

# Soviets bring Transcaucasus troops to ‘wartime strength’

by Konstantin George

After five days of anti-Armenian pogroms in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku and bloody civil war between armed Armenians and Azeris, Soviet Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov on Jan. 18 announced a callup of Soviet Army reservists, primarily combat-hardened veterans of the Afghanistan War, to rush reinforcements into the Transcaucasus, and bring Soviet forces in that strategically important area to “wartime strength.” Yazov announced that “A decision has been adopted to carry out a full mobilization of [military] formations from certain regions of the Soviet Union, to enable them to take part in maintaining order, discipline, and the good organization of the state of emergency,” proclaimed two days earlier by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov for the Armenian-inhabited district of Nagorno-Karabakh and other districts in Azerbaijan. Yazov also declared, “In order to ensure order, we are compelled to bring up to wartime strength a certain proportion of the units located in that area,” referring to the Transcaucasus Military District, embracing the three republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, bordering on Iran and Turkey.

Yazov added that a further purpose of the mobilization of Afghanistan veteran reservists was to “replace units being transferred to the Transcaucasus Military District.” That one sentence revealed that the reason for the reserve callup extends beyond the immediate crisis in the Transcaucasus. It means that additional Army units, including airborne and other elite units, are being created to fill in gaps caused by sending Army forces, including large numbers of paratroopers, to Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In short, an overall buildup of the Soviet Army is under way, and the period of Soviet unilateral troop reductions has ended, at least for the time being.

The troop buildup had begun before Yazov’s announce-

ment. Between Jan. 14 and 17, some 11,000 elite troops, consisting of 6,000 from the Special Units of the Interior Ministry’s forces, and 5,000 Army paratroopers, had been flown into Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. At one level, the need for Army troops as such is clear: Helpless Armenian civilians must be protected; the pogroms must be stopped, and the civil war must be halted. But are such goals Moscow’s policy for the Transcaucasian region? Let’s look at the record, the on-the-ground story of what has transpired in the Transcaucasus since early 1988, when that conflict first erupted with the pogroms against Armenians in the Azerbaijan city of Sumgait.

## Divide and conquer

The Transcaucasus consists of three main national groups: Georgians and Armenians (both Christian), and the Muslim Turkic Azerbaijanis. By the beginning of 1988, a mass independence movement was sweeping all three nations, with all pursuing in parallel a common goal of throwing off the Russian yoke.

Along with the hope that national rebirth in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan brought for each of these captive nations, potentially fatal weaknesses were evident in these independence movements. The cardinal rule for waging a successful liberation struggle—“united we stand, divided we fall”—was partially observed, in that some Armenian-Georgian coordination was achieved. However, no attempt was made to put aside decades of mutual suspicion and animosity between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, for the cause of working together against imperial Moscow.

The failure to overcome a legacy of Armenian-Azerbaijani historic and cultural animosity suddenly turned into a violent inter-ethnic conflict; this was the fault of neither Ar-

menians nor Azerbaijanis. The conflict was ignited by the Soviet KGB, which recruited gangs of Azeri youths and outright criminal elements, to conduct the February 1988 pogroms against Armenians in Sumgait.

Every society has its riff-raff, and this tiny minority of Azerbaijan's population has been the KGB's recruiting ground for the pogroms. It is a fact, for example, though concealed by the media, that for every Armenian killed or injured in a pogrom, there have been hundreds of cases where Azerbaijanis have hidden and protected Armenians from the mobs.

What happened in Sumgait set the tone for what has since followed in the Transcaucasus. The massacre of Armenians could have been stopped, had Moscow taken resolute action on the first day of the pogrom. Moscow did nothing. Only after three days of slaughter, were Soviet Army troops finally sent to Sumgait to "restore order." Moscow willfully created the so-called "Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict," by launching the Sumgait pogrom, and allowing that pogrom to make the maximum psychological impact on the Armenians' fear of "another holocaust at the hands of Turks," by permitting the blood-letting to continue for three days.

