

GENOCIDE IN KHOJALY: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide against Azerbaijanis in the early 20th century

Historical facts show that **mass resettlement of Armenians from Iran and Turkey to the strategically important upper part of Karabakh, an historical region of Azerbaijan**, occurred as early as at the beginning of the 19th century following the annexation of the South Caucasus by Russia. The artificial increase of the Armenian population in this region led to pogroms against Azerbaijanis by hardline Armenian nationalists in the early 20th century. In this period, Armenian chauvinists obsessed by the idea of a “great Armenia”, which was part of the Dashnaksutyun party’s agenda, began pursuing a policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide aimed at expelling Azerbaijanis from their ancestral lands.



Memorial for the victims of Khojaly in Baku





The years 1905 and 1906 saw mass bloody pogroms of civilian Azerbaijani population in Baku, Ganja, Karabakh, Irevan, Nakhchivan, Ordubad, Sharur-Daralagez, Tiflis, Zangazur, and Gazakh. Many towns and villages were ruined. Armenian armed detachments looted more than 200 Azerbaijani villages in the Shusha, Zangazur and Jabrayil provinces of the Irevan and Ganja governorates, as tens of thousands of civilians were ousted from their homes (3, p. 14). Over 200,000 Azerbaijanis, including women, children and the elderly, were killed during the pogroms. These methods were deployed to clear up “living space” for an Armenian state, whose establishment was promised by tsarist Russia.

Furthering this policy, Dashnak gangs destroyed 197 villages in the Irevan governorate, 109 villages in the Zangazur province and 157 villages in Karabakh **from the early 1917 to March 1918**; 60 residential areas were looted and set ablaze in other regions. During the developments that occurred on March 31 and first few days of April 1918, Armenian and Bolshevik military units murdered 12,000 Azerbaijani civilians in Baku and its suburbs. Many of the victims were burned alive in their homes or faced sophisticated torture (1, p. 176). In the Guba province alone, over 16,000 people were killed by Armenian and Bolshevik detachments with utmost cruelty in the first five months of 1918. Moreover,



167 villages were destroyed and 35 of them ceased to exist and are absent from the map nowadays (12, p. 47). Overall, **in 1918-1920, tens of thousands of Azerbaijanis were atrociously exterminated in Baku, Guba, Shamakhi, Kurdamir, Lankaran, Shusha, the Irevan governorate, Zangazur, Nakhchivan, Sharur, Ordubad, Kars and elsewhere**, and over a million people became refugees. Schools and mosques were burned down and many samples of tangible culture of the Azerbaijani people were destroyed in the indigenous Azerbaijani land during the pogroms.



Following the Sovietization of the South Caucasus, the Zangazur province and a number of other Azerbaijani areas were handed over to the Armenian SSR in the 1920s. In the aftermath of this, the Nakhchivan province became isolated from the rest of Azerbaijan. **On July 7, 1923, an Armenian autonomous "oblast" was established in the highland part of Karabakh, with the center in Khankandi** (13, p. 152-153). This decision was imposed on Azerbaijan by the Bolshevik-controlled Kremlin, and as a result, Karabakh, a historical part of the Azerbaijani land, was artificially divided into lower and upper parts. On September 18, 1923, Khankandi was renamed Stepanakert in honor of S. Shaumyan, in accordance with a decision of the Nagorno-Karabakh regional committee of the party (13, p. 187-188). It is noteworthy that the status of autonomy was granted without taking into consideration the opinion of Azerbaijanis, the indigenous population of the region, whose rights were crudely violated. It is also worth mentioning that though the number of Azerbaijani residents who lived in Armenia throughout history exceeded that of Karabakh Armenians many-fold, Azerbaijan never put forward a demand to establish a national state entity for them.

The establishment of the Armenian autonomy in Karabakh, which had led to the emergence of the term "Nagorno-Karabakh", not only violated the administra-

tive-territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, but also became a starting point for further Armenian territorial claims. Despite the fact that the Armenian community of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast enjoyed autonomy in the Soviet period covering a full range of political, economic, social and cultural issues, Armenia continued to put forward territorial claims to Azerbaijan.

