

# Armenia crackdown belies 'glasnost'

by Konstantin George

Only weeks after the All-Union Party Conference that Western media-watchers were told showed the Soviet Union embracing the "liberal" ideas of *glasnost*, on July 18, 1988, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov proclaimed a ruthless suppression against Armenia, one of the Captive Nations inside the U.S.S.R. The Supreme Soviet convened to discuss the crisis in Armenia, where a general strike had been under way for two weeks, and the Armenian-inhabited region of Karabakh, located in the Republic of Azerbaijan, where a general strike has been in effect since May 23.

Gorbachov's speech, delivered in nervous tones, reflected Moscow's decision to prepare to use force to deal with the storm inside Armenia and Karabakh that the crackdown would cause. Resorting to Stalinist vocabulary, Gorbachov denounced the protesting Armenians as "extremists," and "provocateurs," engaged in a "dirty, backhanded maneuver": "Opponents of the *perestroika*, conservative and corrupt elements, are speculating with the problem of Karabakh." Gorbachov threatened that if the protests don't stop, "we'll have to resort to the use of force." The Communist Party boss stressed: "What we are presently passing through is a period filled with tests," such as the crisis in Armenia and Karabakh, which has created "enormous damage" to *perestroika*, the build-up of a war economy, designed by the Soviet military high command.

The Soviet leadership has decided to crush the revolt in Armenia and Karabakh, as an object lesson to other Captive Nations in the European part of the U.S.S.R. The Baltic republics have been in intense ferment for months, and, in June, mass protests (with 50,000 on one occasion) occurred in the Western Ukrainian city of Lvov.

The party heads of the non-Russian republics stressed this theme: Deal with Armenia, now, decisively, before other republics erupt. This was declared by Vladimir Shcherbitski, Politburo member and Ukrainian party boss, in his speech before the Supreme Soviet. Shcherbitski, an accomplished liar and thug, began by reporting, oh so modestly, that he has "accepted" the "criticism" of "the Ukrainian people," for not having spoken out before, and that the same "Ukrainian people" "demand" from the Politburo and other leading organs in Moscow: "Why have you not decisively acted to put an end to such unrest?" and "demand" that "where necessary that the use of force be employed."

Shcherbitski warned that "forces from abroad" are "using the events" in the Transcaucasus, and "trying to replicate" them in other Soviet regions.

## Conjuncture

In the Transcaucasus itself, the situation has reached a dangerous turning point. Previously, the Armenians had friendly feelings toward the Russians, who were seen, under the veil of intense anti-Turkish paranoia, as "protectors." Yet Moscow, faced with the choice of losing the Armenians' loyalty or risking explosions in Azerbaijan and other Turkic regions of the U.S.S.R., opted for the former. As a result, what had begun in February as a primarily anti-Azerbaijani (anti-Turk) mass movement in Armenia and Karabakh, has become a mass movement against "the Russians."

As we go to press, mass arrests have begun in Armenia. Radio Moscow, the afternoon of July 21, timed with the weekly Politburo meeting, denounced the "economic chaos" in Armenia and Karabakh, as "targeting economically vulnerable areas to create economic paralysis and economic sabotage." The Karabakh Strike Committee was also charged with "stockpiling arms and petrol bombs, engaging in insidious actions in factories . . . intimidating local officials, and conniving with local police officials to prevent arrests." The Radio Moscow broadcast named 12 members of the Karabakh Strike Committee as "responsible" for these crimes, and announced that so far, six have been arrested. According to sketchy reports seeping through from Armenia, many more have been arrested.

However, the resistance has not been broken. The general strike in both Armenia and Karabakh was relaunched under very dramatic circumstances. On the evening of July 20, one day after the crackdown resolution of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet had been made public, a crowd of over 400,000 (not 200,000 as the Western press had falsely stated) gathered in Yerevan, Armenia's capital. They booed the Armenian party leadership, just returned from the Supreme Soviet session, whose appeals to end the strike fell on deaf ears. The crowd, raising clenched fists, rejected the Moscow decisions on Karabakh.

The showdown is now set. Moscow has 200,000 troops in Armenia alone (including army and "interior troops," but excluding all local Armenian security forces) and tens of thousands additionally in Azerbaijan and Karabakh, not to speak of the military forces stationed in nearby Georgia. Lt. General Rodionov, the commander of the Transcaucasus Military District, and former commander of Soviet forces in Afghanistan, has far more troops under his present command than he had in Afghanistan.

There is of course, a military-strategic dimension to this unprecedented military build-up in the Transcaucasus, under the cover of the unrest. It has given Moscow the objective capability to strike outward, or to intimidate NATO ally Turkey, or to meddle into post-Khomeini Iran.