

Tajikistan bloodbath used to boost Russian 'sphere of influence'

by Konstantin George

The worst bloodbath in Eurasia, aside from Bosnia, has been occurring in the "civil war" in the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan, and there is no end to the fighting in sight. The war is a depopulation war, steered by forces in Moscow, with Anglo-American complicity. It has the geopolitical goal of using the destabilization and destruction of Tajikistan to cause the other Central Asian republics to stay closely allied to Russia for security reasons, and thus maintain this huge former Soviet region within the Russian sphere of influence.

The targeting of the Tajik nation has a simultaneous flank across the border in Afghanistan, where the number of Tajiks exceeds the Tajik population in Tajikistan itself. Beginning in the late spring of 1992, roughly in tandem with the launching of the civil war in Tajikistan, the ethnically Tajik-dominated, post-communist government of Afghanistan came under repeated armed attack, igniting several rounds of bitter fighting in Kabul, the capital. The cumulative death toll of the Kabul fighting exceeds that of Sarajevo, Bosnia, and has wrecked what is left of the Afghan economy and society. This civil war was begun and maintained by armed units of the Mujaheddin and militias who are core assets of either London or Moscow. On the London side are the Mujaheddin of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who is the key British agent in the Afghan resistance, and who started the post-communist Afghan civil war. In November and December, Moscow helped escalate this civil war by having its main asset, the ethnic Uzbek militias of Gen. Rashid Dostum, which before 1992 had fought on the side of the Kabul communist regime, break their April 1992 alliance with the Tajik-based resistance movement of Ahmed Shah Massoud and plunge Kabul into another round of fighting.

There are several reasons why the Tajik nation has been singled out for destruction. One is the "overpopulation" in Tajikistan, even though its entire population before the present war was only 5.5 million. Starting in 1988, articles appeared in the Soviet media complaining of the "overly high birth rates" among the Tajik Muslims, and alleging that this was the reason why Tajikistan was the "poorest and most backward" of the Soviet republics.

Another reason concerns what for all of Central Asia

comprises the most precious resource, namely, fresh water. Mountainous Tajikistan is the only Central Asian republic with large surplus reserves of fresh water, and its ability to expand and channel these freshwater resources to the rest of Central Asia is indispensable if there is to be any real economic development in the region.

Also, the destruction of the Tajik nation is cultural genocide. Distinct from all the other Muslim peoples of Central Asia, the Tajiks are not Turkic but Persian-speaking, and have maintained through the centuries the traditions of classic Persian Islamic culture. In fact, the great Persian-Islamic Renaissance through Ibn Sina was a Persian-Tajik Renaissance, and the great cities associated with this Renaissance, Bukhara and Samarkand, though now in Uzbekistan, are to this day ethnically Tajik cities.

Mass murder in Tajikistan

Both Russian TV and Tajik media report a confirmed death toll from the civil war in the last six months of 1992 of 50-60,000, and nearly 500,000 Muslim refugees, including 100,000 who reached Afghanistan. In scenes reminiscent of Bosnia, refugees are living in the open in unheated tents, with little food and water, where medicine is non-existent, and there is a grave threat of mass deaths caused by hunger, cold, and disease. The statistics do not include the hundreds of thousands of Russians and other Europeans who have fled to the Russian Federation.

The Tajikistan parallels to former Yugoslavia are striking. The bulk of the killings have been the slaughter of Muslim civilians by irregular Chetnik-type communist militias, armed by the Russian Army, and led by convicted murderers and other criminals. The victims belong almost exclusively to clan-ethnic or regional groupings, such as the Badakhshanis from southeast Tajikistan, and the Gharmis from the region of Gharm in northeast Tajikistan, who together formed the main support of the interim "Islamic-Democratic" government that was driven from power during the autumn by the communist militias.

