

# TRAGIC EVENTS OF 1918 ... IMPOSSIBLE TO FORGET!

It was 1918. In the history of Azerbaijan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this year is perhaps the most important one due to rapidly alternating events – both significant and tragic - each of which could be partially crucial for the Azerbaijani people. The peak of these events, of course, is the date of 28 May 1918 - the proclamation of the state independence of Azerbaijan. The following most important historic events - the liberation of Baku by the united Turkish-Azerbaijani forces on 15 September 1918, the arrival of the government of Azerbaijan in the capital, the formation of the Azerbaijani Parliament on 7 December 1918, and finally, the recognition of the legitimacy of the Azerbaijani government by the command of the Allied Forces in the Transcaucasia and by

the British government on 28 December 1918 - laid the groundwork for building the first democratic government in the East and the first national state of Azerbaijanis - the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic.

But such significant events in 1918 were preceded by no less significant bloody events, which turned into a universal tragedy for the whole Azerbaijani people and called into question its very existence. The events of March 1918 in Baku and Shamakhi were the beginning of this bloody chain. So, within a few days in March, the civilian Muslim Azerbaijani population of these cities and villages of Baku and Shamakhi districts was subjected to an unprecedented and terrible punitive action - massacres, beatings, captivity and plunder, and the cit-



*Shamakhi. Shikhminas Street with the houses of Zeynalov and Ismayilov families destroyed by the Armenians (photo of the Emergency Investigation Commission)*

ies and villages themselves were ruined and burned by the fierce and violent Bolshevik-Armenian armed units. Following Baku and Shamakhi, from April to July 1918, the same tragic fate befell the entire Muslim population of Guba and villages of Guba district, the surrounding villages of Ganja, almost all the Azerbaijani villages in Goychay, Aresh, Javad, Nukha, Lankaran districts, as well as Karabakh and Zangezur.

What was the "guilt" of Azerbaijanis, as well as other representatives of the Muslim population of Azerbaijan - Lezgins, Tats and Kurds, who peacefully lived in their ancestral lands and maintained cordial neighborly relations with all the members of other ethnic and religious groups who settled in these territories in different historical periods - Armenians, Jews and Russians?

All these events, of course, had deep historical roots and causes. Implementation of the pan-Armenian program for the annexation of Azerbaijani lands ceded to Russia after the Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) treaties and the deportation of Azerbaijanis from these territories started from the time of these historic events. Armenians, taking advantage of the decrees of Nicholas I, which allowed them to move freely from Iran and Turkey, began to settle in the Caucasus in large numbers, particularly in Karabakh, Nakhchivan and Erivan lands. The territories of the last two former Azerbaijani khanates were united by the Russian authorities into an administrative unit called "Armenian region" in March 1828. Although the "Armenian region" was abolished soon - in April 1840, that did not stop the Armenians from declaring these territories primordially "Armenian", though in this period, they were significantly outnumbered by the Azerbaijani population. (1)

With the creation of the Armenian political parties Hnchak and Dashnaktsutyun at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the active and well-organized political and armed activities of Armenian organizations begin in the territory of the Ottoman Empire and the Caucasus, aimed at creating an Armenian state. The first formal and large-scale armed campaign of the Armenians against Azerbaijanis took place in 1905-1907, turning into a bloody carnage between the two nations. According to general estimates alone, in the clashes of 1905-1906, about 158 Azerbaijani and 128 Armenian settlements were destroyed in the Baku, Erivan and Yelizavetpol provinces and, according to various estimates, from 3,000 to



10,000 people were killed. (2) However, despite the fact that Azerbaijanis "had no organization similar to Dashnaktsutyun and acted without a specific plan" (3) and were poorly armed and had no basic military training, in this period they were still able to fight back and resist the well-organized fighting squads of Armenians.

With the beginning of the First World War, especially after the February Revolution of 1917 and the collapse of the Russian Empire, the interests of world powers involved in the war became aggravated and collided in the Caucasus. At the same time, great opportunities opened up for the Caucasian peoples to realize their political and national ideals and aspirations. As a result of many years of dedicated work, Armenian ideologists managed to include "the issue of Armenian statehood" in the plans of Western countries and Russia regarding the future of the South Caucasus. The right of Georgians to establish their own state was not disputed either. At the same time, the largest Azerbaijani population of the South Caucasus did not get the attention of Western powers and Russian political forces, who did not consider oil-producing Baku to be an Azerbaijani city.

