

1988: THE FINAL STAGE OF THE DEPORTATION OF AZERBAIJANIS FROM ARMENIA

Article 2

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The demand for the handover of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region to Armenia was ideologically based, firstly, on the myth that Karabakh belonged to Armenians from time immemorial and secondly, on the right of nations to self-determination, which was unilaterally blown out of proportion and tak-

Rally in Baku in 1988. Judging by posters, people believed that Moscow would resolve the Karabakh problem



*Due to inaction, the rallies movement expanded.
Baku, 1989*

en out of the system of the constitutional principles of the Soviet state, which also included respect for the territorial integrity of republics. All the propaganda rhetoric of the separatist movement was carefully adapted to the context of the ideological processes of Perestroika. Namely, the critical reassessment of the history of the Soviet Union was used for spreading far-fetched claims that Stalin allegedly "gave" Karabakh to Azerbaijan in 1921. The idea of dismantling the command-administrative system in the USSR, which was actively discussed in society, was transferred to the national and state structure of the Soviet Union and used for substantiating the revision of the territorial and legal status of the NKAR. Criticism of the socioeconomic problems of Soviet society, in turn, served as a favorable background for real hysteria around the socioeconomic and ethno-cultural problems of the Autonomous Region, which was actually in a relatively better condition compared to other mountainous regions of the Azerbaijan SSR. The propaganda activities of the Armenians were supported by active political and organizational work. Under the leadership of emissaries from Armenia, organizational bases of the separatist movement were created and later legitimized in the NKAR under the names of "Krunk" and "Karabakh".

Inter-ethnic tensions grew in Armenia too. From the end of 1987, the Azerbaijani population of Armenia was under enormous moral and psychological pressure and threats, and there were cases of physical violence against persons of Azerbaijani nationality. As an inevitable consequence, the first hundreds of Azerbaijani refugees from Kafan and Megri districts of Armenia appeared in the adjacent regions of Azerbaijan in January 1988. In February, the extent of the displacement of people increased significantly. By 18 February 1988, i.e. by the time when first reports (unofficial) spread in Azerbaijan about territorial claims and anti-Azerbaijani events in Armenia, the number of Azerbaijanis forced to leave it as a result of tensions, fear and violence had already exceeded four thousand. Most of them gathered in Baku gradually escalating the situation in the capital. The former secretary of the Baku City Party Committee, Fuad Musayev, recalls those events in one of his interviews: "In those days, I was on vacation ... When rallies began in the NKAR on 12 February, we were all confused, and it seemed like something unusual and incomprehensible to us, because until that moment the USSR had not seen any strikes or protests. On 19 February, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of



Azerbaijan issued an instruction to immediately recall all responsible party and state officials from leave. I immediately returned to Baku. Without even going home, I went straight to the city committee. Employees of the city committee told me that several buses carrying refugees from Kafan Districts of Armenia recently arrived in Baku. People were in a terrible state, battered and crippled. The refugees appeared on college campuses, where they began to talk to students about what happened to them in Armenia. I was sure that this incident smacked of provocation. Why did they go to college dorms instead of asking the leadership of the city and the republic for help? They were specially sent to Baku with one purpose - to aggravate the situation. To avoid provocations, I decided to close the entrance to the city. Already on the morning of 21 February, I ordered that the refugees from Kafan be evicted from Baku, and they spent the night in the village of Mehdiabad. Of course, the refugees from Kafan were slightly outraged, but they were still put on buses and sent to the territory of Absheron District." (1) The then second secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, Vasiliy Konovalov, recalls his meeting with refugees from Armenia and their reaction to the inaction of the republican leadership: "Yes, Azerbaijani refugees from Kafan, Masis and Megri



The Azerbaijanis could not understand why the Soviet army did not protect them from Armenian bandits

districts of the Armenian SSR began arriving in Azerbaijan at the time. I met with them, and I still remember their questions that remained unanswered: "Why didn't Moscow and Baku protect us from Armenian extremism?" (2). The retired lieutenant-general and former commander of the air defense forces of the southern strategic direction of the Soviet Ministry of Defense, Petr Polyakh, who was responsible for security during the withdrawal of Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia, expressed his impression about the state of Azerbaijanis leaving Armenia in the following way: "I was just struck by the appearance of Azerbaijanis expelled from Armenia. Armenians burned and looted peaceful Azerbaijani villages located on the territory of Armenia. The Soviet army was doing everything possible to save the Azerbaijanis in Armenia. We flew into these villages and

encircled them so that Armenians would not make raids on them, and then took the Azerbaijanis to Azerbaijan. We mostly took them to the city of Gazakh. We handed over the refugees to the republican authorities." (3)

