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ETHNIC CLEANSING AGAINST THE AZERBAIJANI POPULATION IN THE NORTHERN AND WESTERN REGIONS OF THE ARMENIAN SSR (1988–1990): MAIN FORMS AND METHODS

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This article examines the policy of ethnic cleansing carried out in the Armenian SSR between 1988 and 1990, particularly targeting Azerbaijanis living in the northern and western regions. Drawing on archival documents, eyewitness testimonies, and local sources, the analysis demonstrates that these actions were not spontaneous but rather premeditated and implemented with both direct and indirect support from state authorities. The study highlights key aspects of the campaign, including violence, forced deportations, the destruction of cultural heritage, and the renaming of settlements in Amasya, Zangibasar, Kalinino, Hamamli, and other areas. It also notes that the Spitak (Hamamli) earthquake was used as a means to further suppress the Azerbaijani population, with even humanitarian aid being manipulated for this purpose. Research demonstrates that the events of 1988–1990 were not merely an ethnic conflict, but rather part of a systematic policy of ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide, implemented with the support of both the leadership of the Armenian SSR and the Soviet central authorities.

Keywords: Azerbaijanis, Armenian SSR, ethnic cleansing, deportation, Spitak earthquake, cultural genocide, internally displaced persons, Amasya, Zangibasar, Kalinino, Hamamli.

Introduction. A significant part of the population of the Amasya region, located in the northwest of Western Azerbaijan, on the border with Turkey, had suffered the severe consequences of the deportations of 1948-1953. However, the Azerbaijani population continued to live in a number of areas and settlements of this region. The densely populated regions of the Armenian SSR, such as Canbagcha, Loru-Pembek, and Jalaloglu, had access to Azerbaijan through Borchali. Vedi and Gamarli were located on the border with Nakhchivan. Goycha, Gafan, Zangezur, and Mehrin had direct access to the main part of the Azerbaijan SSR. Amasya, however, had no direct connection with the Azerbaijan SSR. The only territory where the Azerbaijani population of this region could take refuge was Turkey. There was a state border between Turkey and the Soviet Union.

Following the events of 1980–1988, pressure on the Azerbaijani population in these regions intensified. The Spitak (Hamamlı) earthquake of December 1988 further worsened the situation of the Azerbaijani community in the Amasya region, providing both the authorities of the Armenian SSR and Armenian nationalist groups with an opportunity to complete the expulsion of Azerbaijanis from the area. Exploiting the chaos caused by the earthquake, Armenian armed groups and terrorist formations carried out massacres in Azerbaijani-inhabited settlements while simultaneously looting homes. Many of those killed during this period were falsely presented as earthquake victims. Under growing pressure and threats, the Azerbaijani population of Amasya received assistance from Azerbaijanis living in Borchali (Georgian SSR), who helped them cross into Georgian territory via mountain roads. This intervention played a crucial role in preventing larger-scale massacres in Amasya [1].

Aircraft entering Armenia from the airspace of the Republic of Turkey and the Azerbaijan SSR to deliver humanitarian aid were also targeted. During this period, a Yugoslav Antonov-12 plane en route to Armenia on the Belgrade–Ankara–Yerevan route was mistaken for a Turkish aircraft and shot down by Armenian forces. All seven people on board were killed in the crash. Armenian sources attempted to present the incident as an error by the Yugoslav pilots. However, reports published in the

international press claimed that this crash-similar to that of a Soviet military plane that went down near Leninakan two days earlier-had been the result of technical problems [2].

An Il-76 aircraft flying from Baku with medical equipment and food supplies for the earthquake-stricken region was also attacked by terrorists. The plane crashed, killing all 77 people on board. This tragedy not only endangered the lives of those attempting to provide humanitarian assistance but also underscored the terrorists' ruthless disregard for human life [3].

During the earthquake, a large number of Azerbaijanis remained near the Amasya region's border with Turkey. These people were subsequently ordered to be resettled in Azerbaijan. According to representatives of the USSR Komsomol, this resettlement was carried out on the direct orders of Mikhail Gorbachev. This demonstrates that the Soviet government not only sought to remove Azerbaijanis from Armenia, but also indirectly supported the Armenian policy of ethnic cleansing [4, p.307-308].

