

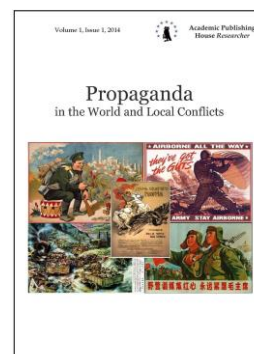
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## Military Propaganda around the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War: Official Materials of Armenia and Azerbaijan Defense Ministries (as illustrated by the first day of the conflict – September 27, 2020)

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### Abstract

The paper spotlights the now relevant issue – propaganda related to another round of the fierce Nagorny Karabakh conflict from September 27 to November 10, 2020, which over the past two and a half decades not only has altered the balance of regional forces, but also predetermined major territorial changes; the outcome of this, without any exaggeration, full-scale war is the victory by Azerbaijan. However, the balance of forces and outcomes of the conflict lie outside our research interest that is here centered on the forms, methods and content of the propaganda war which was as intense as the operations carried out on the front line. Moreover, the war expanded beyond the media of the opposing sides – Armenia and Azerbaijan – and even “permeated” into those of other countries, above all Russia and Turkey.

The paper, discussing the propaganda activities in the context of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, applied both by the sides in the conflict and third countries, analyzes materials from the official military sources of Armenia and Azerbaijan, published on the first day of the war – September 27, 2020.

The paper briefly summarizes the theories of propaganda (H. Lasswell, W. Lippmann, J. Dewey), gives a historical overview of how strained inter-ethnic relations develop, delivers a classification of sources on the problem of propaganda. The analysis and classification provided covered messages by the Defense Ministries of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan on the first day of the conflict. The paper also identifies the methods used by the sides in their propaganda activities and suggests an overall assessment of their quality.

**Keywords:** Karabakh conflict from September 27 to November 10, 2020, propaganda, propaganda activities during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, first day of the war.

### 1. Introduction

The “acute phase” of the decades-long Karabakh conflict became one more tragic event in 2020. Of course, the media of the opposing sides – Azerbaijan and apparently, it would be fair to say, Armenia – also waged an unrelenting ideological war. The fray was instantly joined by foreign media, first of all in Russia that has entered into alliances with both adversaries: with Armenia

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under the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)<sup>1</sup> and with Azerbaijan under the CIS treaty.<sup>2</sup> The forms, methods, “stylistics” and metamorphosis of the propaganda, as reviewed from the onset of the conflict to its end, create a substantial historical and political research field.

The paper makes an attempt to study the propaganda activities of the states with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Hence, to pin down a more specific research area within the body of an individual paper, we will analyze exclusively official sources, namely, the websites of the opposing sides’ defense ministries. However, even in this case, we have an excessive volume of material to analyze, and so we decided to boil down the subject of research in this paper to the first day of the conflict only – September 27.

## 2. Materials and methods

For sources, the paper utilizes official publications by the Armenian and Azerbaijani Defense Ministries on the first day of the military conflict, namely September 27, 2020.

The sources can be classified into several types using a variety of criteria:

1. Based on the sides involved in the conflict, the sources can be broken down into Armenian and Azerbaijani ones. In the legal sense, the Republic of Armenia does not participate in the conflict – the war involves the armed forces of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic only. Nevertheless, judging from the amount of support, which Armenia quite naturally provided to Nagorno Karabakh during the conflict, we may suggest that the former may actually also be identified as one of the sides in the conflict. Therefore, our analysis comprises not only the reports by the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry, but also the messages issued by the Armenian Defense Ministry.

2. Based on the message form, we can distinguish between:

a) statements (messages that are publications having a political nature, which proclaim/demonstrate specific principles of the military agency’s activities, taking into account the current situation in domestic and foreign policy);

b) front-line “status reports” (messages that detail developments in the combat environment and review gains and failures of own armed forces directly from the combat operational zone. As the term “status reports”, in contrast to its use in the media with the reference to the period of the World War II, is already outdated, we put it in quotation marks)

c) information messages (publications that are devised to “plug” information gaps; in particular, reporting on the state of the armed forces (their own and those of the enemy), military equipment specifications, the work of logistic services and support units, etc.).

3. Based on the genre, we can classify propaganda means as follows:

a) traditional means (posters, leaflets, brochures, television and radio messages, etc.);

b) forms of art (theater, ballet, cinema, music, sculpture, painting, variety, etc.);

c) tools of mass communication (the Internet and related elements: departmental, news and content-specific websites, social media, video aggregators (YouTube, TikTok and others), etc.).

As we emphasized above, we take only one “genre” – the official messages of the sides’ military departments, published on the Internet.

The work employs typological, comparative historical, chronological methods and other historical research methods.