In 1948-1953, **about 150,000 Azerbaijanis were forcibly relocated from Armenia**, including Irevan and the adjacent regions, to the lowland regions of Azerbaijan with unfamiliar environmental conditions, in accordance with a decision of the USSR Council of Ministers "On the relocation of collective farmers and other Azerbaijani population from the Armenian SSR to the Kura-Araks lowland of Azerbaijan SSR", dated December 23, 1947 (16, 17).

The territorial claims and military aggression of Armenia against Azerbaijan at the end of the 20th century. In the second half of the 1980s, Armenian nationalist groups, having taken advantage of the conducive situation, caused by the policy of "perestroika" and "glasnost" in the USSR, and with the support of their patrons in the other Soviet republics and beyond, put forth their territorial claims regarding NKAO again. **In February 1988**, a series of strikes, protests aimed at suspending the operation of enterprises and mass rallies demanding



annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia began in the autonomous region. This was an integral part of a **plan that had long been prepared by Armenian politicians and their patrons and was aimed at aggravating the situation in the region** and garnering public support. In addition, a false argument concerning the NKAO's social and economic underdevelopment, which was dismissed as groundless soon thereafter, was put forward and persistently employed.

In the second half of the year, tension escalated further in the region. In late August and early September, Armenians committed massive attacks on the Karkijahan village and the Khojaly settlement. On September 18, the expulsion of nearly 15,000 Azerbaijanis from Khankandi was completed, and their homes were burned down (6, p. 57).

On December 1, 1989, the Supreme Council of the Armenian SSR issued an unconstitutional decree on the annexation of NKAO to the Armenian SSR, grossly violating Azerbaijan's sovereignty (15, p. 130). **The indefinite policy of the Soviet leadership prompted by its explicitly pro-Armenian stance contributed to further**

aggravation of the situation. Thus, in late 1990 and early 1991, the attacks by Armenian militants on the Azerbaijani villages of NKAO and the areas bordering on Armenia assumed an even broader scale. In the same period, **terror attacks** were committed on the Moscow-Baku passenger trains, as well as on buses en route from Tbilisi to Baku, from Tbilisi to Aghdam, from Aghdam to Shusha and from Aghdam to Khojaly. Hundreds of Azerbaijanis were killed as a result of these attacks.

Unfortunately, due response was not delivered to the Armenian separatists from the very outset. This led to an inevitable escalation of the conflict and its subsequent boiling into a full-scale war with the use of modern weapons, which claimed tens of thousands of lives.

In 1991, the situation in the NKAO territory continued to deteriorate. 12 people were killed and 15 others injured in June-December in the attacks by Armenian armed detachments upon the Garadaghli village of the Khojavand district and the Meshali village in Askaran (6, p. 87). In August-September of the same year, 17 people were killed and about 90 wounded after Armenian militants shelled buses en route from Shusha to Jamilli, from Aghdam to Khojavand and from Aghdam to Garadaghli (7, p. 77-78). **In late October and November 1991, more than 30 residential areas** in the highland part of Karabakh, including the strategically important villages Tug, Imarat-Garvand, Syrkhavand, Meshali, Jamilli, Umudlu, Garadaghli and Karkijakhan, **were looted and burned down** (7, p. 63).

In early 1992, **Armenian forces seized the last Azerbaijani settlements of the NKAO.** On February 12, the Armenian armed forces invaded the Malibayli and Gushchular villages of the Shusha district. **During the attack on the Garadaghli village of the Khojavand district that occurred on February 13-17, 118 people (including women, children and the elderly) were taken prisoner, while 33 were gunned down,** and the dead and wounded were buried in a household pit. Furthermore, **68 of the captives were killed,** while 50 of the prisoners were released with great difficulty, and 18 of them subsequently died of incurable wounds. The public learned about **the facts of brutal abuse of the captives,** such as beheading, burying people alive, pulling teeth, keeping captives without bread and water and torturing them to death. In the Garadaghli village, four people each from two families were killed, 42 families lost their bread-winners and about 140 children became orphans. In total, 91 people, i.e. one-tenth of the local residents, were killed (6, p. 93).