Ethnic cleansing against the Azerbaijani population in the western regions of the Armenian SSR during 1988-1990. Archival registration cards of the population deported from Duzkend, a village in the Amasya region, preserved by the West Azerbaijan Community, reveal that the deportees were able to bring with them only a small portion of their belongings and suffered significant material losses. Their homes were appropriated by Armenians without any compensation, while the places where they were resettled were often highly unsuitable. Some of the families displaced from Duzkend eventually settled in the Lokbatan settlement near Baku [5].

During the ethnic cleansing carried out in Armenia in 1988, more than 200 residents of the village of Baligli in the Amasya region were expelled by Armenians, and their property was confiscated. The village's cultural heritage was also destroyed. In the Baligli cemetery, Azerbaijani calligraphers had carved bright red stars (sometimes with a crescent) on old stones made from local red tufa, while poems and *bayats* in Azerbaijani adorned modern tombstones. These elements served as important evidence of the autochthonous Azerbaijani population in the area. Following the ethnic cleansing, Armenians initiated the destruction of both tangible and intangible heritage, demolishing more than 80 percent of the graves. After the deportation of the Azerbaijani population, ethnic Armenians from Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakheti region were resettled in the now-empty houses. In the same year, the Baligli mosque was destroyed, and in 1991, by order of Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the village was renamed Zorakert.

In the Noyemberyan (Barana) region, discrimination against the Azerbaijani population had also begun by late 1988. In the village of Lambali (Bagratashen), the Armenian terrorist group "Girghilar" ("Borodachi") used intimidation and violence to expel the Azerbaijani inhabitants from their homes. Mikhail Tyagunov, then military commandant of Baku, stated in an interview published in *Pravda* on December 23, 1988, that Armenians had forcibly expelled 747 Azerbaijani families -around three thousand people- from this single village in just two days, and described the dire conditions faced by the victims of ethnic cleansing [6, p.57].

One of the regions densely populated by Azerbaijanis was the Zangibasar district. After the establishment of the Armenian SSR on the territories of Western Azerbaijan, the villages of Zangibasar were initially divided between the Uchkilsa and Gamarli districts. By a decree adopted on December 31, 1937, Zangibasar district was formally established, comprising 18 villages from Gamarli and 14 villages from Uchkilsa. The village of Ulukhanli, the main socio-cultural center of the region and an important site in the history of Azerbaijani education and culture, was renamed Zangibasar and, after 1969, Masis.

Historical sources confirm that, prior to the deportations of 1948–1953, 21 of the 32 villages in the district were inhabited entirely by Azerbaijanis. In six villages, Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived together, though Azerbaijanis remained the majority, while five other villages were settled at various times by Armenians relocated from abroad. Although nearly all villages -except Ranjbar- were subjected to forced resettlement under the deportation policy of the late 1940s and early 1950s, many Azerbaijanis eventually returned to their native lands. By the 1980s, Azerbaijanis continued to live in villages such as Ulukhanli, Mehmandar, Ashaghi and Yukhari Nechili, Hachapara, Rahimabad, Sarvanlar, Habilkend, Garagishlag, Donuziyeyen, Demirchi, Ranjbar, Shollu, and the Kalinin settlement.

On April 24, 1983, Dashnak terrorist groups, invoking the so-called "Armenian genocide" as a pretext, launched attacks on Azerbaijani settlements, including Ulukhanli and other villages in the Masis (Zangibasar) region. During these raids, village cemeteries were desecrated, and serious damage was inflicted on the historical and cultural heritage of Azerbaijanis. The defenseless Azerbaijani population, faced with fear and danger, was forced to seek refuge at outposts along the Turkish–USSR border [7].

On June 7, 1988, Armenian terrorists, led by Gevorkyan, chairman of the Masis (Zangibasar) District Executive Committee, and Iskandaryan, head of the district's internal affairs department, burned down 86 houses inhabited by Azerbaijanis and inflicted serious damage on the local economy. The authorities of the Armenian SSR attempted to portray this atrocity as "the act of a group of hooligans" [8]. Of course, such events did not occur spontaneously and were clearly planned in advance. As Rafael Kazaryan, a corresponding member of the Armenian Academy of Sciences and a member of the "Karabakh" Committee, admitted a few months later at a rally in Yerevan on November 7, regular groups and units were deliberately employed to carry out these actions [9, p.65].

