

Landlocked Countries: Artsakh (Karabach)

by Geir Sør-Reime



Many readers will remember the September-October 2020 war between Armenia and the Armenian-occupied areas of Azerbaijan, against Azerbaijan. The war resulted in Azerbaijan taking back the larger part of the territories occupied by Armenia between 1988 and 1994, with Russian mediation resulting in a cease-fire wherein most of the core of the Armenian-ruled Artsakh or Nagorno Karabakh republic remained in Armenian hands.

The area knows as the Nagorno Karabakh autonomous region (and now the core of the Republic of Artsakh) had an area of around 1,700 square miles and in 2010 the population was estimated at around 140,000.

The present conflict dates to 1988 but is rooted centuries back in history. The area known as Artsakh or Mountainous Karabakh has been inhabited by Armenians at least since the 5th Century BC although it has been incorporated into different realms throughout times, from the once mighty Armenian kingdom, through periods with Persian/Iranian rule, a long period of Mongol rule followed by another Iranian period before it came under Russian rule in 1805. And through all this, the local Armenian rulers normally enjoyed a degree of autonomy.

After the October Revolution 1917, both Armenia and Azerbaijan initially achieved independence, and both claimed Nagorno Karabakh belonged to them and there was a short, armed conflict in 1920 which ended when the national republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan were overrun by the Bolsheviks in 1920. In 1921, Josef Stalin, then the Commissioner for Nationalities decided that Nagorno Karabakh should be part of Azerbaijan, probably linked to his ambition to develop tighter links with Turkey. Azeris and Turks speak closely related languages and share a common culture. It was also part of Stalin's split and rule policy.

Nagorno Karabakh was made an autonomous oblast (region) inside the Azerbaijan Socialist Soviet Republic in 1923. For the 60th anniversary of the autonomous oblast, a 1983 pre-stamped envelope picturing the regional administration building in the capital Stepanakert was issued.



Soviet 1983, 'private' pre-stamped envelope for the 60th anniversary of the autonomous oblast of Nagorno-Karabakh

During Soviet times, there was no room for opposition to the 'system' but nonetheless, in 1963, 1965 and 1977 there were demonstrations in Armenia demanding the transfer of Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia. In 1988 this culminated in both Armenia and Azerbaijan in incidents where Armenians resp. Azeris were attacked and even murdered. It all started with an assault on ethnic Armenians in the Azerbaijani coastal town of Sumqavit February 27, 1988. Azerbaijan issued a 2004 stamp with the dove of peace in this town as motif.



2004 peace in Sumqayit

Partly because of such assaults the Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh declared the autonomous region as an independent republic: the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh as a first step towards being integrated with the Republic of Armenia.

This step led to the Nagorno Karabakh war from February 20, 1988, till May 12, 1994, and which ended with a cease-fire and effectively making Nagorno Karabakh an independent state closely connected with the Republic of Armenia.

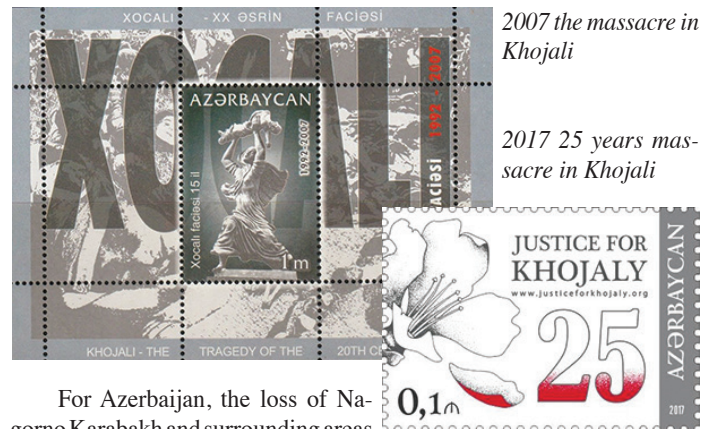
The Nagorno Karabakh republic after the 1994 cease-fire comprised a much bigger area than the former autonomous region of Nagorno Karabakh, especially the territories between Armenia and Karabakh. Small parts of Nagorno Karabakh remained under Azerbaijan control, and internationally, the whole of Nagorno Karabakh remained recognized as an integral part of Azerbaijan.

During the 1988-94 war, the city of Shushi (which was the regional capital until the area became Russian and the capital was moved to Khanakendi, now known as Stepanakert) an Azerbaijani stronghold for the war against Armenia in Stepanakert, so the Armenian victory over the Azerbaijanis in Shushi in May 1994 was seen by the Armenians as the most important and decisive victory during the war.

