



Research Article¹

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Territorial Claims and Mass Violence in Nakhchivan: The Armenian–Azerbaijani Conflict in Historical Perspective

Abstract

This article examines the historical origins and development of Armenian territorial claims concerning Azerbaijan, with particular attention to Nakhchivan and the episodes of intercommunal and organised armed violence that affected the region during the late imperial and early post-imperial periods. The study situates demographic change in Nakhchivan within the broader policies of the Russian Empire in the South Caucasus, including nineteenth-century population movements and the settlement of Armenian communities in the Nakhchivan and Ordubad districts. Employing a historical-documentary approach, the research analyses demographic records, historical studies, administrative materials, political claims, and accounts of violence during the revolutionary and state-building crises of the early twentieth century. Particular attention is devoted to the relationship between demographic engineering, competing national projects, territorial mobilisation, and the activities of armed political organisations between 1917 and 1921. The article also critically considers casualty estimates reported in the existing literature, including the claim that 73,727 residents of Nakhchivan were killed, displaced, or otherwise affected during this period. Rather than accepting such figures without qualification, the study emphasises the need to distinguish among deaths, forced displacement, demographic decline, and total population losses. The findings indicate that violence in Nakhchivan developed through the interaction of imperial collapse, competing sovereignty claims, armed mobilisation, and external intervention. The article contributes to scholarship on the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict by placing Nakhchivan at the centre of an evidence-based analysis of territoriality, demographic transformation, and contested historical memory.

Keywords: Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict; Nakhchivan; territorial claims; population resettlement; mass violence; historical memory

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Introduction

The Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict represents one of the most enduring and contested historical problems of the South Caucasus. Its development cannot be adequately explained through ancient ethnic antagonism or through generalisations about either national community. The conflict emerged from a complex interaction of imperial governance, demographic transformation, competing national movements, territorial claims, armed mobilisation, and the collapse of political authority during the final decades of the Russian Empire and the early twentieth century.

Nakhchivan occupies a distinctive place within this history. Its geographical position between the South Caucasus, Anatolia, and Iran made it strategically important to regional powers and competing national projects. The region's historical connections, transportation routes, demographic structure, and proximity to contested frontiers increased its political and military significance. As imperial authority weakened, sovereignty over Nakhchivan became a central concern for Azerbaijani, Armenian, Ottoman, Russian, and later Soviet political actors.

The demographic history of the South Caucasus is frequently used to support mutually exclusive territorial narratives. Population movements occurring during the nineteenth century, particularly after the Russo-Persian and Russo-Ottoman wars, altered the demographic composition of several districts. These movements included state-organised resettlement, voluntary migration, wartime displacement, and the movement of communities across newly established imperial borders. Their interpretation remains deeply politicised because demographic presence is often presented retrospectively as proof of exclusive historical ownership.

A rigorous historical study must distinguish between population movement as a documented administrative process and later political interpretations of that process. It must also avoid treating religious or ethnic communities as uniform political actors. Settlers, civilians, political organisations, armed formations, imperial administrators, and national councils occupied different positions and exercised different degrees of agency. Failure to maintain these distinctions transforms historical analysis into collective accusation and obscures responsibility for specific decisions and acts of violence.

The ethnogenesis of Armenians has similarly become a field of competing national historiographies. Earlier scholarship proposed different theories concerning the relationship among the ethnonyms *Hay*, *Armenian*, *Hayasa*, Phrygian groups, Urartu, and populations inhabiting eastern Anatolia and the Armenian Highlands. These debates involve archaeology, historical linguistics, epigraphy, and the interpretation of classical sources. They cannot be resolved through isolated quotations or employed as direct evidence for modern territorial entitlement.

For the purposes of the present study, the political history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Nakhchivan is more analytically relevant than attempts to establish exclusive territorial ownership through ancient ethnogenesis. Modern borders, national movements, and episodes of mass violence developed under political conditions fundamentally different from those of antiquity. The use of ancient ethnonyms to legitimise modern territorial projects should therefore be approached critically.

The incorporation of the South Caucasus into the Russian Empire transformed the political and demographic environment of the region. Imperial authorities governed populations through administrative classifications, religious institutions, land policies, and population transfers. The resettlement of Armenian communities from neighbouring empires became one component of this wider imperial strategy. In Nakhchivan, settlement patterns acquired later political importance because

demographic statistics were employed in competing claims regarding representation, autonomy, and sovereignty.

Population statistics from this period must nevertheless be handled carefully. Administrative boundaries changed, census categories were inconsistent, and different sources classified identity according to religion, language, legal status, or ethnicity. Some studies combine the Nakhchivan district with surrounding territories, while others distinguish between Nakhchivan, Ordubad, Sharur, and neighbouring administrative units. Direct comparison is therefore possible only after establishing consistent geographical and chronological parameters.

The decline of imperial authority intensified competition over territory. During the revolutionary crises of 1905–1907 and particularly between 1917 and 1921, the weakening of central government enabled national councils, political parties, militias, military formations, and external forces to exercise increasing influence. Violence was shaped not only by hostility between communities but also by struggles over transportation routes, settlements, food supplies, administrative centres, and future borders.

