

Armenian Migrations to the South Caucasus in the Second Half of the 20th Century and Its Consequences

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Keywords	Abstract
Armenian migrations South Caucasus Soviet repatriation policy ethnic conflict	<p>In the second half of the twentieth century, Armenian migration to the South Caucasus became a key factor influencing the region's demographic and political development. Officially presented by Soviet authorities as a humanitarian "repatriation" initiative, this policy primarily pursued strategic objectives aimed at reshaping the ethnic structure of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Between 1946 and 1948, large numbers of Armenians were resettled from abroad to Soviet Armenia, a process that coincided with the forced displacement of the Azerbaijani population from their historical territories.</p> <p>These population movements significantly disrupted the ethnic balance of the South Caucasus and weakened long-standing traditions of multicultural coexistence. Over time, Armenia developed into a largely monoethnic republic, while Azerbaijan encountered serious social, economic, and humanitarian challenges related to the accommodation and integration of displaced communities. Furthermore, the long-term consequences of these demographic policies contributed to growing political tensions in the region. The escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the late 1980s can be interpreted as an outcome of these sustained ethno-demographic transformations, which ultimately undermined regional stability and interethnic relations.</p>

INTRODUCTION

The second half of the twentieth century was marked by profound ethnic, political, and demographic transformations on a global scale. In the South Caucasus, one of the most significant processes of this period was large-scale population migration, particularly the systematic resettlement of Armenians into the region. These movements were closely linked to the internal policies of the Soviet Union and were aimed at reshaping the national composition of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

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The relevance of this topic lies in the long-term consequences of Armenian resettlement for the ethnic balance of the South Caucasus. These policies generated increasing demographic pressure and contributed to territorial claims directed against the Azerbaijani population. From a contemporary scholarly perspective, an objective analysis of these historical processes is essential for understanding the underlying causes of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

In the postwar period, Soviet demographic policy—especially under the leadership of Joseph Stalin—sought to implement structural population changes in the Armenian SSR by encouraging the return of Armenians from abroad to what was termed “Soviet Armenia.” Although officially presented as a humanitarian repatriation initiative, this policy in fact reflected a deliberate strategy of ethnic engineering.

Beginning in 1945, the leadership of the Armenian SSR actively petitioned Moscow to support the “return of Armenians to their homeland.” As a result, between 1946 and 1948, approximately 90,000–100,000 Armenians from Syria, Lebanon, France, Greece, Iran, and the United States were resettled in Armenia under a centralized state plan. While some were placed in urban centers, a significant number were settled in rural areas traditionally inhabited by Azerbaijanis, accelerating rapid demographic change.

Beyond demographic considerations, this policy also served broader political objectives. The Soviet leadership used the repatriation campaign as leverage in its pressure on Turkey, particularly in connection with territorial claims over the Kars and Ardahan regions. To legitimize these claims, it was considered necessary to artificially increase the Armenian population of the republic.

RESULTS

As a direct consequence of Armenian resettlement, Azerbaijanis residing in the Armenian SSR became subject to systematic displacement. In December 1947, the Council of Ministers of the USSR issued Decree No. 4083, ordering the relocation of nearly 100,000 Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR to the Kura–Araz lowlands of the Azerbaijan SSR. Although officially justified by economic considerations and agricultural development, the primary objective was to create living space for incoming Armenian settlers.

During the deportations carried out between 1948 and 1953, Azerbaijani communities were forced to abandon their homes, lands, and villages. Many deportees were unable to adapt to harsh environmental and social conditions, resulting in significant loss of life. Those who attempted to return were prevented from doing so by Soviet authorities. Consequently, the Azerbaijani share of Armenia’s population declined sharply—from nearly 15 percent in 1939 to approximately 6 percent by 1959—contributing to the gradual transformation of the Armenian SSR into a monoethnic entity.

Although Stalinist repression formally eased in the late 1950s and early 1960s, discriminatory practices against Azerbaijanis persisted. Azerbaijani-language schools were closed, social institutions dismantled, and employment opportunities systematically restricted. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Azerbaijani population continued to decline to around 70,000, driven not by



open deportation but by sustained economic and social pressure, including land restrictions and increased taxation.

Simultaneously, a new wave of Armenian migrants arrived from abroad as part of Soviet ideological propaganda. Despite Armenia's limited economic capacity to absorb these populations, the Armenian SSR was promoted as a national center for Armenians worldwide. By the 1970s–1980s, census data showed that although Armenia's population exceeded three million, Azerbaijanis constituted only 1–2 percent. Archival evidence and eyewitness accounts confirm that this decline resulted from deliberate state policy.

During this period, Azerbaijani cultural heritage was systematically destroyed. Village names were altered, mosques demolished, and cemeteries erased under the pretext of modernization. In reality, these actions aimed to eliminate the historical presence of Azerbaijanis and complete the process of cultural assimilation.