## 3. Discussion

Speaking of the theory of propaganda, academic and popular literature can offer many works ranging from fundamental treatises to very concise pieces. However, the scientific community typically discusses three basic theories:

<sup>1</sup> The CSTO or the Collective Security Treaty Organization is a regional intergovernmental organization acting on the basis of the Tashkent Treaty of May 15, 1992, and constitutes a military alliance of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. Azerbaijan withdrew from the treaty in 1999.

<sup>2</sup> The CIS or the Commonwealth of Independent States is an international organization acting on the basis of the Belovezh Treaty of December 8, 1991, aimed to regulate trade, economic and foreign policies of the nine member states, most of which are the USSR former national republics (out of fifteen states, six did not join the CIS).

1. Harold D. Lasswell believed that propaganda seeks to affect vulnerable elements in the consciousness of an individual, i.e. their fears related to personal (for the life and health of themselves and their family, getting dependent on someone and/or something, etc.), economic (material well-being, quality of life, etc.) and political (loss of liberty, freedom of expression, independence in decision-making, etc.) matters. Therefore, the primary target of propaganda is human fear. For this reason, propaganda efforts should be implemented in a system way and be clearly planned, i.e. have “strategic” rather than “tactical” purposes (see, for example, [Lasswell, 1927](#)). H. Lasswell was one of the first to substantiate the propaganda effectiveness as a tool to “demonize” the enemy ([Lasswell, 1938: 71-100](#)), and the decisive proof of this was offered by the wars both in the 20th and 21st century.

2. The second theory, suggested by Walter Lippmann, is built in its core on an ideology similar to the previous one. However, Lippmann said that the mass man in the street is unable to put together a coherent picture of the diverse information around them, especially at moments of critical importance for themselves and their family (war, famine, hostilities, etc.), in particular considering the scarcity of reliable information, and therefore, they are not self-dependent in decision-making. To address critical moments, according to W. Lippmann, a dedicated government agency is required to closely monitor and eliminate misinformation while accurately and timely “providing” the desired information. He formulated the idea of “filtration” and “dosage” of ideological propaganda, as he believed that the diversity (i.e. full and objective volume) of information is only relevant for the political elite, while the common people need only the level and amount of “filtered data” that fit the interests of the government (see, for example, [Lippmann, 1922](#)).

3. Their ideological opponent, philosopher John Dewey, gave shape to another theory stating that individuals can and should dispute propaganda, and the instrument of the resistance is the broad enlightenment of the masses. An educated average man, according to J. Dewey, is quite capable of distilling reliable data from the information diversity without outside help and determining the mode of their personal behavior, including in critical situations. The researcher also considers it a mistaken idea to delegate control over information to elites as (see, for example, [D'yui, 2000; D'yui, 2002](#)).

As we will directly analyze sources in this work, we think it unpractical to pay further attention to other works on propaganda.

#### 4. Results

Speaking about the propaganda of the warring sides and the international community in the context of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, we should provide a brief overview of the origins and essence of this interethnic confrontation.

The Karabakh conflict is rooted in ethnic and territorial causes, i.e. it is a type of interethnic conflict brought about by the mismatch between the state ownership of a certain territory and the ethnic community that lives in it.

Since the earliest times, the Karabakh area was inhabited by Armenians (who gave the name “Artsakh” to the region, which was mentioned since the 4th century AD), but it passed alternately to Persia and Armenia. The Turkic-speaking nomadic Azerbaijani tribes, which step by step settled in the region after the 11th century (namely, after the fall of the Armenian statehood in 1045) and roughly in the 16th century, gave the name “Karabakh” to the region. Karabakh rulers (khans) acknowledged their vassal dependence on Persia (Iran) (see, for example, [Istoriya Azerbaidzhana, 1960a](#)).

The Karabakh Khanate was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1813 following the Russo-Persian War of 1804-1813 won by Russia, and was established as the so-called Karabakh province with a predominant Persian (Iranian) population. Being loath to live “under the flag” of Russia, Persians migrated to Iran, while Armenians, being Christians and not willing to live in Muslim Iran, migrated to Karabakh. The plague epidemic, which raged across the region in the late 1820s – early 1830s, forced half of the Armenian families to return to Iran, and a significant portion of those who remained died from the plague. However, the sturdiest families refused to leave and embarked on consistent development of this rocky uncooperative terrain, to adapt it for sedentary living, while Azerbaijani tribes utilized the territory mainly for nomadic cattle breeding. Shusha emerged as the largest and most prosperous city and by the early 20th century the Armenian

