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# MASSACRES OF AZERBAIJANIS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

*From the editor*

*31 March 2021 marks the 103<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the genocide of Azerbaijanis. On this date in 1918, Armenian armed formations supported by Bolshevik detachments launched massacres against the Azerbaijani population in the cities of Baku, Guba, Shamakhi, Lankaran, as well as Karabakh, Nakhchivan and Zangezur. The massacres continued until July, claiming the lives of more than 50,000 people. The following is an article showing that the events of 1918 were carefully planned and had serious historical prerequisites and political undertones. The genocide of Azerbaijanis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was underpinned by a policy of creating a mythical "Great Armenia from sea to sea", in the name of which rabid nationalists sacrificed hundreds of thousands of human lives.*

**T**he 20th century, perhaps like few other historical periods, is full of the most important events from the point of view of the development of the Azerbaijani statehood. The most significant among them, of course, is the proclamation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on 28 May 1918. The first parliamentary republic in the Muslim East did not last long, until the Bolshevik coup on 28 April 1920, and then the country was occupied by communist Russia. However, the main state attributes were preserved for the next 70 years until the Republic of Azerbaijan appeared on the world map in 1991 and declared itself the successor of the ADR.

Unfortunately, in parallel with these achievements in the development of modern forms of statehood, the Azerbaijani people were destined to experience a number of tragic events during this period of time, which resulted in countless victims, deportations and territorial losses. The driving force behind these events,

which took place in different historical conditions, was Armenian nationalism. Its territorial claims received full support from leading geopolitical actors in the Caucasus region.

It should be noted that these processes go back to the beginning of the 19th century, when immediately after the signing of the Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) peace treaties, which formalized the seizure of northern Azerbaijani lands by Russia, the Armenians started to be moved to these lands from Iran and Turkey on the instructions of Emperor Nicholas I. This campaign primarily affected the territories of the Nakhchivan, Iravan and Karabakh khanates and was aimed at the subsequent deportation of the indigenous Muslim population. Already in March 1828, the Russian authorities established a new administrative entity on the territory of the Nakhchivan and Iravan khanates, called the "Armenian province", which existed until 1840. During this time, the Armenian

Map of the “Great Armenia” compiled by modern Armenian researchers showing Armenia’s territorial claims



population in this territory was doubled, and although Azerbaijanis continued to prevail numerically, statements were already being made that this was “original Armenian land”.

By the end of the 19th century, as the expansion of the European powers supported by the policy of the split of the Ottoman Empire intensified in the Near and Middle East, radical Armenian parties “Hnchak” and “Dashnaksutyun” appeared. This marked the start of focused and well-organized political activities accompanied by terror and aimed at creating an Armenian state in the east of Asia Minor and the territory adjacent to the South Caucasus. In February 1905, Armenian radicals took advantage of the weakening of public institutions as a result of the first Russian revolution and provoked an armed clash between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Baku. The event served as a signal for whipping up interethnic strife and bloody clashes quickly broke out in the Baku, Iravan, Tiflis and Elizavetpol (Ganja) provinces, especially in Karabakh

and Zangezur, as well as other places throughout the South Caucasus. The clashes lasted about two years. In total, as a result of tragic events, 158 Azerbaijani and 128 Armenian villages were destroyed or burned, while the death toll ranges from 3,000 to 10,000 according to various sources (1).

It is worth noting that many representatives of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia of that time accurately identified the motives of actions and plans of the forces interested in this strife and involved in it. Prominent public figure Khosrov Bey Dovlatov wrote: “... the Armenians were preparing to implement their ideas according to the most carefully developed plan – to cut off the entire mountain strip of the Elizavetpol and Tiflis provinces and, together with the Kars region, join Turkish Armenia, thus creating an independent Armenian state. But thanks to the subtle policies of the Ottoman and Russian governments, they did not achieve this goal” (2). Besides, the Azerbaijanis, “without having an organization like “Dashnaksutyun”, acting spontaneously,

*Destruction in the city of Shusha after Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes in 1905*

armed insufficiently and without even having undergone basic military training”, managed to put up stiff resistance and repel the attacks of the much better organized Armenian detachments (3).