In the late 1980s, as pressure on the Azerbaijani population intensified once again, many were forced to leave their ancestral lands. Most resettled in the western regions of the Azerbaijan SSR bordering Armenia.

Archival documents also record those who moved to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, an integral part of Azerbaijan. Records from the Executive Committee of the Nakhchivan City Council of People's Deputies contain extensive information regarding housing applications submitted by numerous residents of the village of Kalinin seeking accommodation in the city of Nakhchivan [10].

A large number of villagers lost all their possessions, and their property was forcibly confiscated. One resident of Kalinin village in the Masis district wrote in a petition dated May 10, 1990, to the chairman of the Azerbaijan Refugee Society:

"I am writing to inform you that in October 1988, for obvious reasons, we fled from the Armenian SSR. ... I would also like to inform you that we owned 1,800 acres of arable land in the Masis district. Consequently, we were unable to sell the crops we had purchased from that area in 1988" [11].

An application dated March 15, 1999, submitted to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights by a resident of the Masis settlement, indicates that insults and oppression by Armenians were widespread and systematic. In 1988, Azerbaijanis living in the Masis settlement were forcibly removed from their homes under armed pressure. Some of the displaced residents later resettled in the city of Sumgayit and its surrounding areas [12].

Representatives of the Armenian SSR government were directly involved in the process of ethnic cleansing, as evidenced by events in the Hamamli (Spitak) region. On November 23, 1988, at approximately 4 p.m., all district leaders, including the chief of militia Sargsyan and his deputy Mehrabyan, arrived in the village of Gursali in the Hamamli region and ordered the villagers to evacuate within two hours. The villagers, however, refused to comply. At that time, 2,200 Azerbaijanis resided in the village.

Although buses were dispatched under the orders of chief of militia Mehrabyan to relocate the population, the villagers blocked them using various agricultural tools (yaba, bel, etc.), preventing the buses from entering the settlement. That night, from November 23 to 24, an armed attack was launched on the village, with shooting lasting up to an hour. The villagers appealed for assistance to the Soviet military unit stationed in Boyuk Karakilsa (then Kirovakan, now Vanadzor). The timely arrival of the military prevented a larger-scale massacre [13, p.165].

Despite this, armed attacks on the village of Gursali continued in the following days. Pressure and threats were also directed against the neighboring village of Saral. Authorities of the Armenian SSR facilitated conditions that allowed extremist groups to create an atmosphere of terror and fear among the population. On the one hand, they demanded that residents abandon their homes, while on the other hand, they committed atrocities against those who had already fled, instilling fear in the populations of other villages.

On November 28, Mushvig Taghiyev, a 22-year-old resident of Garagishlag village in the Zangibasar district, was attacked by Dashnak terrorists near the village of Chubuglu while returning to

Azerbaijan. He was brutally murdered, his body mutilated beyond recognition, and his property looted [14, p.5].

Ethnic cleansing against the Azerbaijani population in the northern regions of the Armenian SSR during 1988-1990. On December 4, 1988, during the evacuation of residents from the village of Saral by buses, the convoy was intercepted in the Dilijan Gorge, and all passengers-including children and adults-were shot [15].

The earthquake that struck the Hamamli (Spitak) region on December 7, 1988, also inflicted significant damage on the Azerbaijani population. Residents of the village of Gursali, whose homes were destroyed by the earthquake, were subsequently forced to abandon the settlement [16].

The displaced population was neither able to return to their homes in the following period, nor did they receive any compensation from the government of the Armenian SSR [17].

At that time, the authorities diverted humanitarian aid entering the Armenian SSR to the Armenian population, openly discriminating against Azerbaijanis. According to an application submitted by one internally displaced person, Sayyad Aliyev, to the Refugee Society of the Azerbaijan SSR on May 10, 1990, although his house had been destroyed by the earthquake, the authorities of the Armenian SSR did not provide him with full compensation. Due to harsh winter conditions and inadequate living arrangements, Aliyev was forced to relocate first to the village of Jafarli in the Gazakh region of the Azerbaijan SSR in December 1989, and later to the Lokbatan settlement near Baku [18, p.66].