In such a disadvantageous situation for Azerbaijanis, the arrival of Musavat, a party enjoying the support of the overwhelming majority of Azerbaijanis, in the political arena of the Caucasus could not but cause concern both among the Bolsheviks, who preached the idea of class struggle and claimed power in all of the former Russian possessions, including in the Caucasus, and among Armenian nationalists who, while defining the hypothetical area of the future Armenian state in the region, also included vast historical lands of Azerbaijan with a predominantly Azerbaijani population in it. The First World War continued and the Armenian nationalists were not saying goodbye to hopes of creating a "Greater Armenia" in seven regions of Turkey. But they had already realized



*Suraya Dadash gizi Mashadiyeva maimed by the Armenians. Khojaly village, Javad district. On the reverse side is the signature of A. Novatsky, a member of the Emergency Investigation Commission*



that under those circumstances, these plans were considerably complicated. This forced them to move their principal operations to the territory of the Caucasus, where there were more favorable conditions for the realization of these goals. For example, by March 1918 the Armenians managed to successfully carry out one of their main ideas - to clear the area for the Armenian state, which did not exist yet, in the southwest of the South Caucasus in Kars, Erivan province, Zangezur, Goycha, some counties of Yelizavetpol province and in Karabakh through the displacement, forced expulsion and mass extermination of Azerbaijani civilians. After the Bolshevik coup in October 1917 and the withdrawal of Bolshevik Russia from the war, the panicky retreat of Armenian and Georgian troops from the Caucasus front started. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians, who permanently lived on Turkish soil before or had resettled to Turkish vilayets temporarily captured by the Russian army, headed to the Caucasus together with the Armenian armed units. Here they merged with the Armenian refugees who had already flooded the above areas since the Turkish authorities adopted a law on the deportation of Armenians from the area of front-line op-

erations in 1915. The giant stream of embittered and desperate Armenians led by Dashnaksutyun armed groups and supported by thousands of Armenian soldiers fleeing from the front attacked the peaceful, unarmed local Muslim population, which was partly wiped out and partly expelled from its native lands in the shortest possible time. For example, from the beginning of 1917 to March 1918, Armenians destroyed and razed to the ground 199 Azerbaijani villages in the Erivan province alone. (4) This punitive operation was part of Dashnaksutyun's policy of ethnic cleansing against Azerbaijanis followed by the conversion of these lands into a center of Armenian statehood in the Caucasus. It was during this period that the territorial foundation for the future of the Armenian state was laid. However, the fate of "Great Armenia from sea to sea" was solved in cities, including in Baku.

At the beginning of March 1918, power in large parts of Baku and Yelizavetpol (Ganja) provinces was actually in the hands of the Musavat party, which had become the leading political force in Azerbaijani society, being able to rally the overwhelming majority of the Muslim population of Azerbaijan (5). However, in Baku itself, the situation was much more difficult due to extremely tense relations between the leading political forces that claimed sole power. For example, in November 1917, immediately after the Bolshevik coup in Russia, the Baku Council, headed by Stepan Shaumyan, declared itself the sole authority in the city subordinate only to Lenin's Council

*Baku. Minaret of a mosque at the Palace of Shirvanshahs damaged by fire from Armenian guns (photo of the Emergency Investigation Commission)*



of People's Commissars. This decision was opposed by different, including left-wing political forces who acted as opponents of the Bolsheviks. However, the most dramatic position was taken by the Musavat party and the local authorities of the city – the Baku Duma, which was headed by Azerbaijani lawyer Fatali Khan Khoyski and represented the right wing of the multinational Baku society. Azerbaijani national forces led by Musavat were in favor of granting Azerbaijan national-territorial autonomy, which was absolutely unacceptable not only to the Bolsheviks, who preached class ideas, but also to Dashnaksutyun leaders with their opposing geopolitical interests. The latter, incidentally, held key positions in the leadership of the Baku Soviet of Workers' Deputies, which was also headed by Armenian Stepan Shaumyan. Although in this period ultra-nationalist Armenian groups headed by their leader - the Dashnaksutyun party and Bolshevik internationalists pursued different goals, the desire to destroy the national forces of Azerbaijan at all costs brought them together.