population formed a majority here. That time marked the onset of the interethnic tension documented in history. As the Russian Empire collapsed, the independent Azerbaijan Democratic Republic succeeded in securing Karabakh's recognition of Azerbaijani jurisdiction, but routs became commonplace, right until the region was captured by Soviet Russia. After a single rout by each of the sides (Azerbaijanis and Armenians), the conflict was kept at bay both through ideology and (mainly) by military force, but at a political level, the solution was a compromise – the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), established in 1923, although it remained within the Azerbaijan Soviet Social Republic (SSR), had very broad powers of autonomy. Despite the unceasing appeals by the Armenian SSR leadership to make Karabakh its part, the Soviet government never handled the “frozen” controversy – as soon as the USSR's statehood became weaker during the perestroika period, the ethnic conflict escalated into an “acute phase” to spiral into a full-scale local war in 1991–1994. As a result of the Armenian army's victory, Nagorny Karabakh attained de facto independence, and the conflict was once again “frozen”: Almost all Armenians were in fact driven out of Azerbaijan, while Azerbaijanis and Kurds were forced to leave Armenia (see, for example, [Istoriya Azerbaidzhana, 1960b](#); [Dashdamirov, 2005](#); [Kornell](#) and others).

The year 2020 witnessed another war with the violent phase taking place from September 27 to November 10, which ended with the actual victory of the Azerbaijani army: most of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was brought under the control of Azerbaijan, the rest part (including the “Lachin corridor” connecting Armenia with the remaining Karabakh territories and the so-called transport “Meghri corridor” that provides access for Azerbaijan to its Azerbaijani Autonomy of Nakhchivan) – under the control of the Russian peacekeeping contingent. Although President of Azerbaijan I.G. Aliyev speaks of the “final” settlement of the Karabakh conflict ([Aliyev, 2020](#)), the top leadership of Russia and Armenia does not publicly share his optimism.

We should note straight away that the first signs of the aggravating interethnic conflict in Nagorny Karabakh in 2020 became visible several months before the “acute phase” – as early as in the summer, from 12 to 16 July, when an intense exchange of fire took place between the sides with casualties on both sides. The skirmishes became known in the media as “Tavush (Tovuz<sup>1</sup>) clashes” ([Boi v Tuvashe](#)) or “fighting in Tovuz (Tavush)” ([Boi v Tovuze...](#)). The flare-up was triggered by an incident on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border on July 12, 2020, in which a UAZ vehicle of the Azerbaijani armed forces crossed the state border of the Republic of Armenia, the Armenian side claims. The Azerbaijani servicemen were turned out back home, but inexplicably, they left the service vehicle behind on the territory of Armenia, after which the mutual shelling commenced. The active phase of the conflict continued until July 16; the sides agreed on a ceasefire starting from July 17, but the agreement was violated by both sides until the end of July, although with the use of small arms only, and heavy weapons were not engaged any more.

The “Tovuz conflict” appeared to be a prelude to far more serious clashes that took place from September 27 to November 10, 2020, which can be termed as a local war in the full sense of the word. For this reason, the work will focus on the analysis of the latter hostilities that was named “Nagorno-Karabakh armed conflict (September – November 2020)” by historians and the media. Since it is impossible to cover the entire plethora of messages released by official agencies and media within one paper, a decision was made to take the most “crucial” day in terms of propaganda – the first day of the military conflict, and limit the review solely to the messages by the military agencies. Hence, the subject of this work will be front-line status reports, statements and information messages of the Azerbaijani and Armenian Defense Ministries on September 27, 2020.

As defined in the above classification, we can divide the messages under review as follows:

#### **4.1. Statements by the sides on the first day of the conflict (September 27, 2020) Statements of the Defense Ministry of the Republic of Armenia**

On the very first day of the conflict, September 27, 2020, after the offensive of the Azerbaijani forces, the Armenian Defense Ministry released a message about potential misinformation in first place: “The Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia convincingly urges the mass media and users of the social networks to refrain from spreading unverified, unofficial information. It is necessary to clearly realize that the opponent, besides the actual combat operations, also carries

<sup>1</sup> The different spellings refer to the pronunciation nuances and spelling – the more accurate Armenian name is “Tavush”, and Azerbaijani name – “Tovuz”.

out a large-scale information attack through all the possible channels, which implies the spread of a huge amount of misleading information, particularly on the social platforms. We urge you to be vigilant and not to become a participant in another provocation undertaken by the opponent” ([Zayavlenie Ministerstva oborony RA 1](#)). This message falls into the group of statements (which, in fact, is indicated in its headline) and immediately drives it home to citizens that they must “listen to” and “hear” only official sources; of course, the approach is by no means novel and prepares fertile ground for further propaganda efforts.