In 1911, a prominent Azerbaijani writer and playwright of the first half of the last century, Mammad Sayid Ordubadi, prepared and published, with financial support of renowned oil industrialist Murtuza Mukhtarov, a valuable collection of unique documents entitled “Bloody Years”. It is an impartial chronicle based on more than 600 different documentary sources, including 245 letters from representatives of various social and national groups, among them Armenians. The author does not confine himself to a mere statement of facts, but undertakes to analyze the reasons, including the following: the “bloody show” staged by the Dashnaks in the Caucasus; inaction and indifference of local authorities; lack of experience and preparation of Azerbaijanis for provocations against them and for armed struggle; active support of Western powers for Armenian extremist movement to create a “great Armenia” in Asia Minor and the South Caucasus (4). It is noteworthy that at the beginning of the book the

author calls on both peoples to learn from these tragic events and ponder the mistakes made during these two years (1905-1906) (5).

Subsequent events showed that the Armenian side, which acted as the instigator of the bloody clashes, did learn a “lesson” from what happened, but in a slightly different context. Seeing the stubborn resistance of the Azerbaijanis and the actions of the Russian authorities, which ultimately ended the bloody riots, the Armenian extremists concluded that in order to seize the lands populated by the Azerbaijanis, it was necessary to deploy the army or establish an alliance with the authorities and other Christian communities, and at a later stage achieve complete disarmament of Azerbaijani troops. After these problems were out of the way, the plan was to implement the “technical task” of carrying out ethnic cleansing of the territory of the future “great Armenia”. Both the massacres of 1918 and the tragic events that began in 1988 indicate that Armenian extremists acted and continue to act against the Azerbaijanis exactly according to this scenario.

The collapse of the Russian Empire and the subsequent coming to power of the Bolsheviks in 1917

*Destruction in the city of Shusha after Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes in 1905*

opened a new page in the history of the South Caucasus, full of shocks and armed conflicts. As a result of many years of focused work, Armenian ideologists succeeded in ensuring that Russia and the Western powers included the issue of the "Armenian state" in their strategic plans for the South Caucasus. At the same time, paradoxically, neither the Western powers nor Russia, which did not consider the oil-rich Baku to be an Azerbaijani city, recognized the political rights of Azerbaijanis, the most numerous people in the region. Under such



circumstances, the emergence on the political arena of the Azerbaijani liberal-nationalist party "Musavat", which defended the interests of the Azerbaijani people, could not but disturb the Bolsheviks, who did not conceal their intentions to restore Russian control over all their former possessions, and Armenian national radicals, who began to gradually implement plans on the creation of an Armenian state on Azerbaijani lands. By March 1918, Armenian extremists using armed attacks, forcible expulsion and massacres of the peaceful Muslim population managed to clear significant territories in the Kars region, the Iravan province and a number of territories in the Elizavetpol (Ganja) provinces. In Iravan province alone, 199 villages were devastated or destroyed (6).

But the fate of a "great Armenia" was being dealt with in the cities, not least in Baku, where Stepan Shaumyan, who was appointed by Lenin as extraordinary commissar for the Caucasus, worked hard. He bent over backwards to strengthen the Soviet power in Baku, making statements like "dreaming of Azerbaijan's autonomy, the Musavatists will receive a heap of ruins" (7). During this period, the Bolsheviks developed plans to isolate Baku and other Caspian districts of the Baku province from the rest of Azerbaijan for subsequent annexation to the RSFSR. This policy

fully met the interests of the Armenian Dashnaks, as it facilitated the implementation of their plan to create an Armenian state on the territory of the former Baku and Elizavetpol provinces (8). Thus, common interests in the fight against Azerbaijani parties prompted the Bolsheviks, whose Baku organizations were ruled by ethnic Armenians, to enter into a tactical alliance with Armenian nationalist groups, among which the leftist "Dashnaksutyun" party stood out for its activity and influence. Both sides began to build military forces. Former high-ranking officers of the Russian army of Armenian nationality were also actively involved in organizing an Armenian corps in Petrograd, sending armored trains, cars, vehicles, equipment, ammunition, and even an ambulance train from there. In addition, generals of the former tsarist army I. Baghramyan and A. Bagratuni, as well as one of the founders of the "Dashnaksutyun" party, S. Zoryan, also known as Rost, arrived in Baku on 6-7 February 1918 (9). The Armenian National Council tried in every possible way to detain Armenian soldiers returning from the front in Baku. In early March, the council issued an appeal to "Armenian soldiers", urging them not to part with their weapons and be ready to use them everywhere to protect the interests of the Armenian nation (10). At the same time, new units of the "red army" subordinated

