

REMEMBERING THE 1988 SUMGAIT POGROMS: THE THREAT OF GENOCIDE

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By Arus Karapetyan, Ontario, Feb 27, 2021

February 2021 marks the 33-year anniversary of the Sumgait pogroms of Armenians in Azerbaijan. Based on court testimony and eyewitness reports of the slaughter it is evident the pogroms had been organized well ahead of time.

At a Feb. 26 gathering of so-called Azeri refugees from the Armenian city of Kapan, it was falsely reported that Armenians had killed and deported Azeris from the Armenian city. Shrieking "Death of Armenians," the enraged crowd rushed to Sumgait's Armenian neighborhood where 18,000 Armenians lived.

Law enforcement authorities had left Sumgait before the blood-thirsty crowd had arrived at the Armenian areas. Phone lines were also cut-off and roads leading to Sumgait were blocked with home-made barriers. The mob that was armed with sharp-edged metal rods and pipes, knives, axes, and other home-made weapons, had the list of Armenian addresses. In the next three days, the Azeris attacked Armenian men, women, and children in their homes and dragged them out to the streets. Armenians were beaten, tortured, mutilated, burnt, raped, and killed. Azerbaijan has not released the true number of Armenians perished although the number is estimated to be in the hundreds. As well, hundreds of Armenians became disabled as a result of torture. Peace was established when Soviet troops dispersed the blood-thirsty crowd. Surviving Armenians fled to Armenia.

To conceal the Sumgait massacres and to avoid international condemnation the Soviet Union split the crime into several lawsuits with majority of the cases being held in Soviet Azerbaijan. The majority of Azeris received light sentences or were set free and hailed as heroes. The conspirators who had organized the pogroms were never identified and many hold high positions in the Azerbaijani government.

In November of the same year there was another pogrom (in Kirovabad) of Armenians. They were followed by the 1990 Baku and 1992 Maragha massacres. By then Azerbaijan had massacred thousands of other Armenians. An estimated 350,000 to 500,000 Armenians were expelled from Azerbaijan. They either went to Armenia or to Nagorno-Karabakh, or became refugees elsewhere.

Azerbaijan's attacks on its innocent Armenian minority turned into the war of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). There, in 1991 more than 90 percent of the Armenians had voted to separate from Azerbaijan and become independent. In the previous 70 years of Azeri occupation, Armenians had become second-class citizens and were subject to ethnic cleansing. By 1970 Azerbaijan had deported all Armenians from historically Armenian Nakhichevan where they constituted 50 percent of the population.

After four years of war between Artsakh Armenians and the Azeris, in 1994 the Azeris had failed in their goal to expel Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. Instead, through their victory, Armenians of

Artsakh constructed a security wall as a buffer to prevent further massacres by the Azeris.

In September 2020 Azerbaijan again attacked Artsakh so as to drive out its 150,000 population. By November, most of the population had fled and one-third of the people had lost their homes and land. The losses and deaths in Artsakh are the latest examples of the threat by Azerbaijan and Turkey to eliminate the 4,000-year-old Armenian presence in the region.

In a statement on the 33rd anniversary of the Sumgait pogroms, Armenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the September 2020 war *"against Artsakh and its people was accompanied by similar war crimes against the Armenian identity, with one difference - the murders of the civilians were not carried out by controlled mobs, but by servicemen of the Azerbaijani armed forces and the relevant videos were uploaded on the Internet."*

The statement added: *"During the 44-day war, the Azerbaijani armed forces, driven by a sense of impunity, committed numerous violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, which are manifestations of mass atrocities, including ethnic cleansing and war crimes. While adhering to the behaviour of terrorist groups, the Azerbaijani armed forces committed violations against prisoners of war, civilians, barbarically destroyed historical-cultural monuments and desecrated sanctuaries. The executions of the Armenian prisoners of war and civilians in the Hadrut region of Artsakh and other settlements fallen under the military control of Azerbaijan are the results of the past uncondemned crimes."*

To read the full statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs please click on this [link](#).

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