On 29 (17) March 1918, Bolsheviks and Dashnaks, provoking an incident with the Evelina steamer and disarming several dozens of Azerbaijani soldiers, caused Azerbaijanis to retaliate, and taking advantage of this



*Inside of the Juma mosque after the violence unleashed by the Armenians (photo of the Emergency Investigation Commission)*

incident, the allied armed forces - the Red Army of the Baku Council consisting of 6,000 people of whom 70% were made up by Armenian soldiers led by Dashnak officers and 3,000-4,000-strong national units of Dashnaksutyun - unleashed a real war against the civilian Azerbaijani population of Baku. So, within just one week, three days of which – from the evening of 30 March to 2 April – were especially distinguished by the mass character of

*Azerbaijanis killed by the Armenians in Baku  
(photos of the Emergency Investigation Commission)*



massacres and looting, more than 12,000 people, mostly from the Turkic-Muslim population, were brutally killed, and the overwhelming majority of them were civilians residents, “workers and disadvantaged people, including thousands of women, children and people incapable of carrying weapons”. (6) This last fact once again confirmed the intention of the Armenian-Bolshevik forces about the mass extermination of the Azerbaijani population of the city, without distinction of sex or age, and nullified their description of the events allegedly as a “civil war”. Victims of the Armenian pogroms and violence were all layers of the Azerbaijani population of the city without exception, starting from the Baku nobility to ordinary people. The armed campaign against the Muslim population of Baku began simultaneously in different parts of the city, both in the center, in the historical quarter, and on the outskirts, in areas called Mammadli, Kirpichkhana, Kanni-tapa, Pokhlu-Dara inhabited exclusively by Azerbaijanis from poor and socially disadvantaged segments of society. The active intervention of Russian soldiers and sailors and residents of various nationalities - Russians, Jews, Georgians, Poles, Germans and others – saved the Muslim population of the city from full extermination. During the March pogrom, many public buildings in the city - theaters, cinemas, schools, police stations, homes of individual wealthy Armenians, station premises, baths, etc. served as places where thousands of destitute and robbed Azerbaijanis who had just survived the horrors of brutal murders of their loved ones, mainly women, children and the elderly, were delivered and where they were locked up for several days, often without food or water. The capture of Muslims was carried out by force and was accompanied by insults, bullying, threats, and often murders. Muslim women were forced to take off their veils, tied together with braids, taken away bare-headed and barefooted and beaten with rifle butts on

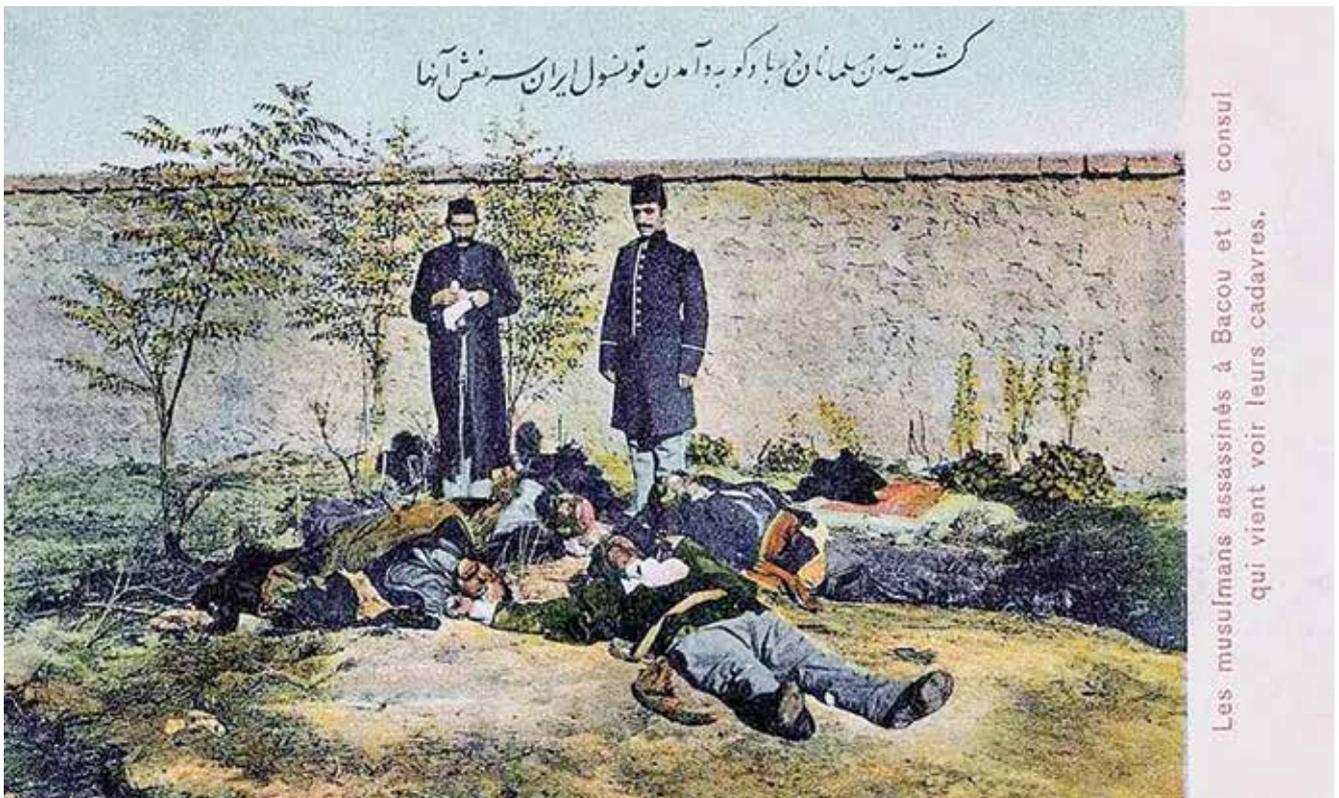
the road. Women, shocked by the death of their loved ones, died of a heart attack in captivity or went mad, their small children died in their arms. Devastated houses and entire neighborhoods, after the murder and capture of their occupants, allowed the Armenian gangs to loot, rob and capture Muslims’ property, plunder and destroy all that was impossible to take away within three to four days in numerous cars and carts.