The war and the preludes led to widespread ethnic cleansing and a wave of refugees from both sides. Up till this day many of these have lived in refugee camps and in both countries, their bare existence is a tabu.

February 22, 1992, at least 161 Azeris flying from Khojak were killed by Armenian forces when they tried to cross the border from Nagorno Karabakh into Azerbaijan,

In 2007 Azerbaijan issued a souvenir sheet in memory of the victims, and in 2017 a stamp was issued for the 25th anniversary of this massacre.



2007 the massacre in Khojali

2017 25 years massacre in Khojali

For Azerbaijan, the loss of Nagorno Karabakh and surrounding areas has been a national trauma and this had a great impact on the political life of the country.

In April 2016, fighting resumed and Azerbaijan succeeded in regaining much territory, including the strategic important Lala Tepe height, a symbolic victory commemorated on a 2019 stamp.

The fighting that broke out September 27, 2020 seems to have been started by Azerbaijan with the objective of regaining Azeri territory outside of Nagorno Karabakh proper, but their initial successes made it possible for the Azeri forces to advance quicker and deeper into Karabakh, and re-took the city of Shushi and advanced very close to the Artsakh capital, Stepanakert. A meeting of the foreign ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia managed to agree on a cease-fire to be monitored by Russian forces. The cease-fire went into force October 10, 2020, but there have been sporadic fighting after that, and when Russia needed soldiers in Ukraine in 2022, fighting has become more frequent.

Since 1993, the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh/Artsakh has issued its own distinct stamps. Even though the republic is not recognized by any other country (including Armenia), the stamps are in practice valid for international mail.

The Armenian Post (Haypost) receives in transit mail from Artsakh in accordance with Article 4 of the Universal Postal Convention:

Article 4. Exceptional relations: Member countries whose designated operators provide a service with territories not included in the Union are bound to act as intermediaries for other member countries. The provisions of the Convention and its Regulations shall be applicable to such exceptional relations.

In a footnote, article 4 is explained: This prov.(ision) regulates the relations of member countries with countries or territories which are not part of the UPU within the meaning of art 3, but which maintain postal relations with a member country on the basis of a bilateral Agr.(reement).

The first stamps from Nagorno Karabakh used the country name "Republic of Mountainous Karabakh", thereafter the title was "Republic of Nagorno Karabakh" 1996-2000, then again "Republic of Mountainous Karabakh" 2001-2017, finally replaced in April 2017 by "Republic of Artsakh", although both names, Mountainous Karabakh and Artsakh are still equally official.

The first stamps of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh were issued June 11, 1993, and the three stamps featured the flag of the republic (as the Armenian national flag, but with a symbolic divide showing that Karabakh (then) had no direct contact with Armenia proper), the president, and the national monument. The accompanying souvenir sheet showed the monastery church Ganzasar dating from the 13th Century. The stamps were denominated in rubles.



1993 the first issue



2016 3 years re-conquest of Lala Tepe heights

Two of these stamps were surcharged in 1995, as a new currency of 100 luma equaled 1 Dram. Further surcharges were made in 2003 and 2004.

Three definitive stamps featuring churches in Dadiwank, the Parliament building in Stepanakert and the national monument were issued in 1996. There was also a souvenir sheet of four. The first printing of this had a flag ribbon as background, but the colors were upside down (orange-blue-red instead of red-blue-orange), and this was corrected in a second printing.



1996 definitive stamps (Dadiwank, Parliament, National Monument) 1996 5 years independence souvenir sheet, both varieties (bottom, the stamps show the Parliament, map, arms, the national monument, reversed colors of the flag (red should be on top))



10 years Karabakh-movement (for union with Armenia)

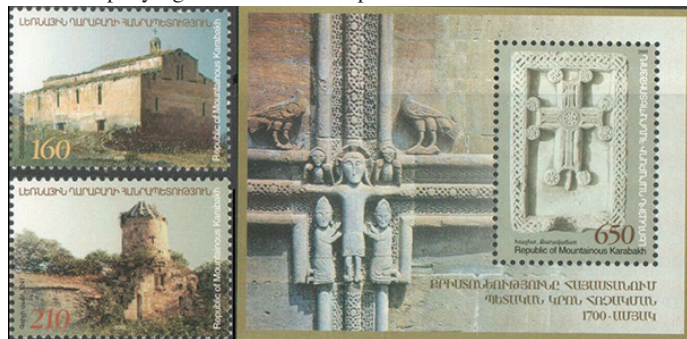
The Karabakh uprising in 1988 was remembered on a 1998 stamp showing a stylized eagle.