The refugees coming from the neighboring republic told of the atrocities committed against them and the difficult, depressing atmosphere forcing them to leave their native land, the graves of their ancestors and their property. Here are the accounts of Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia recorded by Baku journalists: "Since 19 February, we have not slept a single night. Azerbaijanis from the neighboring villages came to our village of Kalinin in Masis District for security. And the village itself was under the protection of border guards," said Huseyn Qambarov from the Ararat state farm in Masis District. "The Azerbaijani school was closed. At nights,

In response to public protests, Soviet troops rolled onto Baku. On 20 January 1990, hundreds of unarmed Azerbaijanis were killed and thousands wounded



10-20 men gathered around the campfire in the center of the village or town to guard the houses. And still not a single night passes without a house being set on fire. Old men, women and children go to bed dressed, even in shoes, in order to be able to jump up and run away." Farmer Humbat Abbasov described his experiences: "In our village of Artashat in Masis District they set fire to three houses. Since 19 February, we have not been allowed to the markets, and the harvest we have grown with hard work is being lost. You will not find a single Azerbaijani surname in the records of hospitals, clinics and health centers in Armenia. We are refused medical care. They do not sell bread and products to us. They do not allow us to use urban transport. Mass unreasonable dismissals of Azerbaijanis have begun. They literally spat in our face and shouted: Turks, get out of Armenian land." (4) Such reports about events in Armenia, the appearance of refugees on roads and in towns across the republic and their stories about what happened greatly alarmed and angered people and led to an increased need to demonstrate national solidarity.



Weapons, ammunition and nationalist literature was sent from Armenia to Karabakh



The ousting of Azerbaijanis from Armenia was gaining momentum

The emotional atmosphere in Baku began to heat up even more when reports started coming in from Stepanakert about the appeal of deputies of the regional council to join Armenia. On 22-23 February, the first crowded, yet spontaneous rallies were held in front of the building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. Only on 24 February 1988, did the press, in the form of a TASS report, finally publish the official position of the CPSU Central Committee on the events in the NKAR, which set out the decision of the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee. It officially described the territorial claims and separatist demands as unreasonable and unlawful, and thus, the center did not support them. However, it did not say anything about the refugees, as well as the involvement of Armenia in the events in the NKAR. In contrast to the clear estimates contained in the decision of the Politburo, a hefty element of ambiguity was added to the Kremlin's position by Mikhail Gorbachev's appeal to the Azerbaijani and Armenian peoples in the same days. Gorbachev's

appeal softened these estimates with exhortations to be tolerant and patient and wait until the entire complex of national problems in the USSR is considered in the near future. The Armenian side perceived such hesitations in the appeal of the secretary-general as a signal for increased pressure on the central government. Apparently, the usual bureaucratic formula "consider" was regarded by Armenians as a sign of hope and even the belief that their demands about Nagorno-Karabakh would be taken into account. Such a dead-end strategy for some sort of balance in the guilt of the two republics, conducted by the center, only added fuel to the fire. Thus, the center gradually retreated from national constitutional principles and increasingly resorted to mutually exclusive political arguments of the right to self-determination and the inviolability of national borders, which inevitably fueled the conflict even more. As a result, together with the strengthening of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, political opposition to the Kremlin originated in both republics.

Meanwhile, an emotional and political crisis was brewing in Azerbaijan. The events in Nagorno-Karabakh and open anti-Azerbaijani propaganda created an extremely tense situation in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations around the perimeter of direct interaction between the Armenian and Azerbaijani populations, both in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and especially in Nagorno-Karabakh. The demands for the separation of the autonomous region of Azerbaijan, loudly voiced at rallies and demonstrations in Stepanakert and Yerevan, created an atmosphere of heated emotions and engendered hostility and enmity between the two communities of Nagorno-Karabakh. People were ready to demonstrate their determination not to give in to territorial claims and express solidarity with refugees from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The first case of mass confrontation between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, which threatened to escalate into a bloody massacre, took place on 22-24 February on the Agdam-Stepa-

nakert road. The situation in Agdam District, which neighbored on the NKAR, was in turmoil as the population was agitated by refugee accounts about events in Stepanakert and their complaints about atrocities and abuse against Azerbaijanis. The culmination was the assassination of two Azerbaijanis – the first victims of the Karabakh conflict – in Asgaran District. With the efforts of district activists and representatives of the authorities in Baku, the indignation of the people was contained. At a rally in Agdam, it was decided not to inflame tensions so that the death of two Azerbaijanis would not lead to more bloodshed (5). However, events began to develop by a different scenario. Soon rumors of Armenian atrocities suddenly received official confirmation in a report circulated by central TV. The growing flow of refugees from Armenia, multiplied by the disturbed state of Azerbaijani society, turned the Armenian population of the republic into hostages to the Karabakh conflict. In principle, this was the calculation of Armenian na-