The period between the Russian revolutions and Soviet consolidation was especially destructive. The dissolution of the imperial army, the movement of armed units, the effects of the First World War, and the emergence of competing republics produced a fragmented security environment. Civilians became vulnerable to killings, forced displacement, property destruction, hostage-taking, and retaliatory operations. Nakhchivan's proximity to Ottoman and Iranian territory further connected local events to wider regional developments.

Historical accounts of this period often employ terms such as massacre, ethnic cleansing, and genocide without defining them or demonstrating how the available evidence satisfies their legal and analytical requirements. These concepts are not interchangeable. Massacre generally describes the deliberate killing of civilians or disarmed persons; ethnic cleansing refers to the coercive removal of a population from a territory; and genocide requires evidence of an intention to destroy, in whole or in substantial part, a protected group as such. A publishable study must explain which term it uses and why.

The reported figure of 73,727 population losses in Nakhchivan between 1917 and 1921 illustrates this methodological problem. The number is historically significant within Azerbaijani scholarship, but its meaning must be established precisely. It may refer to people killed, missing, displaced, subjected to violence, or absent from later demographic records. Population decline may also reflect military mobilisation, famine, disease, migration, changes in administrative boundaries, and incomplete enumeration.

Accordingly, the figure should not be presented solely as the number of persons killed unless individual records, contemporary reports, or a transparent demographic calculation substantiate that conclusion. The sources used to derive it should be identified, compared, and evaluated for authorship, date, institutional origin, and possible political bias. Separating documented deaths from broader demographic loss would substantially strengthen the credibility of the analysis.

The historiography of the conflict remains divided along national lines. Azerbaijani scholarship emphasises territorial claims, armed attacks, civilian losses, and efforts to detach Nakhchivan from Azerbaijan. Armenian scholarship generally presents the same period through alternative narratives of security, historical geography, and national self-determination. Russian, Ottoman, Iranian, British, and other contemporary records may provide external perspectives, but these sources also reflect the strategic interests of their institutions and governments.

An evidence-based study should therefore employ source triangulation. Claims appearing in national historiographies should be compared with archival records, diplomatic correspondence, military reports, demographic statistics, local administrative documents, and contemporary press materials. Disagreement among sources should be reported rather than concealed. Where the evidence does not permit a definitive conclusion, the study should clearly identify the limits of historical knowledge.

This article investigates three interrelated questions. First, how did imperial population policies and nineteenth-century migration affect the demographic and political environment of Nakhchivan? Second, how were demographic history and territorial claims mobilised by competing national actors during the collapse of the Russian Empire? Third, what forms of violence affected the civilian population of Nakhchivan between 1917 and 1921, and how reliably can their scale be reconstructed?

The study does not attribute collective responsibility to Armenian or Azerbaijani populations. Instead, it seeks to identify the institutions, organisations, armed formations, and political actors associated with particular policies and violent events. This distinction is essential both for historical accuracy and for the ethical study of mass violence.

By integrating demographic history, territorial politics, and the study of organised violence, the article aims to contribute to a more methodologically transparent understanding of Nakhchivan's twentieth-century experience. It also demonstrates that the credibility of historical research depends not on the intensity of national claims but on the quality, diversity, and critical evaluation of the evidence supporting them.

Literature Review

The historical relationship between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the South Caucasus has developed into a highly contested field of scholarship shaped by imperial legacies, demographic transformations, territorial disputes, collective trauma, and competing national narratives. The available literature may be grouped into four principal areas: debates concerning Armenian ethnogenesis; population movements under the Russian Empire; demographic change in the Irevan and Nakhchivan regions; and intercommunal violence during the late imperial and revolutionary periods.

One strand of the literature addresses the ethnogenesis and early history of the Armenian people. Diyakonov's (1968) influential study examines the formation of the Armenian ethnolinguistic community within the broader historical setting of Asia Minor and the Armenian Highlands. Although his reconstruction has been interpreted differently by later scholars, Diyakonov distinguishes between linguistic, geographic, and political designations and cautions against projecting modern national identities directly onto ancient populations. Azerbaijani-language works such as Gafarsoylu (2008), Budagov and Geybullayev (1998), and Mehdiyev (2010) advance alternative interpretations of the relationship between the ethnonyms *Hay* and *Armenian* and challenge Armenian claims concerning historical territorial continuity. These works are relevant to the historiographical debate, but their conclusions should be evaluated in conjunction with archaeological, linguistic, and comparative historical research rather than treated as uncontested evidence.

A second body of scholarship focuses on the expansion of the Russian Empire into the South Caucasus and the population transfers that followed the Russo-Persian and Russo-Ottoman wars of the early nineteenth century. Glinka (1990) describes the organized relocation of Armenians from Qajar Iran into territories incorporated into the Russian Empire. Griboyedov (1971), who participated in imperial administrative affairs, also documented practical and political problems associated with resettlement.

These accounts are especially valuable as near-contemporary sources, although their authors' official positions and imperial perspectives require critical consideration.

Statistical and administrative descriptions provide additional evidence concerning demographic and socioeconomic conditions in Nakhchivan. Grigoryev's (1833) statistical account and Shopen's (1852) extensive description of the former Armenian Oblast contain population figures, settlement lists, and administrative observations. Azerbaijani researchers have used these records to examine the settlement of Armenians in the Nakhchivan and Ordubad districts and the resulting changes in the region's demographic composition (Kazimov, 2007; Pashayeva, 2004; Rahimov, 2010; Verdiyeva, 1999). According to this interpretation, Russian imperial policy did not merely respond to spontaneous migration but actively facilitated settlement as part of a broader strategy of political consolidation.

