

BOOK REVIEW:

“Russia’s Interventions in Ethnic Conflicts: The Case of Armenia and Azerbaijan” by James J. Coyle.

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Russia's Interventions in Ethnic Conflicts: The Case of Armenia and Azerbaijan by James J. Coyle. *Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 175 pp.*

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After seeing that diplomatic efforts had not yielded any meaningful results for three decades, Azerbaijan, by using force, liberated seven regions outside the formerly Armenian-occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region and the town of Shusha. As a result of the 44-Day War, Azerbaijan also gained control over the entire length of the Azerbaijani–Iranian and Azerbaijani–Armenian borders. De-occupation of the Azerbaijani territories has, in brief, transformed the geopolitical reality in the South Caucasus. It has opened up new opportunities for the region. However, some questions and concerns, such as landmines and border delimitation and demarcation, still remain. Moreover, the fact that some radical circles in Armenia are still eager for revenge cannot be disregarded. Azerbaijan, differing from Armenia, is determined to unblock all transport and communication links in order to create an environment for sustainable peace. James J. Coyle's latest work is definitely an invaluable resource for understanding the conflict.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has evoked academic interest and received ample scholarly attention. Still, most of the works regarding this conflict have resulted from one-sidedness or 'bothsidesism': the authors have tried to create a false equivalence between an occupier and a side subjected to occupation. In this sense, James J. Coyle's *Russia's Interventions in Ethnic Conflicts: The Case of Armenia and Azerbaijan* fills this obvious gap by being impartial and unbiased. James J. Coyle is a well-known international consultant on security and foreign policy based in California, USA. As a diplomat of 24 years, he has held a variety of positions, including Director of Middle East Studies at the US Army War College. He is the author of *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts* (2018) and a frequent contributor to *The Hill*. He has taught at several universities in Southern California. He is also a senior non-resident research fellow at the Atlantic Council. Coyle speaks and reads Turkish, Persian, and French in various degrees of proficiency.

In *Russia's Interventions in Ethnic Conflicts: The Case of Armenia and Azerbaijan*, James J. Coyle updates and expands his earlier work,

Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts. Coyle's research is unique in the field of conflict studies, and regarding the former Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict in particular, because of his ‘evidence-based’ approach.

There are six sections to the book: one on the roots of the conflict; subsequent chapters describing it through military, political, economic, and diplomatic lenses; and a final chapter with analytical conclusions.

In the introductory part, the author explores the roots of the conflict by presenting the geography and demographics of the region and takes a brief look into the 20th-century history of both countries. Coyle has documented the historical evolution of the conflict, emphasizing an examination of how structural vulnerabilities, in this context geography, contributed to the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict. He asserts that Armenians arrived relatively recently in the “Nagorno-Karabakh region” after the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay and the 1829 Treaty of Adrianople. According to a census conducted by the Czar's representatives in 1805, only 8% of the population of Karabakh and the surrounding regions were Armenian before these treaties (p. 4). As stated by Coyle, the Sumgait incident was double-edged: it triggered a mass population exchange between the two Soviet Socialist Republics and, later, a larger Armenian massacre of Azerbaijanis at Khojaly on its anniversary (p. 16).

Chapter two details the military face of the conflict and clearly describes the armed hostilities and the post-war periods. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Coyle opines that Azerbaijan was relatively defenceless against the Armenian aggression. While Baku had remained loyal to the Kremlin and relied on Soviet military support, in contrast, the Armenians had been organizing their own militias and paramilitary groups for some time (p. 31). Furthermore, Russian soldiers took part in military operations on both sides of the conflict. Coyle contends that this was not a conscious decision on the part of the Kremlin, but the result of the physical location and makeup of the ‘Russian’ troops (p. 33). Eyewitness testimony of survivors indicates that the 366th Motorized Rifle Unit was involved in the Khojaly Massacre, one of the bloodiest incidents committed by Armenian forces against Azerbaijani civilians (p. 35). The author states that the Armenians did not give the civilians safe passage. In fact, the ‘humanitarian corridor’

was a field of fire. He adds that the Russians and Armenians opened fire on fleeing civilians trying to reach the relative safety of Aghdam (p. 35). Armenians insinuated that this was ‘a great victory for Armenians’ and ‘[t]he massacre was revenge for the anti-Armenian pogrom in Sumgait four years earlier’ (p. 37). Future Armenian president Sargsyan bluntly told British journalist Tom de Waal that the Khojaly massacre was an intentional attack on the civilian population to prove the willingness of Armenian forces to wage a total war: ‘I think the main point is this, before Khojaly the Azerbaijanis thought that they were joking with us, they thought that the Armenians were people who could not raise their hand against the civilian population. We needed to put a stop to all that. And that’s what happened’ (p. 38).