The following message, which should also be classified as a statement based on its form, aims to inspire patriotic sentiments: “In recent hours, there have been numerous cases when individual citizens and groups (up to 10,000 people) apply to the military commissariats throughout the country with a request to join the army and leave for the Artsakh-Azerbaijani contact line. The RA Ministry of Defence, highly appreciating the readiness of our compatriots, informs that there is no need for volunteering at this moment, and in case of occurrence, the RA Ministry of Defence will make a separate, special announcement” ([Zayavlenie](#)). It is clear we have absolutely no right to assess the objectivity of the statement, but it delivers its intention to raise patriotic sentiments very inconspicuously.

Statements by senior officials include, but not limited to, Lasswell’s “demonization of the enemy”, i.e. drawing its vilest portrait. We think it appropriate to quote the unabridged texts of the messages without “cutting” them into quotations to ensure a complete understanding of the accuracy and quality of the propaganda work. We denoted the division into paragraphs with ellipsis points. D. Tonoyan, RA Minister of Defense: Dear compatriots, ... Early this morning, grossly violating the current norms of the international humanitarian law and logic of the peaceful negotiation process to resolve the conflict, the Azerbaijani armed forces attacked at the entire length of line of contact between the armed forces of Artsakh and Azerbaijan using rocket-artillery and aviation and targeting the combat positions of the Defence Army and peaceful settlements of Artsakh. Thus, the military-political leadership of Azerbaijan bears the entire responsibility for the consequences of the combat operations. ... At the moment, the Defence Army of the Republic of Artsakh is stopping all the attempts of the enemy to attack with decisive counterattacks, causing heavy losses to the enemy. ... Being the guarantor of the security of Artsakh, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia are ready to provide any assistance to ensure the security of the people of Artsakh. It is already obvious that the Azerbaijani authorities, not learning lessons from the inglorious defeats of the past, have once again overestimated their abilities, for which, I am sure, they will be severely punished. ... This adventure will have severe consequences for the enemy. Our response will be tougher than ever. The Armenian army has all the necessary means to once again destroy the enemy encroaching on our Homeland. ... Dear compatriots, comrades-in-arms, ... Unity has built all the victories of our history. I am sure that at this crucial moment we will jointly and honorably carry out our combat mission, teaching a lesson to the enemy who only understands the language of force” ([Obrashchenie ministra oborony RA...](#)).

Chief of the General Staff Onik Gasparyan, in turn, also posted an address to Armenian armed forces: “Generals, officers, sergeants, servicemen, my comrades-in-arms of the glorious Armenian army, ... It is time to affirm the glory of the Armenian Armed Forces once again. Our freedom and independence, earned at the cost of the thousands of lives and blood of the best sons of Armenia, are once again under threat. ... Azerbaijan, evoking by the multifaceted support of the centuries-old enemy of our nation- Turkey, cannot accept the fact of a crushing defeat in the combat operations it incited in Artsakh in April 2016 and in the northeastern part of the Republic of Armenia in July 2020 and now it has unleashed a war again. Azerbaijan is currently attacking at the entire length of the frontline of the Defence Army using rocket-artillery and aviation and simultaneously shelling the civilian settlements. ... The units of the Defence Army are successfully thwarting its plans causing significant losses to the opponent. ... My comrades-in-arms, ... I call to continue honorably fulfilling the sacred mission of the defender of the Homeland, relying on the power of our strong arm, ignoring danger and enemy, fighting with unwavering devotion and self-sacrifice. The brave fighters of the Armenian Army, the time has come to show the courage of your spirit, strength of your arm, boundless hatred towards the remainders of the nomadic and having no fatherland cave tribe. ... You are the servicemen of the army having splendid and glorious victories. ... Let’s be worthy of the glory of the Armenian weapon and glory of the name. ...



Our work is fair. We defend the sacred land of our ancestors, our paternal home, our honor and right of our people to live peacefully in a free country. ... WE WILL WIN!" ([Obrashchenie nachal'nika general'nogo shtaba...](#)).

You can see the same techniques are put to work – demonization, appeal to patriotism and declaration of military advances. In addition, the last message makes use of the retrospection method – the words of the Chief of the RA General Staff are demonstrably reminiscent of V.M. Molotov's phrase concluding his speech on the day the Great Patriotic War broke out: "Our cause is just. The enemy shall be defeated. Victory will be ours!"

Overall, we can point out the propaganda in the form of statements was organized at a very high professional level in the military department of the Republic of Armenia.