Research on the Irevan Khanate similarly emphasizes the relationship between imperial conquest, migration, and demographic transformation. The collective volume *The Irevan Khanate: Russian Occupation and the Resettlement of Armenians in the Lands of Northern Azerbaijan* examines treaties, administrative measures, and settlement practices associated with the incorporation of the khanate into the Russian Empire (Mahmudov, 2009). Safarov (2009) investigates longer-term changes in the ethnic composition of the Irevan Governorate during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gasimly (2010) connects these demographic developments with subsequent Armenian claims to territories inhabited by Azerbaijanis, particularly in relation to Nagorno-Karabakh. However, because several of these studies employ the conceptual language of national historiography, their findings should be compared with imperial censuses, archival documents, and scholarship originating outside the immediate conflict environment.

A third strand of the literature examines Nakhchivan's political and demographic development from the Russian conquest until the establishment of Soviet authority. Kazimov (2007) provides a broad account of the region's population, economy, and political history between 1828 and 1920. Shakhverdiyev (2008) analyzes the political development of Nakhchivan from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, while the collective works *Nakhchivan in the History of Azerbaijan* (1996) and *Pages from the History of Nakhchivan* (1996) situate the region within the wider evolution of Azerbaijani statehood. Smirnov's (1999) historical and ethnographic materials offer additional information concerning settlements, social organization, and population groups. Together, these works demonstrate that Nakhchivan's historical development cannot be separated from the geopolitical rivalry among the Russian, Persian, and Ottoman empires.

The most politically sensitive part of the literature concerns Armenian–Azerbaijani violence during the revolutionary and post-imperial period. Ordubadi's (1991) account of the violence of 1905–1906 constitutes an important Azerbaijani narrative of intercommunal confrontation. As both a contemporary testimony and a nationally situated account, it must be assessed through comparison with administrative reports, newspapers, and evidence produced by other observers. Jafarli (2008) examines Armenian–Azerbaijani contradictions in Nakhchivan and connects local clashes with wider territorial and political struggles.

The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, the emergence of competing national governments, foreign military intervention, and the absence of effective state authority intensified violence across Nakhchivan and Zangezur. Nasibzade (1996) situates these events within the foreign policy of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, whereas Musayev (1996) analyzes the policies pursued by foreign states and regional political actors between 1917 and 1921. Atnur (1999) concentrates on the political circumstances preceding Nakhchivan's autonomous status. These studies emphasize that violence in

the region was connected not only to interethnic hostility but also to military competition, state collapse, contested sovereignty, and intervention by external powers.

Claims concerning the scale of civilian losses require particularly careful evaluation. Azerbaijani historical works report substantial casualties, displacement, destruction of settlements, and material losses in Nakhchivan during 1917–1921 (Aliyev, 1993; Musayev, 1996; Ordubadi, 1991). However, figures presented in retrospective publications must be distinguished according to whether they refer to people killed, missing, displaced, deported, or included in an estimated demographic decline. A defensible assessment therefore requires corroboration through population censuses, archival records, local administrative correspondence, refugee lists, and contemporary press reports.

The literature reveals several important limitations. First, many publications were produced within competing national historiographies and consequently employ morally and politically charged terminology. Second, demographic statistics are sometimes cited without adequate discussion of changing administrative boundaries, enumeration methods, or population mobility. Third, the categories of massacre, deportation, ethnic cleansing, demographic loss, and genocide are not consistently differentiated. Finally, collective ethnic labels occasionally obscure the distinction between civilians, political organizations, military formations, local authorities, and external forces.

The present study addresses these limitations through systematic source criticism and triangulation. It does not attribute collective responsibility to an entire ethnic community. Instead, it seeks to identify the specific institutions, political organizations, armed formations, and decision-makers associated with particular episodes of violence or displacement. By integrating imperial administrative documents, demographic records, contemporary testimony, archival materials, and modern historical scholarship, the study aims to provide a more transparent reconstruction of territorial contestation and mass violence in Nakhchivan.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative historical research design to examine population movements, territorial contestation, demographic transformation, and episodes of Armenian–Azerbaijani violence in Nakhchivan from the early nineteenth century to 1921. The analysis combines documentary research, historical source criticism, comparative historiography, and limited demographic reconstruction. This design is appropriate because the research questions concern historical processes that cannot be investigated experimentally and for which the available evidence was created by institutions and individuals operating under different political conditions.

The study proceeds at three interconnected levels. The first examines Russian imperial expansion and the administrative management of migration after the Russo-Persian and Russo-Ottoman wars. The second investigates demographic and settlement changes in Nakhchivan and neighboring territories. The third analyzes the relationship between territorial claims, the collapse of imperial authority, armed mobilization, forced displacement, and violence during the early twentieth century.

Source Selection

The source base consists of four categories of material. The first category comprises nineteenth-century administrative, statistical, and diplomatic documents, including the works of Grigoryev (1833), Shopen (1852), Glinka (1990), and Griboyedov (1971). These sources provide information about settlement

policies, population distribution, administrative boundaries, and the political objectives of Russian imperial authorities.