Another archival document indicates that residents of the village of Chakhmakh in the Amasya region experienced similarly brutal treatment following the earthquake. In December 1989, the villagers barely managed to escape the escalating pressure and sought refuge in Tovuz [19, p.3].

One of the northern districts of the Armenian SSR was the Kalinino district, historically known as Dashir and later as Varantsovka. The district was formally established in December 1937 within the Loru district, on the territory of Dag Borchali. It was one of the regions densely populated by Azerbaijanis and comprised 22 villages. The village of Shahnazar was the largest in the Armenian SSR, though its name was later changed to Medzavan. While Kurds, Armenians, and other ethnic groups also resided in the district, Azerbaijani was the main language of communication. After the formation of the USSR, the Armenian population in the district gradually increased, and by the eve of the events of 1988, the demographic balance had shifted in favor of Armenians [20, p.5-6].

Statements from Zakir Gurbanov, born in 1961 and a resident of the village of Qizilshafag, indicate that Armenians employed various provocations to intimidate and suppress the Azerbaijani population in the region. The local Azerbaijanis continued to believe that the authorities-particularly Moscow, considered the center of the Soviet Empire-would not make decisions detrimental to them. Meanwhile, Armenians reportedly told Azerbaijanis who were constructing houses in the area at the time that any buildings they erected would ultimately belong to Armenians [10].

According to Hummat Huseynov, a former chairman of the Gizilshafag village council, since November 1988, armed Armenians attacking Kalinino -particularly Gizilshafag village- were primarily transported by buses from Yerevan and Kirovakan. These groups assaulted, insulted, and abused Azerbaijani residents, declaring, “You should leave; this is Armenia, and only Armenians should live here” [11].

Despite intense pressure, the village of Qizilshafag was one of the settlements where Armenians faced serious resistance. The local Azerbaijani population refused to abandon their homeland. To organize the village’s defense, they blocked the road from Shahnazar to Qizilshafag using agricultural machinery and established night guards. Azerbaijani defenders set up a checkpoint on a high hill near the village to monitor incoming and outgoing vehicles, enabling them to anticipate danger and respond to attacks by Armenian armed groups. The population was armed with primitive weapons for self-defense.

Attacks were typically launched at night, with the village lights turned off, making defense especially difficult during dark and cold winter nights. Despite their efforts, Armenian attacks intensified, and the villagers were eventually forced to leave. Several Azerbaijanis were killed during these conflicts, including Garabogaz Mahammad. While defending the village, Garabogaz Mahammad reportedly killed two Armenians; his funeral the following day was attended by all Azerbaijanis in the district.

A representative of Armenian nationality, the first secretary of the district party committee, also attended the funeral. His presence aimed to prevent a mass massacre, but it angered Armenian nationalists. He was beaten by nationalist groups, expelled to Yerevan, and subsequently dismissed from his post by the authorities of the Armenian SSR without a proper investigation.

Following this incident, conditions for Azerbaijanis in the district became dire, and migration intensified. Among the villages and settlements in Kalinino district with compact Azerbaijani populations, Qizilshafag was the last settlement to be abandoned. Migrants from neighboring villages passed through it as they relocated.

At that time, the local governing body of the Communist Party was the district party committee, while the district executive committee served as the executive authority, implementing the instructions of the Communist Party. Colonel Telentev, commander of the military unit in Stepanavan (then Jalaloglu), visited Qizilshafag and conveyed the firm decision of the Armenian SSR authorities to the village's Azerbaijani representatives:*"Not a single Azerbaijani should stay here. If you do not leave, a very difficult situation will arise for you; your life will be in danger. Do not even think about staying here"* [10].