### **Statements of the Defense Ministry of the Republic of Azerbaijan**

The initial statement under the heading "Armenian armed forces committed large-scale provocations along the entire length of the front" skillfully capitalizes on a propaganda technique that can be conditionally (and ironically) called "search for the guilty" as the military agency accuses the Armenian armed forces of provocations while justifying the use of its own armed forces. We emphasize that we absolutely have no intention to verify the accuracy of the messages, but are aimed to study them only in terms of the quality of propaganda activities. To ensure an objective understanding, we will quote the complete text: "Civilians and human settlements of Azerbaijan exposed to enemy fire ... On September 27, at about 06:00, the armed forces of Armenia, committing large-scale provocations, have subjected to intensive shelling from large-caliber weapons, mortars, and artillery mounts of various calibers of the positions of the Azerbaijan Army along the entire length of the front and our human settlements located in the frontline zone. ... There are killed and wounded among the civilian population as a result of the intensive shelling by the enemy of the Gapanly village of Terter region, the Chiragli and Orta Gervend villages of Aghdam region, the Alkhanli and Shukurbeyli villages of Fizuli region, and the Jojug Marjanli village of Jabrayil region. Serious damage was caused to civilian infrastructure. ... Information on casualties and wounded among the civilian population and military personnel is being specified. ... The foremost units of the Azerbaijan Army are taking retaliatory measures to suppress this provocation of the enemy and to ensure the safety of the civilian population living near the line of confrontation of the troops" ([Armyanskie vooruzhennye sily sovershili...](#)). The message appears to be a model of the quality propaganda work, especially given that this is in fact the first message about the beginning of a full-scale war – it shifts the blame for the conflict (and inevitable future victims) onto the opponent; is keen to incite hatred (by reporting of the killed and wounded among the civilian population and damage inflicted to civilian facilities); does not speak directly of the results of the clashes, keeping their options open to further add clarifications and comments, depending on how the situation will change in the future. The choice of wording for the statement has been delivered, without doubt, in a remarkably seamless manner in terms of propaganda.

The statements of the Azerbaijani side, in contrast to the Armenian military agency, harnesses another propaganda technique that can be conditionally called the "method of official denial"; in cases related to hostilities, it means refuting, counter-balancing or substantially downplaying the opponent's military successes. By their form, such messages rather belong, from our viewpoint, to statements than to front-line status reports or conventional information messages. This can be illustrated by the following message: "Information spread by Armenia about allegedly shooting down of 3 tanks, 2 helicopters and 3 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) of the Azerbaijan Army is false and disinformation. ... We pointed out that, our units have complete advantage over the enemy in the front" ([Ministerstvo oborony oproverkaet...](#)).

Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry also turned the attention of its citizens (and, considering the information – not only the one released by Azerbaijan, but also that of its opponent, as well as of third countries – is generally available and open) to the fact that its actions were "right and legitimate"; the method can be conventionally called "justice of our deeds". Here is a respective quotation: "As reported earlier, the command staff of the Azerbaijan Army decided to launch a counter-offensive operation along the entire front to suppress the combat activity of the armed forces of Armenia and ensure the safety of the civilian population. ... We officially announce that the Azerbaijan Army does not target the civilian population, civilian facilities, and civilian infrastructure. Unlike the occupying country Armenia, during military operations, Azerbaijan

complies with the requirements of the regulation of international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions. ... The Armenian army deliberately places its firing points inside and near human settlements. ... The Azerbaijan Army makes calls for the civilian population in the occupied territories to stay away from military facilities” ([Azerbaidzhanskaya Armiya ne podvergaet...](#)).