1998 5 years liberation of Shushi

1998 also saw two stamps for the 5th anniversary of the liberation of Shushi.

In 2001, 1700 years of Christianity was celebrated with two stamps showing churches from the 6th Century and 1241, respectively, whereas the accompanying souvenir sheet depicted an Armenian tombstone.



Artsakh07: 2001 1700 years Christianity as state religion in Armenia

The 770th anniversary of the John the Baptist Church in Gagdzasar was commemorated on three 2010 souvenir sheets.



2010 770 years John the Baptist Church in Gandzasar souvenir sheets



2011 20 years independence



The 15th anniversary of the self-proclaimed independence was celebrated 2006 with a single stamp, and in 2011, the 20th anniversary was celebrated with two 2011 stamps.

In 2009, a souvenir sheet remembered the victims of the 1988-94 war and depicted the memorial monument. In 2012 two stamps commemorated the 20th anniversary of the liberation of Shushi and another recognized the army of Mountainous Karabakh.



2009 monument over fallen soldiers



2012 20 years liberation of Shushi

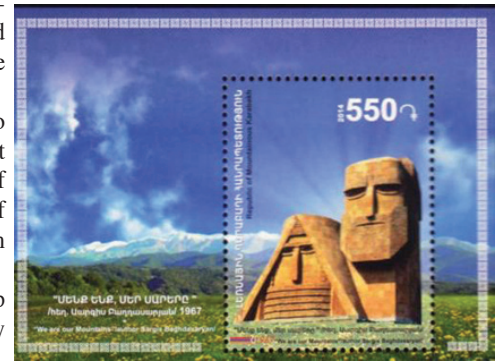


2012 20 years army of Mountainous Karabakh

A 2014 stamp was dedicated to the national monument entitled 'We are our mountains', and also in 2014, stamps showing national costumes and folk instruments were issued.

There was also a stamp showing that Karabakh was one of the ten provinces of the ancient Armenian kingdom.

A similar stamp was also issued by Armenia.



2014 National monument "we are our mountains"



2014 joint issue Armenia: Karabakh, the 10th province of the Armenian kingdom, left, Karabakh; right, Armenia



2014 medals for bravery in battle

Folk dances and costumes were pictured on 2013 and 2014 stamps, and a 2013 Europa issue, page 4, pictured a mail van in front of the national monument.



2013 and 2014 dances and folk costumes from Mountainous Karabakh

There were also two stamp depicting building of the 18th and 19th centuries.



2016 25 years independence

The visit of Pope Francis to Yerevan was also marked by Mountainous Karabakh with a souvenir sheet with the Pope in the foreground. Armenia has a overwhelming majority of orthodox Christians, but there is also a Catholic minority.



2016 Pope Francis' visit to Armenia (Yerevan), he did not go to Karabakh



2017 Nikol Duman, hero of the first liberation war

In 2017, Nikol Duman (1867-1914), an Armenian hero from the first attempt of creating an Armenian state was honored on the 150th anniversary of his birth.

A monastery and a castle were depicted on the 2017 Europa stamps that were focusing on the heritage of Artsakh.



2017 Europa, monasteries, and fortresses

The 25th anniversary of the liberation/conquest of Shushi was celebrated on four 2017 stamps, an event that also was commemorated on an Armenian stamp.



Above, 2017 25 years liberation of Shushi, Artsakh issue; right, ditto, Armenia issue



The Caucasus region is well known for its handknit carpets and in 2017 Artsakh issued two stamps showing typical carpet designs of Karabakh, page 5.

The arms of the Republic of Artsakh was shown on four 2017 stamps celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh/Artsakh, page 5.

2013 Europa, mail van in front of the national monument



In 2015, Artsakh also mourned the Armenian genocide 1915 with a single stamp, and there were also two stamps depicting churches. Martyrs of the 1992 war were honored on two 2015 stamps, and important archaeological finds testifying Armenian presence in the area for at least 2000 years were shown on two 2015 stamps.



2015 monument for the victims of the genocide in Stepanakert



2015 new churches



2015 martyrs of the 1992 war



2015 heritage buildings

The 25th anniversary of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh was celebrated with two 2016 stamps.