The same pattern reestablished itself in subsequent pogroms: in all cases begun by KGB-directed gangs, and in all cases no immediate response by the Moscow authorities, to maximize hatred between the two populations.

This is the classic tactic of a multinational empire in crisis: attempting to maintain imperial rule through schemes of "divide and conquer" against subjugated nations. This policy, analogous to Britain's creation and manipulation of Hindu-Muslim communal warfare in India, is the root cause of the tragedy in the Transcaucasus.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has now reached civil war dimensions, with groups of Armenians and Azerbaijanis, very well armed with automatic rifles, machine guns, armored personnel carriers, and even helicopters, attacking each other. The media mentions, correctly *in part*, that this huge arsenal of weapons has been "stolen" from arms depots. Let's explore this a bit more in detail. From exactly where and exactly how did this transfer of tens of thousands of weapons from depots into the hands of armed bands occur?

The weapons were "stolen" from depots belonging to the *native* Interior Ministry forces and police of Azerbaijan and Armenia, with the complicity of these forces. The "thefts" did not begin yesterday or last week. They have been going on for well over one year. Had Moscow wished to prevent full-scale civil war, it could have done exactly what happened in *every* East European country this past autumn, when the various workers' militias were disarmed: Order the Army to seize and transport to army depots all weapons stores belonging to the Interior Ministries of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Nothing of the sort was done, because policy was to allow the weapons' "thefts" to continue, month after month.

Even now, with the declaration of a state of emergency,

there are curious details in that declaration that raise questions as to whether "restoring order" is Moscow's goal. According to official figures released on Jan. 17, eighty persons, nearly all Armenians, have been killed in Azerbaijan, of whom 56 were killed in Baku. The total is clearly understated, but the *proportion*—nearly three-quarters of the deaths occurred in the Baku pogroms—is correct. Yet Baku was not included in the state of emergency.

## A policy of triage

Moscow's policy for the Transcaucasus as a whole can be summarized in two phrases: *economic triage* and *military-strategic real estate*. Since 1988, the Transcaucasus has been cut loose from the rest of the Soviet economy, through a policy of disinvestment, and severe restriction and even cutting off of vitally needed supplies. Moscow's concern in the region is, as Yazov stated, to build up its military presence there "to wartime strength," with a view toward future military options in the Turkey-Iran-Persian Gulf theater. Moscow does not care in the slightest about the fate of the native populations in the Transcaucasus.

There has been, for example, virtually no post-earthquake reconstruction in Armenia. Thirteen months after the earthquake devastated that republic, hundreds of thousands of Armenians are still homeless, living either with relatives or in unheated tents in the bitterly cold winter. For four months, in the summer and autumn of 1989, when the rail lines from Azerbaijan to Armenia and Georgia were blockaded, Moscow did nothing to break that blockade. Armenians and Georgians subsisted in large part on whatever they grew or produced locally. The same happened to Azerbaijan, as once the blockade was in force, Russia "logically" sharply reduced rail traffic into Azerbaijan. Since early 1988, aside from military-related infrastructure, there has been almost no new investment in these economies by the Soviet Union.

There is one potential ray of hope in this tragedy. The very appearance of the Soviet Army in force throughout the region will spark renewed anger from both Azerbaijanis and Armenians against their true oppressor, the Russian Empire. Inter-ethnic conflict will soon be joined by protracted *guerrilla war* against the Soviet forces. The nastiest anti-Russian guerrilla operations will be conducted by the Azerbaijanis, presenting Moscow with a dilemma. The Soviets must attempt to suppress such an armed revolt, but by doing so, they risk not only a full-scale Azerbaijani uprising, but also uprisings by Turkic Muslims throughout Central Asia. This outcome could very well force accelerated withdrawals of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, giving new opportunities for advancing the democratic revolution process there.

However, the perspective of mass uprisings, guerrilla war, and brutal suppression in the U.S.S.R.'s southern rim contains great dangers. As the Russian empire crumbles, the Soviet leadership will tend to behave more and more like the wounded bear at his most dangerous.