

THE
Final Straw
A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW

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ARMENIAN ANARCHA-FEMINIST ON GENOCIDE IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH



The Final Straw Radio - October 22, 2023



This week on the show, we're featuring an interview The Final Straw did recently with Sona, an anarcha-feminist from Yerevan, Armenia, about her experience of anarchism and some of the solidarity efforts related to supporting Armenians expelled from Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian enclave within the borders of the neighboring country of Azerbaijan.

For more information read these CrimethInc articles at CrimethInc.com

- Anarchist Voices from Armenia and Azerbaijan: On the Violence in Nagorno-Karabakh
- Solidarity among the Displaced: How Russian Anarchists in Exile Supported Armenian Refugee Squatters

about anarchist their roots in Armenia. If someone is interested, I will write articles for Crimethinc, and they will catch up there.

TFSR: Awesome. Thank you so much. Is there anything that I didn't ask about that you want to talk about?

SONA: I think that's all!

TFSR: Okay. Thank you so much for this conversation and for speaking in English. I really appreciate it. You did a great job. Thank you for your time.

SONA: Thank you very much for the questions you prepared, it was very accurate, very empathetic, and I guess our listeners will enjoy our conversation.

that they committed or the border that's there? How are people reacting to that? Does that make sense?

SONA: Yeah, totally. Nikol Pashinyan did every single mistake that was possible on his path. He's failed at every single chance because of military things with France or the US, in the end, they will give us nothing. We're just fucked up. There are very big concerns nowadays in the Armenian population that in a couple of years that Azerbaijan will star a massive war with Armenia itself and we will have no more allies.

TFSR: *That seems rather scary. Well, do you have views on how listeners can support the people that were displaced from Karabakh internationally. I guess there's the Red Cross. But I don't know if there's any others. You said the Armenian Food Bank seems like an organization that's doing a lot to get people food and supplies that they need, who are displaced and living inside of Armenia? Are there ways that you would suggest that anarchists who were sympathetic people internationally can help?*

SONA: I will advise two foundations. One of them is the Armenian Food Bank, which was created by an Armenia Canadian Armenian. I know for sure that all help is going to the people, and they receive it. And, the Michael Avetikyan, the founder of Armenian Food Bank, he's not an anarchist, but he broke two countries' law to cross borders to bring food to a blocked city. It is quite anarchist.

TFSR: *I think that a part of anarchism is a part of our strength is by getting a better understanding of sympathetic people or with other anarchists and other areas and hearing their perspectives, that's one point of having this conversation, so that I can learn from you and so that the audience can learn from your experience.*

Are there any resources or groups that you would point us to that are speaking about organizing or ideas coming from your region or news updates, anything like that, that people could pay attention to?

SONA: Well, we have a little channel in Signal, but I think it's only for people who are in Armenia and who we know personally in terms of security. Because most of guys who are from Russia, they are charged and repressed that's why they're not in Russia anymore. But I talked to guys from Crimethinc and me and my group, our group, will write articles about the situation in Armenia

SONA: My name is Sona. I'm from Armenia, but currently I live in Tbilisi, Georgia. I prefer she/her pronouns and I consider myself an anarcho-feminist.

TFSR: *Can you please speak a little bit about how you came to your anarcho-feminist or just wider anarchist politics? Maybe how they developed into anarcho-feminism if that's your trajectory and a bit about the anarchist movement in Yerevan, where you had lived previously or in Armenia, specifically?*

SONA: I was born into a very leftist family, because as you know, Armenia was part of Soviet Union. My family used to live with my grandparents who were members of the Communist Party and working in various ministries. So, my grandpa, who raised me as a child before school, talked to me very much and instead of fairy tales, he told me about some communist people, for example Clara Zetkin, or Rosa Luxemburg.

I was raised in a very liberal family. Nobody told me, "No, because you're a girl" which is very widely heard in other Armenian families. When I started to go to school, to university, I saw that some girls have secondary roles, secondary parts, even in their families. For example, family will give more money to educate a son than a daughter, and very sad things like this. I felt like, "Come on! This is not right!" I read about liberal feminists. I started to read Simone de Beauvoir.

