

Mountains of Time: Yazgulom and the 1992-97 Tajik Civil War

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I am going to tell you about a battle from the Tajik civil war.

I will also share with you what war does to a survivor's sense of time. Perhaps that seems philosophical to you. And you would be right. Time is so nebulous that more obvious concerns tend to crowd it out. But thinking about time and war is enormously practical. I am going to try to convince you of that by talking about the mountains in which the battle happened. Mountains make time visible. If you do not see time, you do not understand the reality in which war survivors live.



Figure 1: Panorama of Yazgulom's largest village, Motravn

The battle occurred in a narrow mountain valley, Yazgulom, in the Pamir Mountains, Tajikistan. Yazgulom's gnarled, steep sides are for the most part totally bereft of any vegetation, even grass. Tens of millions of years of rain, wind and earthquakes have battered the valley walls and slopes, producing surprising amounts of sedimentation that gathers in densely packed motionless flows of stones and dirt

that can reach high up the valley sides. Despite the erosion, the valley's rockface remains imposing and impenetrable. The valley's cragged flanks so tower over everything else that one never forgets they are surrounded by rock in every direction.

The battle's focal point was the valley's entrance, which is dominated by a foothill that acts as a natural physical and psychological barrier when entering and leaving the valley. The only road into Yazgulom passes over the foothill's moderate slopes and flattened peak. The Yazgulom river has cut away its northern edge, revealing its raw, muscular, solid rock. Its orange-brown and grey-white layers are exactly like that of the steep valley slopes either side of it.



Figure 2: The foothill at the entrance to Yazgulom

The battle started on a cloudy day at 6pm on April 8, 1995, and finished three days later on the foothill. Yazgulomi mujahedin fought Tajik government and Russian troops. The Yazgulomis wanted to seize the position held by their adversaries, who were dug in to positions on and around the foothill.

Yazgulomis feared they would invade the valley. Yazgulomis speak their own language, number about 9,000, and unlike most other Pamiris, are Sunni. Yazgulomis were part of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO).

The Yazgulom battle was one of several battles in early April that contributed to the downfall of a temporary ceasefire that the Tajik Government and UTO had agreed to in September 1994 in Tehran (U.N. Security Council, 1995, p. 3).

Three days after the battle, when the two sides met for a peacemaking meal of the Central Asian staple osh, the Russians told the Yazgulomis that the combat's unrelenting intensity meant "they didn't have one minute for themselves." Questioning the nature of the fighting itself, they said "What kind of war is it? No time for eating or resting, only fighting, fighting, fighting." Both sides had hundreds of fighters. Both employed snipers. Both had mortars with a 2–3 km range, which they fired day and night. A Yazgulomi claims he fired his mortar about 500 times during the battle. The Russians launched parachute flares to illuminate the Yazgulomi positions, a technology the Yazgulomis lacked. The Yazgulomis also lacked the airpower and armored personnel carriers of the Russians.

On the battle's second night, 25–27 Yazgulomi mujahedin split from a group of more than 100 men that had been sheltering from enemy fire behind a large outcrop of solid rock on the valley floor located 1.2 km into the valley. Under the cover of darkness, they left the protection of the outcrop and headed for the foothill. Jagged boulders that were once part of the steep valley walls and slopes dot the landscape they crossed.

I wonder now if at some point in the hours and days before the fighting began, any of the mujahedin had taken in the unexpected bursts of vibrant color of the well-rounded yellow, green and maroon stones along the river's edge. I wonder too if they had the chance to ponder their mortality, their fragility, and the transient nature of their lives.

When the mujahedin reached the foothill it was already morning. At the top of the foothill, they fought the embedded Tajik government troops. So close were the respective sides that some undertook hand-to-hand combat. How many Tajik government troops died during this combat is unknown.



Figure 3: Looking into Yazgulom from the foothill. The outcrop is on the upper left.

The cloudy weather the previous two days meant the Russians could not operate their helicopters and planes in the Pamirs. On the third day of fighting, the skies were clear enough for three Russian helicopters to fly in from a base outside the Pamirs.