The numerous messages issued by the Defense Ministry of the Republic of Azerbaijan (the tactic, we think, is also used deliberately because, first, it is easier for a “common” person to get confused in the glut of information, and, second, it allows you to continuously and consistently implant a certain idea/information/thought to the masses, “wrapping” it in various texts) include the message by the nation's leader, President of Azerbaijan and Supreme Commander-In-Chief of the Azerbaijani Army I.G. Aliyev’s “President Ilham Aliyev appealed to Azerbaijani people”, which combines a video with a text ([Prezident Azerbaidzhana Il'kham Aliev...](#)). The voluminous address, which we cannot give here in full because of its large size, can be called a perfect example of highly efficient propaganda work. It “demonizes” the opponent (in particular: “...This is another manifestation of Armenian fascism”; “...Armenia's military provocations against Azerbaijan have become regular of late”; “...What objectives did Armenia pursue by committing this provocation? First of all, Armenia plans to occupy Azerbaijani lands and does not conceal that. ...A new policy of occupation for new territories – this is the policy of Armenia’s military-political leadership today. ...It is as a result of Armenia's hypocritical, unconstructive and false policy that the negotiations have actually stopped”; “...Today, the Azerbaijani Army protects the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan on its territory. What are Armenian soldiers doing in our lands?! What is the Armenian army doing in our lands?! It is no secret that 90 percent of the personnel in the “Nagorno-Karabakh army” are Armenian citizens. Armenia is an occupying state, this occupation must and will end”, etc.); it also appeals to religion, i.e. it carefully draws on the confessional factor in inciting hatred of the enemy (for example: “...As a result of the enemy fire, there are casualties among the civilian population and our servicemen. Some people have been wounded. May God rest our martyrs in peace! Their blood will not remain unavenged”), praising own successes (“...The Azerbaijani Army is currently firing on the enemy's military positions, and as a result of these strikes, many units of the enemy's military equipment have been destroyed”; “...In July, Azerbaijan gave a fitting response to the enemy, preserved its territorial integrity and once again showed that anyone speaking to Azerbaijan in the language of threats will regret doing that. Unfortunately, this was not a lesson for them. However, after the July provocation, I said that this bitter defeat by Armenia should be a lesson for them”, etc.); in addition, it provides arguments substantiating the justice and legitimacy of the actions by their own armed forces and emphasizes the repeated “situations of harassment”, caused by the “neighbor’s” “unfair” actions (for example: “...As a result of the crushing blows, the Armenian side was forced to accept a bitter defeat. I have said this and I want to say again that if we had wanted, we could have conducted military battles on the territory of Armenia. However, we do not have military targets in Armenia, and this being the case, a ceasefire was introduced a few days later”; “...In August, Armenia launched yet another military provocation”; “Armenia's provocations against us do not end at that. Recently, the “swearing-in” ceremony of the head of the so-called criminal junta was held in Shusha, an ancient city of our ancient Azerbaijan. Isn't this a provocation? This is an insult to us. They thought that we would put up with this insult. They are deliberately provoking us and they will see the bitter consequences”, etc.). Moreover, the Azerbaijani President used the nearly verbatim quotation of V. Molotov’s legendary phrase he said on June 22, 1941: “...We are on the right path. Ours is the cause of justice. We will win!”. The move primarily targeted citizens aged 40 and above, who experienced the period of the Soviet Union at a conscious age and, accordingly, were partially or entirely brought up in the environment of Soviet propaganda. Moreover, in Azerbaijan (as it is the case in Russia, Armenia, some Central Asian countries; unlike, for example, Baltic states and Ukraine, partly Georgia), the victory in the Great Patriotic War is widely commemorated, and the chapter in the Soviet history is an integral and crucial element in the government propaganda, and consequently, Molotov’s phrase strikes the right chord with the younger generation either.

For this reason, the content of I.G. Aliyev’s statement and its publication on the military department’s website can be described as the right decision that produced the propaganda effect. Armenian Prime Minister N.V. Pashinyan did not make such statements, which can be considered a mistake in terms of propaganda. On the other hand, “keeping silence” by “other sides” was

justified (and above all because the Republic of Armenia is not legally involved in the conflict); we would venture to suggest that the situation was impelled by political motives.

Although the decree of the President of Azerbaijan “On declaring martial law”, dated on 27.09.2020, is both a statutory document and, to a great extent, a propaganda vehicle, however, we think its analysis makes no sense, since its title speaks for itself ([Ukaz Prezidenta Azerbaidzhanskoi Respubliki...](#)).

Azerbaijan’s Defense Ministry, just as its Armenian “counterpart”, unswervingly capitalizes on propaganda techniques that imply “demonstration of justice and legitimacy”, primarily in the aspects related to victims among civilians: “As reported earlier, the command staff of the Azerbaijan Army decided to launch a counter-offensive operation along the entire front to suppress the combat activity of the armed forces of Armenia and ensure the safety of the civilian population. ... We officially announce that the Azerbaijan Army does not target the civilian population, civilian facilities, and civilian infrastructure. Unlike the occupying country Armenia, during military operations, Azerbaijan complies with the requirements of the regulation of international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions. ... The Armenian army deliberately places its firing points inside and near human settlements. ... The Azerbaijan Army makes calls for the civilian population in the occupied territories to stay away from military facilities” ([Azerbaidzhanskaya Armiya ne podvergaet...](#)). This message should also be categorized as a statement, rather than an information message, since it has a prominent political context.

Analysis of the statements with a political dimension shows that the sides used similar methods such as “denial”, “justice” and “justification” of their own actions, “demonizing the opponent”, “confirming military successes” and others, but the Defense Ministry of Azerbaijan employed a broader range of the techniques.

