

# Crisis not ended in Soviet Transcaucasus

by Konstantin George

On Sept. 27, two days after an ultimatum from Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov to the Central Asian republic of Azerbaijan to end its blockade of Armenia, or else force would be employed, Soviet radio proclaimed the “end” to Azerbaijan’s four-week rail blockade of the neighboring republic. Soviet radio announced that “the first trains have arrived in Armenia after Azerbaijan lifted the blockade.” It thus appeared, on the surface, that Gorbachov’s ultimatum had succeeded, and that the crisis between the two ethnic groups in the Transcaucasus was beginning to wind down. Surface appearances are almost always deceptive, and this case was no exception.

The Soviet announcement was at best a half-truth, and the smell of a statement designed to win political capital for Gorbachov, while covering up an actual worsening of the crisis, was already evident in the very next sentence of the broadcast: “However, several freight trains are missing, including one with food,” and most cargoes are still being airlifted.

Armenia depends on rail lines that run through Azerbaijan for 85% of its supplies, and the blockade, which terminated shipments of fuel, food, raw materials, and construction materials, had brought all of Armenia’s transport and auto traffic to a halt, shut down most industry, and stopped all post-earthquake reconstruction work. In short, in the first case ever where one Soviet republic blockaded another one, Armenia’s economy was crippled. Armenia is totally dependent on Azerbaijan for fuel.

On Sept. 27, the “first trains,” seven to be precise, did arrive in Armenia, in an Armenia where no civilian motor transport operates because there is no gasoline or diesel fuel. The trains brought desperately needed building materials, machinery, paper, and coal for winter heating (winters are severe in Armenia); other shipments arrived with food. Azerbaijan did not end the blockade, but changed tactics to “confine” the blockade to fuel. Everything that reached Armenia got no further than the train station, where the supplies were unloaded, to sit and rot, awaiting, due to the absence of fuel, non-existent motor transport.

Moscow’s grandiose announcement that the blockade had been “lifted,” got Gorbachov off the hook, temporarily, in that he was not compelled to use the military against the Azerbaijanis, which would have certainly precipitated a

bloody guerrilla war against Moscow in that mountainous Muslim republic—where hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis have, since 1988, acquired arms—and other, unpredictable consequences.

How long Gorbachov can postpone deploying troops without entailing major political consequences for himself, is questionable. The disruption of Transcaucasian rail service has already passed the blockade stage. The Soviet government daily *Izvestia* of Sept. 28 reported that a rail bridge in Azerbaijan, near Karabakh, had been blown up. Guerrilla war is already beginning. The U.S.S.R. Interior Troops, which Gorbachov placed under his personal control before the September Central Committee Plenum, are being mobilized for such a contingency. Timed with Gorbachov’s Sept. 25 ultimatum, an entire elite division of Interior Troops, composed of “special units,” (recruited from ex-Army Airborne and Afghan War special forces veterans) were flown into Azerbaijan’s Karabakh region, where many Armenians live. The troops had arrived from Uzbekistan’s Fergana Valley, where they had been sent in June to quell the Uzbek pogroms against Meshketian Turks.

The urgency of the situation in Armenia and Azerbaijan was underscored by Interior Ministry Gen. Vladimir Yegorov, in a Moscow press conference on Sept. 26. He stressed that even though the “first trains” had arrived in Armenia, no food and no fuel were getting through. Yegorov warned that if the blockade were not totally lifted, then “the forces of the state” would be employed to break the blockade.

## Military grows impatient

Soviet military impatience over Gorbachov’s tough words but do-nothing stance toward the blockade and national unrest in general, is very high. Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov in his speech to the Central Committee Plenum Sept. 20, warned that “nationalist and extremist forces” are not only active throughout the Soviet Union, where he singled out the Baltic republics and the Transcaucasus, but had begun “to find an echo” within the Armed Forces itself. He demanded that “a stinging rebuff” be given to these forces.

The Transcaucasian theater is but one of many crisis arenas troubling Moscow. In October, the Baltic Popular Fronts will hold congresses, and renew their campaign for wide-ranging autonomy and future independence. The next round of mass strikes in the Ukraine and Russia will probably begin also in October. In the other Warsaw Pact satellite states, the economic-political crises in Poland, Hungary and East Germany, will also heavily intensify as winter comes on.

Gorbachov’s preemptive strike at the September plenum, ousting three Politburo opponents, has given him a short-term political stability. However, the current emergency in the Transcaucasus, and the inevitable October upheavals, will provoke new and bitter rounds in the power struggle raging in the Soviet leadership.