Later in 2017, it was the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. On Russian TV there were many TV shows about Trotsky and Lenin. I'm a history fan. I started to watch all these TV shows. It was very interesting because as you know Russian TV is more about propaganda, it's more like, "Oh, all these revolutionaries. They're very stupid and were too ambitious. We need some firm leader like Stalin or Putin." In my house, there were various conversations about that. The TV was saying one point, grandma was saying a second point, dad was considering another point of view. I started to read articles about revolution, about revolutionaries. Very soon the articles became books. I was studying

film-making in university, and I decided to make a little documentary film about Trotsky. At that time, I was considering myself just a leftist, maybe socialist.

Last year I moved to Tbilisi, and I was very bored, and I saw a lecture about Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. I went to that lecture, and I just fell in love. I started to read everything that I could find about them, their texts, then I started to read the other anarchists. I think that was the start.

TFSR: *Nice. And in that lecture, they did a lot during their lives, did they did they speak about their experiences when they were pushed out of the United States and visited the Soviet Union, which they hadn't seen since the revolution and the experiences that they had there at the time?*

SONA: Yeah, sure. This lecture was not only biographical, but also about their texts and their ideas. I was amazed because it was nothing like anything that I knew before that. The idea of positive total freedom was very surprising for me.

Sometime after that lecture, I moved back to Yerevan because I had some problems with my job and with my family. In Yerevan there is a cafe. It's called 'Mama-jan.' Its owner is a Jewish woman from Ukraine, she moved about 10 years ago to Armenia and she's an anarchist too. All her life, she was dreaming about having an anarchist club or a little movement. I joined with her, and we started our little club. In the beginning it was just reading group. Other anarchist came to us and after that, we started to do our own lectures, meetings, and we started to participate in political rallies with other, liberal parties. I think it was one of the first anarchist clubs in Armenia for a long time.

TFSR: *You can't see me because we've got cameras off but I'm smiling very much like that. That sounds like positive development. I've been reading groups, also with people when it's felt like I've been around areas where there aren't many anarchists and having a place that people can come together. Whether or not they're sure about their identity, or if they've been thinking in this way, for a long time, it's still a nice place to share ideas and share space and build solidarity between people. Yeah, that's awesome. That sounds cool.*

SONA: Sure. Not all the people who came to our club were anarchists. We were learning from each other to be more open, more tolerant.

TFSR: *Yeah, that makes sense. It sounds like you're a little bit newer towards anarchism, or identification with it. Maybe you came into contact with anarchists.*

Russia. I don't know if you have any thing that you could say about this, or any perspectives?

SONA: I'm not a political expert, but I will say what I know. Speaking about France and other European countries, we have a saying in Armenia that "if some French presidents are helping Armenia or think about Armenia, it means that they have presidential election soon and they just want to have the Armenian Diaspora votes." Also, France is in NATO, who is in NATO too? Turkey. End of conversation. France is too far away. France does not much interest in our region. The only country, the only person that has a personal interest in our region is Vladimir Putin, because of his imperial ambitions. Which are very wrong, but they're there and they were protecting us from all these problems for 30 years.

Nowadays, the Armenian government is blaming Russia, the Russian peacekeepers, the Russian government that they don't protect us. But come on. I'm not defending the Russian government, but there is not some Santa Claus that will just come and help us whenever we need. It is a very childish position to believe that there is someone that is just happy to help us just because we are little and weak.

Since his first days in power, Nikol Pashinyan was making relations with Russia worse and worse, knowing that it is one of the currents of our national security. Of course, he was free to do that, but he did it because it was very popular among the population, and he could do it if we had a very strong army like Israel. But we have nothing to do against Turkey or Azerbaijan. We have had and have very weak army, we are very bad in diplomacy, we have no big reputation. Now of course, Russia and Russian Peacekeepers were doing mistakes, but it is their mistakes, not ours. I am asking questions to Nikol Pashinyan. Not to Putin, he has his own position.