The second category includes population statistics and archival records, particularly documents preserved in the State Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan and data from the First General Census of the Russian Empire. These materials are used to assess demographic patterns and to compare claims made in later historical scholarship. Archival references are identified by fond, inventory, file, and folio or page number whenever these details are available.

The third category consists of contemporary or near-contemporary narrative sources, including Ordubadi's (1991) account of the violent events of the early twentieth century. Such testimony provides information that may not appear in formal administrative records, including local experiences, reported attacks, displacement, and destruction. However, eyewitness and retrospective narratives are not treated as automatically reliable; they are analyzed in relation to the author's position, access to information, intended audience, and temporal distance from the events described.

The fourth category comprises modern Azerbaijani historical scholarship on imperial migration policy, demographic change, territorial disputes, and political violence (Gasimly, 2010; Jafarli, 2008; Kazimov, 2007; Mahmudov, 2009; Musayev, 1996; Pashayeva, 2004; Rahimov, 2010; Safarov, 2009; Shakhverdiyev, 2008; Verdiyeva, 1999). These studies are used both as secondary interpretations and as guides to relevant primary materials.

Sources were selected according to four criteria: direct relevance to Nakhchivan or the wider South Caucasus; identifiable authorship or institutional provenance; chronological proximity to the events examined; and the presence of information capable of comparison with other evidence. Publications lacking verifiable bibliographic details are used cautiously and are not employed as the sole basis for major factual conclusions.

Historical Source Criticism

Each source is subjected to external and internal criticism. External criticism evaluates authorship, date of production, institutional origin, publication history, and the authenticity or completeness of the document. Internal criticism examines the author's terminology, political position, intended readership, access to information, and possible motivation for emphasizing or omitting particular facts.

Russian imperial sources are not treated as politically neutral. Statistical descriptions and administrative reports were produced within a colonial system of governance and may reflect imperial classifications, security priorities, and administrative objectives. Similarly, Azerbaijani historical works are assessed in light of their intellectual and political contexts. This approach does not automatically invalidate nationally situated scholarship; rather, it requires that significant claims be corroborated through independent evidence.

Comparative Historiographical Analysis

The study uses comparative historiographical analysis to distinguish documented events from later interpretations. Assertions concerning ethnogenesis, historical territorial ownership, population movements, and collective responsibility are compared across different types of sources. Particular attention is given to differences between contemporary records and retrospective narratives.

The analysis separates four components of every major claim: the empirical event being described, the source reporting the event, the terminology applied by that source, and the interpretation advanced by later scholarship. This procedure helps prevent historiographical conclusions from being presented as if they were direct archival facts.

Demographic Analysis

Demographic evidence is analyzed through a comparative reading of settlement registers, statistical descriptions, census materials, and later historical reconstructions. Population figures are compared only when the sources refer to compatible territorial units and broadly comparable dates. Changes in administrative borders, seasonal migration, household-based enumeration, religious classifications, and inconsistencies in ethnolinguistic categories are considered before drawing conclusions.

Where the sources report population decline, the study distinguishes among documented deaths, missing persons, refugees, deportees, temporary displacement, and estimated demographic loss. The figure of 73,727 associated with Nakhchivan during 1917–1921 is therefore treated as a claim requiring source-specific verification rather than as an automatically established number of people killed. Its evidentiary meaning must be determined by examining the original calculation, the population baseline, the territorial scope, and the categories included.

Analysis of Political Violence

Episodes of violence are analyzed by identifying, as far as the evidence permits, the date and location of the event, the actors involved, the institutional or military affiliation of those actors, the targeted population, the type of harm reported, and the sources confirming the incident. Responsibility is attributed to identifiable armed formations, political organizations, commanders, administrative bodies, or individuals rather than to ethnic populations as collective entities.

The terms *massacre*, *forced displacement*, *deportation*, *ethnic cleansing*, and *genocide* are not used interchangeably. “Massacre” refers to the intentional killing of multiple noncombatants in a specific event. “Forced displacement” refers to coercive removal or flight caused by violence or a credible threat of violence. “Ethnic cleansing” denotes a policy or organized practice intended to remove a population from a territory. “Genocide” is reserved for cases in which evidence supports the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. This distinction is necessary to maintain analytical clarity and avoid conclusions that extend beyond the available evidence.

Triangulation and Reliability

Triangulation is the principal strategy used to improve reliability. A major factual claim is considered strongly supported when it is confirmed by at least two independent sources of different provenance, such as an administrative document and a contemporary narrative, or a census record and an archival report. When sources contradict one another, the disagreement is reported rather than resolved through selective citation.

Greater evidentiary weight is assigned to records produced close to the event, documents with identifiable provenance, and sources containing verifiable names, dates, locations, or numerical data. Retrospective accounts remain valuable, particularly for reconstructing local experiences, but they are used more cautiously when they do not identify their underlying documentation.

Ethical and Terminological Considerations

Because the research concerns mass violence and an ongoing field of political contestation, the study avoids dehumanizing descriptions, ethnic stereotypes, and the attribution of inherited or collective guilt. Historical statements are formulated in terms of specific actors, policies, institutions, and documented events. Claims originating in a particular national historiography are clearly identified as interpretations rather than presented as universally accepted conclusions.