*Destruction in the city of Shusha after Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes in 1905*

to the Baku Soviet were formed. The assembly of these formations was handled by the secretary of the executive committee of the Baku Soviet, B. Avakyan. As a result, the so-called "Red Guard" of 10,000-12,000 fighters was formed, of which about 70 percent were Armenians (11). According to Stepan Shaumyan himself, the number of Bolshevik forces was "about 6,000", and "Dashnaksutyun" had "national detachments of 3,000-4,000 people" (12).

On 29 March, these formations disarmed 48 Azerbaijani soldiers who were preparing to sail to Lankaran on the "Evelina" steamer after attending the funeral of their friend, the son of well-known philanthropist Z. Tagiyev, who died as a result of careless handling of a weapon. This was an open provocation that served as a signal for armed clashes. On the evening of 30 March, Bolshevik-Dashnak formations attacked the city center and the outskirts inhabited by Muslims, which, at the same time, began to be fired at by artillery from ships of the Caspian Flotilla and bombed from airplanes. The savage reprisals against peaceful Azerbaijanis, as well as robberies and looting, continued for three days, spilling out beyond the city to cover a number of suburban villages. In total, Bolsheviks and Dashnaks killed more than 12,000 people in Baku and its environs. According to approximate estimates, the

overwhelming majority of these people were women, children and old people. On 31 March, a group of representatives of the Muslim population appealed to the Baku Council and personally to Shaumyan to stop the bloodshed, declaring acceptance of the ultimatum on recognizing the authority of the Baku Council presented on the eve and withdrawal of all Muslim detachments from the city. After that, an armistice was announced, but robberies and murders of Muslims continued in the city until commanders of the 36th Turkestan Regiment and sailors of the Caspian Flotilla demanded an end to the excesses, threatening to withdraw from subordination to the Baku Council (13).

The atrocities against unarmed Azerbaijani population by military formations of the Baku Council and the Dashnaks in late March and early April 1918 were described in Azerbaijan as a national tragedy and genocide of the Azerbaijani people. In addition, as a result of artillery and aerial bombardment, hundreds of buildings and houses in Baku, including historical and cultural sites, were destroyed and entire neighborhoods were wiped off the face of the earth. According to the most approximate estimates, the material damage amounted to 400 million rubles (14).

On the same days, the Bolsheviks and Dashnaks unleashed bloody pogroms of the Muslim population in

the ancient city of Shamakhi and neighboring villages. Starting from late 1917, weapons and ammunition were delivered there from Baku. These were stored in Armenian villages. From 29 March to 10 April, the Bolshevik-Dashnak military formations supported by local Molokans carried out two attacks on Shamakhi, turning the Muslim quarters of the city into ruins and ashes. Thirteen mosques were set ablaze together with the civilians taking refuge inside. Ultimately, out of more than 21,000 people of the city's Muslim population, over 8,000 were killed and material damage caused exceeded 1 billion rubles (15). On these and subsequent days, 110 villages of the Shamakhi district were destroyed and ruined, in which 10,341 people were killed, including 4,359 women and children. Damage in the amount of 607,167,420 rubles was caused (16). Subsequently, the pogroms spread to the neighboring Goychay, Javad, Aresh, Nukha districts where hundreds of villages were ravaged and burned, and their inhabitants were either killed or forced to flee. In such a situation, epidemics broke out, which, together with those who died from starvation, claimed many times more lives than the number of those killed.