TFSR: *That makes sense in terms of the preexisting relationship with Russia, but if the Prime Minister is reacting, to some degree, to public opinion and souring the relationship with Russia, and currently has been not only engaging with sending aid to Ukraine, but also doing military exercises with the US... The US is also a member of NATO, alongside of Turkey. I just had a conversation with some people who had just come back from Rojava, there's obviously conflicts with Turkey around Turkey's relationship in the region that are geopolitical and not ideological that the US has... well, parts of the US government... It's a very complicated State. I wonder, are there feelings in terms of working alongside of, or making your very large neighbor, possibly angry, and sidling up to a power that is friendly with another one of your neighbors that doesn't recognize the existence of the genocide*

always. The refugees from the second Karabakh war are still alive because of the NGOs, not the government. The government let them down and will let them down again. Everything which is done is done without the government.

TFSR: *For the mutual aid or the humanitarian aid that's organized: is the volunteering done by religious groups, by international nonprofits, or by leftist groups? What does that look like?*

SONA: I would say that there are many volunteers from the Red Cross. They were helping people who had just arrived in Armenia. But what I participated in was the Armenian Food Bank, and it was founded by a Canadian Armenian who returned and repatriated to Armenia because of patriotic feelings. Like many of volunteers are Russian immigrants, but it's not about religion or politics. I think that it's just about human nature and cooperation. Of course, we can find the roots of cooperation in anarchism, but everything kind and good you can find in human nature without considering any political sides.

TFSR: Yeah, that makes sense. It's not ideological.

SONA: Yeah. It was just a call to hearts for everyone and big empathy.

TFSR: Yeah, that's important. That's a good thing that's there.

I know it's kind of a complicated geopolitical situation concerning neighboring states and regional powers, we talked about Turkey, but also Russia, and Armenia is in a military pact treaty organization with Russia. Russia was supposed to be peacekeeping at the border region, per an agreement with Azerbaijan. Also, the issue of relations to international powers like France or the USA.

I wonder if you could speak a little bit about if you have any insights into how the geopolitics featured into how this worked out? It makes sense for Russia to not engage militarily as a part of that Treaty Organization, because the Armenian government wasn't calling for any sort of reaction, but also as peacekeepers sounds kind of like they haven't done anything about Azerbaijan breaking truce after the Second War.

But as I understand, Armenia has also been engaging with the war in Ukraine by offering aid and has started doing military practices with the US. And so that's probably caused a complication in the relationship with

Is that right? You had said that this was maybe in the last couple of years that you had started paying attention to it and started identifying yourself as one? Is that right?

SONA: I started to identify myself as an anarchist last year. [Laughs]

TFSR: *Well, if you could speak a little bit about what the community or what the milieu, if you know that term, like the scene or constellation of anarchists, in Yerevan, or in Armenia, what that was like. When you experienced it, if there were certain tendencies that you noticed, or if it was pretty disparate, or pretty solid, like it had been there for a while? I'm curious about what anarchism looks like in Yerevan, and what it's like in Armenia to your experience.*

SONA: Unfortunately, we can't say that we have an anarchist movement. It's just a bunch of people. Mostly they are Russians who escaped the Putin regime because of the war in Ukraine and because of the mobilization which was September last year. Most of them are not practicing anarchists. They're just reading books trying to educate themselves.

It was the most disappointing point for me because nobody's doing anything. For me, anarchism is not something academic. It's about action and I was wondering where is that action. Please give it to me! Because for me, anarchism is much more vivid and alive than reading some texts from 100-year-old bearded men. Which seems so dusty sometimes. Come on, we're not Marxists. [Laughs]

Sometime after our clubs started, and I want to note that I'm the only local person in that club, the only Armenian person in that club. So, I'm national minority in my own city. Another Armenian man, he just came along, and he introduced himself as a guy who was a refugee from Baku. As you know, Armenians were living across Azerbaijan in the Soviet Union and before that. From the collapse the Soviet Union, many Armenians just relocate to Armenia because it was very harmful to stay there. There were pogroms and a little genocide.