The study also recognizes that civilian communities experienced violence, insecurity, and displacement in a broader context of imperial collapse and competing state-building projects. Acknowledging this context does not diminish the suffering of Azerbaijani civilians in Nakhchivan; it situates that suffering within a methodologically defensible explanation of how political breakdown, territorial competition, and armed mobilization produced mass violence.

Methodological Limitations

The study is limited by uneven archival survival, inconsistent population classifications, politically influenced historical narratives, and restricted access to sources representing all parties to the conflict. Several references are later editions or republications of earlier texts, making it necessary to distinguish the date of the edition consulted from the date of original composition. Moreover, the current source base is predominantly Azerbaijani and Russian-language. The inclusion of Armenian, Ottoman, Georgian, British, and other international archival materials would strengthen comparative balance.

Accordingly, the study does not claim to provide a final demographic calculation or an exhaustive legal classification of every violent episode. Its purpose is to reconstruct the principal historical developments, evaluate the evidentiary foundations of major claims, and identify areas in which further multilingual and multi-archival research is required.

Results

Imperial Reorganization and State-Sponsored Population Movement

The documentary evidence indicates that the Russian conquest fundamentally transformed the political and administrative structure of the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates. Following the Treaty of Turkmenchay in February 1828, the imperial government incorporated the former khanates into a newly established administrative unit designated as the Armenian Oblast. The decree of March 21, 1828, institutionalized this territorial reorganization and placed the former political entities within the administrative framework of the Russian Empire (*Collection of Acts Relating to the Historical Survey of the Azerbaijani People*, 1833, pp. 178–179).

The subsequent migration of Armenian families from Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire was neither entirely spontaneous nor merely incidental to the postwar environment. Contemporary and near-contemporary records indicate that imperial officials planned, facilitated, and supervised the relocation process. Glinka (1990) described the administrative organization of Armenian resettlement, while Griboyedov (1971) acknowledged both the state's involvement and the practical tensions that emerged when newly arrived families were placed near or on lands used by the existing Muslim population.

The available evidence suggests that Nakhchivan and Irevan were among the primary destinations of the resettlement program. Russian authorities regarded these territories as strategically important frontier zones adjoining Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Later historical studies consequently

interpret the settlement policy as part of the Russian Empire's broader effort to consolidate control over its newly acquired South Caucasian territories (Gasimly, 2010; Mahmudov, 2009; Rahimov, 2010; Verdiyeva, 1999).

This finding does not imply that every instance of Armenian migration resulted from a single centrally coordinated plan. Population movement included state-assisted resettlement, family reunification, voluntary migration, refugee movement, and migration outside formal administrative procedures. Nevertheless, the surviving documentary record supports the conclusion that Russian imperial institutions played a significant role in directing and facilitating a substantial part of the post-1828 migration.

Demographic Transformation in Nakhchivan

The statistical materials demonstrate a measurable increase in the Armenian population of the former Nakhchivan Khanate following Russian annexation. Shopen's administrative description reports that 6,949 Armenian families, comprising approximately 35,560 individuals, were resettled in the Armenian Oblast. According to the same account, 23,568 individuals were placed in the Irevan province, 10,652 in the Nakhchivan province, and 1,340 in the Ordubad district (Shopen, 1852, pp. 540, 635–642).

Settlement was geographically dispersed rather than confined to the principal urban centers. The sources report the placement of Armenian families in 61 villages of the Nakhchivan province and 11 villages of the Ordubad district (*Nakhchivan in the History of Azerbaijan*, 1996, p. 117; *Pages from the History of Nakhchivan*, 1996, p. 117). Armenian families were also settled in the city of Nakhchivan and in villages such as Nehram, Jahri, Kultapa, Bananiyar, Abragunus, Gazanchi, Shahbuz, and Aylis.

Grigoryev's (1833) statistical description indicates that the number of Armenian households in the Nakhchivan province rose substantially after the resettlement. The account records 434 Armenian families before the organized migration and a total of approximately 2,719 families after the arrival of new settlers (Grigoryev, 1833, pp. 125–127). Although the precise figures require comparison with other registers, the magnitude of the reported increase demonstrates that the postwar migration altered the demographic composition of the province.

The results also indicate that demographic change involved more than the arrival of a new population. War, insecurity, economic disruption, and dissatisfaction with Russian rule contributed to the departure of part of the Muslim population toward Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Pashayeva (2004), Safarov (2009), and Verdiyeva (1999) associate the combination of outward Muslim migration and inward Armenian settlement with a substantial transformation of the ethnic and confessional composition of the former khanates.

These figures must nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. Nineteenth-century imperial statistics frequently classified inhabitants by religion, estate, household, or administrative status rather than by modern ethnicity. Moreover, the boundaries of provinces, districts, and governorates changed over time. The available numbers therefore demonstrate the direction and approximate scale of demographic change more reliably than they establish an exact ethnic composition for every locality.

Land, Settlement, and Local Relations

The sources indicate that resettlement created disputes concerning land, housing, taxation, and access to agricultural resources. Griboyedov (1971) observed that the placement of incoming families could generate dissatisfaction among the established Muslim population, particularly when the newcomers

were accommodated in inhabited villages or assigned land previously used by local communities. His observations are significant because they were recorded by an official directly involved in the imperial administration of the region.

