

Unrest spreads in Soviet Union, East bloc satellite countries

by Mark Burdman

Amid continuing reports of atrocities in the Armenia-Azerbaijan region of the Soviet Union and new waves of unrest in the East bloc satellite states, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. met on March 9 to discuss "intercommunal tensions." With the heads of the Communist parties of Azerbaijan and Armenia in attendance, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov issued the stark warning that "the achievements of 70 years of Soviet history" could be jeopardized, unless such tensions as have developed in the Armenia-Azerbaijan area, were put under control.

Radio Moscow the next day reported that the Central Committee had instructed the Soviet Politburo to urgently find ways to resolve the conflict between Armenians and Azeris over sovereignty of the disputed, Armenian-inhabited region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is in Soviet Azerbaijan, but which the Armenians are demanding be placed under Soviet Armenian control.

On the day of the Central Committee meeting, Soviet press spokesman Gennady Gerasimov tried to dispel alarm, telling reporters that the situation in the area of tension had "normalized." Gerasimov was charitable enough to admit that previous Soviet estimates that 31 people had died in rioting in the Azerbaijan city of Sumgait were wrong, the actual number was 32! Accounts made available to *EIR*, however, suggest that the number is at least 2,000, and the figure of 1,500 has begun to appear in the West German press.

Additionally, there has been anti-Armenian violence in Azerbaijan in the city of Kirovabad, where at least 10 Armenians were killed, and in the small town of Shamkhor. In the strategically central city of Baku, clashes have also been reported, although details are not known. In Baku, all sports events have been canceled, to avoid crowds forming.

While Gerasimov was speaking, reports were coming into Moscow, synopsised in the March 10 *Times* of London and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of West Germany, about the atrocities that had taken place in Sumgait. Armenian refugees streaming into Moscow reported indiscriminate beatings, rapes, and other horrors. One refugee stated: "What is happening to our people is a repetition of 1915 [the genocide of Armenians], and yet it seems the Soviet authorities are trying to stop us from finding out about it. But they will

not succeed." A committee of 13 Soviet Armenian influentials has been formed, to handle the refugee flow.

Additionally, because whole apartment blocks and neighborhoods where Armenians lived were demolished in Sumgait, thousands of homeless Armenians are awaiting repatriation to Armenia.

Immediately before the Central Committee meeting, it was clear that any deal that Gorbachov thought he had with Soviet Armenia had broken down. On March 7, 300,000 people took to the streets for new protest actions, and were addressed by prominent Armenian actors, theater directors, and other cultural personalities.

General strikes in Soviet Armenia are planned for the period up to March 26, the date by which Gorbachov has promised to come up with some response to Armenian demands that Nagorno-Karabakh be transferred to Armenia. From March 18-23, Shiite Islamic holidays and festivals are being celebrated in Soviet Azerbaijan, and there is apprehension that new outbreaks of anti-Armenian activity could occur then.

In Azerbaijan, meanwhile, the huge crackdown continues, enforced by divisions of Red Army troops, who are conveniently in place should any crisis erupt in Iran, which borders Azerbaijan.

More generally, throughout Soviet Central Asia, in Tadzhikistan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizia, and Turkmenistan, it can be expected that the Moscow authorities will employ the "iron fist" to deal with the populations there. The signal for this was an article in the military daily *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*) March 8, warning, in substance, that the "inferior races" among the Soviet Asian Muslim populations were misbehaving, and had to be whipped into line by their Russian-race masters. The article said that the situation in Central Asia had become "impossible," with growing "militaristic-pacifistic" tendencies, and evasion of military service. "Religious preoccupations and prejudices" were still massive, often producing "unfriendly acts toward soldiers" of the Red Army. To counter these "new negative symptoms," the paper warned, there had to be an offensive launched in "ideological and patriotic education." Especially worrisome, was that "Soviet war songs and hymns are unknown, as is the Russian language in general."

