

Transcaucasus ethnic riots divert nationalist protests

by Konstantin George

During the week of Nov. 15-22, when the world's media were fixated on developments in the three Soviet Baltic republics, the gravest crisis of national unrest was coming to a head elsewhere, in the Transcaucasus republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The current crisis was generally ignored until Nov. 23, when, as a result of Azerbaijani pogroms against Armenians, all hell broke loose. What is now erupting in the Transcaucasus is no replay of the February pogroms against Armenians in the Azerbaijan city of Sumgait, but a qualitative change in the national unrest in the U.S.S.R. For the first time, simultaneous mass nationalist outbreaks are under way in all three Transcaucasian republics—the Christian republics of Armenia and Georgia, and the Muslim republic of Azerbaijan.

Nov. 23 marked a turning point in the Transcaucasus. Azerbaijani Shi'ite mobs went on a rampage against Armenians in the Azerbaijani city of Kirovabad and in Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan enclave. Nakhichevan is a strategically important territory; separated from Azerbaijan and sandwiched between Armenia and Iran, it forms a significant portion of the Soviet-Iranian border. On the same day as the pogroms, the official Soviet media provided indirect, yet solid proof that massacres had occurred, admitting that three soldiers deployed by Moscow's Interior Ministry were killed, and 126 people, all civilians and mostly Armenians, were wounded.

In contrast, when the February KGB-directed pogrom by Shi'ite mobs against Armenians was in progress in the city of Sumgait, Moscow at first denied that any deaths had occurred, and later admitted a death toll of 31, when in fact hundreds had been butchered. One can surmise that the current pogroms have produced a grisly death toll of Armenian

civilians, where the news of the real extent of the massacres is being suppressed.

One guaranteed result of the violence in Azerbaijan will be martial law, *de facto* or *de jure*, and there is the pretext for a certain Soviet troop buildup in Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan. Indeed, on the evening of Nov. 23, the Azerbaijan authorities announced that a state of emergency had been declared in the Kirovabad region and in Nakhichevan, and a similar status is expected soon for Baku. In short, under these latest emergency decrees, during the final week of November, the next phase of the militarization of the Transcaucasus, which began last March, was in full swing.

The Azerbaijan pogroms capped seven days of protests by hundreds of thousands of Azeris in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, denouncing what they termed Armenia's "creeping annexation" of the predominantly ethnic Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, which lies inside Azerbaijan. A pogrom had been only narrowly averted Nov. 22, when Azeri crowds marched to the Armenian quarter of the city, and were only prevented from storming it by thousands of assembled Soviet Interior Ministry troops and Army units. The mass demonstrations in Baku by Nov. 23 had reached a total of 800,000 persons in the streets, demanding Armenian blood. Marchers shouted "Long live the heroes of Sumgait!" (referring to the pogrom murderers on trial) and carrying green Islamic flags.

The demonstrations were triggered by: 1) the first death sentence imposed on an Azeri in the ongoing Moscow trial of the Sumgait rioters; 2) the fact that Armenia has funded and is constructing a branch of an Armenian aluminum enterprise in the Karabakh town of Shusha. The Azeris are claiming a violation of the U.S.S.R. and Azerbaijan Consti-

tution, which stipulates that any investment decisions must either be decided by Moscow or the republic on whose territory the project is to be constructed. The fact that the Shusha project is being constructed means that Moscow gave the go-ahead for Armenia to build enterprises in another republic; 3) rumors spread in Azerbaijan by KGB sources that "Armenian settlers" are pouring into Karabakh by truck from Armenia.

Every move taken, or rumor started, that has contributed to launching the Azerbaijan explosion, stems from the Moscow center.

Armenia's anti-Moscow revolt

Moscow's decision to re-launch anti-Armenian pogroms in Azerbaijan was a conscious attempt to deflect the Armenian mass nationalist movement from its anti-Moscow campaign, and rechannel its energies into a conflict with Azerbaijan. The pogroms in Azerbaijan struck at precisely the moment that huge protests in Armenia were in full swing, demanding, both that Karabakh should join Armenia, and an Armenian "declaration of national sovereignty" and the right to veto any laws from Moscow. The pogroms also intersected startling developments in the Republic of Georgia, Armenia's neighbor, where the long-dormant nationalist movement, during November, came out in full bloom, with huge protests against Russian rule.