#### **4.2. Front-line status reports on the first day of the conflict (September 27, 2020)**

##### **Front-line status reports by the Defense Ministry of the Republic of Armenia**

The Armenian Defense Ministry naturally launched its front-line status reports by demonstrating its military successes on the front line with appropriate headlines, embedded videos and no body texts: “The annihilation of Azerbaijani tanks and manpower” ([Unichtozhenie azerbaidzhanskikh tankov...](#)), “Other destructions of Azerbaijani military equipment” ([Ocherednye porazheniya azerbaidzhanskoi...](#)), “The Armenian armed forces continue the destruction of the Azerbaijani military equipment” ([Armyanskie VS prodolzhayut porazhat' 1](#)), “The Armenian armed forces continue the destruction of the Azerbaijani military equipment” ([Armyanskie VS prodolzhayut porazhat' 2](#)). In terms of their format, the messages can be defined as front-line “status reports”, but the absence of body texts appears to be quite logical and well-considered because, first, video is more effective than words, and second, this leaves room for further comments and clarifications, where required.

##### **Front-line status reports by the Defense Ministry of the Republic of Azerbaijan**

Unlike the initial status reports by the Armenian military agency, Azerbaijan’s Defense Ministry provides only textual information, and by doing this, it, of course, looks less convincing than the contesting side: “The firing points and the combat activities of the armed forces of Armenia are suppressed with the interaction of foremost military units, missile and artillery units, frontline aviation, armored vehicles, and other branches of troops deployed in the tensest Tartar-Aghdam and Fizuli-Jabrayil directions of the front. ... Currently, the Azerbaijan Army is taking retaliatory actions and our troops fully control the operational situation. ... The mass media and the public will be additionally informed about the events taking place in the frontline zone” ([Podavlyayutsya ognevye tochki...](#)).

The Azerbaijani military agency also releases neutral messages in terms of military advances. By their form, it seems it would be correct to describe them as front-line status reports: “Units of the Azerbaijan Army are fighting for important heights located under the occupation of Armenian troops in the Terter-Aghdam, Fizuli-Jabrayil directions, and in the direction of Murovdag Mountain. ... Rocket and artillery troops and aviation assets strike at enemy command posts, destroying a large number of maneuvering forces, military equipment, and military facilities. ...



Fierce battles are taking place along the entire length of the front” ([The Azerbaijan Army’s counter-offensive operation](#)).

In the afternoon, the Ministry began to post status reports that included video footage. In contrast with the Armenian Defense Ministry’s website, the Azerbaijani military agency adds fairly straightforward comments to the videos, in particular: “As a result of the counter-offensive operation of the units of the Azerbaijan Army, a large number of military personnel and military equipment of the Armenian troops were destroyed in various directions of the front. ... The video shows the moment of destruction of enemy’s military equipment” ([Unichtozheny boevaya tekhnika...](#)). Taking into account the theory of propaganda and previous global experience, this kind of “propaganda” explanations are devised primarily for poorly educated readers; to the eye of informed “viewers”, the messages by the Armenian Defense Ministry compare more favorably with this background. A similar context is created in other front-line status reports provided by the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry on September 27, 2020, in particular: “As a result of the counter-attack operation of the Azerbaijan Army units, enemy troops retreated and left a large number of armored vehicles on the battlefield. ... This video shows destroyed and abandoned Armenian combat vehicles” ([Protivnik bezhit...](#)).

Other front-line status reports (see, for example, [Unichtozhen sklad oruzhiya...; Unichtozheno eshche dva tanka](#), etc.), posted by the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry on the first day of the 2020 Karabakh conflict, incorporate very similar ideology and content, and therefore, it is impractical to analyze them, in our opinion.

A number of front-line status reports are written in the neutral style, and through this, they serve as a powerful propaganda lever for the highly educated population and expert community (both the military and journalists), for example: “As a result of the military operation carried out by our troops in the direction of Goranboy, the Murov peak in the Murov mountain range was liberated. ... As a result of the operation, the Vardenis-Agdara military highway, which connects the occupied territories of Azerbaijan with Armenia, was taken under control visually, as well as under fire control of firearms and artillery means. The gained military advantage allows hinder the transportation of additional military cargo from Armenia to the occupied Kalbajar and Aghdere. ... The combat operations continue” ([Osvobozhdena vazhnaya vysota...](#)).

As we can see, the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry, provided the status reports in great abundance, as opposed to similar publications of the Armenian Defense Ministry, and created them with various audiences in mind. This, on the one hand, enhances the reach while, on the other hand, “diverts” educated citizens away from the blatant flag-waving messages.

