Information Operations and Maneuver Warfare

Maneuverist Paper No. 13

by Marinus

Conventional information operations, what people often call "propaganda," resemble campaigns of attrition. Just as the attritionist attempts to wear down the enemy's will to resist by slowly inflicting a large number of relatively small injuries, the propagandist deploys many modest messages in order to convince others of the virtue of his friends, the justice of his cause, and the iniquity of his enemies. Clever practitioners of information operations, however, do things differently. Rather than casting to the winds a myriad of minor memes, they employ the informational analog of maneuver warfare to achieve decisive effects.

An excellent example of such maneuver in information space played a role in the outcome the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, a conflict that began on 27 September 2020 and ended, 44 days later, on 9 November 2020.[1] In this struggle, the winning side (the Republic of Azerbaijan) combined skillful information operations with kinetic actions of various kinds to in order to capture, and ethnically cleanse, land it had lost in an earlier conflict.[2] At the same time, the losing side (composed of a pair of intertwined Armenian republics) found itself drawn into what might be called information ambushes, some of which were of its own making.

The bone of contention in the war between Azerbaijan and the two Armenian republics was a contiguous collection of territories that, in rough terms, corresponds to an area long known as Karabakh. With an area of some 4,500 square miles, these territories cover more than twice as much acreage as the state of Delaware but somewhat less than Connecticut. In 2020, about 150,000 people lived in Karabakh that, apart from a short frontier shared with Iran, were entirely surrounded by land in the obvious and unencumbered possession of Azerbaijan.

All but a handful of the people who lived in Karabakh in September of 2020 spoke the Armenian language, embraced Armenian culture, and claimed Armenian descent. Indeed, the population of the polity they formed in the course of the breakup of the Soviet Union, a state originally called the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh, contained a somewhat higher proportion of Armenians than the eponymous, and substantially larger, Armenian ethnostate, the Republic of Armenia. (While many people around the world continue to refer to the smaller state by its original designation, Armenians are much more likely to refer to it by its newer name of the Republic of Artsakh.)

The relationship between Artsakh and the larger Republic of Armenia is a complex one. While so closely allied that they draw both military personnel and weaponry from a common pool, the inhabitants of Artsakh had much more skin in the game than their cousins in the Republic of Armenia. In the

In the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, the forces of Azerbaijan skillfully combined traditional operations with OIE to achieve victory. (Photo by SSgt Ryan Whitney.)

event of defeat at the hands of Azerbaijan, all of the residents of Artsakh faced the very real danger of being converted into refugees. For people living in the Republic of Armenia, however, an Azerbaijani victory, while painful in many ways, was much less likely to result in the loss of hearth, home, or livelihood.

Prior to the early 1990s, some 400,000 people who were not Armenian, the vast majority of whom were Azerbaijanis, had also lived in the contested territories.[3] Nearly all of these people, however, had left their homes in the course of the long war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis that ended in 1994. In some parts of Karabakh/Artsakh, the towns and villages vacated were soon occupied by Armenians who had lost their homes in the course of the recent war. In others, however, few, if any, people took the places of those who had been driven out. As a result, the contested territories were rich in ghost towns.

On the battlefield, the first great event of the war that broke out on 27 September 2020 was the destruction, at the hands of Azerbaijani unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), of a substantial proportion of the Armenian inventory of tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and mobile anti-aircraft systems.[4] While this was going on, Azerbaijani artillery units fired a small number of long-range rockets into a handful of built-up areas in Karabakh, most of which were located dozens of kilometers away from the places where the mechanized units of the two belligerents had been deployed. (While fired from multiple rocket launchers, few of these rockets seem to have been launched as part of the salvos such weapons were optimized to deliver. Rather, the damage done by the explosion of the rockets suggests that most of the rockets were either fired singly or in pairs.)

Soon after the start of hostilities, Azerbaijani information operators began to share a large number of photos that depicted, and considerable film footage that documented, the demise of Armenian armored vehicles at the hands of flying robots. They refrained, however, from publishing any pictures, moving or otherwise, of the terminal effects achieved by the rockets fired at civilian targets. On the contrary, Azerbaijani publicists categorically denied that anyone in the Azerbaijani armed forces had taken part in the bombardment of civilian communities. (Every once in a while, moreover, Azerbaijani information operators took a break from the celebration of the anti-armor achievements of aerial automatons in order to publish complaints that Armenian artillery units had fired rockets at civilian targets.)