Smirnov's (1999) historical and ethnographic materials also demonstrate that the consequences of migration varied across localities. In some settlements, the demographic structure changed rapidly; in others, the effects were more limited. Settlement patterns were influenced by the availability of arable land, irrigation, transport connections, security, and administrative decisions. Accordingly, the evidence does not support treating the entire Nakhchivan region as a demographically uniform space.

The findings suggest that imperial resettlement generated long-term political consequences because later national movements interpreted nineteenth-century demographic conditions as evidence of historical sovereignty. Population statistics that initially served administrative purposes consequently became central elements in competing territorial narratives. The relationship between migration and later territorial claims was therefore mediated by the emergence of modern nationalism and should not be understood as an automatic or predetermined outcome of the 1828 resettlement.

Escalation of Intercommunal Violence in 1905–1906

The archival and narrative materials identify the Armenian–Azerbaijani confrontations of 1905–1906 as an important turning point. Violence affected Nakhchivan city, Ordubad, Jahri, Tivi, Cheshmabasar, Tumbul, and other settlements. Ordubadi (1991) describes armed attacks, the destruction of property, population displacement, and attempts by local political and administrative actors to contain the clashes.

The evidence suggests that the violence was not reducible to spontaneous communal hostility. The weakening of imperial authority during the Russian Revolution of 1905, the proliferation of armed political organizations, local disputes, and competing national programs created conditions in which localized confrontations escalated. Jafarli (2008) connects the clashes in Nakhchivan with broader territorial competition and the strategic importance of routes linking Irevan, Nakhchivan, and Zangezur.

One reported episode concerns the destruction of commercial property in Nakhchivan in November 1905. According to the narrative record, dozens of shops, warehouses, and other structures in the Muslim market were looted or burned (Ordubadi, 1991, p. 119). Such incidents demonstrate that the violence had an economic as well as a demographic dimension. The destruction of marketplaces, homes, agricultural resources, and transport connections weakened communities and contributed to subsequent displacement.

The sources predominantly document Azerbaijani experiences of violence and loss. Consequently, they establish the need for a detailed reconstruction of attacks against Azerbaijani communities but do not, by themselves, provide a complete account of all violence in the region. A comprehensive study would require comparison with Armenian, Russian, Georgian, Ottoman, and international records.

State Collapse and Mass Violence, 1917–1921

The withdrawal and disintegration of the Russian Caucasus Army after the 1917 revolutions produced a severe security vacuum. Weapons circulated among newly formed military and political groups, while competing authorities attempted to establish control over the former imperial borderlands. In this environment, Nakhchivan acquired strategic importance because of its location between Anatolia, Iran, Irevan, Zangezur, and the rest of Azerbaijan.

The sources associate armed formations linked to Armenian nationalist organizations, including units commanded by Andranik Ozanian, with attacks on Azerbaijani-populated settlements in Nakhchivan, Sharur-Daralayaz, and neighboring territories. Contemporary and retrospective Azerbaijani accounts describe killings, looting, burning, forced displacement, and the destruction of villages (Aliyev, 1993, p. 142; Atnur, 1999, p. 34; Musayev, 1996, p. 70). These accounts indicate that civilians were directly affected by military operations and campaigns intended to establish territorial control.

Aliyev's (1993) diary-based narrative is particularly valuable because it records the experience of an individual connected with the Nakhchivan Muslim National Committee. However, like other eyewitness accounts, it reflects the author's political location, personal experience, and access to information. It is therefore most reliable when used to reconstruct particular events and perceptions and when corroborated by administrative or military records.

The literature reports that approximately 50 Azerbaijani-populated settlements were attacked or destroyed and that the total demographic loss in the Nakhchivan region reached 73,727 people (*Kaf Dağı*, 2001). This number must be treated as a reported estimate rather than an independently verified death toll. The cited source does not, on its own, establish whether the figure includes people killed, missing, displaced, deported, or otherwise absent from later population counts. The estimate should therefore not be described simply as the number of people killed unless supported by detailed victim lists, archival documentation, or a transparent demographic calculation.

The evidence nevertheless supports the broader conclusion that Azerbaijani civilians in Nakhchivan suffered substantial loss of life, displacement, and property destruction during 1917–1921. The precise scale remains difficult to establish because of shifting front lines, repeated displacement, incomplete recordkeeping, changing administrative boundaries, and the political use of casualty statistics.

Local Political Organization and the Contest for Nakhchivan

The results demonstrate that the population of Nakhchivan responded to the collapse of imperial government by creating local political and defensive institutions. The establishment of the Aras-Turkish Republic in late 1918 represented an attempt to preserve local authority and resist the transfer of Nakhchivan to another political administration. Musayev (1996) interprets this development as a response to external intervention, territorial uncertainty, and the absence of a stable regional government.

The Batumi treaties of June 1918 enabled the Ottoman Empire to provide military assistance to the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic under specified conditions (Nasibzade, 1996, p. 60). Ottoman forces subsequently entered Nakhchivan and altered the regional military balance. After the Armistice of Mudros, however, their withdrawal again exposed the territory to competing political claims.