DISCUSSION

In the early 1980s, as the USSR entered a deep economic and political crisis, national issues once again moved to the forefront of political life in the Armenian SSR. Following Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985 and the introduction of the policy of *perestroika*, conditions emerged that enabled the open articulation of nationalist ideas. Within this environment, the “Miatsum” (“Unification”) movement developed, with Armenian political elites and nationalist groups openly demanding the incorporation of Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia.

These developments were not accidental. The demographic and ethnic transformations implemented throughout the second half of the twentieth century had already reshaped Armenia into a predominantly monoethnic society, creating a structural foundation for renewed territorial claims. Within this context, Armenian political discourse increasingly positioned Armenia as a “national center,” fostering expansionist aspirations toward neighboring territories, particularly Azerbaijan.

The mass demonstrations and separatist rallies that erupted in February 1988 in Khankendi represented the culmination of these long-term demographic and political processes. While the movement received broad support within Armenia, the central Soviet authorities initially failed to respond decisively. This lack of effective intervention accelerated the escalation of tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh, deepened interethnic confrontation, and ultimately led to armed conflict.

During this period, Azerbaijanis residing in the Armenian SSR were once again subjected to forced displacement. Between 1988 and 1990, approximately 200,000 Azerbaijanis were expelled from their homes. Entire villages were destroyed, houses burned, and cultural and religious monuments demolished. By the end of the twentieth century, these processes had resulted in Armenia becoming a fully monoethnic state.

The destabilization of the ethnic balance in the South Caucasus had far-reaching consequences. Within Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory, separatist movements supported by



Armenia triggered the outbreak of the Karabakh conflict. The roots of this conflict can be directly traced to the demographic engineering policies implemented between the 1940s and the 1980s. Each wave of Armenian migration served specific political objectives: in the 1940s, as part of Soviet pressure on Turkey; in the 1960s–1970s, to ensure ethnic homogeneity within the Armenian SSR; and in the 1980s, to legitimize territorial claims and separatism.

As a result, centuries-old traditions of interethnic coexistence in the South Caucasus were replaced by distrust and confrontation. For the Azerbaijani population, these developments constituted a profound tragedy—not only in terms of demographic loss, but also due to enduring moral and psychological suffering. Hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis expelled from Western Azerbaijan have been unable to return to their ancestral lands to this day.

Parallel to these demographic changes, the economic structure of the region was also transformed. The forced relocation of Azerbaijanis to the Azerbaijan SSR generated social tension and placed additional strain on agricultural systems and infrastructure. At the same time, Armenia received substantial financial assistance from the Soviet state to accommodate incoming Armenian settlers, exacerbating economic inequality among the republics.

The consequences of Armenian migration extended well beyond the twentieth century, producing political, social, and economic repercussions that persist into the twenty-first century. Ethnic stability in the region was never fully restored, and mutual mistrust deepened. Armenia's monoethnic structure further contributed to its isolation from broader regional economic and cultural integration processes.

Thus, Armenian migration in the second half of the twentieth century should be understood not merely as population movement, but as a deliberate political, demographic, and ideological strategy. From postwar repatriation campaigns to the separatist movements of the late 1980s, each stage formed part of an interconnected process aimed at altering the traditional ethnic composition of the South Caucasus, weakening the role of Azerbaijanis and other communities, and consolidating Armenian dominance in the region. Consequently, the South Caucasus—once characterized by multiculturalism and mutual tolerance—was transformed into a zone of prolonged ethnic tension, the effects of which continue to shape regional dynamics today.

The Armenian resettlement process directed toward the territory of the Armenian SSR formed an integral part of the Soviet Union's broader national policy in the postwar period. Officially promoted under the slogan of “returning Armenians to their homeland,” this policy was presented as a humanitarian initiative. In practice, however, it pursued clear political objectives: to alter the ethnic composition of the Armenian SSR, create conditions for the systematic removal of Azerbaijanis from their ancestral lands, and strengthen future territorial claims against Turkey under the narrative of “historical lands.”

Between 1946 and 1948, tens of thousands of Armenians were resettled from the Middle East and Europe into the Armenian SSR. Their placement followed a centralized state plan, with particular emphasis on rural areas predominantly inhabited by Azerbaijanis. As a consequence, the



demographic structure of Armenia changed radically. Whereas Azerbaijanis constituted nearly 15 percent of the population in the late 1930s, by the late 1980s their share had fallen below one percent. This decline was not the result of natural demographic processes but stemmed from a deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing, in which Azerbaijanis were forcibly expelled from their homes and their property transferred to newly resettled Armenians.

The social consequences of these policies were severe. Many deported Azerbaijanis were relocated to the Kura–Araz lowlands, including the districts of Sabirabad, Saatli, and Imishli, where they faced extreme climatic and socioeconomic difficulties. A large number of families struggled to adapt, resulting in widespread hardship and long-term social vulnerability. These processes affected not only one ethnic group but also undermined the overall social fabric of the South Caucasus, destroying long-standing traditions of peaceful coexistence and multicultural interaction.

