

EIR Feature

Armenia fights for independence from the Soviet empire

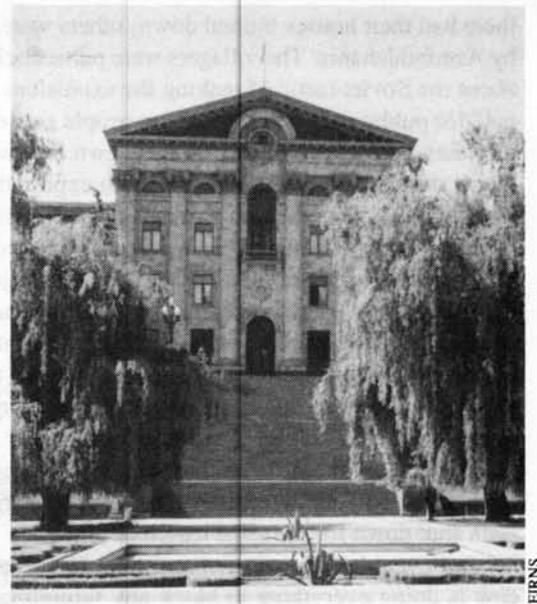
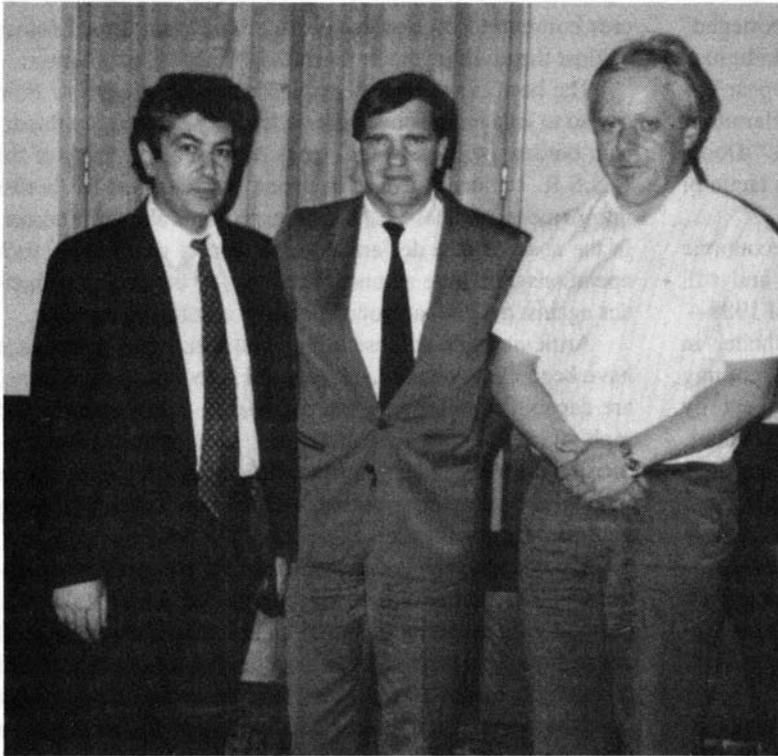
by Anno Hellenbroich

“The Army came with tanks. They hit us—first the soldiers, then the OMON [special forces], and behind them came the Azerbaidzhanis. We asked the soldiers: ‘Why are you doing this?’ They said, ‘This is on orders from Gorbachov.’ ” Sixty-year-old G.W. Adamirovic was agitatedly describing events of two months ago, when he was driven from his hometown of Getashen, which lies in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaidzhan north of the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. More than 50 people have been slain in just the last few weeks; mutilation, terror, looting, and arson mark the war run by the Moscow regime, in its drive to bring independence-minded Armenia to its knees.

In the past three years some 450,000 Armenians have been forcibly expelled from Azerbaidzhan. In emotional letters to the secretary general of the United Nations, to the President of the United States, and to the chairman of the French National Assembly, the democratically elected President of the Armenian Republic, Levon Ter-Petrossian, has sought immediate help to halt the deportations and murders at the hands of Soviet troops, special forces, and Azerbaidzhani militias.