2016 25 years independence



2017 hand-knitted carpet



2017 National arms 25 years

2017 Leonid Azgaldyan

(supreme commander 1992 war)



Leonid Azgaldyan (1942-92), the supreme commander of the military forces during the 1988-92 war was honored with a 2017 stamp on the 75th anniversary of his birth.

In 2018 the heritage of Artsakh was highlighted on two stamps showing old bridges. Also in 2018, heroes from the 1918 liberation war were honored on two stamps. There was a single stamp for the 25th anniversary of Artsakh's first stamps, and the French-Armenian singer Charles Aznavour was honored on another 2018 stamp.



2018 Europa, old bridges



2018 heroes of the first liberation war (after the Bolshevik revolution)

In 2019, Artsakh hosted the European CONIFA Soccer Championships (CONIFA is the Confederation of Independent Football Associations, which has its HQ in Swedish Luleå).

Two stamps and a souvenir sheet were issued for this event. The souvenir sheet includes the flags of the participating associations, which were



2018 25 years Nagorno-Karabakh stamps

2018 Charles Aznavour



2019 CONIFA soccer championships

Abkhazia, Artsakh, Chameria, Cornwall, Crimea, County of Nice, Délvidék, Donetsk, Elba, Ellan Vannin (Isle of Man), Felvidék, Franconia, Greenland, Kárpátalja, Lazistan, Luhansk, Monaco, Northern Cyprus, Occitania, Padania, Jersey, Raetia, Romani people, Sápmi, Sardinia, Skåneland, South Ossetia, Székely Land, Transnistria, Two Sicilies, Western Armenia, and Yorkshire.

Artsakh also hosted the 7th Pan-Armenian Athletic Games in 2019 and issued another stamp for this event.

The Armenian-born Soviet Chess Master Tigran Petrosian (1929-84) was honored on four 2019 stamps.



2019 Pan-Armenian Athletics Games



2019 Chess Master Tigran Petrosian

Artsakh's Europa stamps for 2019 show ancient mail routes in the region, page 6. There was also a 2019 souvenir sheet with motifs from the capital Stepanakert. Two newly built churches in Stepanakert were also depicted on two stamps, and Khrimian Hairig (1820-1907), the head of the Armenian church and one of the leading figures in the Armenian

national movement leading to the establishment of the first Armenian republic was honored with a stamp on the 200th anniversary of his birth.

2020 new churches in Stepanakert



2020 buildings in Stepanakert



2020 Europa, old mail routes



2020 church, and nationalist leader Khrimian Hairig, 200th birth anniversary

After the 2020 war, Artsakh in 2021 issued several stamps, including one highlighting the area's important wine industry, another honoring Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Andrei Sakharov, and four stamps depicting birds.



2021 wine production



2021 Andrei Sakharov



2021 birds

In 2022, the Armenian Chess Team was congratulated with their second place in the Chess Olympics 2022, and there were also two stamps for the Beijing Winter Olympics.



2022 Armenian Chess Team



2022 Beijing Winter Olympics



1997 mosque in Shushi



2003 fortress in Askeran and city gate in Shushi

Azerbaijan have used Karabakh motifs and themes on several of its stamps. The first was one of the 1997 mosque stamps that depicted the mosque in Shushi (Suşa in Azeri). In 2003 the fortress in the town of Askeran was depicted on one of Azerbaijan's definitive stamps with buildings as motifs and a definitive stamp depicting one of the city gates in Shushi (Suşa) was issued.



In 2006 the church in Ağoğlan near Laçın in Nagorno Karabakh was depicted on a definitive stamp. In 2007 stamps showing the old bridge in Cəbrayıl and the Lev fortress in Kəlbəcə were issued. Both these two towns lie outside of Nagorno Karabakh proper but were in Armenian control until 2020.

Two 2007 souvenir sheets from Azerbaijan showed flowers from Nagorno Karabakh.



Left to right: 2006 church in Laçın; 2007 the old bridge in Cəbrayıl, and the Lev-fortress in Kəlbəcə

2007 flowers from Karabakh



Left, 2012 folk costumes from Shushi; right, 2004 folk costumes from Shushi

In 2004, folk costumes from Nagorno Karabakh were included in the four stamp set depicting Azeri folk costumes, and in 2012, a souvenir sheet with two stamps depicted folk costumes from Shushi (Suşa).

In 2014, Azerbaijan issued a souvenir sheet with six stamps portraying notable Azeri people from Nagorno Karabakh.