Following these events, the village elders traveled to the Azerbaijan SSR to find a suitable location to resettle the displaced population. They eventually decided on the village of Kerkenj in the Shamakhi region. An agreement was reached regarding the relocation between the local Armenian population, who had previously been resettled in Kerkenj by Tsarist Russia, and the representatives from Gizilshafag. In May 1989, the first group of Armenians arrived in the village of Gizilshafag [6]. By this time, the majority of Azerbaijanis had already packed their belongings and relocated to the neighboring village of Irganchay, leaving approximately 50 people in the village [18, p.66]. After the Azerbaijani population departed, the Armenians changed the village's name to Dzunashokh, giving it a new identity and erasing its original Azerbaijani heritage.

One of the most tragic events occurred in the village of Vartanly (also called Vardana) in the Boyuk Garakils (Kirovakan, now Vanadzor) region. On November 27, 1988, the village was subjected to an armed attack by Dashnak groups operating from Kirovakan. During this assault, Armenian terrorist groups committed particularly brutal atrocities against the local population.

An armed group led by Samvel Gazanstyan mercilessly killed resident Gara Bayramov for refusing to leave his home. Brothers Lyova and Lendrum Khachaturyan tortured and murdered resident Leyli Huseynova. Another group, led by Samvel Vanesyan, committed acts of violence against Mehraly and Khanim Isgandarova; reports indicate that Khanim was publicly insulted before being killed alongside two family members. The group led by Grigory Chavushyan and Hamlet Gasparyan killed Abdullah Aliyev, born in 1924. Villagers Suleyman Mammadov and Ahmed Aliyev were killed by groups led by Suren Yosmedyan and Vazgen, respectively, for refusing to leave their homes. In a particularly heinous act, Suren Zehranyan deliberately ran over villager Fatma Aliyeva with a "Niva" car.

The residents of Vartanly were forced to flee their homeland under systematic threats, physical violence, and destruction. During this period, Armenians looted over 200 houses in the village and killed at least 15 Azerbaijanis [4, p.308].

Journalist Mane Papyan, currently residing in Vanadzor, published an article titled *"Events in Gugarka: How Azerbaijanis Were Beaten in Armenia"* on April 29, 2015, on the website www.epress.am. The article included a number of firsthand accounts regarding the tragic events in the village of Vartanly. Papyan visited Vartanly and interviewed eyewitnesses of the events. The article was also based on information provided by Grigory Shahveridyan, who served as the prosecutor of Kirovakan (Boyuk Garakils) at the time of the massacres.

Conclusion. Research indicates that in the Armenian SSR, beginning in the mid-20th century - particularly during the wave of deportations in 1948-1953- ethnic cleansing of the Azerbaijani population was deliberately carried out, culminating in the mass expulsions of the late 1980s. Analysis of archival documents, witness accounts, and official records confirms that the violence and deportations in the northern and western regions of the Armenian SSR were not random acts, but a systematic process of ethnic cleansing, planned in advance and supported, directly or indirectly, by state authorities. Local officials, militia leaders, and even the central Soviet leadership (under instructions from

Mikhail Gorbachev) were actively involved. Moscow effectively endorsed the ethnic cleansing policies of Armenian nationalists.

The 1988 Spitak earthquake, while a natural disaster, was exploited by Armenian armed groups to intensify pressure on the Azerbaijani population. Targeting humanitarian aid further exposed the inhumanity of this policy. The chaos caused by the earthquake was deliberately used to conceal massacres, looting, and the misappropriation of property.

State institutions and law enforcement agencies of the Armenian SSR were not passive observers but active participants in the ethnic cleansing. The displaced population was stripped of property, farmland, and housing, without receiving any compensation. The self-defense efforts of villagers in Qizilshafag and other settlements demonstrate that traditions of resistance existed against deportations and massacres. Evidence from personal applications of internally displaced persons, registration cards, decisions of local Soviet bodies, and witness statements confirms these findings.

The research also shows that the authorities' actions toward Azerbaijanis in regions not directly bordering the Azerbaijan SSR were particularly harsh. The ethnic cleansing extended across nearly all northern and western regions of the Armenian SSR, including Amasya, Masis, Kalinino, Hamamli, Noyemberyan, and others.

