

To: Laurence Mekhitarian¹
From: Raoul Vaneigem
Re: Armenia and Azerbaijan
15 October 2020²

Dear Laurence,

I understand your feelings and those of your friends, both in Armenia and elsewhere, but it is an illusion to imagine there can be a humanitarian intervention on the part of rulers for whom oil reserves have more importance than the thousands of civilians being crushed under the bombardments. What scandalizes me is the passivity of the people, obedient to their leaders, who, in the name of the people, send them off to die. And yet there are individuals who have the intelligence and courage for civil disobedience. For proof of this I need only the following recently received message, which, with affection for you and those whom you love, I relay for your reflection.

“The Azerbaijani anti-war activist and social media militant Giya Ibrahimov has been captured by the Azerbaijani security police at his apartment in Baku after having posted to social media a statement against the war against Armenia. ‘I am against the war, and I am disgusted by patriotism on the Internet when people are dying down there,’ he wrote on Facebook.”³

¹ A Swiss-Armenian pianist, Ms. Mekhitarian lives in Belgium, as does Raoul Vaneigem. She was a co-signatory of the undated public statement “Call for Peace and Immediate Cease-Fire,” which concludes with the following lines: “In light of numerous violations of international laws, we call on all people and powers in the world to exert their influence on Azerbaijan and Turkey to put an end to this war immediately. We call for an immediate mediation process that guarantees the safety of all people throughout the region.” <https://www.wecallforpeace.com/>. She might also have contacted Vaneigem directly: this would explain his decision to address her directly.

² Unpublished. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! on 17 October 2020. All footnotes by the translator.

³ This is the opening of a Russian-language news article titled *Азербайджанская полиция арестовала противника войны* (“Azerbaijani police arrest enemy of war”) and published on 30 September 2020 by the Russian section of the International Association of Workers (the AIT): <https://aitrus.info/node/5558>. (Link provided by Vaneigem.) Note that this article does not include Giyas Ibrahimov’s anti-war declaration, as Vaneigem’s letter does.

“Anti-War Declaration of the Leftist Youth of Azerbaijan”⁴

“Our enemy is not an Armenian; our enemies are the people in power.”

The most recent escalation of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh region⁵ once again shows the degree to which the system of the Nation-States has been surpassed by today’s realities.

The only occupation against which we must rise up is the occupation of our minds and abilities to think beyond the narratives and ideas that are imposed upon us by our predatory nationalist governments. That’s our “inability” to surmount a state of mind that divides people into “human” and “nonhuman” on the sole basis of their birthplaces, then sets the “superiority” of the “humans” over the dehumanized “others,” as the only possible perspective on life within certain territorial limits.

As soon as the “nation” calls on us to protect it from the “enemy,” we are encouraged to forget about the exploitative conditions of life in our own countries. But our enemy isn’t the average Armenian, whom we have never met in our everyday lives, and, perhaps, whom we may never meet. Our enemies are the people in power, people who have particular names, titles, ranks and faces, the people who for more than 20 years have pillaged the resources and inhabitants of our country and keep us in a state of poverty for their own personal benefit. They do not tolerate any political opposition and they have used a powerful security apparatus to repress those who think differently from them. They have seized natural areas, coasts and beaches, as well as natural resources, for their own pleasure and use, and they have limited the access of ordinary citizens to them. They have destroyed the environment, cut down the forests and polluted the water. They have accomplished an “accumulation through expropriation” on a vast scale. They are implicated in the disappearance of historic and cultural monuments and sites throughout the country. They have taken funds that should have been devoted to education, healthcare and social security and have given them to the army and our capitalist neighbors with imperialist ambitions: Russia and Turkey.

Curiously, everybody knows all this and yet suffers from a sudden onslaught of amnesia as soon as the first bullet is fired at the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Blind, like the people in *Blindness*, the novel by Saramago,⁶ they turn self-destructive in an instant and welcome the death of their youth in the name of being a “martyr” for a “holy cause.” This question has never been anything other than the bread and butter of the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia. It keeps them in power and justifies the endless militarization of their respective societies and even more bloodshed.

We are not blaming the people: in the absence of alternative interpretations that give a meaning to the war and the conflict between these two nations, nationalist ideology remains unchallenged. If there are in fact things that our under-funded educational establishments do

⁴ Signed by Vusal Khalilov, Leyla Jafarova, Karl Lebt, Bahruz Samadov, Giyas Ibrahim [*sic*], Samira Alakbarli, Toghrul Abbasov, Javid Agha, and Leyla Hasanova. Presumably written in Azerbaijani, this “Declaration” was translated into Russian by the AIT, then from Russian into French by someone else, and now from French into English by us.