British intervention in 1919 introduced another external dimension. British officials temporarily supported administrative arrangements involving the Republic of Armenia, while the local Muslim population and its political representatives rejected the proposed transfer. The resulting confrontation illustrates that Nakhchivan's status was shaped by the interaction of local resistance, Armenian and Azerbaijani state-building projects, Ottoman withdrawal, British policy, and the later advance of Soviet power (Atnur, 1999; Musayev, 1996).

Discussion

Migration, Empire, and the Construction of Territorial Claims

The findings demonstrate that the history of Nakhchivan cannot be explained exclusively through an ethnic-conflict framework. Russian imperial expansion changed the region's political borders, administrative institutions, land relations, and demographic patterns. The migration of Armenians into the former Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates after 1828 was an important component of this transformation, but it operated alongside war-related displacement, Muslim emigration, economic migration, and administrative restructuring.

The state-assisted character of a substantial portion of Armenian resettlement is supported by contemporary Russian documentation (Glinka, 1990; Griboyedov, 1971; Shopen, 1852). However, the historical significance of this policy should not be overstated by treating all later Armenian inhabitants as agents of an imperial project. Migrant populations possessed varied motives and experiences, while subsequent generations cannot be assigned responsibility for decisions made by nineteenth-century imperial authorities.

The more important analytical finding is that demographic reconfiguration later became politicized. As Armenian and Azerbaijani national movements developed, population distribution, historical maps, religious monuments, and imperial administrative categories were transformed into arguments concerning territorial sovereignty. The same nineteenth-century statistics were interpreted differently by competing historiographies. Armenian narratives often emphasized cultural continuity and the return of populations to an ancestral homeland, whereas Azerbaijani scholarship emphasized imperial resettlement and the displacement of indigenous Muslim communities (Gasimly, 2010; Mahmudov, 2009; Rahimov, 2010).

A rigorous interpretation must distinguish between evidence of residence, evidence of state-supported migration, and claims of exclusive territorial ownership. None of these categories automatically determines modern sovereignty. Historical demography can clarify how populations changed, but it cannot independently resolve political or legal claims.

From Administrative Demography to Nationalized Conflict

The demographic changes of the nineteenth century created new patterns of proximity and competition, but they did not make twentieth-century violence inevitable. The transition from demographic pluralism to armed confrontation occurred through political processes: the rise of national movements, the weakening of imperial institutions, competition over local administration, the mobilization of armed groups, and the collapse of mechanisms for conflict regulation.

The confrontations of 1905–1906 reveal this transition. Violence spread during a period of revolutionary instability in the Russian Empire, when administrative authority weakened and armed political organizations expanded. Economic interests, land disputes, and control of communication routes became intertwined with ethnic identification. The destruction of commercial and residential property also suggests that violence was sometimes intended to undermine the capacity of rival communities to remain in strategically important locations (Jafarli, 2008; Ordubadi, 1991).

This interpretation is more analytically useful than attributing violence to allegedly permanent characteristics of either ethnic group. Essentialist explanations cannot account for periods of coexistence, variation among localities, or the decisive effect of state collapse. The available evidence instead indicates that violent mobilization depended on political organization, military resources, territorial objectives, and the absence or partiality of effective authority.

The Security Vacuum of 1917–1921

The collapse of the Russian Empire intensified every major source of instability. Former imperial military units withdrew or fragmented; arms entered local circulation; and several competing governments claimed authority over the same territories. Nakhchivan's geographical position made it especially vulnerable to conflict because control of the region affected access between Anatolia, Iran, Zangezur, Irevan, and Azerbaijan.

The reported attacks against Azerbaijani settlements must therefore be understood as part of a struggle for territorial control rather than as isolated outbreaks of communal hostility. Armed formations linked to nationalist political projects sought to influence future boundaries by establishing military and demographic facts on the ground. In this context, violence against civilians, the burning of settlements, and forced displacement could function as instruments of territorial consolidation.

At the same time, analytical precision requires the identification of specific perpetrators. Terms such as "the Armenians" and "the Armenian people" obscure distinctions among civilians, refugees, political parties, irregular armed units, regular forces, and local authorities. The evidence examined in this study more directly concerns particular armed formations, including Dashnak-affiliated units and forces commanded by identifiable military leaders. Responsibility should therefore be attributed at the level supported by the evidence rather than generalized to an entire ethnic population.

Interpretation of Casualty and Demographic-Loss Figures

One of the most significant methodological problems concerns the reported figure of 73,727. If interpreted as the number of people killed, this would represent approximately 38% of the population attributed to the region in the article's underlying narrative. Such a claim requires exceptionally strong documentation. A newspaper reference without an accompanying victim register, archival calculation, or explanation of categories is insufficient to establish a precise mortality total.

Several interpretations remain possible. The figure may represent a combined estimate of people killed, missing, displaced, deported, or removed from the population count. It may also have been calculated by comparing population totals from different years without fully accounting for migration, territorial changes, military recruitment, famine, or epidemic disease. Until the original calculation is identified, the academically defensible formulation is that the period produced a reported demographic loss of as many as 73,727 people, while the precise number of direct fatalities remains unverified.

This qualification does not deny the occurrence of mass violence. Aliyev (1993), Atnur (1999), Musayev (1996), and other sources provide converging evidence of attacks, deaths, displacement, and settlement destruction. Rather, distinguishing an established pattern of violence from an uncertain numerical estimate strengthens the credibility of the study and protects its conclusions from being undermined by an unsupported figure.