Cultural genocide accompanied these acts of violence. Cemeteries were destroyed, mosques were demolished, and historical village names were changed (e.g., Balığlı → Zorakert; Ulukhanli → Masis; Qizilshafag → Dzünashok). In some cases, the Soviet leadership attempted to portray the deportation process as a population exchange. For example, Azerbaijanis from Qizilshafag in the Kalinino (Dashir) region were ostensibly "exchanged" with Armenians living in Kerkenj in the Shamakhi region of Azerbaijan. In reality, this exchange involved the forced displacement of a large number of Azerbaijanis in exchange for a small number of Armenians. Research demonstrates that this was effectively a secret deportation, with Azerbaijanis compelled to leave their homeland under threat and coercion.

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ERMƏNİSTAN SSR-İN ŞİMAL VƏ QƏRB RAYONLARINDA AZƏRBAYCANLI ƏHALİYƏ QARŞI ETNİK TƏMİZLƏMƏ (1988-1990): ƏSAS FORMA VƏ ÜSULLAR

Məqalədə 1988–1990-cı illərdə Ermənistan SSR-in, xüsusilə şimal və qərb rayonlarında yaşayan azərbaycanlılara qarşı həyata keçirilmiş etnik təmizləmə siyasəti araşdırılır. Arxiv sənədləri, şahid ifadələri və yerli mənbələr əsasında aparılan təhlillər göstərir ki, bu proses təsadüfi deyil, əvvəlcədən planlaşdırılmış və dövlət orqanlarının birbaşa və dolayı dəstəyi ilə həyata keçirilmişdir. Araşdırmada Amasiya, Zəngibasar, Kalinino, Hamamlı və digər bölgələrdə zorakılıq, deportasiya, mədəni irsin məhvi, yaşayış məntəqələrinin adlarının dəyişdirilməsi kimi faktlar təqdim olunur. Qeyd olunur ki, Spitak (Hamamlı) zəlzələsi azərbaycanlı əhalini sıxışdırmaq üçün alətə çevrilmiş, humanitar yardımlar belə hədəfə alınmışdır. Tədqiqatlar sübut edir ki, 1988–1990-cı illərdəki hadisələr yalnız etnik qarşıdurma deyil, Ermənistan SSR rəhbərliyinin və sovet mərkəzi hakimiyyətinin dəstəyi ilə həyata keçirilən sistemli etnik təmizləmə və mədəni soyqırımı siyasətinin bir hissəsi olmuşdur.

Açar sözlər: Azərbaycanlılar, Ermənistan SSR, etnik təmizləmə, deportasiya, Spitak zəlzələsi, mədəni soyqırımı, məcburi köçkünlər, Amasiya, Zəngibasar, Kalinino, Hamamlı.

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ЭТНИЧЕСКАЯ ЧИСТКА ПРОТИВ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНСКОГО НАСЕЛЕНИЯ В СЕВЕРНЫХ И ЗАПАДНЫХ РАЙОНАХ АРМЯНСКОЙ ССР (1988–1990 ГГ.): ОСНОВНЫЕ ФОРМЫ И МЕТОДЫ

В статье исследуется политика этнических чисток, проведённая в 1988–1990 гг. в Армянской ССР, в частности в северных и западных районах, против азербайджанцев. Анализ, основанный на архивных документах, свидетельских показаниях и местных источниках, показывает, что данный процесс не был случайным, а был заранее спланирован и осуществлялся при

прямой и косвенной поддержке государственных органов. В исследовании приводятся факты насилия, депортации, уничтожения культурного наследия, изменения названий населённых пунктов в Амасии, Зангибасаре, Калинино, Хамамлы и других регионах. Отмечается, что Спитакское (Хамамлы) землетрясение было превращено в инструмент вытеснения азербайджанского населения, а гуманитарная помощь также стала объектом давления. Исследования доказывают, что события 1988–1990 гг. были не просто этническим противостоянием, а частью системной политики этнических чисток и культурного геноцида, реализованной руководством Армянской ССР при поддержке центральной советской власти.

Ключевые слова: азербайджанцы, Армянская ССР, этническая чистка, депортация, Спитакское землетрясение, культурный геноцид, вынужденные переселенцы, Амасия, Зангибасар, Калинино, Хамамлы.

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