The Azerbaijan pogroms touched off a new dimension to the now daily rallies of 500,000 or more people in the Armenian capital of Yerevan. At the Nov. 23 mass demonstration, when the news of the pogroms reached Armenia, speakers called for the formation of Armenian vigilante squads to protect Armenians in Karabakh, elsewhere in Azerbaijan, and in those areas of Armenia which contain a mixed Armenian-Azeri population. Once the news spread, workers at Yerevan factories laid down their tools, transport workers struck, and, starting late in the afternoon of Nov. 23, a general strike was under way.

A mood of rage already prevailed the day before in Yerevan when the Armenian Parliament was in session and about to vote to follow Estonia's Nov. 16 "declaration of national sovereignty." At that point, in walked Arkadi Volsky, Moscow's special emissary for the Transcaucasus. Volsky, the KGB-linked former adviser to the late General Secretary Yuri Andropov, whom Moscow appointed in July as its *de facto* governor general for the Transcaucasus, abruptly adjourned the session, ordering all the deputies back to their home districts.

The explosion was already building. Rallies of half a million Armenians had been held each day in downtown Yerevan since Nov. 18, to renew the campaign to have Armenian-inhabited Karabakh join Armenia, and to demand that the Armenian Parliament issue a declaration of "national sovereignty." The Nov. 18 rally also featured a one-day general strike in Yerevan. In Karabakh, the general strike

that began on Nov. 16 continues, and, following the outbreak of anti-Armenian pogroms in Azerbaijan, Karabakh—with its 80% Armenian majority and 20% Azerbaijani minority—is on the verge of inter-ethnic armed conflict. In recognition of this, immediately after he adjourned the Armenian Parliament, Volsky flew to Karabakh's capital, Stepanakert.

Georgian nationalist rebirth

This time around, however, in contrast to previous rounds of the Transcaucasus crisis in 1988, the upsurge in Armenia has been joined by nationalist protests in neighboring Georgia. The day of the pogroms, Nov. 23, the Georgian Parliament convened to decide whether or not to follow Estonia's example. For whatever reasons, the Georgian Parliament became the only Parliament of any Soviet republic to demand that Moscow change the proposed U.S.S.R. Constitution to guarantee to republics the right to veto laws from Moscow, and declare null and void any attempt to abrogate a republic's paper "right to secede" from the U.S.S.R.

The really important event that day in Tiflis was the rebirth of active Georgian nationalism, in a nation with a 3,000-year history, and most of whose population would like nothing better than independence from Russian rule. More than 200,000 Georgian nationalists marched in Tiflis. Huge banners read: "Long Live Independent Georgia!"

This is the first time that such slogans have been the lead slogans during a demonstration by the people of a Soviet captive nation. Taking up Lenin's famous phrase about the Russian Empire, Georgian demonstrators are now denouncing the Soviet Union as a "jail of nationalities." The characterization was also used by Lyndon LaRouche to describe the Soviet Union, in a U.S. nationwide TV broadcast last spring, during the course of the presidential election campaign.

A demonstration of 13,000 had already occurred in Tiflis Nov. 12, and another one, with 15,000, on Nov. 18. Nov. 20, a crowd of more than 20,000 Georgian nationalists protested against Moscow's national policies in the Black Sea port of Batumi. On Nov. 22, a memorandum drafted by Georgian nationalists, demanding a Georgian veto right over any Moscow legislation and the "right to secede" from the Soviet Union was sent to the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet, with a copy for Gorbachov himself. Along with the memo were sent hundreds of thousands signatures collected on petitions calling for "national sovereignty." The signers vowed that if Gorbachov does not meet Georgian demands for a veto right and the right to secede, he will be confronted by the "disobedience of the population."

New protests are guaranteed in all three Transcaucasian republics, as the biggest national unrest crisis of 1988 inside the Soviet Union escalates by the day. Much of what will transpire is unpredictable, but the trouble will certainly extend into December, and then intersect probable eruptions elsewhere in the Muscovite Empire's "jail of nationalities," and Moscow's satellites in Eastern Europe.