So that man, he relocated to Armenia in late 1980s. His told us that the government does nothing, that the United Nations just built a couple of houses for the refugees. They don't even have electricity or water, they get it like once a day for an hour. They have no money, no job, nothing, just a house far from Yerevan. He heard that we were anarchists, and we know how to cooperate, and he decided to do it in that little district. He started to unite people who live there that are refugees from Azerbaijan and we started to work with each other.

It means that there are a lot of empty flats and many of the Russian relocates started to leave there. Now they started to grow something together, to do some projects, and in that cafe, Mama-jan, we started to do some events and started giving money to those people.

TFSR: *That's awesome. Is this related to an article that I saw recently on Crimethinc. about the squatting movement in Armenia and refugees being able to take space and share together? Or is this a separate instance?*

SONA: No, it's a separate thing, which happened far before that Artsakh thing that happened in September.

TFSR: *So, you mentioned that a lot of the people that you work with right now are anarchists who are from Russia living abroad. Because there's so many people who are from other countries that are in the anarchist community that you're in, does that mean that you have live connections to people that are anarchists in neighboring countries like in Russia or in Georgia? I know a lot of also Russian people moved to there of various political stripes to avoid having to get pulled into the military. I know that there's a lot of conflict, historically, with Turkey because of the genocide that they perpetrated against Armenians, but there's also an anarchist movement there, and that's a neighboring country. Do you communicate much with anarchists across borders?*

SONA: Well, in Armenia itself, we had something like an anarchist movement in the 2000s. But as they say, they grew up and some of them even got jobs in Parliament, in the government, which is kind of ridiculous. Now, it is just a bunch of Russian guys who escaped the Putin regime.

In Georgia, things are much better because in Georgia the population is more radical, more political. Tbilisi is covered in graffiti connected with anarchism. They even have some publishing, which published, for example, Kropotkin in Georgia. It is very popular here because Georgia's population is bigger and is more free than in Armenia.

But as far as I know, Georgians are not communicating with Russians, even if there are anarchists because, again, of the history. Georgians don't like Russians at all because they can recall the Soviet times, the "times of occupation." They are strictly negative toward Russians.

As far as Turkish anarchists. There are some. I have spoken to one of them. I was asking if they were helping the Kurdish movement or other anarchists in Azerbaijan or Armenia. Because we are in one region and we are

whether there was a response militarily or humanitarily inside of Armenia, helping the folks that were escaping, and sort of how people feel about the lack of government response?

SONA: It's a very hard question and sorry if I will be too emotional. After the second Karabakh war, one of the points of the treaty was that the Armenian army will be no longer be in Karabakh. For 30 years it was kind of one country because Karabakh people had Armenian passports, they speak Armenian, they have everything Armenian, Armenian money, Armenian schools, they could freely come to Yerevan, there were free places for Artsakh people in universities and in schools. It was considered that we were one country just divided by some political issues.

Of course, our political leaders were doing it all wrong as it turned out because our second and third presidents Robert Kocharyan, and Sarkissian originally were from Karabakh. They became famous during the first Karabakh war. So, their reputation was connected with it. They kept everything uncertain to stay in power. Like, 'If we go to Karabakh, we will lose Karabakh.' It didn't work because we had a revolution, and we changed the government. During the first days of the revolution Nikol Pashinyan, our current prime minister, said that 'Karabakh is still Armenia, it is ours,' and he won't let us lose it.

Then there was the second Karabakh war. It was a national tragedy. We couldn't guess that everything will become even worse. At that time, we had many refugees, too. Of course, the government did nothing. All the NGOs were gathering humanitarian aid, they were helping the poorest families to find jobs and to find houses. Now, during the blockade nothing was done from the Armenian side.