Describing the situation in Baku after the March tragedy, the newspaper of Baku Mensheviks Nash Golos wrote: “Everywhere speechless, mutilated corpses, burned corpses, piles in some places, in others separate corpses, the corpses of men, women and children ... Near Tazapir Mosque there is a terrible sight. The mosque was hit by shelling. The desecration of the sanctuary hurts masses, corpses disturb them much more.” (7)

The local Armenian population, both intellectuals and the nobility, and “the Armenian mob” actively participated in the Azerbaijani pogroms in Baku with weapons in their hands. The pogroms were spearheaded by the Armenian National Council and the Baku Committee of the Dashnaktsutyun party. They had made lists of addresses of well-known and wealthy Azerbaijanis in advance and distributed them among violent Armenian soldiers, and the property looted from the Azerbaijani population was placed in an organized way in premises, warehouses and houses belonging to Armenians.

The material damage caused to the Muslim population of the city - both major Muslim industrialists, businessmen, owners of factories, marinas, oil fields, and the owners of numerous civilian, social and retail facilities, homes, offices, hotels, schools, restaurants, bars, barber shops, workshops, stores, warehouses, stalls, stables, etc., amounted to hundreds of millions of rubles. Baku residents themselves indicated a total amount of approximately 400,000,000 rubles by the old rate only on the

*Azerbaijanis killed by the Armenians in Baku. Caption in French says:  
“Muslims killed in Baku and the Iranian consul standing by dead bodies”*



basis of the known facts. Among buildings belonging to Muslims, which were deliberately set on fire and destroyed, were those which embodied the socio-cultural and spiritual center of Azerbaijanis - the buildings of the Muslim Charity Society Ismayiliyya, Kaspi and Achig Soz newspapers, as well as the Dagestan, Iskandariyya and Islamiyya hotels. The Tazapir and Shah mosques in the Baku Fortress were strongly affected by the shelling, while the Haji Ajdar Bey, Shamakhi and Bibi Heybat mosques were destroyed.

In March and September 1918, many villages in Baku district - Mammadli, Ahmadli, Balakhani, Binagadi, Bibi-Heybat, Goymali, Zabrat, Sabunchu, Ramana, Khirdalan, etc. also became victims of the atrocities of the Armenian armed units. All these villages were subjected to pogroms, resulting in houses, public buildings, mosques and shops being destroyed, burned and looted and hundreds of villagers being killed and wounded. (8) ❖

**To be continued**

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