In the letter to French National Assembly chairman Laurent Fabius, he wrote, “The Soviet Union is engaged in a virtual war against Armenia. During the last three weeks Armenian villages along the border with Azerbaidzhan have been assaulted by tanks, artillery, and helicopter gunships; the civilian population is being terrorized; local militia, our regular police functioning under the jurisdiction of the Armenian Interior Ministry, and civilian inhabitants have been taken hostage and incarcerated in Azerbaidzhan.”

So far there has been no appreciable response to the call for help of the President, who sharply criticized the “state terrorism” of the central authorities. In August 1990, Armenia became the second republic of the U.S.S.R., after Lithuania, to elect a non-communist President. In the same month, a declaration of sovereignty was passed and the country now called itself the Republic of Armenia. Earlier, in February 1988, there had been huge demonstrations calling



Houses of Parliament in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Note the square hole in the gable, where a Lenin relief has been removed. Left to right: Vice President Harutyunia of Armenia with the Schiller Institute's Anno Hellenbroich and Michael Vitt.

for the joining of Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian enclave within Azerbaidzhan, with the Armenian homeland. "One people, one republic," was the demand. It was meanwhile learned that the longstanding request for linking up Nagorno-Karabach to Armenia was denied by a second-level functionary in Moscow. More than 1 million people demonstrated in the streets of the Armenian capital of Yerevan.

Moscow slandered the Armenian demonstrations as "extremist" and "steered from abroad," and tried to pin the problems in Nagorno-Karabakh on economic mismanagement and corruption.

Then "popular rage broke out"—obviously deliberately planned—in Sumgait, an Azerbaidzhani city with an Armenian minority. Equipped with lists of residents, loudspeakers, and vans, killer squads massacred dozens of their Armenian fellow citizens there, without the militia stepping in. Only on the third day of the pogrom did the military arrive from Baku, a mere 60 kilometers away. What ensued was further brutal riots that left numerous dead and wounded.

In January 1990 Gorbachov rushed Soviet troops to Azerbaidzhan, the only U.S.S.R. republic to have been actually invaded and militarily occupied by the central government, and the autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh region was placed under Soviet emergency rule, after another 28 people lost their lives in clashes. The non-communist Azerbaidzhani resistance was crushed.

The latest brutal deportation operation, which was carried out with the help of Soviet troops, has buttressed the belief

of most Armenians that the Moscow regime was seeking any pretext to shore up the last remaining communist regime in Transcaucasus, under Azeri President Mutilabov, and to weaken the independence-minded Armenian government.

Schiller delegation visits Armenia

At the invitation of parliamentary groups, two representatives of the Schiller Institute visited Armenia at the beginning of June. They repeatedly witnessed evidence of the last weeks' deportation tragedy, which has gone all but unnoticed in the West. In a discussion with them, Vice President Harutyunia emphasized that because of the current crisis it is important that the West—the European countries above all, and especially Germany—politically and economically support Armenia's steps toward independence, which are taking place in full accordance with the rules Gorbachov established. The official particularly thanked the Schiller Institute delegation for visiting suffering Armenia in this very difficult period, and turned over the latest documents on this "undeclared war" to the visitors.

While there, at the invitation of the Karabakh Committee, the Schiller Institute envoys were able to question victims expelled from the towns of Getashen and Martunashen in early May, who have found temporary shelter in a rest home in northwest Armenia, in Zachkadsor. They described shattering scenes of brutality against women and children, but especially against the men of the village (see box). About 20 communities have been driven out in recent months; some of

them had their houses burned down, others were "besieged" by Azerbaidzhani. The villagers were particularly indignant about the Soviet tactic of making the expulsions appear "legal" for public purposes, by having people sign declarations that they had "moved away of their own free will." Documents of this "Operation Zalif," which expose this tactic of Moscow's, have come into Armenian possession.