Moscow pretended that there was no problem of Azerbaijani refugees





Azerbaijani refugees left behind homes and other property acquired over the years



The eviction of Azerbaijanis was accompanied with murder. People lost their kith and kin

tionalists sitting in Yerevan and Stepanakert as they wanted Armenian blood to be shed in order to make a propaganda show about it. Killings of Armenians would give these individuals a reason to prove that Azerbaijan is violating the rights of the Armenian population and the two peoples are not compatible for further co-existence. Therefore, a dead Armenian was more valuable to them than a living one as he could greatly benefit the cause of propaganda. Also, the favorite tactic of the Armenians was to seek confrontations with the authorities, calling it oppression in their propaganda. Such behavior of the Armenian nationalists was noted even by foreign journalists who ever had to face them. For example, back in 1919, the British military journalist Scotland Liddell, who was specially sent to Azerbaijan from London and was at the British mission in Shusha, wrote: "Whenever an Armenian is killed, he rises up and shouts - I was killed during the beatings." (6) This was the tactic of those who organized the Sumgayit provocation, one of the leaders of which was Armenian E. Grigoryan, who was previously convicted three times. Of course, fuel to the fire was added by the refugees that were in the city, mostly from Kafan District of Armenia, with their stories of the pogrom committed by Armenians in areas inhabited mainly by Azerbaijanis. Perhaps this was the very spark that caused the outbreak of the 28-29 Feb-

*Deprived of shelter, the Azerbaijanis were cast at the mercy of fate.
Moscow continued to pay no heed to Azerbaijani refugees*



ruary mass riots and violence in Sumgayit. Just before the events in Sumgayit, on 26 February CPSU Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev met in the Kremlin with the inspirers of the Karabakh movement, poetess Silva Kaputikyan and journalist Zoriy Balayan. It was Yakovlev who brought them to him. The very next day after the events in Sumgayit, at an emergency meeting of the Politburo on 29 February 1988, Gorbachev described his meeting with them in his speech as follows: "Balayan ... is a nationalist person, and he is fiercely nationalistic. He is very well-known among them, a little bit unbridled, self-confident and very rigid. Very rigid. Back in Moscow, Kaputikyan dragged him along as well. She asked me to receive him for at least five minutes. I thought: why avoid it, it is necessary to use everything here. I'll say what I think, and then it will be difficult for them - they will be bound to me. We met. I said - it is tense in Azerbaijan. You understand, it is necessary to stop it. People are tense there too. And she (i.e. Silva Kaputikyan - I. N.) said to me: why are they tense? You have decided in their favor. I say: no, I don't agree with you. We decided in favor of Armenia, Azerbaijan and the country as a whole. The conversation was very difficult, emotional and charged. It must be admitted that it was clear from the outset why they rushed here. They were earning a reputation for themselves. They wanted to strengthen their influence." (7)

Victims of the Sumgayit provocation were Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Although the events in Sumgayit were condemned by residents, the public and the official authorities of Azerbaijan and criminal proceedings

were launched against 96 people, this did not calm the Armenian extremists. They decided that the events in Sumgayit were not given a political and legal assessment. The Armenian side needed this to justify another

***This Azerbaijani woman miraculously survived –
devious Armenian chauvinists lacerated
her body with a screwdriver***





Due to a shortage of tents, some refugees had to spend decades in railway wagons

myth about “genocide” in order to pin it on the republic as a label. In his book, F. Bobkov cited the admission of one Sumgayit Armenian woman, who openly says: “Do you think these intellectuals there in Yerevan are thinking about us, Armenians? They are thinking about the land. And they need Karabakh only for that purpose.” Such an admission during a meeting with Bobkov was also made by the deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers of Armenia, Kirakosyan. Explaining in detail why the Karabakh problem should be solved in favor of the Armenians, he cited the following as an important argument: “We very much need land.” (8) The book “Hearth” by Armenian journalist Zoriy Balayan, which was notorious for its rough inflammatory anti-Azerbaijani rhetoric, contains the following lines, “... what tiny distances we have. How cramped we are ... The smallest republic in our country ... Only two thousand kilometers of fertile land. A handful of land” (9). These lines sound particularly ominous from the lips of a man, with the active participation of whom nearly 200,000 Azerbaijanis were soon expelled from Armenia as a result of the escalation of the conflict and 20 per cent of the lands of the Azerbaijan Republic were occupied.