Legal and Conceptual Classification

The source material frequently characterizes the events as genocide. From the perspective of historical analysis, evidence of extensive civilian victimization, forced displacement, and the destruction of settlements warrants serious investigation. However, genocide is not simply a synonym for large-scale killing. Its application requires evidence that perpetrators intended to destroy, in whole or in substantial part, a protected national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

The current evidence is sufficient to discuss mass violence, massacres, forced displacement, and practices that may have contributed to ethnic homogenization. A definitive genocide determination

would require a separate legal-historical analysis incorporating orders, policy documents, command structures, patterns of target selection, and evidence concerning intent. Where such documentation exists, it should be examined directly rather than inferred solely from casualty figures or the brutality of particular incidents.

This distinction is particularly important for publication in an international journal. Careful terminology does not minimize Azerbaijani civilian suffering; it ensures that the description of that suffering rests on identifiable evidence and clearly defined concepts.

Historiographical Implications

The study demonstrates both the value and limitations of the existing Azerbaijani historiography. Works by Kazimov (2007), Musayev (1996), Rahimov (2010), Safarov (2009), and Verdiyeva (1999) preserve important demographic information and draw attention to sources that were often overlooked in Soviet historical writing. Contemporary narratives such as those of Aliyev (1993) and Ordubadi (1991) are indispensable for reconstructing local experiences.

Nevertheless, the source base remains asymmetrical. Most of the materials employed here represent Russian imperial or Azerbaijani perspectives. This imbalance makes it difficult to reconstruct decision-making within Armenian political organizations, distinguish central policy from local initiative, or compare Azerbaijani experiences with violence suffered by other civilian groups.

Future research should therefore incorporate Armenian archival documents, Ottoman military records, British diplomatic correspondence, Russian military reports, international humanitarian records, and local population registers. A multilingual and multi-archival approach would permit a more precise reconstruction of individual episodes and a better assessment of competing casualty estimates.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship among Russian imperial expansion, population resettlement, demographic transformation, territorial competition, and mass violence in Nakhchivan from the early nineteenth century to 1921. The evidence supports several principal conclusions.

First, the incorporation of the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates into the Russian Empire fundamentally altered the political and administrative structure of the region. The creation of the Armenian Oblast and the organized resettlement of Armenian families from Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire formed part of the empire's postwar consolidation strategy (*Collection of Acts Relating to the Historical Survey of the Azerbaijani People*, 1833; Glinka, 1990; Shopen, 1852).

Second, the resettlement contributed to a substantial demographic change in Nakhchivan. Nineteenth-century statistical accounts report a marked increase in the number of Armenian families and their settlement across numerous villages in the Nakhchivan and Ordubad districts (Grigoryev, 1833; *Nakhchivan in the History of Azerbaijan*, 1996; Shopen, 1852). These changes occurred alongside the emigration and displacement of part of the Muslim population and subsequently became central to competing territorial narratives.

Third, demographic change alone did not cause the later conflict. The transformation of local competition into organized violence depended on the development of national political movements, weakening imperial authority, access to weapons, territorial state-building projects, and intervention by external powers. The violence of 1905–1906 and 1917–1921 must therefore be situated within the

broader crises of the Russian Empire and the struggle to define the post-imperial political order (Jafarli, 2008; Musayev, 1996; Ordubadi, 1991).

Fourth, the evidence demonstrates that Azerbaijani civilian communities in Nakhchivan experienced killings, forced displacement, looting, and the destruction of settlements during 1917–1921 (Aliyev, 1993; Atnur, 1999; Musayev, 1996). Responsibility for these events should be attributed to identifiable political organizations, armed formations, commanders, and administrative authorities rather than generalized to an entire ethnic population.

Finally, the reported demographic-loss figure of 73,727 cannot presently be treated as a verified number of people killed. It requires examination of the original calculation, territorial boundaries, baseline population, and the categories included. The historically sustainable conclusion is that Nakhchivan suffered extensive civilian casualties and demographic disruption, while the exact scale and legal classification of particular episodes require further archival investigation.

The article consequently contributes to the historiography by connecting demographic transformation with the political mechanisms through which territory became nationalized and violence became an instrument of control. It also demonstrates that a credible history of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict requires critical source evaluation, precise terminology, multi-archival corroboration, and the rejection of collective ethnic blame. Such an approach provides a stronger foundation for documenting Azerbaijani civilian suffering while maintaining the methodological standards expected of international historical scholarship.

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Author Contributions

Ismayil Hajiyeu is the sole author of this article and was responsible for its conceptualization, historical investigation, source selection, methodology, analysis, interpretation, drafting, critical revision, and final approval.

Data Availability Statement

No new datasets were generated during this study. The research is based on published historical literature, archival references, administrative records, demographic materials, and other documentary sources identified in the article. Additional information concerning the sources may be provided by the author upon reasonable request, subject to archival access and copyright restrictions.

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval was not required because this study is based exclusively on historical, archival, bibliographic, and publicly available documentary materials and did not involve human participants, personal interviews, clinical data, or experimental procedures.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. The research did not involve living human participants or the collection of personally identifiable information.

Consent for Publication

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