⁵ 27 September 2020.

⁶ Cf. José Saramago (1922-2010), a Portuguese novelist. His *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (“Essay on Blindness”) was published in 1995.

well, they are definitely the sewing of hatred and the spreading of nationalist propaganda. Because hatred is never the product of the psyche of individuals; it is constructed and produced in the existing relations of power.

In a context in which there is no direct contact between the “haters” and the “hated,” it is constantly necessary to recall to the “hating” public the necessity of hating the “hated,” and so much more so if the “hating” public is forced to struggle for its own day-to-day economic survival in the framework of a system that rejects the equal sharing of resources and services and that brings more suffering. Hatred must be *produced*. “They” have stolen “our” land, they tell us; “this is why we detest them.” Never mind that there are innumerable ways of inhabiting this land without any single group claiming an exclusive right to it.

When he was still an adolescent, the younger brother of someone in our group once exclaimed with horror when he learned of an upcoming business meeting abroad with Armenian colleagues: “Will we see a *real* Armenian?” If you think about it, entire generations have grown up in a vacuum, without any contact with those with whom we once co-existed in a single place for centuries. What kind of violence does such isolation do to our minds and how does it ravage our creative abilities? It is obvious that this situation is perfect for dehumanizing “the other.” What is easier than attributing every bad quality to people with whom one has never been in contact?

In the years that followed the signing of the Bichkek Protocol of May 1994,⁷ when the two parties agreed to a ceasefire, the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments have acquired vast arsenals of deadly weapons that they now want to use against each other. The last time that these two countries approached reaching a peace agreement was in 2001, during the peace talks at Key West, which were brokered by the Minsk Group, which included France, Russia and the United States. Those talks failed due to nationalist sentiments and the fact that the leaders of the two sides were not disposed to make any compromises whatsoever. Ever since then, a peace accord has never really been pursued seriously.

In the current situation, it seems extremely difficult to find the means to avoid a new war in the region. We see the discourse of hatred dominate the narratives of both sides and gain influence, in particular on television, in the official declarations and the postings to the social networks that circulate with alarming speed. The two parties make declarations that are difficult to verify, which creates an atmosphere of fear, mutual hatred and mistrust.

The populations on both sides have been affected by the epidemic and the economic recession, and they have had difficulties facing the challenges posed by these [twin] crises. At the moment, they are involved in a military conflict, which is still far from attaining a constructive solution to the conflict in Karabakh. Such conflicts consume enormous amounts of economic and human resources, so that the elites on both sides can continue to benefit from them. Azerbaijan’s military budget for 2020 has surpassed \$2.3 billion and Armenia’s has reached \$634 million, which represents around 5 percent of the [combined] gross domestic product of the two countries.

It is high time that we, the youth of Azerbaijan and Armenia, take responsibility for finding a solution to this superannuated conflict. Finding a solution can no longer be the prerogative of men in suits and uniforms, whose goal is the accumulation of capital – economic and political – and not the resolution of the conflict. We must throw the Nation-State’s hideous

⁷ Signed by representatives from Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (unrecognized).

straitjacket into the trashcan of history, which is where it belongs, and then imagine and create new ways of collective peaceful coexistence. To this end, it is imperative that we revitalize grassroots political initiatives that are, in the majority, composed of ordinary citizens. Above all, these initiatives must restart the negotiations for peace and cooperation. Leftist activists who live in Azerbaijan, we will not support any effort to involve the youth of this country in this senseless war. The restoration of dialogue is our principal task.

This new military escalation and new incitements to mutual hatred can neither resolve the conflict nor begin a new future. The most recent military clashes in the Nagorno-Karabakh region haven't brought peace any closer to the region. We do not want to see ourselves involved in an all-out war, because we know the consequences that it would have for our societies and their future generations.

We strongly condemn all measures that prolong the conflict and incite hatred between Armenians and Azerbaijani. We must turn back⁸ and take the measures that are necessary to restore trust between our societies and our young people. We reject all nationalist declarations and all propaganda that advocates war, because war deprives us of the possibility of once again living together on this land. We call for initiatives that consolidate peace and solidarity. We are convinced that there is a way of getting out of this impasse – a way based upon mutual respect and an orientation towards peace and cooperation.

⁸ The French here is *Regardons en arrière*, but these are forward-looking people, so we have modified the translation: *turn back from the path of war*.