



By Ziya MURADOV

NIGHT OF SOVIET SHOOTING



These authorities appeared unshakable just a few years earlier...

It was like a tough rock in the midst of an endless ocean. Inhabitants of this island who sought to travel to other shores were doomed to severe hardship and for this reason alone, just a few of those Soviet people dared to go ahead. The Soviet Union, a communist superpower, was fenced off from the rest of the world by the Iron Curtain, using totalitarian methods to create a new generation of people who would be builders of communism, dubbed in Western terminology as "Homo Sovieticus". **These new individuals, who had some**

national traits, which were mostly of external and scenic nature, were expected to feel completely as part of a new world, as citizens of a great and vast country called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The evening-out of national traits, languages and distinct features had far-reaching aims. The main message was the fact that any potential unresolved inter-ethnic issue could destroy the country, whose unity dwelled upon distancing this matter from the comprehension of the public at large as much as possible.

Numerous analysts, historians and political scientists currently debate and discuss the reasons for the collapse



of such a “great” country. Some of the former “Soviets” are even nostalgic of the old days, recalling their care-free childhood and youth as a happy time for all Soviet people and forgetting the founding pillars of this delusive happiness and the price paid for it. They evidently

forget the tribulations endured by their forefathers **in the distant times when the authorities could easily load an entire ethnic group of people overnight into vehicles slated for transporting cattle, i.e. freight cars, and send them into exile thousands**



of miles away. This was the fate of many nations. Moreover, there were plans to evict Azerbaijanis from the Caucasus as well. However, a decision was made not to do so immediately, but to take time and relocate them in stages...

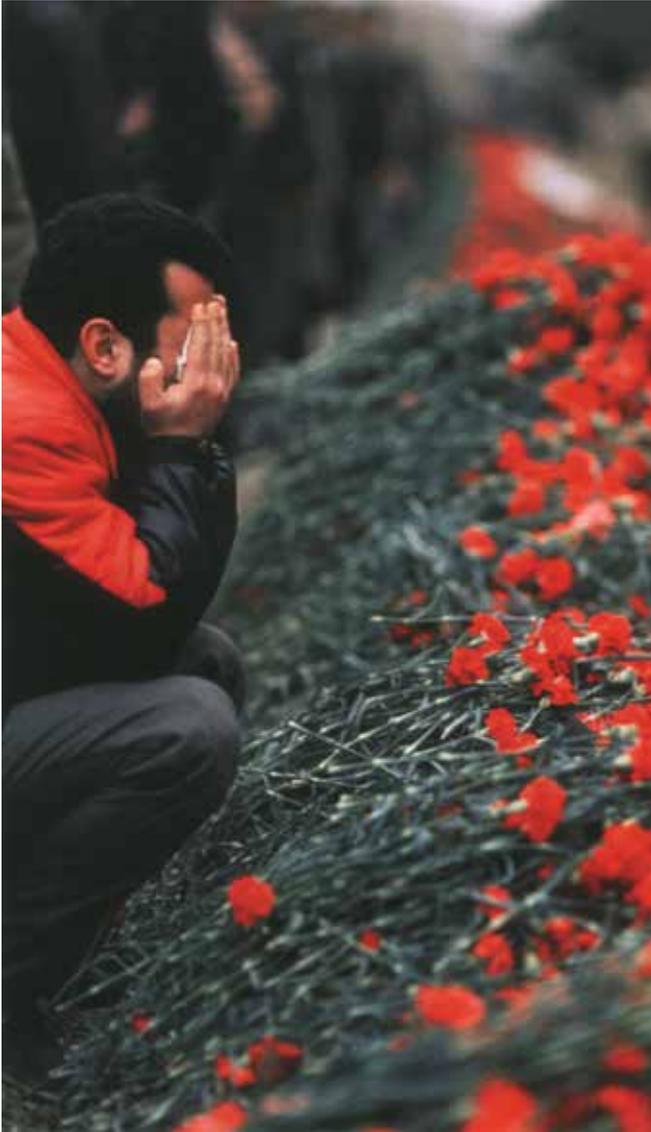
Azerbaijanis were resettled on many occasions both before the Soviet regime and under the Socialist rule. They were mainly driven out of the territory of present-day Armenia. The penultimate relocation was carried out in the post-war period. **The Azerbaijani population of the Armenian SSR was resettled in 1947-1953, in accordance with decree of the USSR Council of Ministers No. 4083 dated 23 December 1947.**

Prior to the mentioned decision, on 21 November 1946, the same body passed a decree "On measures regarding a return of foreign Armenians to Soviet Armenia". Thus, **a campaign aimed at repatriation of Armenians to their so-called "historical homeland"** was launched. About 360,000 people residing in a total of 12 countries, including the US, France, Romania, Egypt, Bulgaria, Lebanon and Syria, sought to leave for the USSR. As for the settlement of the repatriates, a decision was made to solve the issue at the expense of the Azerbaijanis who had lived in their native land for centuries in the territory of Armenia.

All these developments occurred in the Soviet Union, a country where slogans about friendship and equality of nations were a cornerstone of official ideology and any attempts to raise ethnic issues were followed by a clampdown. However, these were merely slogans, but in reality, some nations were "more equal than others", according to a well-known expression once used by George Orwell. Thus, **Armenians enjoyed a special status both during the Tsarist rule and the Soviet period; manifestations of nationalism were also traced in Armenia during the most powerful reign of the Soviet regime.** However, crackdowns that were used in similar cases in other regions were not carried out against them.