Because of Azerbaidzhan's Moscow-backed economic blockade of Armenia, and because of the major and still unrepaired damages of the earthquake catastrophe of 1988—nearly 800,000 people live without permanent shelter in northern Armenia—the economic situation of the coming months will be very difficult, especially in regard to energy supplies for next winter. The nuclear plant near the capital, which went on line in 1976, has remained inoperative since the earthquake, and the Sevan Lake hydroelectric plant has been shut down for the same length of time.

But even though—or perhaps precisely because—Moscow is doing everything to block any future moves toward independence, all institutional forces in the Armenian Republic have decided to proceed with the referendum on Sept. 21.

The popular mood is visible on the streets of Yerevan. In recent months the signs of Soviet central power and the communist system have largely vanished. Statues of Lenin have been toppled, and the Lenin relief on the gable of the former Communist Party building, recently taken over by the democratically elected parliament, has been dismantled. Yet there are signs that because of the lingering guerrilla war, a "compromise" on the holding of the referendum in Nagorno-Karabakh will be sought, which ultimately goes in the direction of isolating Armenia and splitting off Nagorno-Karabakh under Azerbaidzhani control.

Armenian President appeals to Bush

This letter was sent by Armenian President L. Ter-Petrossian to President George Bush on May 8.

The Republic of Armenia and the Armenian people, having opted for democracy and sovereignty, are living through critical times.

Armed forces of the U.S.S.R. and Azerbaidzhani Interior Ministries, supported by heavy artillery, tanks, and helicopter gunships, are implementing a preplanned policy of depopulation of Armenians in Azerbaidzhani territory, specifically those living in villages adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh. Many villages have already been forcibly evacuated and others burnt.

There have been repeated cases of pogroms and massa-

ces committed by Soviet and Azerbaidzhani armed forces against the civilian and defenseless Armenian population.

The horrors which only armies can inflict have now been spread to villages inside Armenian territory near the Azerbaidzhani border since last week. Units of the Fourth Army of the U.S.S.R. stationed in Azerbaidzhan have crossed the border into Armenia and have been shelling villages along the border. In the absence of a declaration of a state of emergency, such operations constitute an undeclared war by the central authorities against the civilian population of a constituent republic.

Armenian self-defense units, whose size and importance have been exaggerated in Soviet and Azerbaidzhani reports, are capable of defending the population from brigands and mob attacks but not against armies. Moreover, it is militiamen of the Armenian Interior Ministry that have been the targets of Soviet army operations, in some cases becoming victims of brutal murders.

My government is convinced that these military operations and atrocities are being committed with the aim of destabilizing the situation in Armenia and weakening its legal and legitimate government. Since the victory of popular and democratic forces last August, Armenia has introduced a multi-party system, implemented a policy of land distribution to the peasants, and adopted a constitutional path toward the attainment of independence. In this respect, the government of Azerbaidzhan, still under the control of the Communist Party, has become an ally of the anti-reformist forces in Moscow. The two share an interest in perpetuating authoritarianism and dependency; their joint policies are intended to penalize Armenia for its decision to hold its own referendum on the question of independence and democracy.

It is apparent that such policy decisions and large-scale military operations could not have been implemented without the knowledge and approval of U.S.S.R. President Mikhail Gorbachov himself. Under no circumstances can President Gorbachov and the central authorities of the U.S.S.R. escape the responsibility for the massive violations of elementary human rights, the Charter of the United Nations, and international treaties and conventions.

The government and people of Armenia have followed closely the concerted action of the international community in dealing with violations of international law and standards in the Gulf region in the spirit of the New World Order, and the consequences of the war there.

Armenia wishes to see nothing more and nothing less than the respect everywhere of international standards of behavior by governments.

It is my hope that the government of the United States will consider carefully the implications of Soviet policies with regard to Armenia and other democratic republics of the U.S.S.R. and that it will undertake whatever means it considers necessary and proper to ensure that the principles of collective security, peaceful conflict resolution, and self-determination are respected within, as much as without, the U.S.S.R.