The 44-day war in the stories of participants

A Brief Summary

War is one of the most extreme types of human activity. The societal condemnation of killing is temporarily set aside. Soldiers are extended a right, more correctly a duty, to kill members of an out-group. The shocking feature of war, therefore, is that it is a legitimized act of collective killing. War is justified by 'great ideas'; it rebrands murder as virtuous. It is notable that war is widely used in the myths of identity formation. Many national identities link their origin with war. War destroys life, the environment, the past, present, and future. The lasting pain and trauma of war are intrinsically linked to this destruction of a person's world, both its external and internal (psychological) components.

Individuals experience war in different ways. The experience of those who were immersed in the war directly was finding oneself on the precipice between life and death. Those who have looked at it from a distance, from a position of one of the parties to the conflict, experience the war as a clash of interests of the parties to the conflict. Those who had children, relatives, or close associates directly immersed in the war had a very different experience from those who did not have loved ones in such a predicament. As a number of war anthropologists have noted, war affects and transforms society, which adapts to the war. Some societies adapt easily to going to war, while others, on the contrary, tend to resist it.

The Firsthand Perspective

This research is an attempt to take an anthropological approach to studying the 44-day war in the Armenian reality. The main aim is to present the war from the perspective of the participants, both military and civilian. While political and intellectual elites tend to play a key role in shaping the perception of war, they generally do not take part in the war in person. The discourse they shape about the war often diverges from the view of the people who witnessed it firsthand, who

had the most at stake, whose bodies experienced the war directly upon themselves. This research is an attempt to study and present the war through the stories of those participants. The study describes the impact of the war on people, and typical phenomena such as perceptions of heroism, patriotism, betrayal, life and death, images of the enemy and the self, the role of victory and defeat in making sense of and redefining identity, new technologies and human helplessness, experiences of fear and horror, the process of transformation caused by the war, and similar issues.

The main questions are: "How did the individual go through the war?", "What did he/she see during the war?", "How did what he/she saw affect him/her?", "What did the war change in the individual?", and "How did the individual try to rediscover and reinterpret their life after the war?".

The research was conducted by recording oral histories from Armenians in the time period of July 2021 to September 2021; 60 in-depth interviews were conducted, 45 with soldiers who participated in the war, and 15 with civilians. Military interviewees included conscripts, professional (contract) soldiers, reservists and volunteers. Civilian interviewees were selected among people who, in one way or another, felt the war very close to them, and went through the chaos of the war.

As a result of the research, based on the recorded oral histories, several topics emphasized by the participants of the war were singled out. They concern:

- the description of the war
- the army's image of itself
- feelings during the war and their moral and psychological dimensions

The Description of the War

In the stories dedicated to the description of the war, participants distinguish a number of features to characterize it. First of all, the attack launched by Azerbaijan is described by everyone as completely unexpected. Soldiers in the army understood that the situation was generally tense, and there could be clashes. However, many people were surprised by the inadequacy of the army's procedures aimed at predicting the war, developing resistance scenarios in the case of an enemy attack, and preparing the appropriate state of combat readiness.

We were not in the least bit informed. If only we had a slight idea that something like this could happen, at least we could have been better prepared to do something. At least on the frontline, we thought that the situation was normal, that's it, that there weren't going to be any problems. And especially in terms of all-out war, no one had any idea. None of us imagined that such a thing could happen…

25-year-old male contract soldier[1]

Another descriptor of the war in the participants' stories is a lack of organization. This concerns not only the overall disorganization of the army, but also disorganization among the high level commanders that affected the rank and file. Many combatants did not receive clear tasks, other than to fiercely counter the enemy's offensive actions and defend themselves.

The 44-day war is described as a battle of survival, both on a personal and group level. The main goal of many soldiers on the battlefield was not so much to solve a military problem, but simply to stay alive. In many descriptions, the war is interpreted as a situation in which the Azerbaijani side constantly kept the Armenian army under attack, while the Armenian soldiers were not particularly focused on accomplishing military objectives, but simply tried to defend themselves and stay alive.

A characteristic feature of this war is the human vs. technology confrontation and its imbalance.

That war did not last very long; it wasn't really very long at all. The 44 days, if you compare against world history, what other war lasted for only 44 days, if you think about it? But there has probably never been such a war before on the face of the earth, where only technology did the fighting. This was a new kind of war; it was a real 21st century war, where weapons did the fighting, not men.