The bloodshed in Sumgayit drew a purple scar on the moral reputation of perestroika - some Western newspapers published a drawing of Gorbachev with

a bloody birthmark on his forehead. Like a boxer who was knocked down, but stayed on his feet, he tried to pretend that nothing irreversible had happened, urged people to keep cool, warned against reprisals and offered to send an appeal to both peoples. “The killers must be held accountable,” he said at the Politburo. “However, we have to act respectfully and sensitively. We must not be nervous.” He saw the Sumgayit events as a conspiracy by anti-perestroika forces and the local mafia directed against him personally - “a test for Gorbachev”. If this was the case, then his policy of national appeasement clearly failed this test. Years later, two men who differed by characters and political positions, both former ministers, Defense Minister Yazov and Interior Minister Bakatin, independently spoke about it in the same way: the impunity of the rioters coupled with irresponsibility and inflammatory appeals of extremists and nationalist intellectuals caused the subsequent escalation of violence and new, even more numerous casualties (10). Assessing the causes of the Sumgayit events, the former second secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, V. Konovlov, also acknowledged that “the influence of the party leadership of the republic was not enough to prevent them. As a result, the response of Azerbaijanis to what was happening in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia was unexpected for party and government bodies.” (11)

After Sumgayit there was a sharp escalation of the conflict. In the future, various atrocities of the Armenian militants were attributed to Sumgayit, which prompted Azerbaijanis to take appropriate action. An anti-Azerbaijani propaganda campaign was launched in the media already on the national and international scale using a cleverly simulated image of the Azerbaijani nation. Exploiting the Sumgayit events, the Armenian media aggressively promoted the version about the tragedy of the Sumgayit Armenians allegedly prepared by the leaders of Azerbaijan well in advance. Thus, an important and, we can say, strategic goal was achieved - the Armenian side, which provoked an explosive process of ethnic confrontation, appeared as a victim of the confrontation in the post-Sumgayit situation; thanks to these efforts, Azerbaijan began to be perceived only as an aggressive, reactionary and uncompromising side of the interethnic conflict starting from that moment. And people in the USSR were willing to believe it because the average Soviet man in the street could not imagine what he had long become a target of political and information technology.

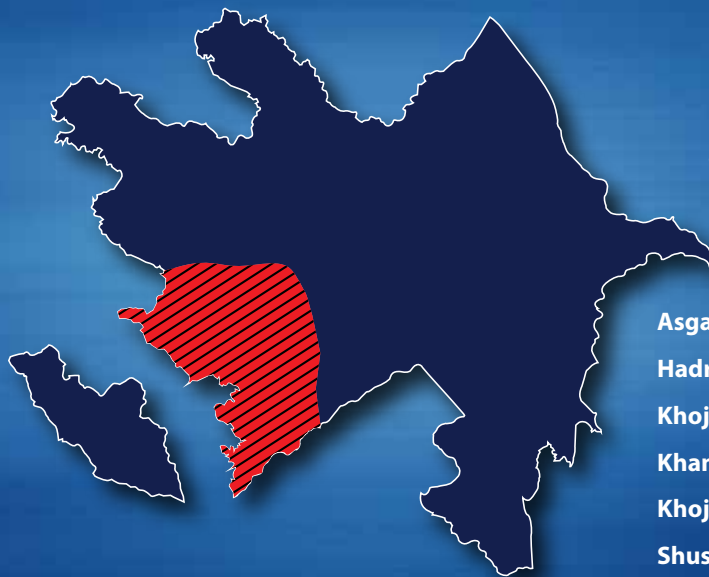
Sumgayit exacerbated the conflict and inter-ethnic confrontation, drawing a growing number of people from both sides into its orbit. There appeared the first Armenian refugees, but now from Azerbaijan, while the initiators and organizers of the “Karabakh movement” got new arguments for anti-Azerbaijani propaganda using the image of Azerbaijani rioters as a deterrent for Armenians, applying the key code “genocide”. Making the most of the trouble, zealots of “genocide” were trying to discredit Azerbaijan and sought moral and public support in the country and worldwide, thus trying to get a political advantage in the struggle for Karabakh. Thus, the main objective of the separatists was achieved – the conflict began to take an irreversible and irreconcilable nature. And a few days after the events in Sumgayit, 2 March, a new wave of Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia was registered: many Azerbaijani families expelled from Armenia’s rural areas appeared in Zangilan and neighboring districts of Azerbaijan. ❁

To be continued

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THERE IS NO AZERBAIJAN WITHOUT KARABAKH



Azerbaijani districts
occupied by Armenia
and dates of their occupation

Asgaran – 1991	Agdara – 07.07.1993
Hadrut – 1991	Agdam – 23.07.1993
Khojavand – 1991	Kalbajar – 02.04.1993
Khankandi – 1991	Fuzuli – 23.08.1993
Khojaly – 26.02.1992	Jabrayil – 23.08.1993
Shusha – 08.05.1992	Gubadli – 31.08.1993
Lachin – 18.05.1992	Zangilan – 29.10.1993