From late April to mid-May, a detachment of 3,000 people under the command of notorious Dashnak leader Amazasp committed bloody pogroms in the city of Guba and 167 surrounding villages. As a result, more than 4,000 civilians were killed (17). Pogroms of the peaceful Muslim population also covered the outskirts of the city of Ganja, Lankaran and Zangezur districts, as well as all Azerbaijani settlements of Karabakh. A real threat was posed to the existence of the Azerbaijani people as such: the Baku Council under the leadership of Stepan Shaumyan was preparing to seize the last essentially Azerbaijani stronghold of Ganja and thereby finally resolve the "Azerbaijani question". This meant the destruction of the newly emerged fragile state, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, proclaimed on 28 May. However, the arrival of the Turkish military and the heroic epic of the "Caucasian Islamic Army" that followed from July to September led to the liberation of Azerbaijani lands from the Bolshevik-Dashnak formations. Its entry into Baku on 15 September dramatically changed the situation.

On 15 July 1918, the ADR government formed an Extraordinary Commission of Inquiry to study the massive crimes against the life and property of the Muslim population committed in the South Caucasus since the start of World War I. The commission collected 50

*Remains of victims of the genocide of Azerbaijanis in March 1918. Guba city*



volumes of documents (18). This was the first experience of a legal and political assessment of the genocide against the Azerbaijanis, the starting point of the process, which culminated in a decree of President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev of 26 March 1998, which declared 31 March as the Day of Genocide (19).

Unfortunately, massacres and ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis are not only a topic for historians, but also a burning problem of our days. In 1988, at the height



*Destroyed and burnt quarters of Shamakhi, March 1918*

*A document of the Extraordinary Investigative Commission established by the Azerbaijani government to investigate the genocide of Azerbaijanis in March 1918*

127.

Г. Председателю Extraordinary Комиссии в городе Кюба.

18/11 1918 г.

Старшего Помощника Кубинского Уездного Начальника Велимир Бека Аманшибекова.

## З а я в л е н и е

Мною было заявлено Вамелу Высокоблагородию, что прибывшим на ст. Качмазь в марте этого года для скотоводства в Кюбу, армянами протаманным отрядом во главе Амоса Сопенко до основания собственноручно принаделенный деревянный дом крытый палаткой, в 3-х комнатах, одна из комнат большая зала с печью при доме и русской печуркой. Дать этот сундук мною в 15.000 рублей.

18 декабря 1918 года  
гор. Кюба.

Старший Помощник  
Уездного Начальника *Севакян*

trived Karabakh problem, almost 200,000 Azerbaijanis were forcibly deported from their ancestral lands on the territory of present-day Armenia with the active participation of the Soviet army. The deportation was accompanied by bloody excesses in which dozens of civilians were killed. At the next stage, well-armed and trained detachments of Armenian militants unfolded aggression in Karabakh and borderline districts of Azerbaijan. The Kremlin, clearly ignoring these unprecedented events for the USSR, staged a defiantly aggressive army operation in Baku and a number of other regions of Azerbaijan in January 1990. As a result, according to official figures, 138 civilians were killed, including women, children and the elderly, and 700 people were injured.

With the collapse of the USSR, the Armenian aggression assumed the nature of a full-scale interstate war, which ultimately, with the direct participation of the Russian army, led to the occupation of 20 percent of the territory of Azerbaijan. At the end of February 1992, the Armenian forces supported by the military personnel of the "armed forces of the CIS", destroyed the ancient city of Khojaly and perpetrated a monstrous reprisal against its inhabitants: 613 people were killed, 421 were wounded

of perestroika and glasnost in the USSR, Armenian nationalists already disguised in the opportunistic toga of democracy, supported by a number of circles in the top Kremlin leadership, made open territorial claims to Azerbaijan – in full accordance with the memorable events of 1905-1906. The Azerbaijani people once again faced a sudden and large-scale provocation, which was an important component of the Kremlin's planned policy. Against the background of anti-Azerbaijani propaganda hysteria around the con-

and 1,275 were captured or went missing (20). These tragic events have been inscribed in the modern history of Azerbaijan as genocide in Khojaly.

Today, the Azerbaijani state is carrying out work to inform the world community about the crimes committed by Armenian radical nationalists against the Azerbaijani people in previous decades, including the Khojaly tragedy. The recognition of it as an act of genocide on the international platform is an important direction of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. 🌟

*General view of a memorial for the victims of the genocide of Azerbaijanis in March 1918*



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