Pictured in the next column, they are:

- 50 qapik – Molla Panah Vagif - Azerbaijan poet.
- 50 qapik – Khurshidbanu Natavan - Azerbaijan poet.
- 50 qapik – Bulbul - Azerbaijan singer.
- 50 qapik – Uzeyir Hajibeyov – Azerbaijan composer.
- 50 qapik – Khan Shushinski - Azerbaijan singer.
- 50 qapik – Abdurrahim Hagverdiyev - Azerbaijan writer

A similar souvenir sheet depicting churches and mosques in Nagorno Karabakh also was issued in 2014. Those *historic buildings* are:

- 50 qapik – Khotavang Christian complex. VI – XIII c. Caucasus Albanian period. Kelbajar region.
- 50 qapik – Ganzasar Christian complex. XIII c. Caucasus Albanian period. Kelbajar region.



Azerbajdsjan13: 2014 prominent people from Karabakh:



2014 historic buildings in Karabakh

- 50 qapik – Mausoleum "Malik Azhdar". XIV c. Lachin region.
- 50 qapik – Mosque "Ashaga Govhar agha". XIX c. Shusha town.
- 50 qapik – Barda mausoleum. XIV c. Barda town.
- 50 qapik – Agdam mosque. XIX c. Agdam town

The Azeri victories in Karabakh were duly celebrated already in 2020. There was a souvenir sheet showing Azeri soldiers hoisting an Azerbaijani flag over Karabakh.

Another, page 8, issued for the Victory Parade in Baku, and a stamp proclaiming "Karabakh is Azerbaijan!" displayed the national flag. Azerbaijan also issued three pre-stamped envelopes with the same message.



2020 victory in Karabakh war



2020 victory parade in Baku



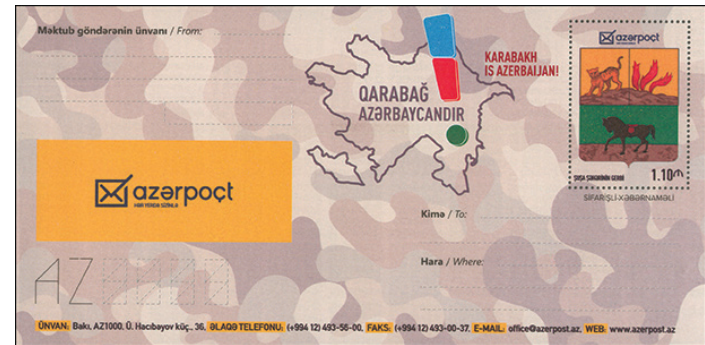
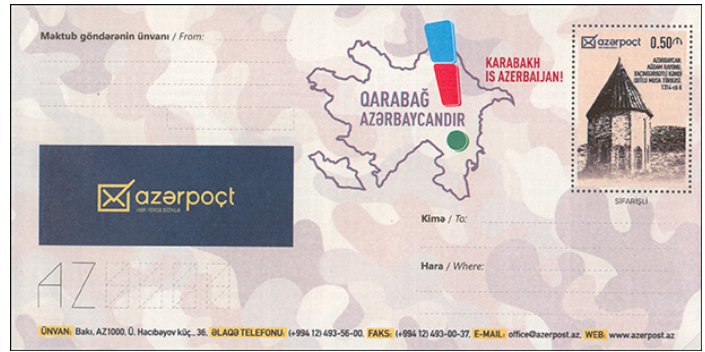
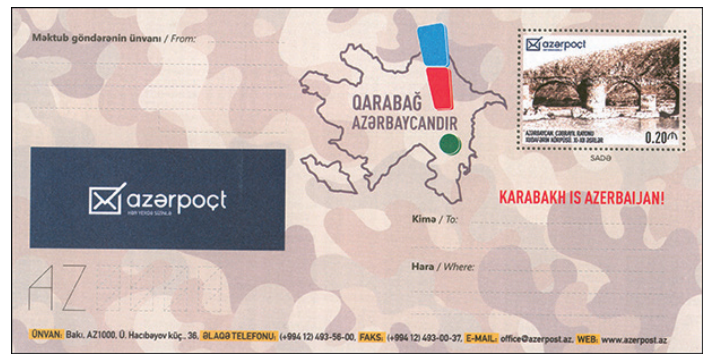
2020: left, Karabakh is Azerbaijan! right, support for Azeri armed forces

There was also a stamp for Victory Day in 2021.



2020 Azeri military in Karabakh – clearing mines and fighting Covid-19 (these stamps were deemed to be in violation of the Universal Postal Convention by the UPU)

2021 Victory Day



2020 pre-stamped envelopes 'Karabakh is Azerbaijan!'