Despite Moscow’s professed commitment not to arm either side in the conflict, it violated the UN arms embargo by sending weapons to Armenia (p. 39). In September 1992, Azerbaijani forces captured six members of Russian special forces (*Spetznaz*), part of the Russian Seventh Army assigned to Yerevan. The Russian state asked Azerbaijan to deport them for trial in Russia; however, Azerbaijan categorically refused and insisted that they were mercenaries. The capture of these *Spetznaz* troops was the first concrete proof of direct Russian involvement in the conflict (p. 40).

Coyle underlines that Armenians looted and burned the invaded villages. He claims that some of the looting, such as in Aghdam (it has been destroyed to such an extent that it is sometimes called a ‘Ghost Town’ or the ‘Hiroshima of the Caucasus’), was organized and planned by the Armenian authorities (p. 42).

After the Ceasefire Agreement concluded in Bishkek in 1994, low-level skirmishes along the border and military preparations continued on both sides. The Four-Day War, in April 2016, showed that the *status quo* could not last forever. As a result of the April clashes, Azerbaijan achieved its goals by taking control of strategic territory on the ground and changing the line of contact: ‘The victory helped restore the morale of the Azerbaijan army, and shocked Armenia who considered their army to be the descendent of Soviet generals while Azerbaijan’s came from cooks and dishwashers’ (p. 52). The Four-Day War demonstrated that Russian security guarantees to Armenia were subject to the

Kremlin's interpretation and did not extend to Karabakh. But it did lay down some red lines that Azerbaijan could not cross. Coyle posits that Moscow signalled to Baku that military action concerning Karabakh could not expand into Armenia (p. 53). In May 2018, immediately after Nikol Pashinyan achieved office, Azerbaijani troops regained fire control of the Yerevan–Goris–Gafan–Lachin highway without fighting by moving troops in Nakhichevan. The defence minister of Armenia at the time, David Tonoyan, said there would be strategic changes in the country's defence policy, stating that the Armenian Armed Forces were moving from a passive to an active defence and calling for 'a new war for new territories'. In August 2019, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan visited Khankendni ('Stepanakert') and stated, 'Artsakh is Armenia, and that's it.' In doing so, Pashinyan confirmed his commitment to '*miatsum*' (unification in Armenian), the goal of Armenian nationalists since it was first voiced in February 1988 (p. 90). Such provocative statements clearly demonstrated that the Armenian leadership was constantly ramping up aggressive rhetoric and actions that impeded the negotiation process.

Starting at noon on 12 July 2020, fighting broke out across the Armenia–Azerbaijan international border in the direction of Tovuz district, far from the line of contact but near the Caspian oil and gas pipelines to western Europe (p. 58). On 27 September, the conflict flared up again. In the six-week war that followed, Azerbaijan recaptured three of the seven provinces surrounding the Karabakh region as well as the city of Shusha. Russia brokered a ceasefire in November that solidified an Armenian retreat. It also introduced 1,960 Russian peacekeepers to the war zone (p. 59).

With regard to weapons purchases, Coyle remarks that Russia arms both sides in the conflict. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan purchases weapons from Russia at market price, while Armenia receives Russian weapons as either military aid or at discretionary prices (p. 59). While Armenia may have been Russia's favourite in the conflict, Moscow supports Azerbaijan to gain a stronger position with both sides (p. 122). The author underscores that Russia's continued sale of weaponry to Azerbaijan was met with considerable hostility in Armenia (p. 61). He affirms that,

while Russia's principal allies in the Armenian government lost power in 2018, that did not stop Moscow from continuing to be Armenia's primary arms supplier (p. 63). Azerbaijan's arms purchases are not limited to Russia. Israel, Turkey, Belarus, and some other countries also sell Azerbaijan new weaponry worth billions of dollars. Coyle claims that hydrocarbon wealth enabled President Aliyev to expand his defence budget. Military spending went from \$175 million in 2004 to an estimated \$3.1 billion in 2011, exceeding Armenia's entire national budget (p. 111).

In the chapter *The Politics of Frozen Conflict*, Coyle explores the trajectory of political development in Armenia and Azerbaijan in parallel with the conflict. The author writes that political figures in both Armenia and Azerbaijan have paid a heavy cost for the war. In Armenia, a president had to resign because he was perceived as too willing to compromise for peace. In Azerbaijan, two presidents lost their jobs because of their inability to defend their country adequately (p. 65). He maintains that Armenia consciously used the cause of "Nagorno-Karabakh" to build its sense of identity (p. 90). Thus, they turned this issue into an instrument of nation-building (p. 66).