Immediately after the mujahedin reached the top of the foothill and started fighting the Tajik government troops, the Russian helicopters arrived. Two of the helicopters landed on a plain outside Yazgulom. Highly trained, combat hardened Russian soldiers hastily emerged. The two helicopters carrying the Russian soldiers arrived and departed rapidly. The new arrivals were elite soldiers. The third helicopter protected the other two helicopters, flying high over the Yazgulom valley and a village outside

it called Amran, firing at mujahedin in both places. A Yazgulomi mujahed on the mountain slopes above the outcrop fired surface-to-air missiles at the three helicopters. He missed with every shot. A nearby mujahed was tasked with shooting Russian troops, but he hid when he saw the helicopters.

The elite Russian soldiers fired automatically propelled grenades onto the twenty-five odd mujahedin from as close as 10 to 15 m away. The grenades were designed to devastate ground troops. They proved highly effective against the mujahedin. After the grenades, the Russians approached the mujahedin and shot any remaining survivors. Between twenty-four and twenty-six mujahedin died on the foothill over the space of an hour (oral accounts differ). One Yazgulomi who fled the battle survived. Although the number killed is miniscule in comparison to all those lost in Tajikistan's civil war, it was a devastating loss for the Yazgulomi people. Those who died were all young men. One was just fifteen.



Figure 4: Mountainside in Motravn

The sense that war “happened yesterday” is a pervasive reality among war survivors worldwide. It does not matter how long ago the war was — for most survivors, war seems recent. The prolific Yazgulomi mortar operator I mentioned earlier said “When I think about [my friends in the war], it seems like it all happened yesterday. When we talk about it, everything comes to my mind, in front of my mind.” Another Yazgulomi man said “I remember very well all that savagery and violence. For me it’s like it was yesterday. Because I was standing just here [in the village] when the helicopters were flying over the village. Everybody was scared.” Another Yazgulomi collected the bodies of the dead mujahedin from the foothill. He reports “every second” of the experience “is always in front of my eyes”. When he sees a relative of the dead, he remembers how they were killed and the sight of their bodies on the ground. “One was here, two were there, one was on his back, one was on his side, or on his face.” One man’s feet were shot and his knee was touching his abdomen. “Until I die it will remain with me,” he says.

Some might object that what we are dealing with here is memory, not time. After all, these survivors are talking about their memories. But memory is a mechanism, just as symbols are mechanisms and language is a mechanism. People can think of war and invasion as recent even when they have no memory of it because it occurred centuries ago.

Time is not a mechanism. Time is a dimension of reality. Places like Yazgulom bring that reality to life. Occasionally, when looking up to the deep blue sky from the Yazgulom valley floor, past the vast expanse of rock, you can feel the sky’s presence. How different time and space seem on such occasions. Space is compressed; it is as if the upper atmosphere is close, and space is in reach. You feel the Earth is home, a sanctuary, but it is *in* space. The rocks are ancient and we are not; but the Earth does not seem so old when in the cosmic expanse of space.

That is an experience of time. It is an experience that changes one’s conception of reality. We need to understand how war survivors’ experiences of time change their conceptions of reality. To understand their experiences of time we must confront a humbling truth — most of us do not understand time all that well. We have all experienced time throughout our lives, but unless we study time, we do not

know it conceptually. Experience is not conceptual understanding. Many of us can recall the experience of being on a mountain, but our experience tells us almost nothing about mountains conceptually — how and why they emerge, how old they are, and so forth.