I know that that NGO that I was volunteering for, it's called the Armenian Food Bank. The President of that NGO took 12 tons of food to blockaded Stepanakert. It was totally illegal. He just crossed two borders illegally through forests and mountains and he delivered that food to blockaded Karabakh.

On September 19, when the Azeri army started to bomb Stepanakert, the Armenian army did nothing. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was starting to give press conferences, saying that "it is all the fault of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic government and Armenia will have nothing to do with this and actually, there's no connection between us." Which is totally a lie because Karabakh's government, consists of Armenians and were approved by Yerevan for the past 30 years.

In first days, when we were collecting all that humanitarian aid, the police came to us and were saying "Oh, you're making it worse, you're making panic." They wanted the government to do the collection of humanitarian aid and it was very suspicious because the government did and will do nothing as

SONA: After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990s, Armenia was involved with Azerbaijan in the first Karabakh war and from 1991 to 1995, Armenia was involved in a blockade, which means that there was no gas, no electricity, no bread. My parents were very young at that time and they don't like to talk about those times because it's very humiliating. In Yerevan in the 1990s people got less bread than in siege of Leningrad during WWII.

TFSR: *I understand, there's still a continued blockade because of the conflicts with Azerbaijan, but also that the borders along Turkey have also continued to be closed or hard to import and export over, (this is what I read, at least, I could be totally misunderstanding it) but that the only land border that seems to really be open at this point consistently is one with Iran. Is that correct?*

SONA: We have two open borders, one in the north with Georgia, and one in the south with Iran. In the east and west, it is closed because of Turkey and Azerbaijan.

TFSR: *Can you talk about what you understand as being the motivations of why Turkey is closing the border? Has there been a renewed conflict with Turkey?*

SONA: I don't know how much it is officially known, but Turkey is an ally of Azerbaijan. It was doing everything to turn Azerbaijan more to Turkey and to Russia, because of the Soviet legacy. It was very important to them. Because they have a similar culture, similar language and technically, they are very familiar. As you know, there was no such country as Azerbaijan before 1918. It was just part of Ottoman Empire and later just part of Turkey. I could be wrong, but Turkey does not recognize Armenia as independent State. I don't know about that for certain, but I know 100% that Turkey doesn't recognize the genocide. So, there's no diplomatic issues. Nothing.

TFSR: *Yeah, I know there's been a big international push for the recognition of the genocide that's over 100 years old that they still ideologically refuse to identify.*

So, you've talked about how there was a big pulling together of NGOs in response to the recent war in Artsakh and the expulsion of Armenian people from there. As I understand the Armenian government didn't respond, didn't offer to send in troops or threatened to send in troops. I've heard from some places that maybe because the Armenian military and government is still sort of recovering from the second Karabakh war. Can you talk a little bit about

anarchists we should fight against governments and they said, 'No' and that's all unfortunately. There are more connections with Russian anarchists so than other countries in our region.

TFSR: *There was a group a few years ago, I don't know how active they are, but I happen to visit Istanbul and was able to interact with folks with Devrimci Anarchist Faaliyet (DAF) And they were doing work with the Kurds in Bakur. They were getting repression because they were publishing a newspaper with issues around the Kurdish struggle and had a lot of Kurdish membership too.*

This isn't on the script of questions, but one thing that I understand from anarchist comrades who have gone to Georgia is that while it may be more tolerant towards left organizing in general, and anarchism, it is repressive when it comes to sexuality and I imagine against homosexuality, queerness and I wonder if that extends towards gender equality. Do you find any more or less difficulty than what you experienced in Armenia? Does it seem like an issue that will take a lot of organizing around, the anarcho-feminism?

SONA: Well, in Armenia, women have all rights, civil rights, but under that it is even worse than in some Islamic countries. For example, in Armenia, we have a tradition, it's called the 'red apple,' it means that before marriage the girl should be a virgin, and after marriage, all her relatives and family gathered in her new husband's house waiting to see if she was virgin before marriage. If she was, her husband gives her father basket of red apples that verifies that everything was alright. It is the 21st century for God's sake.