In *chapter four*, Coyle seeks to assess the impact of military conflict on both countries' economies. He claims that the Armenian economy is the story of an agrarian country trying to survive in a hostile environment. Over time, Russia has purchased all of Armenia's major assets (p. 91). According to Coyle, Azerbaijan, in contrast, became a regional economic powerhouse (p. 91). The final indicator of Armenia's total economic subservience to the Kremlin, the author professes, is the story of how Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (p. 95). Referring to Manvel Sargsyan, the director of the Centre for National and International Studies in Yerevan, Coyle evaluates this as a process of gradually ceding sovereignty to Russia (p. 98).

Chapter five draws attention to the various aspects of diplomatic negotiations. The author explores the context of peace talks in which varying proposals, such as the so-called 'package' deal, 'step-by-step' or 'phased' proposal, 'common state' proposal, etc., were taken up. The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict is of considerable

interest to the surrounding countries: Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Europe and the United States have also played a diplomatic role. However, Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act adopted by the US Congress, which prohibits direct US government aid to Azerbaijan, was, according to the author, so completely one sided that it hurt US-Azerbaijani relations for many years (p. 128). To Russia, the Caucasus and all the countries of the former Soviet Union still belong to it (p. 115). Coyle surmises that, after Russia seized Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and the Crimea in 2014, it became obvious that the West was limiting its involvement in the Caucasus (p. 153) and Washington has ceded the Caucasus to Russia's sphere of interest (p. 132). He believes that Russia has attempted, over the years, to push the international community aside (p. 119) and monopolize work related to the settlement of the conflict (p. 157). Moreover, he presumes that, except for votes at the United Nations, the rest of the world ignores the conflict. The UN respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states in the area and reaffirmed the inviolability of international borders. It reinforced the inadmissibility of the use of force for acquiring territory. All four UN resolutions demanded a ceasefire and peace talks, as well as a withdrawal from the occupied territories. Coyle declares that missing from all four was a critical element: any enforcement mechanism to compel the parties to obey the resolutions (p. 124).

The central point of contention between Armenia and Azerbaijan is that Armenia believed the principle of international law that should determine the Karabakh region's status was self-determination. Azerbaijan, in contrast, believed that the overriding principles were state sovereignty and the inviolability of international borders (p. 143). The fact that self-determination requires the approval of both sides of the conflict still remains. Multiple UN resolutions have reaffirmed the inadmissibility of acquiring territory by force. There is a general principle in international law, however, that a people can only secede if both the secessionists and the recognized state agree (p. 166).

In conclusion, Coyle asserts that the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan is a created conflict: 'Russia supplied the weaponry to create a hot war in 1992, and it has supplied the diplomacy that has

kept the conflict “frozen” but not resolved ever since.’ As a result, Russia has troops stationed in Armenia, it owns the commanding heights of the Armenian economy, and it is Azerbaijan’s major weapons supplier. Now, it will have peacekeepers on Azerbaijani territory until 2025 (p. 165). This view is the overarching thesis of Coyle’s book. Ultimately, Coyle ends his book with a condemnation of the international community, saying that it has done nothing to enforce international law concerning this conflict (p. 168).

By virtue of Coyle’s incisive observations and astute insights, *Russia’s Interventions in Ethnic Conflicts: The Case of Armenia and Azerbaijan*, like his earlier book, deserves to be widely read in the field of conflict studies. In other words, the policymakers who engage in conflict resolution would be wise to read Coyle’s impressive book in order to advance the state of their knowledge on this issue. One of the strengths of Coyle’s work is that it introduces lesser-known facts throughout the book, which enrich his narrative. Like any masterpiece, Coyle’s book is also not perfect in all aspects. Some of his arguments are insufficiently explained or inadequately sourced. Another drawback of the book is its theoretical weakness. Put differently, this study is based on an empirical approach and findings more than on theory. Moreover, greater emphasis could be placed on the 44-Day War. Although the author mentions Russia’s illegal arms sales to Armenia in the 1990s, the facts of intensified military shipments by the Russian Federation to Armenia in the wake of the border skirmish in the Tovuz region in July, and later during the six-week war in autumn 2020, receive no mention in this study. Aside from these criticisms, there is so much more to commend in Coyle’s well-conceived and well-researched book, one of the finest overviews of this subject. Overall, this seminal study contains critical insight and empirical richness on the topic and represents a welcome addition to the shelf of policymakers and scholars seeking a nuanced analysis of Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict.