

# Armenian troubles test Moscow leaders

by Muriel Mirak

Just as the attention of Soviet-watchers was focused on nationalist upsurges in the Baltic republics in late February, unexpected rumblings began to be heard from the Soviet Republic of Armenia, feeding speculation that the Gorbachov leadership may be facing its most serious test of strength internally.

The ostensible reason for the outbreak of public protest, which saw over 100,000 Armenians marching for five days in the streets of the capital city Yerevan, was twofold: Citizens were demanding that two highly polluting synthetic rubber plants be closed down. More importantly, the demonstrators, carrying banners saying "One People, One Republic," demanded that the ethnically Armenian region of Nagorny Karabakh be returned to Armenia from neighboring Azerbaijan. The region, which still boasts an 80% Armenian majority, was given to Azerbaijan in 1920, when Armenia was partitioned by the Soviets and Turkey, and the Soviet Republic of Armenia was proclaimed.

But that is not the whole story, either. As British press reports indicated long before the February demonstrations occurred, a fight has been brewing for the last 18 months between the local Armenian political machine and Gorbachov's Moscow apparatus. Already last June, in the context of his perestroika ("restructuring") policy, Gorbachov had issued scathing criticisms of "totally unjustified complacency" toward "bribery, profiteering and protectionism." The target of this attack was Karen Demirchian, who became head of the Armenian Communist Party in 1974, under Brezhnev. In a December meeting of the Armenian Central Committee, when one member called for Demirchian's ouster, accusing him of not having implemented Gorbachov's policies, he was drowned in a chorus of boos, and accused of "personal ambition." Despite the barrage of attacks issuing forth from the general secretary's mouth in Moscow as well as the pages of *Pravda*, not only was Demirchian not purged, but the power of the Armenian "machine" gained new strength in Azerbaijan.

And not only in Armenia, but also among the Armenians in Nagorny Karabakh. On Feb. 11, according to *Izvestia*, disturbances began among the ethnic Armenians in Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorny Karabakh. Shortly thereafter, the local parliament, whose 140 members include 110 Armenians, voted in favor of uniting with Armenia—a rare occurrence within the Soviet bloc. A week later, demonstrators took to the streets in the region as well as in Armenia's

capital city of Yerevan. Work stoppages and school boycotts also reportedly accompanied the demonstrations, which numbered in the hundreds of thousands, according to dissidents.

Moscow obviously rejected the demand for reuniting the region with Armenia; Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov succinctly proclaimed, "The present status quo should be maintained." On Feb. 22, Armenia's First Secretary Demirchian went on Armenian television to appeal for "calm" and "order." He stated that although the environmental demands regarding the rubber plant were being considered by the authorities, the national territorial question was not open to discussion. The following day, the Soviet Central Committee in Moscow issued a two-page statement calling on authorities both in Azerbaijan and Armenia to "safeguard public order and the strict observance of socialist laws." Ruling out any changes in the borders, it blamed the "breaching of public order" on "irresponsible calls by extremist individuals."

On Feb. 24, Moscow dispatched two candidate members of the Politburo, Georgi Razumovsky and Pyotr Demichev, to visit the troubled area and attempt to impose a solution. The first concrete result of their mission appeared to be a concession to nationalist Armenian demands: On Feb. 24 the party leader of Nagorny Karabakh, an ethnic Russian named Boris Kevorkov, was suddenly deposed, for "shortcomings in his work." His replacement, Genrikh Posogyan, bears a characteristically Armenian name.

## Fierce nationalism

Where will it go from here? Moscow's concern, according to sources, is to reach a speedy solution, so as to nip the nationalist ferment in the bud. More than the Armenian unrest, Moscow is reported to fear an explosion of protest among the Turkic Azeri population, were any significant concessions made to the Armenians.

Yet, the potential threat posed by the tightly knit Armenian community is no joke. As certain British press reports have keenly observed, Armenia is the "least Russian" of all the Soviet republics, 90% of its population being Armenian. And it is fiercely nationalistic. Although they have a history of foreign dominations and persecutions at the hands of the imperial powers that have controlled the strategically vital region between the Caspian and the Black Sea, Armenians have preserved a cultural unity through their language, literature, and religion. Soviet Armenians will readily tell visitors that their 1,600-year-old language had already received the works of Shakespeare in the 17th century, and will add that their language, with its own sophisticated alphabet, was a national vernacular four centuries before the name Russia was heard of.

Furthermore, they boast that the Armenian Apostolic Church, which preserves an existence independent of the Russian Orthodox Church, was the first Christian church to be adopted by a nation, in the early fourth century.