On Dec. 9, communist militias entered and seized the capital, Dushanbe. The new communist government is nomi-

nally headed by Tajik Supreme Soviet President Imamali Rakhmanov, who is from the Kulab region, as is his entire cabinet. However, the strongman, also from Kulab, is Sangak Safarov, 63, a convicted murderer and embezzler who spent a total of 23 years in Soviet prisons. Safarov has unleashed his Kulab militias in a gruesome pogrom against the 180,000 Badakhshanis living in Dushanbe. In scenes like those in the towns of eastern Bosnia seized by the Serbs, the streets of Dushanbe are littered with hundreds of hacked up corpses of murdered Badakhshanis, and every day, dozens of others "disappear." The slaughter of the Badakhshanis, who form the backbone of the intelligentsia and educated-literary class of Tajikistan, illustrates the Pol Pot-type policy being practiced, namely, the attempt to exterminate the nation's intellectual elite.

This genocidal depopulation is quietly promoted by Moscow, with the Russian 201st Motorized Rifle Division, based in Tajikistan and commanded by General Asharov, a Tajik from Kulyab, providing the arms and logistics for the Safarov killing machine. The first evidence of American backing was given to the Tajik media, ironically, by the Safarov group itself. According to their own account, soon before the fall of Dushanbe, Safarov and other militia leaders met with Mark William, first secretary of the U.S. embassy in Dushanbe, from whom they received "advice." What is confirmed is that the U.S. embassy was informed about the coming march into Dushanbe, and as a result, organized the air evacuation of both U.S. embassy personnel and of the Turkish embassy staff.

The open Russian support for the communists has been carried out around a flood of propaganda in the Russian media about the threat of "Islamic fundamentalism" in Tajikistan. Russians were told that the pre-Dec. 9 Dushanbe regime, in reality a coalition of moderate Islamic and national democratic forces, was a stalking horse for a Muslim fundamentalist takeover, and played up the threat to the Russian population of Dushanbe. Nothing of the sort was true. During the brief tenure of the non-communist opposition, not a single Russian was hurt, let alone killed. The alleged "fundamentalists" did not even ban the sale, distribution, or consumption of vodka or pork, to say nothing of an enforced "Islamicization."

The 'Central Asian Union'

The consolidation of the Russian position in Central Asia was affirmed by the Jan. 4-5 Tashkent summit of the five Central Asian states. By including the Tajik communist government, the other four added their stamp of approval to that of Moscow for the Russian-installed Dushanbe regime. At the summit were the Presidents, prime ministers, and economics and defense ministers—former communists in every case—of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and the new communist leadership of Tajikistan. The five states decided to form their own "League of States . . . should the CIS [Community of Independent States] prove

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incapable of functioning." The end of the moribund CIS was predicted by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who said he doubted whether there will be any more CIS summits after the next one, set for Jan. 22 in Minsk, Belarus.

This new grouping, called the "Central Asian Union," will function in close coordination with Russia. After the summit's conclusion, Radio Moscow reported on Jan. 6, the five states agreed to form a "cooperation council" and a "regional communications center," both to be based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The communications center will oversee a regional TV station and a regional Central Asian newspaper. A "packet of multilateral agreements" were signed, centered on trade and economic cooperation, creating a "common economic space."

Attesting to the closeness with which this new "Central Asian Union" will work with Russia, the five agreed in essence to a joint defense policy, supplementing existing bilateral military agreements with Russia, and affirmed their common interest in a defense against "attempts to achieve influence" in the region by Islamic states, specifically naming Iran and Turkey, as well as "other states." Reaffirming what Moscow has already said, Tajikistan, meaning its communist government, was assured that its borders with Afghanistan and China would be guaranteed, and "moral and material" support would be provided. The five agreed to stay in the CIS as long as it exists, and to remain in the ruble zone.

For the promoters in Moscow of a Russian imperial strategy, the population war against Tajikistan was bearing its first fruits. In reality, however, the hastily concluded "Central Asian Union," by making Tajikistan a fifth-wheel appendage to a Turkic-dominated "union," will serve to escalate the ugly war in Tajikistan and increase the danger that it will spill over into populous Uzbekistan, where there is a large Tajik minority.