Armenia and Azerbaijan. *(Map by author.)*

From the start, Armenian press officers worked hard to counteract stories of the success achieved by Azerbaijani UAVs. To do this, they showed pictures of the wreckage of Azerbaijani UAVs that had been shot down, celebrated the service of Armenian soldiers equipped with hand-held air defense missiles, and documented the destruction of Azerbaijani armored vehicles by Armenian ground troops. Armenian publicists also took pains to deny all tales of Armenian rocket attacks upon civilian communities. At the same time, the bulk of the materials promulgated by Armenian press releases and social media posts told heart-rending tales of homes destroyed, women wounded, and children orphaned by the explosion of Azerbaijani rockets fired at long range into places inhabited by Armenian civilians.

On 4 October 2020, the first day of the second week of the war, the Armenian armed forces fired a pair of tactical ballistic missiles into the middle of Ganja, the second largest city in Azerbaijan.[5] The resulting explosions, recorded by closed-circuit television cameras, destroyed two large buildings and damaged many others. According to reports published by Azerbaijani sources, the strike also resulted in the death of one civilian and the wounding of thirty others.

Later that day, three Armenian authorities disseminated separate statements about the missiles that had exploded in Ganja. Maj Shushan Stepanyan, the press secretary of the Armenian Ministry of Defense, categorically denied that any Armenian missiles had been fired against the city. Mr. Vahram Pogosyan, the press secretary of the Republic of Artsakh, claimed that the Armenian missiles had destroyed the Ganja International Airport, which is located about five kilometers (three miles) away from place where the two missiles had landed.[6] (Armenian sources had long claimed that this airport, which had been closed to civilian traffic in March of 2020, was being used as a base for the aircraft, both manned and unmanned, of both Azerbaijan and Turkey.) The president of the Republic of Artsakh, Mr. Arayik Harutyunyan, explained that the missiles, which had been aimed at military installations in Ganja, had been fired in retaliation for Azerbaijani attacks on Armenian settlements. He added that, in order to minimize the chances of civilian casualties, he had previously warned the civilian inhabitants of Ganja to leave that city.[7]

In sharp contrast to his Armenian counterparts, Mr. Hikmat Hajiyev, a senior civil servant serving as the director of the war information center set up by the Republic of Azerbaijan, issued a coherent series of press releases, media kits, and social media posts that contrasted the humane precision of Azerbaijani combat operations with the crudely executed warcrimes perpetrated by the Armenians. In a war in which

Azerbaijani forces were using precision strikes against purely military targets, these materials explained, the Armenians were tossing poorly aimed projectiles into the middle of a city that lay nearly 40 kilometers (24 miles) away from the nearest battlefield and 130 kilometers (80 miles) away from the site of the fiercest fighting.

On 5 October 2020, Mr. Pogosyan, who had previously claimed that the missiles had struck the airport at Ganja, posted a message on social media that included a painfully bombastic threat of follow-on attacks. "A few more days," he wrote, "I'm afraid that the archeologists even won't be able to find the place of Ganja."[8] This statement enhanced the credibility of the Azerbaijani information campaign, which aimed to convince the world that the Armenian armed forces were deliberately targeting places where civilians lived. The following day, Maj Stepanyan, acting for the Armenian Ministry of Defense, published figures for the number of people killed and wounded, and the number of buildings destroyed or damaged, by Azerbaijani attacks upon Armenian towns and villages.[9] (While Maj Stepanyan may well have been trying to divert attention from Mr. Pogoyan's self-inflicted wound, the timing of this message gave the unfortunate impression that she was attempting to justify the missile strikes on Ganja as retaliation for rocket attacks on Armenian settlements.)

Over the course of the two weeks that followed the attack of 4 October 2020, additional Armenian missiles struck Ganja. These, according to figures published by the Azerbaijani government, resulted in 31 additional deaths among the civilian population. As before, Armenian publicists responded to Azerbaijani messaging on the subject of these losses with press releases and social media posts describing Azerbaijani attacks on Armenian civilians. They also identified a number of military support facilities located in, or near, Ganja.[10]

While public affairs officers engaged in their war of words and projectiles fell upon civilian communities, Azerbaijani ground combat forces conducted a long series of attacks with limited objectives. These served three purposes. First, they pushed Armenian units out of the patches of woodland that protected them from the prying eyes of Azerbaijani UAVs. Second, they facilitated the occupation of towns, villages, and farms. Third, they allowed Azerbaijani ground forces to approach, day-by-day and step-by-step, the most populous urban center in the contested territory. (The Armenians refer to this city of 55,000 people, which serves as the capital of the Republic of Artsakh, as Stepanakert. Azerbaijanis call it by its old Turkish name of Xankendi.)[11]

