.

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