Flashpoint East Europe, 1988

Management of such crises would be less complex for the Soviet Russian leadership, were it not for the simultaneous unrest hitting the East bloc. One highly informed expert on East bloc affairs told *EIR* March 7: "1988 is the year that we will have an East bloc crisis on our hands."

In **Poland**, the situation began to explode in a new way March 8, the 20th anniversary date of student uprisings in 1968, with student demonstrations in Warsaw, Krakow, Gdansk, Wroclaw, and Lublin. According to France's *Le Figaro* March 10, in Warsaw, the Polish anti-riot police, the so-called "zomos," charged students who had gathered in front of the St. Anne's Church, often throwing them to the ground and beating them up.

These events are only the tip of the iceberg. Whether it be students, workers, or other groups in Poland, the factor driving the dissatisfaction and unrest, and making the situation so volatile, is a horrifying economic collapse. There are extreme, continual shortages of such non-food necessities as toilet paper, soap, women's hygienic articles, and medicine. Even at the minimum expected 1988 inflation rate of 40%, the cost of living by the end of the year will have nearly doubled since the end of 1986, and increased more than ninefold since the end of 1979.

As volatile as Poland is, many informed East bloc experts anticipate that **Hungary** will be the first country to explode. Even though no significant unrest has been manifested so far, the level of austerity is reaching such proportions, that the "stability" which has prevailed since 1956, could rapidly unravel. Hungary is squeezed between the demands of the Soviet war machine and Western usurers, the latter insisting that credit conditions for Hungary will be drastically tightened. In December 1987, a sweeping austerity program was adopted, which allocates 75% of 1988 export earnings for debt repayment. The government set the goal of reducing the living standard by 2.5%, but experts predict a 5% drop in 1988. Cuts will be made in state subsidies to unprofitable heavy industry enterprises, especially in coal and steel. The government estimates that by the end of 1990, at least 200,000 will become unemployed through these measures. The hardest hit by austerity will be Hungary's 2,600,000 pensioners, 25% of the population, whose average purchasing power has already fallen 30% since 1975.

Neighboring **Romania**, which is stripping its internal resources bare to repay foreign debt, is also ripe for unrest.

In **Czechoslovakia**, on March 6, 10,000 people—the largest number in decades—attended mass at St. Agnes Cathedral in Prague. Following this, 1,000 were received at the residence of Czech Cardinal Tomasek. The authorities responded in two ways. On the spot, 20 people were arrested. Before the event, the government had stopped trains and buses in various parts of the country, which would have brought thousands more people to the event. During the gathering, people chanted, "Long live the Church! Long live the

Pope! We want our bishops!" Of 13 bishoprics in Czechoslovakia, 10 bishops' seats are vacant.

Here too, the economic situation is extremely bad, and as political tensions heat up one front, other things can easily be set in motion.

In **East Germany**, the authorities arrested about 200 people over the March 5-6 weekend, in a new wave of crack-downs. In East Germany, the economy is more of a "wild card" than would seem obvious on the surface. Some of East

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Germany's most developed technological capabilities, for example, in electronics and optics, have been looted by the Soviets for the U.S.S.R.'s war build-up.

Outside the formal bloc itself, but most relevant to all the other countries, is the case of **Yugoslavia**, especially as Gorbachov arrives in the country March 14 for an unusual state visit. The volatility of the Yugoslavian internal situation, was a central subject at the March 5-6 meeting of the European Community foreign ministers in Constance, West Germany, where evaluations were presented that Yugoslavia was on the brink of economic collapse and political disintegration. Informed London banking sources warn that the country is on the brink of "balkanization." Interestingly, Soviet radio March 9 reported that Gorbachov would present a plan to "help out Yugoslavia with large-scale economic aid."

One possibility in Yugoslavia, which had been hinted at by the country's military leaders at various points during 1987, is that there could be a coup by the military, to hold Yugoslavia together. The Army is, on the one hand, disgusted at the crumbling, decaying political situation. On the other hand, recent austerity measures declared by the Yugoslav government, have included slashing the budget for defense, which may become the "last straw" for the military leadership.