The last, and largest, of the Azerbaijani attacks resulted, on 6 November 2020, in the capture of a hill adjacent to Stepanakert/Xankendi, one that rises a good 600 meters above the city. In addition to dominating the surrounding terrain, this hill is also home to a town, known to Armenians as Shushi, and to Azerbaijanis as Shusha, of great significance to both sides in the long struggle between the two peoples. Prior to 1992, Shushi/Shusha had been inhabited by some 15,000 Azerbaijanis. On 9 May 1992 of that year, however, Armenian forces captured the town, and the Azerbaijani inhabitants of the place became refugees. In the three decades that followed, more than 4,000 Armenians, many of whom had previously fled their homes in Azerbaijan, moved into the town.

Preparations for the Azerbaijani attack on Shushi/Shusha began nearly a month before Azerbaijani ground forces entered that town. On 8 October 2020, two large projectiles of undoubted Azerbaijani origin struck the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral. A building of great significance to Armenian culture that also served as a symbol of Armenian ownership of Shushi/Shusha, the cathedral had only recently been renovated, refurbished, and reconsecrated. (Sources differ as to the specifics of these projectiles. Some describe them as rockets or missiles, others as bombs dropped by aircraft. What is certain, however, is the precision of the two strikes, both of which landed within two meters of each other upon the cupola of the cathedral.)[12]

The centerpiece of the Armenian response to the strike upon the cathedral in Shushi/Shusha was a carefully crafted video in which a world-class Armenian cellist set up his instrument in the ruined building and played a haunting piece by Armenia's greatest composer of sacred music. As propaganda, the video, which depicted Armenians as highly cultured and determined defenders of Christian civilization, succeeded brilliantly. As a maneuver in information space, however, it failed. In particular, by reminding viewers of the precision with which the Azerbaijani strike upon the cathedral had been delivered, it supported the central message of the Azerbaijani information campaign, a message that, in turn, convinced tens of thousands of Armenians to act in ways that set the stage for Azerbaijani victory.

From the start of the war, the combination of depiction and denial employed by Azerbaijani information operators sent a powerful message to the Armenian population of the contested territories. The first element of the message was the ability of the Azerbaijani armed forces to conduct precision strikes. The second part of the message, inadvertently magnified by Armenian propaganda, was the willingness of the Azerbaijani leadership to conduct such strikes against Armenian settlements in the contested territory. As a result, thousands of Armenian civilians decided to abandon their homes well before the anticipated arrival of Azerbaijani troops.[13]

The power of Azerbaijani information operations to multiply the psychological effect of bombardment becomes evident when one compares the casualties caused by rocket strikes in the two battles for Stepanakert/Xankendi. Between November of 1991 and May of 1992, Azerbaijani artillery units fired thousands of unguided rockets into the city, killing 169 civilians and convincing nearly all of the city's 70,000 inhabitants to flee.[14] Between 27 September 2020 and 9 November 2020, Azerbaijani gunners launched a much smaller number of projectiles at the city, killing 13 civilians and driving 50,000 people (out of a total population of 55,000) from their homes.[15]

A similar pattern can be seen in a comparison between the Azerbaijani bombardments of the first war for Artsakh/Karabakh and the conflict that took place in 2020. Between December of 1991 and January of 1993, long-range weapons

fired by the Azerbaijani armed forces killed about 1,500 Armenian civilians. Between 27 September 2020 and 9 November of the same year, weapons of that type killed 29 Armenian civilians. (In addition to this, Azerbaijani unmanned aerial vehicles killed four additional civilians.)[16]

The Azerbaijani campaign in Artsakh/Karabakh contained many elements alien to the maneuver warfare tradition. The use of fleets of unmanned aerial vehicles to destroy so many of the armored vehicles deployed by the Armenians in the first few days of the war was an act of unalloyed attrition. The terrain-oriented attacks with limited objectives were likewise products of scripted, stereotyped, and methodical battle plans. At the same time, when combined with limited (and thus more deniable) rocket strikes and a messaging campaign that stressed the precision of their weapons, the Azerbaijanis were able to achieve, in 44 days, the most important of its war aims.

In much the same way, the Armenian forces defending Artsakh/Karabakh were highly decentralized. This proved to be a great advantage when fighting in the wooded areas that sheltered them from Azerbaijani unmanned aerial vehicles. The same mentality that enabled the Armenians to fight so well in the forest, however, proved a liability when it came to the employment of the two weapons that the Azerbaijanis wielded so well. Thus, the tactical ballistic missiles dropped on the city center of Ganja proved to be a self-inflicted wound, one made even worse by messages sent by Armenian propagandists bereft of a common vision.