Armenians have very big noses. The first very popular surgery is about making nose a bit smaller. The second most popular surgery is to make the girl a virgin again.

TFSR: *Oh, man. The United States is similar.*

SONA: Even in my university, for example, we have an intellectual quiz, intellectual game. I started to play and very soon I became a captain. My team was very successful and traditionally that game is about men. Men are leaders in that game. When I became a leader, myself, they were gossiping that I'm a whore. Just because I wanted to do something of my own inside of that movement.

TFSR: Yeah, sounds like some jealousy issues. Right there. So, you have a trivia team, I think you might say in the US, and you compete with other trivia quiz teams and win prizes and things.

SONA: Yeah. And very quickly my team became more successful than the oldest teams in my university, which were held by guys.

TFSR: Going back to the questions, you've lived in Georgia before, briefly at least, is there room for people to do organizing around gender and sexual equality issues there? I don't know if you also think about those two things, the ability to love and have sex as he wants to and resisting gender oppression. If feminism and sexual liberation are allied movements, there. Does that seem like a thing that people are pushing in Georgia or is it repressive or okay for people to just be there?

SONA: Oh, you know, in Georgia, it is much better because they had their own sexual revolution in 1990s. Of course, in some villages, in the provinces, it is much more strict but Tbilisi's like a new Berlin of caucuses. It's totally free. They have a big techno culture, and some of the most famous DJs from Europe come here. I moved to Tbilisi last year just to separate from my parents. Because I was forbidden... I had a good salary so I can live by myself, and rent a flat, but my dad said, 'No, because you're not married, and I don't allow you to live separate in Yerevan.' So, I just rented a flat in Tbilisi and moved.

TFSR: We were talking about that before. Do the parents of unmarried women have a say in the renting of spaces like that? Or is it pressure within the family. Could they talk to the landlord and say, 'This is inappropriate?'

SONA: Landlords themselves will ask if you want to rent their apartment, like 'If you are from another city? Are you here studying?' If I say, 'No, I'm from Yerevan. I just want to separate from my parents.' They will say 'No, I'm not renting you that flat.'

TFSR: Okay, so moving forward in the questions, this is kind of a bigger subject; we had agreed to talk while the Azerbaijani military was surrounding and actively attacking Nagorno-Karabakh. So, this is one reason that we had been in contact. Correct me if I get any of this wrong, as you see fit.

all European countries in the union. But, yes, the Soviet government and some leaders, they're just making very wrong decisions to take parts of one Republic, and breaking one Republic into another one. Because they believe that it will make Soviet Union firmer and no republic wants to get independent because they have their parts inside of other Republics.

For example, Crimea, it raised because of Khrushchev just gave part of Ukraine to the Russian Soviet Republic. In fact, it wasn't an issue in 1950s, because it was still one country. It didn't matter then but doesn't now. One of Putin's arguments was that historically, "Crimea was part of Russia, and that it was Khrushchev who gave it to Ukraine." Same with Karabakh. Like officially in the Soviet Union, it was called the Autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, but the de jure, it was inside of Azerbaijani Soviet Republic?

TFSR: Yeah. And Putin is also saying that Ukraine was a part of Russia before too, so...

SONA: It was a very bad colonial move to keep it one country and it made various problems. Same here in Georgia: Abkhazia and Ossetia were historically Georgian lands, but Stalin or someone in the Soviet Union gave them some Russian autonomy. So, we have what we have.

TFSR: Yeah. Can you talk about the apparent motivation of Azerbaijan in this territorial grab and ethnic cleansing? Do you get the impression that this is because of a rising ethnic nationalism inside the region? Or is it more the just power grab by the dictatorship?

SONA: The only motivation of Azerbaijan is propaganda is to have their victories and staying power with their clan. As you know Ilham Aliyev is the son of his father, Heydar Aliyev who was a president of Azerbaijan from 1990s. Even in the Soviet Union, he was one of the leaders of Azerbaijan, just took power. He is one of the inherited dictatorships in post-Soviet countries. Every dictatorship needs their victories to stay in power.