So let us see Yazgulom through a geologist's eyes. Heat from the Earth's interior causes continental plates to move. The Pamir mountains in which Yazgulom is found formed when the Indian continental plate collided with the Eurasian continental plate. The India-Asia collision started some 40–50 million years ago (Wicander & Monroe, 2016), although some scholars suggest it may have begun as long as 63–65 million years ago (Ding, et al., 2017). To the north of Yazgulom lies the valley of Vanj. Separating them is a portion of what geologists call the Yazgulom Dome. As it emerged, the Yazgulom Dome exhumed rocks of Cenozoic age, placing their age within the last 66 million years (Fuchs, Gloaguen, & Pohl, 2013, p. 1986). The Yazgulom Dome, along with other central Pamir domes, “were all exhumed from about the same 25–35 km depth beginning at essentially the same time: 22–20 Ma [22–20 million years ago]” (Hacker, et al., 2017, p. 1761). Peak exhumation of the Yazgulom Dome was around 15 million years ago (Fuchs, et al., 2013, p. 1998).



Figure 5: View of Vanj looking north from one of its lower villages

When we understand the geological forces that propel continents and raise mountains we transform them from static presences into dynamic components of a broader planetary system — something more than a platform upon which life lives and dies. Likewise, instead of merely being a static

medium in which war occurs and peace is built, time is a dynamic medium with its own logic and pathways that astute practitioners can craft and use.

Vanj lies on the boundary of what geologists call the central and northern Pamir. That boundary is meaningful — the Paleotethys suture runs through Vanj, marking the line where two continental plates collided in the Triassic period, some 200 million years before the Yazgulom Dome emerged (Daniel, et al., 2017). Knowing that the northern part of Vanj is a couple of hundred million years older than neighboring Yazgulom makes no difference pragmatically — experientially, the grandeur of the two valleys is unchanged. They are both magnificent. Few who have experienced war see it as magnificent, but regardless of one’s feelings for it, war is tremendously significant. For its survivors, wartime events seem like yesterday because of that special significance. It matters not whether the temporal span between when war occurred and the present is measured in years or centuries. Wartime events stand out because they are important. War rises above the mundane. Or as Hedges (2002) puts it in the title of his book, war is a force that gives us meaning.

To better understand a war survivors’ experience of time we can look to the meaning they generate from their wartime experiences, connecting it to the action they take now and in the future to build peace or resume war. All the Yazgulomis I came to know do not want to see more war in Tajikistan, but not all Tajiks who experienced war reject the use of violence to enact social change. To understand the meaning people take from their wartime experiences we must study how time is understood by the self.

Cognitive scientists Núñez and Cooperrider (2013) argue what we call “time” is best understood as three core concepts: (1) deictic time, (2) sequence time, and (3) duration, or more technically, temporal span.¹ Without going into details — see Table 1 for an overview — the main point is these three time

¹ Geologists use the same three time concepts but name them differently. In the same order, they are (1) numerical dating (years before the present), (2) relative dating, which places geologic events in sequential order without telling

concepts differ from one another. They “require independent investigation” (p. 227). We so effortlessly combine the three time concepts in our language and thought that we hardly notice their differences, however. But we can get into real trouble if we assume any one of these time concepts stands for time as a whole.² Time is complex.



Figure 6: The shell of a Russian BTR-60 armored personnel carrier on the foothill

us when they occurred, and (3) duration (Wicander & Monroe, 2016). Geologists do not distinguish between internal and external aspects of D-time, however.

² For example, Bolten (2014) argues “time and chronology do not exist at all” in her ethnographic respondent’s narrations of what happened to them during the Sierra Leone civil war, because her respondents did not specify when events occurred (i.e. deictic time). Yet her respondents’ narratives are suffused with sequence time, where one thing happens after another. Bolten does however make a valuable observation regarding sequence in their narratives: she argues their “inability or unwillingness to properly sequence events” was because they wanted to emphasize the chaos they experienced (p. 431). Presumably she is referring to events the community perceive as separate from one another, as opposed to the particulars of individual events her respondents shared with her.

The same applies to the self. The self is exceptionally complex. A confusing proliferation of terms and theories describe it. There is no consensus as to what a self means in anthropology or philosophy — or any other scholarly discipline. No discipline by itself can adequately describe the self, and it may be impossible to ever definitively define it. Some descriptions of the self are so broad they are of limited theoretical use. Demarcations of the self are vital if theory is to advance, but if seen as strict, are misleading.