This is not to say that the combined arms effect achieved by Azerbaijan provides a template for the conduct of maneuver warfare in information space. After all, the effect achieved by the combination of limited rocket strikes with a messaging campaign owed much of its effect to memories of bombardments that had taken place three decades before. What the Azerbaijani victory does tell us, however, is that our philosophy of maneuver warfare provides a solid foundation for the study of ways that deeds in the realm of ideas and images might be combined with deliberate actions of other sorts.

Notes

1. For a brief, but authoritative, overview of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, see Cory Welt and Andrew S. Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno- Karabakh Conflict*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021).

2. For an accessible account of the earlier conflict, often described as the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, see Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2013).

3. For a brief, but comprehensive, discussion of the number of people living in the territories in recent times, as well as the number who became refugees, see *Black Garden*.

4. For a systematic attempt to account for items of military equipment destroyed, damaged, or captured, see Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans, "The Fight for Nagorno-Karabakh: Documenting Losses on the Sides of Armenia and Azerbaijan," *Oryx,* (September 2020), available at https://www.oryxspioenkop.com. (The date of this article is misleading. The initial report, which dealt only with losses on the first day of the war, was subsequently updated many times. The losses described thus pertain to all 44 days of the war.)

5. The tactical ballistic missiles that landed in Ganja on 4 October 2020 seem to have been of a type designated by NATO as "Scud B." These have a maximum range of 300 kilometers (180 miles) and a payload of 985 kilograms (2,167 pounds.)

6. Republic of Artsakh, "Ganja Airport was Destroyed," *Telegram*, (October 2020), available at https://www.telegram.com.

7. Arayik Harutyunyan|Artsakh President, "As act of self-protection ..." *Twitter*, (October 2020), available at https://twitter.com.

8. Ваграм Погосян,Боюсь, археологи не смогут даже найти место Гянджи» [Vahram Poghosyan: "I'm afraid archaeologists won't even be able to find the place of Ganja"], *U1+*, (October 2020).

9. Shushan Stepanyan, "Civilian Losses Caused by Azerbaijani Aggression," *Twitter*, (October 2020), available at https://twitter.com.

10. Staff, "Armenia: Unlawful Rocket, Missile Strikes on Azerbaijan," *Human Rights Watch*, (December 2020), available at https://www.hrw.org.

11. For an accessible and authoritative description of the Azerbaijani campaign of successive attacks with limited objectives, see John Spencer and Harshana Ghoorhoo, "The Battle of Shusha City and the Missed Lessons of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War," *Modern War Institute*, (July 2021), available at https://mwi.usma.edu.

12. Staff, "Azerbaijan: Attack on Church Possible War Crime," *Human Rights Watch*, (December 2020), available at https://www.hrw.org.

13. See, among others, Lillian Avedian, "Displaced Armenians of Artsakh Receive Aid, but No Status," *Armenian Weekly*, (January 2021), available at https://armenianweekly.com.

14. Rachel Denber, Alexander Petrov, and Christina Derry, "Bloodshed in the Caucasus: Indiscriminate Bombing and Shelling in Nagorno Karabakh," *Helsinki Watch Newsletter*, (July 1995).

15. Staff, "Azerbaijan: Unlawful Strikes in Nagorno-Karabakh," *Human Rights Watch*, (December 2020), available at https://www.hrw.org.

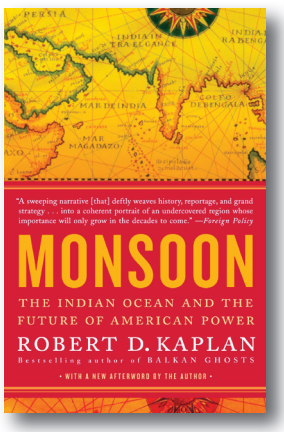
16. Republic of Artsakh, Human Rights Ombudsman, *Interim Report on the Cases of the Killing of Civilians in Artsakh by the Armed Forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, (Stepanakert: January 2021).

October 2021
Volume 105 Number 10

MARINE CORPS Gazette
Professional Journal of U.S. Marines

Cover
A Marine assigned to the 24th MEU carries a girl at the Kabul International Airport. (Photo by 1stLt Mark Andries. Courtesy U.S. Central Command Public Affairs.)

DEPARTMENTS



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Maneuverist Papers

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