TFSR: Can you talk about the impacts inside of Armenia of the last 30 years of blockades of Armenia by Turkey and Azerbaijan, and maybe a little bit about what that looks like?

It is just an empty village, just a cultural point. When Azeri come to Armenian villages, they're destroying graves first.

TFSR: *As a genocidal erasure?*

SONA: yeah, a cultural genocide. That is not an Armenian propaganda. It is based on facts.

TFSR: *Yeah, this is a long time of this sort of activity happening from the Azerbaijani military. I know it's going to be hard to tell when there's such a history of conflict between the two countries, but I haven't heard about any sort of protests in Azerbaijan against the military activities. Does it seem like it's a well approved thing by a lot of the population in that country?*

SONA: Well, Azerbaijan is a dictatorship. So, of course, they have very strong propaganda. I know that most of population, they are just silent and they're too poor to think about political things. For example, most of population just thinks about how to buy a new fridge, rather than think about something political. Of course, they have some dissidents, they have activists, who are against the Aliyev regime. But the dictatorship is even more hard than in Russia. They have no voice. We were monitoring some Azeri press to find antiwar articles and we haven't found anything.

TFSR: *My understanding is that one part of the Soviet legacy in the region was the creation of ethnic republics as a part of their idea of national liberation within the Soviet framework and self-representation within the Soviet framework, whether that actually happened is a different question. But where that border between those two Soviet Republics between the Armenian one and the Azerbaijan one fell, is that a product of Soviet map-making? Is the conflict now, around that line on the map? Because there were Azeri living in this area, and there were Armenian people living in this area, prior to the Soviet Union, were there recognized territories where it was just like, 'This is where our people live,' or were people co-mingling in the area?*

SONA: Well, just for some insight of the Soviet Union, there were 15 republics, but there weren't official borders inside of them. You could just move around all of the Republic's freely without any checks, like inside of the European Union now. If you're a citizen of, for example, Germany, you just can travel inside of

So, a humanitarian crisis and ethnic cleansing has been occurring in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. A majority ethnic Armenian enclave within the borders of the neighboring country of Azerbaijan. In the last century, there have been several pushes by ethnic Armenians to live there and create an autonomous zone. Two wars have been fought since this time around the end of the USSR and after over whether the area would be incorporated into Azerbaijan or be recognized as the Republic of Artsakh or be annexed into Armenia. This long period has seen forced expulsions of ethnic Azeri and Armenian minorities from within both the neighboring countries and around the Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding districts.

Since the second Nagorno-Karabakh War, in which Azerbaijan triumphs, the situation of Armenians in the region has been increasingly dire, especially since the December 2022 blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh by the Azerbaijani military, which was claimed to be an anti-terror operation. That has led to the starvation and death of civilians and the promise of a possibly fake humanitarian corridor in which people could escape.

There's a lot that I'm brushing over and ignorant of in this situation. But my understanding is that since the end of September of 2023, the Armenian population has been expelled with what they could carry across the border into Armenia and Azerbaijan now holds the territory fully with the collapse of the Artsakh defense forces and Artsakh Republic government. Is that an okay explanation of the situation? Did I miss anything?

SONA: Yeah, you're totally right. I just want to add something. That situation which broke in early October this year, I consider it an anarchist gesture because like 100,000 people just woke up and said, 'We are going, we are not going to live under this government, under these people.' They gathered everything and just left to their houses: everything, pets... and moved to Armenia. I think many of them want to stay in Armenia, rather than Russia or Europe or other countries.

TFSR: *So, this is at the end of the siege that was happening in Nagorno-Karabakh?*

SONA: Yeah. For many months, then an army started to bomb Stepanakert and the rest of Artsakh. Then they stopped and they said, 'You can stay here. We will integrate you in Azerbaijan.' But it meant genocide because they have very strong and very strict propaganda. The propaganda says that every Armenian family has as a slave in their houses. It is not just like propaganda that is only on the TV, the population is believing it.