The genocide in Khojaly is a heinous crime committed by the Armenian aggressors against Azerbaijanis at the end of the 20th century. The annihilation of the residents of the Khojaly town in Karabakh is considered one of the most serious crimes against humanity. **The Khojaly massacre is not any different than such terrible tragedies as the developments in Khatyn, Lidice, Oradour, Songmy, Rwanda and Srebrenica,** which went down in the military history as acts of genocide against civilian population.

The town of Khojaly, with its strategically important location in the NKAO, 12 km north-east of Khankandi between the Aghdam-Shusha and Askaran-Khankandi highways, was an obstacle for the Armenian invaders' plans (4, p. 10). Moreover, **the only airport in Nagorno-Karabakh is located there.** It was a large Azerbaijani residential area (with over 7,000 residents), surrounded by Armenian villages (4, p. 10). Therefore, the invaders' main goal was to take control over the Askaran-Khankandi highway traversing Khojaly and seize the airport. In addition, they set out a goal to raze to the ground this ancient settlement, which had retained a number of valuable historical and cultural monuments. It is known that monuments of the Khojaly-Gadabay archaeological culture dating back to the 14th-7th centuries BC, were located nearby.

In the early hours on **February 26, 1992**, Armenian armed units, with the support of the 366th motor rifle regiment of the former Soviet army, which was called the "CIS armed forces" at that time, unleashed a horrible massacre of civilians in Khojaly. In a bid to cover up the traces of their crimes in every way, the murderers simultaneously did not forget to destroy the most valuable historical and cultural monuments, which were important not only for the Azerbaijani people, but also the entire mankind.

As early as four months before the tragedy, from October 1991, all the highways that linked Khojaly with the rest of the world were cordoned off and power supply was suspended from January 2. Khojaly was connected to the rest of Azerbaijan only by air, using helicopters. However, the air link was also disrupted after a Mi-8 helicopter en route from Aghdam to Shusha was shot down over the Khalfali village on January 28, 1992 by a missile fired from the direction of Khankandi, which resulted in the death of three crew members and 41 passengers on board (18, p. 282).

Armenian armed forces with the aid of 10 tanks, 16 armored vehicles, nine infantry combat vehicles, 180



military specialists and numerous servicemen of the 366th motorized rifle regiment of the 23rd division of the fourth army unit of the "CIS armed forces", stationed in Khankandi, surrounded the town of Khojaly in Nagorno-Karabakh (6, p. 83-87). Afterwards, the assault upon the town began with the use of modern weapons. **As a result, this residential area was essentially razed to the ground, while its residents were subjected to an atrocious massacre (7, p. 8). Many of the victims were decapitated, their eyes were hollowed out; some had their skin ripped off and some were burnt alive. According to official statistics, a total of 613 people were killed, including 63 children, 106 women and 70 elderly people.** Of those:

- eight families were completely exterminated
- 56 people were tortured to death
- 27 families were annihilated with only one family member surviving
- 25 children lost both parents
- 130 children lost one parent
- 230 families lost their bread-winners
- 487 people, including 76 underage persons, were disabled
- 1,275 people were taken prisoner (1,165 of them were later released)
- 150 people went missing, and no information about them is available to date (8, p. 5-11).

It is worth mentioning that during the unequal battles in Khojaly, local self-defense forces, a small number of servicemen and police officers fought to the last man, putting up tough resistance to the enemy. Thus, **the town's defenders wrote down another heroic page in the history of the Azerbaijani people.** About 3,000 of the civilians, who were in Khojaly at the time, managed to escape, and in doing so they often had to pass through



Memorial for the victims of Khojaly in The Hague (Netherlands)

Armenian-populated villages surrounding the town.