Amid an evident stalemate of the communist regime in the Soviet Union in 1988, Armenians embarked on rallies in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of Azerbaijan calling for secession and joining Armenia instead. **The central authorities once again displayed a loyal attitude toward the developments, to say the least.** This was the case even when firearms began to be used by groups of militants sent in from Armenia and further from other regions. Simultaneously, the latest ouster of Azerbaijanis from





the Armenian territory started with the use of violent means that were beyond criminal actions, which were marred in some areas by murders.

The Azerbaijanis deemed those attempts to separate a part of the republic as horrible and inconceivable, especially since those actions were taken with regard to Karabakh. **People's memory of the past developments suggested that this was a precursor of a troublesome outcome.** Meanwhile, the central authorities did everything possible to drag out the issue, treated the Armenian separatists amiably and seriously addressed their alleged historical arguments. This was the first time an open territorial dispute and inter-ethnic stand-off broke out between two Soviet republics. Addressing the USSR Congress of People's Deputies in 1989, Armenian MPs made instigative speeches, openly promoting separatism, while Azerbaijani law-

makers called for staying reasonable and maintaining order. Thus, the floodgates were opened, so to speak. Undoubtedly, **the Karabakh developments laid groundwork for the outbreak of a series of inter-ethnic conflicts, which covered other outlying regions of the Soviet empire in accordance with the domino effect** and were followed by coups in Eastern European countries. All these events ultimately led to the collapse of communism.

Meanwhile, protests began to gain momentum in Baku as tens or even hundreds of thousands of people gathered on Lenin Square, which was later renamed to Azadliq (Freedom) Square. Protesters condemned rampant Armenian separatism and its patrons in the Soviet-controlled center. Azerbaijan was indignant and angered by these trends. **The developments were increasingly taking an ugly turn for the Soviet government** and the Kremlin started taking counter-measures.

According to published data, a large task group that included over 50,000 officers from the Transcaucasian, Moscow, Leningrad and other military districts was created on the outskirts of Baku 16-19 January 1990. The group was also comprised of the Navy and internal troops of the Interior Ministry. Baku Bay and access to it were blocked by ships and boats of the "Red-Banner Caspian Flotilla". **In the early hours on 20 January, the**







Soviet armed forces launched an assault on Baku in an effort to defeat the Popular Front and assert the power of the Communist Party in Azerbaijan.

The formal basis for this operation, dubbed "Strike", was

the decree on a state of emergency that was introduced in the city from midnight. However, **television broadcasting was switched off at 7.30 p.m. due to a blast carried out on a TV power supply unit by a special KGB group of the USSR, therefore**, residents of the city were unaware of ongoing developments. Most of the population learned about the state of emergency at 5.30 a.m. following relevant announcements on the radio and leaflets dropped from helicopters. By then the actions of the Soviet military, namely, the unfounded and excessive use of force in the city and its suburbs, had caused numerous civilian casualties. As many as 131 people were killed and 744 others were wounded, according to a republican commission tasked with scrutinizing the circumstances and causes of the tragic developments of January 20, 1990.

On 22 January, residents throughout Baku took to the streets to bid farewell to the victims of the tragedy at the S.M.Kirov Park in the area of an old rural cemetery where the victims of the 1918 genocide were once buried. The cemetery was ruined during the Soviet period and a park was built in this part of the Azerbaijani capital, which is currently known as the Alley of Martyrs.

Azerbaijan buried the heroes who fought for its independence, its unarmed fighters for justice in the Karabakh issue. On the day of their funeral, the airport, the railway station and long-distance telephone com-





munications suspended their operation despite a ban of the military commandant's office; vessels of the Caspian Shipping Company honked their horns in the Baku Bay uninterruptedly to mourn the victims. **Over the next 40 days of mourning, sirens sounded every hour,**

while various enterprises and organizations were at a standstill, with the exception of bread factories and hospitals. The operation of oil fields, plants, factories, international and nationwide transport hubs crossing Azerbaijan was suspended. People wore black





ribbons on their chest. Many men kept beards as a sign of mourning, while women regularly wore black headscarves.

20 January 1990 is the date of a Soviet Communist shooting in Azerbaijan, a tragic act of intimidation and suppression, i.e. reprisal against unarmed people. The





next morning, the streets of the city where it occurred, as well as the paths followed by those who carried the dead bodies on their shoulders, were covered with carnations. Since then, these beautiful flowers, which became symbols of a tragedy, have not been presented to loved ones, but instead, they are laid upon people's graves.

Dark-red carnations are a symbol of pain and sorrow, as well as pride, fearlessness, courage and love of the people for their homeland. Over 32 years that have passed since the 20 January tragedy, Azerbaijanis have been holding a mourning march along the same route every year. They start walking from the central square toward the old cemetery in the former upland park, which is currently the Alley of Martyrs. Afterwards, those killed in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War were buried at the same location.

20 January is a day of remembrance and mourning, as well as a day of pride for those who did not spare their lives for freedom. They courageously faced tanks without weapons, countering a dictatorship and injustice.

20 January is the birth-date of a new country called Azerbaijan that is free and powerful. It is strong due to its martyrs who fell in a holy struggle, fighting for our lives! ❀