22-year-old male conscript

1 Age is done for the time of the interview

This asymmetry gave rise to a sense of existential crisis, which on occasion manifested itself in feelings of nullification of the human factor, meaninglessness, and extreme powerlessness. This disproportionality sometimes caused fear and panic by triggering a perception of guaranteed death as the only possible outcome. The war is also described as very intense. The Azerbaijani side kept an intensive schedule of bombing and offensive operations. The shelling and drone attacks were extremely intense.

> *Well, our task was to eliminate the enemy's drones and planes, but it didn't work. It was impossible, because so many shells were raining from the sky, you just couldn't. By the time you had it in the cross hairs, to shoot down the drone, it was too late… There were too many tanks, too many drones, too many shells. No one imagined it would be on such a large scale.*
>
> ***21-year-old male conscript***

One of the characteristic features of this war is its inhuman nature. This statement is remarkable in that, although war itself is an anti-human act, it also has some perceptible limits of cruelty, which were severely violated during the 44-day war.

> *To tell the truth, we have seen war three times. This war was an unbelievable war. I can't call it a war; this was murder, simply murder. The meat grinder was set up; it chewed up everything. That's all, so many people perished in the meat grinder.*
>
> ***61-year-old female military cook***

The Army's Image of Itself

In the stories of almost all the participants, the Armenian conscripts are distinguished from contract, volunteer, and reserve soldiers. They are described as the most prepared and organized fighters who were able to overcome the fears that arise during combat most successfully. They were brave, alert, and took on the main burden of resisting and fighting the enemy.

I, for example, did not imagine that our 18-year-old soldiers could be so much more mature than our, say, 30- or 40-year-old reservists and volunteers that they could be better and could fight against so many states and so many mercenaries for 44 days. I could not have imagined that so many things could be done, and using old weapons at that. Our enemy didn't use such weapons; they didn't even have such old weapons.

Middle-aged male volunteer soldier

Contract servicemen were differentiated into two groups. The first group included those who happened to live in a settlement near a military unit, went to work there primarily as a means of employment, and did not have special professional or combat training. The second group includes soldiers with special military training and skills who played an important role during the war, significantly contributing to the combat effectiveness and defense of conscripts and the Armenian army in general.

Generally, the first thing that stood out was the forces, the conscripts, because they are only 18-, 19-, 20-year-old boys who, until the last moment, the last drop of blood, fought at their post and did not take a step back, not at all. The second was the officer corps. In addition to the commanders, there were contract soldiers who were really serving (rather than marking time – note by an editor). Among them as well, not a single person ran away. They basically fought like the conscripts and always told them: we are with you, we're not above you or anything like that, we're your equals, your brothers, everything. There were even times they said: we can even hear your thoughts, understand, for example we can see what to do and how to do it so that things are easier and more convenient for you.

20-year-old conscript, intelligence soldier

Volunteers and reservists are described as the most vulnerable parts of the army. There were good things said about those volunteers who quickly mastered the use of different types of weapons, had a certain level of moral and psychological training, and were able to usefully participate in combat operations on the battlefield. A significant number of volunteers are also described negatively. They

are mainly those who volunteered without having an adequate idea about the war and, appearing at the heart of the hostilities, panicked. This description is also often ascribed to many reservists.

While describing the Armenian army, respondents often compared it to the Azerbaijani army. In these comparisons, interviewees described the Armenian army as poorly-armed, technologically-behind and badly-organized.

One of the most negative aspects of the description of the Armenian army was the lack of a system. It is often said that, even though the Armenian army was poorly-armed and lagged behind in terms of military equipment and management technologies, the soldiers, especially the conscripts, were good, with a high fighting spirit: smart, quick-witted, brave, and reliable fighters. That is, as individuals, soldiers were not inferior to the Azerbaijanis, but as an army, the Armenian forces were inferior. A common formulation was that "In the war, the Armenian soldiers were not defeated; the army was defeated," or "Although the Armenian army was defeated, the Armenian soldier was not."

> *People say that we were weak. But those people haven't served, nor do they really know… Those people who say that our army is weak, they are wrong. OK, now we have lost; we are weak. Back then as well, we were weak. Weak in the sense that there was no education, no processes, no adequate system, but as individuals we are not weak. We just need to create a system to unite those individuals. That's all.*
>
> ***26-year-old male volunteer soldier***

Another narrative is that the army did not lose the war, the political elites did. The proponents of such an interpretation generally mean that the army fought above and beyond the limits of its strength. However, due to the incompetence of both past and present political authorities, the army lacked the necessary management standards, high-quality command staff, modern weapons and ammunition, and diplomatic support. The main reasons for the low combat effectiveness of the army and for the defeat are attributed to the disunity of political elites, the subordination of state and national interests to group and party interests, the spread of propaganda leading to disintegration within the army, etc.