The inhuman reprisals committed by Armenian and Russian armed units against the residents of the small Azerbaijani town quickly made headlines in foreign media. Thus, the Paris-based magazine **Valer Aktuel**, published in a country where the Armenian lobby enjoys considerable influence, said in its issue dated March 14, 1992, "In this 'autonomous region', Armenian military units, alongside those that arrived from the Middle East, possess the most up-to-date military machinery, including helicopters. ASALA has military camps, weapons and ammunition warehouses in Lebanon and Syria. The Armenians exterminated Karabakh Azerbaijanis, committing pogroms in more than 100 Muslim villages." (18). The French newspaper **Le Monde** reported the Armenian atrocities in its March 14, 1992 issue. "Foreign journalists who visited Aghdam saw the dead bodies of women and children among the people killed in Khojaly, three corpses that were scalped, with their nails pulled out. This is not Azerbaijani propaganda, it is reality," it said. (14).

British newspaper **The Sunday Times** reported on March 1, 1992, citing the testimonies of Khojaly survivors, "Armenian soldiers exterminated hundreds of families. Survivors say that the Armenians gunned down over 450 Azerbaijanis, who were mostly women and children. Hundreds or perhaps, thousands of people, are missing. Raziya Aslanova, who ended up in Aghdam along with other women and children who fled Khojaly, says that they were continuously fired upon. People were burned alive and scalped. She said that her husband, brother-in-law and son-in-law had been killed, while her daughter went missing." (15).

Convincing reports regarding the Armenian forces' attack on Khojaly, carried out with the use of up-to-date military equipment and marred by mass killings of Azerbaijanis, were published by the US newspaper **The Washington Post** on February 28, British newspaper **The Sunday Times** on March 8, France's **Krua**

l'Eveneman on March 25, 1992, as well as a number of other periodicals (17, 16, 12).

Reports about the atrocities of Armenian militants committed against civilians were circulated by the Russian media as well. The **Izvestia** newspaper reported on March 13, 1992, "Major Leonid Kravets: 'I saw with my own eyes about 100 dead bodies on a hill. One of the lads lay there beheaded, and corpses of women, children and the elderly killed with utmost cruelty were seen everywhere.'" (11). A report of the Russian **law enforcement center Memorial** on the facts regarding the atrocities of the Armenian aggressors noted that the dead bodies of the 200 Azerbaijanis killed in Khojaly were delivered to Aghdam over four days and **dozens of corpses were desecrated**. A forensic test run in Aghdam on 181 dead bodies (130 men and 51 women, including 13 children) revealed that 151 of them died of gun wounds, while 20 died of shrapnel wounds, and the other 10 were killed with a dull object (7, p. 8).

The British **Financial Times** reported in its March 14, 1992 issue, "General Polyakov reported that 103 Armenian servicemen from the 366th regiment stayed in Nagorno-Karabakh" (13). During the withdrawal of the 366th motorized rifle regiment from Khankandi **25 tanks, 87 armored personnel carriers, 28 infantry fighting vehicles and 45 artillery installations were handed over to the Armenian forces** (3, p. 72). On March 2, 1992, the 366th regiment was redeployed to the Russian base in the Georgian town of Vaziani, and as early as on March 10, it was "dartingly" disbanded, while its personnel and military equipment were transferred to other military units (4, p. 145). This is how they were trying to cover up the traces of those crimes.

While pursuing the residents who managed to escape from the siege during the attack on Khojaly, the attackers **killed 16 people in the Katik forest, 130 people on the road to the Nakhchivanik village, 23 people in the vicinity of the Garagaya village, 23 people near the Dahraz village, eight people near the Shelli village and six others in other areas. 18 of those who were captured were killed with particular cruelty under tortures** in the internal affairs department of the Askaran district (3, p. 68-69). Overall, an external examination of the bodies, the conclusions of the forensic examination, as well as the testimonies of the persons who managed to escape the siege proved that there were cases of atrocities and

*Memorial for the victims of Khojaly in Mexico City
(Mexico)*

brutal torture committed by Armenian militants and servicemen of the 366th regiment. Many captives and hostages, held both in the occupied Azerbaijani territory and in Armenia, faced torture, some of them were murdered or maimed. 🌿

(To be continued)

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