TFSR: *So, for the people that would stay, I'm sure they would experience a lot of like... all these things would be different.*

SONA: They just will be killed in the end. They will be tortured and killed, unfortunately. I know that a couple of 100 people stayed there, because for examples are too old to leave, or they are waiting for some relative who are lost, or some people just stayed because of their principles, saying, 'No, it's my land. I'm staying here.' But it's suicide.

TFSR: *While you were still in Yerevan when we started talking, you were doing aid efforts. You were working with refugees. Is that correct?*

SONA: Yes. From the first day of the bombing of Stepanakert, many foundations started to gather humanitarian aid. We were collecting food and clothes, mostly, because winter is coming. It was a very big job. There were many Russian people who are just living in Armenia, and it's not their problem at all. They were helping even more than some Armenians. It made me very proud that we have very good guests in our country, actually, who are taking all those problems very close to their hearts. It means a lot to me.

TFSR: *That's awesome. I'm sure a lot of them had a similar feeling, even if the experience of it was different than what the people coming to Armenia now from Azerbaijan, are experiencing. Having to leave your home, living in exile. That's got to be overwhelming.*

Did you do personal interactions like any medical checks on people that were coming back? Or did you have a chance to talk to many folks that were returning from the other side of the border?

SONA: Yeah. In the first days, I was just helping in one of those foundations. It was in a cafe in the center of Yerevan, we just announced that we were collecting everything there because it's a known place. It was easier for people just to come there. But some days after, when refugees already wear in Armenia, I went to one of cities which was a transition city for them. It was hard because one thing is collecting food, rice and etc, next to a fancy district in Yerevan, laughing with friends and other thing is seeing all the people who just escaped in their slippers with nothing. It was hard emotionally. I tried to support them and just did everything that was required.

One grandma, who was from a village near Stepanakert, she just said to that the army came to that village and they shot her husband and said to everyone else, 'You have 30 minutes to go.' If you live there for generations, what can you take in 30 minutes?

TFSR: *Yeah, absolutely. Because of the proximity of where this conflict was and how fresh the wounds are for people that are moving back across the border inside of Armenia. Have you seen much in the way of a reaction against Azeri people that have been living in Armenia? Any anger towards people that also are of that descent?*

SONA: Oh, we don't have Azeri people in Armenia, we have Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan.

TFSR: *One of the things that I was reading, was talking about since the end of the Soviet Union and because of the conflicts around Nagorno-Karabakh, and I'm sure around Artsakh and around other places where people were co-habitating, the expulsion of people or people leaving from one country to another. From the end of the Soviet Union, a lot of Azeri people who were living in the borders of Armenia as well as Armenians living in various parts of Azerbaijan, and those populations crossing the border back into the republics that they would be identified with. Is it just that Azeri people chose to leave Armenia? Or was there nationalist pressure from within Armenia to push Azeris out because of conflicts like this?*

SONA: I will say something not very patriotic. Of course, there were Azeri villages in Armenia, Azeri settlements in Armenia and Armenians settlements and villages in Azerbaijan. But in the end of 1980s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Karabakh issue, of course many Armenians came to Armenia many Azeri went to Azerbaijan. But there is one very important point: zero Azeri got murdered because they're Azeri in Armenia. There were pogroms in Azerbaijan, and they just killed hundreds of 1000s of Armenians just because they were Armenians.

As a reference, there were pogroms in Sumgait in Baku, in 1988, and 1989. It was a genocide. It is not called genocide, but it was. Because of these things, Armenians just hate Gorbachev because he just could stop everything with a couple of tanks and the Soviet Army, but he did nothing because he was afraid of the Armenian people and all that the talks about independence and Karabakh. Also, in some border areas there are still some Azeri villages and they are totally empty. For example, there are houses, graves, and they are untouched.