### **4.3. Information messages on the first day of the conflict (September 27, 2020) Information messages by the Defense Ministry of the Republic of Armenia**

On the very first day of the war, the Armenian Defense Ministry calls on citizens not to post information on the military equipment movements in public domains: “The Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, considering the spread of the videos on the movement of the combat equipment of the Armenian side absolutely unacceptable, strongly urges to refrain from such actions. It is necessary to clearly understand that the internet is thoroughly monitored by the opponent and any such video turns the combat equipment into a target for the Azerbaijani armed forces” ([Zayavlenie Ministerstva oborony RA 2](#)). Although the message headline says that it is an “announcement” (statement), it actually brings some information to the public’s notice and calls on it to be on its guard. The message key goal is to only steer people towards the sources that are fully controlled by the government, meaning they give thoroughly “filtered” information from the point of view of propaganda.

### **Information messages by the Defense Ministry of the Republic of Azerbaijan**

The Defense Ministry from the onset (in the second message following the first one that announces the beginning of hostilities) published a requirement to use only official information as part of a front-line status report. It pursues the same purpose as the Armenian military agency in its the messages, and therefore, the communications require no additional analysis because they reflect identical ideas: “We urge users of social networks, electronic media, and other mass media representatives not to use unofficial, unspecified, and biased information in order to avoid

confusion among the population and to ensure the safety of our servicemen” ([Podavlyayutsya ognevye tochki...](#)).

An essential attribute of the “right” ideological approach is to demonstrate battleground successes: “The command staff of the Azerbaijan Army decided to launch a counter-offensive operation of our troops along the entire front to suppress the combat activity of the armed forces of Armenia and ensure the safety of the civilian population.

The military personnel and tank units, with the support of units of the Rocket and Artillery Troops, frontline aviation, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), determining a large number of manpower (military personnel), military facilities, and military equipment of the Armenian armed forces located in the forward line and in the depths of the enemy's defense, have destroyed them. ... According to the information received, 12 OSA anti-aircraft missile systems of the Armenian air defense units were destroyed in various directions. A combat helicopter of the Air Force of Azerbaijan was shot down in the Terter direction, the crew members are alive. ... The blitz counter-offensive operation of our troops continues” ([Voiska Azerbaidzhanskoi Armii pristupili...](#)).

The information messages also use the propaganda method of “official denial”, in this case, with respect to the military losses reported by the Armenian side: “Information spread by Armenia about allegedly shooting down of 3 tanks, 2 helicopters and 3 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) of the Azerbaijan Army is false and disinformation. ... We pointed out that, our units have complete advantage over the enemy in the front” ([Ministerstvo oborony oproverkaet...](#)). We do not categorize the message as a front-line report, because in its form it removes information “gaps”, instead of keeping track of the current combat situation.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis conducted, we can sum up and formulate the following findings:

1. Looking at the messages by the Armenian and Azerbaijani military agencies through the lens of theory and the practice that has taken shape in the 20th and 21st centuries, we should admit that they have top quality and were presented at a high professional level. The sides resorted to an extensive toolkit of propaganda techniques.

2. The review of initial messages by the Defense Ministry of Armenia on the first day of the war suggests that its propaganda efforts were adequately orchestrated, ranging from appeals to the feeling of patriotism and clear (with no text) demonstrations of military successes to calls for vigilance and “demonization” of the opponent. The military agency’s senior officials – the Minister of Defense and the Chief of General Staff – released their statements, and each of the messages, one way or another, uses all the specified techniques: inspiring patriotic sentiments, “demonizing” the opposing side, confirming military successes, as well as giving a retrospective allusion to the prophetic legendary words of V. Molotov, who broke the news of the beginning of the war with Germany to the Soviet people.

3. The first messages, issued by the Defense Ministry of Azerbaijan on September 27, 2020, were expertly contextualized in the current situation in terms of propaganda. In addition to the methods of “demonization”, retrospection (Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Azerbaijan Armed Forces I. Aliyev virtually quoted the final phrase of V. Molotov’s speech at the end of his address to the nation), raise of patriotism, demonstration of military successes, denial of the opponent’s military successes, they also utilized a religious lever and many others as propaganda means.

4. We do not have enough arguments in favor of the propaganda materials under review of either of the military agencies, because each side displayed great professional competence in tackling the challenge.

The strengths of the propaganda, organized by the Armenian side, include its focus on ensuring “visible objectivity” (videos of military successes with no comments), generating laconic and clear messages (concise items of information are better absorbed by people), providing addresses of the military leaders to the nation.

The strengths of the propaganda, organized by the Azerbaijani side, include posting multiple messages (consistently repeated information becomes as a rule fixed in the minds of readers; in addition, the tactic beneficially generates more opportunities for the media to disseminate “various” news), putting emphasis on the religious element in propaganda (it is quite logical that it

is present only in the President's address to the nation), engaging a wider audience to reach both the poorly educated population (through "flag-waving" messages), and highly educated readers and expert community (through "neutral" status reports explaining the advantage gained in combat operations).

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