Culturally, the impact was equally destructive. In the region historically known as Western Azerbaijan, hundreds of Azerbaijani villages were erased, and dozens of mosques, cemeteries, and architectural monuments were demolished or repurposed. Place names were systematically changed, and settlements were renamed in Armenian, reflecting a deliberate policy of cultural transformation aimed at eliminating the historical presence of Azerbaijanis. These measures represented a coordinated effort to erase tangible and intangible Azerbaijani heritage from the region.

The political consequences of Armenian migration were profound. From the 1940s to the 1980s, the expulsion of Azerbaijanis and the artificial growth of the Armenian population fundamentally disrupted the ethnic balance of the South Caucasus. Armenia gradually evolved into a monoethnic state, while Azerbaijan and Georgia retained their multiethnic structures. This transformation enabled Armenia to construct an identity as an “ethnically homogeneous” space, which later facilitated separatist movements and territorial claims.

Within Armenia’s domestic politics, demographic changes increasingly intersected with economic challenges. During the final decades of the USSR, Armenian political elites linked internal economic difficulties to ethnic narratives, promoting territorial demands under the banner of “historical justice.” This ideological framework became the basis for the events that erupted in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988. The monoethnic environment that had formed in Armenia strengthened these ambitions both ideologically and practically.

As a direct consequence of Armenian migration policies, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue intensified on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Having consolidated an “ethnically pure” state, Armenian political forces extended similar objectives to neighboring regions, particularly Azerbaijani territory. The events of 1988–1991, including Armenia’s territorial claims and the subsequent war, were the political outcomes of long-term demographic engineering. The artificial resettlement of Armenians disrupted ethnic harmony and fostered deep mutual distrust.



Demographic transformation also had economic implications. Although Armenian resettlement temporarily stimulated urban and agricultural sectors, this growth proved artificial and unsustainable. Many Armenians resettled from abroad failed to adapt to local conditions and later migrated to other Soviet cities. Nevertheless, the primary political goal had already been achieved: territories formerly inhabited by Azerbaijanis were emptied and repopulated.

Following the destruction of the South Caucasus's multicultural balance, confrontational tendencies intensified. Mutual trust among ethnic groups was replaced by division and hostility. Armenian migration also influenced neighboring regions, such as Georgia's Javakheti, where demographic changes contributed to long-term political and social tensions.

The moral and psychological consequences were particularly severe for the Azerbaijani population. The forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis from Western Azerbaijan remains a national tragedy embedded in collective memory. Many families have never been able to return to their ancestral lands, and subsequent generations grew up displaced, deepening feelings of injustice and loss. At the same time, Armenia's pursuit of ethnic homogeneity undermined regional stability and long-term development.

By the late 1980s, Armenia had effectively eliminated most ethnic minorities, including Azerbaijanis and Kurds, despite officially promoting the rhetoric of "friendship among peoples." From a broader perspective, these policies disrupted economic integration within the South Caucasus. Inter-republican economic ties weakened, Armenia's domestic market contracted, and these challenges intensified after independence in the 1990s.

Culturally, centuries-old patterns of coexistence collapsed. Mixed families, shared traditions, and interfaith practices gradually disappeared, as rigid ethnic boundaries replaced a historically interconnected cultural landscape. Ultimately, Armenian migration constituted not merely a demographic phenomenon but a comprehensive geopolitical process. It reshaped the political map of the South Caucasus, undermined multicultural values, and transformed the region into a zone of prolonged ethnic confrontation. The legacy of these policies continues to shape Armenian–Azerbaijani relations and regional dynamics to this day.

CONCLUSION

In the second half of the twentieth century, Armenian resettlement in the South Caucasus became a decisive factor shaping the region's political, social, and demographic trajectory. Although officially framed by Soviet authorities as a policy of "repatriation," this process functioned in practice as a mechanism of ethnic homogenization within the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Between 1946 and 1948, tens of thousands of Armenians were relocated from abroad to Armenia, a development that coincided with the forced displacement of large segments of the Azerbaijani population from their ancestral territories.

These demographic interventions fundamentally disrupted the long-standing traditions of ethnic and religious coexistence in the South Caucasus. As Armenia gradually evolved into a monoethnic state, Azerbaijan was confronted with extensive humanitarian, social, and economic challenges



related to the accommodation and integration of displaced communities. The consequences of these policies extended beyond population change, fostering deep interethnic mistrust and political tension across the region.

Ultimately, the resettlement and deportation policies of the Soviet period contributed directly to the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the late 1980s. The resulting humanitarian crisis and prolonged instability demonstrate that these demographic strategies undermined regional cooperation and multiculturalism, leaving enduring negative effects on peace and development in the South Caucasus.

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