Figure 7: Signs in Yazgulom exhorting peace

Nonetheless, conceptions of the self have emerged — some are highlighted in Table 2 — in which scholars have developed a degree of theoretical coherence. The minimal or experiential self is all about the phenomenological experience of pre-reflective self-consciousness, for instance, whereas the culturally shaped self stresses self-representations found in society. But here we face the same problem as with time — equating one concept of the self with the totality of the self is theoretically debilitating. Yet

our academic disciplines encourage just that. If the self was a mountain, most sociocultural anthropologists would be surveying the view from up high, while neuroscientists and psychologists would be busy drilling and mining into the base of the mountain. Psychotherapists would be exploring the caves. If we are to effectively analyze social phenomena we must not limit ourselves to focusing only on one or two layers of selfhood. We must integrate different layers of the self into our analyses.

Time and the self are bound together through their use of visual perspective by the mind's eye (Table 3). Phenomenological accounts of war use a first-person visual perspective, where survivors look out from their own eyes. Such accounts were common among my ethnographic respondents. The sense of time in them is constrained to the immediate experience being conveyed. When my respondents wanted to draw out the meaning of an event for their broader life and society, they switched to a third-person visual perspective with an expansive view of time. By third-person visual perspective I mean their own self became an object of reflection — visually they could see themselves in the scene as they recalled it.

My dissertation presents my empirical findings, but for now I want to return to the claim I started with about the practicality of time and war. Asking survivors to report on and change the visual perspective of their mind's eye as they recall what happened to them in war is both practical and revealing. It is practical because most ethnographic respondents understand how to do it when asked. It is revealing because it draws out observations that otherwise might not be voiced.

Appendix

Table 1: Spatial time concepts

Type	Description	Examples	Key sources
Deictic time (D-time)	Has a sense of now (the present); past and future derive from it. Has two variants: internal and external. In <i>Internal D-time</i> , the deictic center is now, which is co-located with the ego (self). In <i>External D-time</i> , the deictic center “is displaced to an external locus” (Núñez & Cooperrider, 2013, p. 222).	<p><i>Internal D-time:</i></p> <p>“We’ve put the civil war behind us now.”</p> <p>“The end of the battle is rapidly approaching.”</p> <p><i>External D-time:</i></p> <p>“The civil war made me the man I am.”</p> <p>“Unlike today, during the civil war, people in our village went hungry.”</p>	Núñez and Cooperrider (2013), but see also Bender and Beller (2014).
Sequence time (S-time)	Earlier-than and later-than relationships (no now, future, or past).	“Before the civil war, people in my city lived well.”	
Temporal span (T-span)	Duration	“The civil war lasted five years.”	

Table 2: *Self-in-the-world*

Layer of selfhood	Mode	Mechanism	Style	Self's Object of Attention	Discipline	Key sources
Culturally shaped self	Collective representation	Narrative, symbol, concept, performance	Representative	Self as culturally enacted	Anthropology	Quinn (2006)
Represented self	Self-representation	Narrative, symbol, concept, performance	Representative	Self as seen by others		Bloch (2012)
Narrative / Conceptual self	Reflective self-consciousness	Narrative, symbol, concept	Reflective	Self as seen by oneself	Neuroscience Philosophy Psychology	Gallagher (2000); Libby and Eibach (2011); Schechtman (2011)
Minimal / Experiential self	Pre-reflective self-consciousness	Phenomenological	Experiential	World	Psychiatry	Gallagher and Zahavi (2012); Libby and Eibach (2011); Voegeley and Gallagher (2011); Zahavi (2007)

Table 3: *The spatiotemporal self*

	Minimal / Experiential self	Narrative / Conceptual self	Key sources
Spatiotemporal perspective	Internal D-time	External D-time S-Time	Núñez and Cooperrider (2013)
Visual perspective	First-person	Third-person	
Mental processing emphasis	Phenomenological	Meaning in context of broader life and society	Libby and Eibach (2011)

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