Forum: Historical Security Council
Issue: The situation in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan (12/13 January 1990)
Student Officer: Olivia Hunt
Position: Deputy President

Introduction

On 12 January 1990 atrocities were committed against the ethnic Armenian population in Azerbaijan’s capital city of Baku. Large numbers of ethnic Azerbaijanis took to the streets, spurred on by the strong anti-Armenian rhetoric of the anti-communist Azerbaijani Popular Front. Ethnic Armenian homes were ransacked and burned in widespread acts of arson. Ethnic Armenian people in Baku were attacked, beaten, burned, raped, and expelled. Reports of these atrocities have been spread across western media sources. Although the Soviet news agency Tass does not apply the term “pogrom,” its description of events are similar to those describing the rampage carried out against Armenians in February 1988 in the Azerbaijan seaport city of Sumgait.¹

The atrocities show signs of continuing for several days. On January 13th it is reported that 50,000 people took to the streets. Many do not believe the turmoil will end until the majority of the city’s ethnic-Armenian population is expelled. Witness accounts detail the perpetrators possessing lists containing the addresses of Armenian homes, suggesting that the violence is a systematic and planned event rather than an opportunistic or sporadic occurrence. There are further reports which indicate that the local police in Baku and the Azerbaijani military force have deliberately allowed the mayhem to continue. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, USSR, which oversees both the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, Armenian SSR, and the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, Azerbaijan SSR, has yet to announce a state of emergency in Baku, or to deploy forces to Baku.

The atrocities and turmoil are believed to be a direct response to the passing of a resolution in the Armenian SSR Supreme Soviet formally declaring the consolidation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) with the Armenian SSR. The Azerbaijani population of Baku, and the entirety of the Azerbaijan SSR, believe this to be unconstitutional and an infringement of Azerbaijani sovereignty. However, it is clear that the ferocity of the turmoil stems from deep-seated ethnic hatred between ethnic-Azerbaijanis and ethnic-Armenians. For the past three years violent confrontations have occurred throughout the NKAO as well as the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijan SSR. Increasing nationalistic sentiment among the peoples of both nations further inflames the conflict. It is important to note that the conflict has blatant religiously discriminatory sentiments, with ethnic-Armenians taking aim at the Azerbaijani majority faith of Islam and the Azerbaijanis taking aim at the Armenians majority faith of Christianity.

¹ “Rampage in Azerbaijani capital,” UPI NewsTrack, 13 January 1990.
The United Nations has yet to take action on the question of the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijan SSR due to the nature of the conflict, their relations with the USSR and the previous human rights abuses. Thus, it has come to the attention of the Security Council of 1990 to ensure the maintenance of peace and the curtailment of future violence.

Definition of Key Terms

Nagorno-Karabakh

A geographical territory within the south east of Armenia and western Azerbaijan made up of roughly 1,700 square miles with a population of 160,000. In 1920 the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was established as a separate independent state under the supervision of the Azerbaijan SSR, a Soviet satellite state. Despite being overseen by the Azerbaijan SSR, 95% of the population are ethnic Armenians.

Pogrom

An act of organized cruel behaviour or killing committed against a group of people because of their race or religion. A pogrom involves a large group of people who share similar political or social beliefs aggressively attacking those of a different social, ethnic, or religious background. Pogroms are often motivated by political and social revenge.

Ethnically Armenian

A group of people who identify as members of the Armenian ethnicity through factors including but not limited to: nationality, ancestry, culture, religion, language, and race. Within the context

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2 Cambridge English Dictionary
of this topic, those who are identified as ethnically Armenian might not be citizens of the Armenian SSR.

Ethnically Azerbaijani

A group of people who identify as members of the Azerbaijani ethnicity through factors including but not limited to: nationality, ancestry, culture, religion, language, and race. Within the context of this topic, those who are identified as ethnically Azerbaijani might not be citizens of the Azerbaijan SSR.

The Supreme Soviet of the USSR

The Supreme Soviet of the USSR was the most authoritative legislative body within the USSR. It possessed the power to approve constitutional amendments. From 1989 to 1991 it elected the Presidium and served as the collective head of state of the USSR.

The Karabakh Committee

An organization founded in 1988 for the purpose of seeing the consolidation of the NKAO and the Armenian SSR. The group was comprised of Armenian intellectuals and political thinkers, and was regarded by many as the “de-facto” leaders of the Armenian SSR during the Nagorno-Karabakh War. The group developed into a notable nationalist organization called the Pan-Armenian National Movement.

The Azerbaijanis Popular Front, APF

An organization that began in 1988 as the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA), aimed at achieving Azerbaijan’s independence from the USSR. The organization became an important player in the conflict between the Azerbaijan SSR and the Armenian SSR and is credited with inspiring violent anti-Armenian sentiment including that of the ongoing Baku Pogroms.

Oblast

An administrative and territorial division in some republics of the USSR. Specifically, regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, the oblast descriptor means that the NKAO was an autonomous or independent state controlled by the USSR and overseen by the Azerbaijan SSR.

Ministry of Internal Affairs, MVD

A ministry within the USSR that dealt primarily with policing and maintaining order. MVD forces have been utilized by the USSR to combat pogroms previously, including those at Sumgait.

Background Information

Relationship to the USSR

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3 Bill Keller, September 5, 1988
The Armenian SSR was founded in December 1920, and the Azerbaijani SSR was founded in April of 1920. Both nations were considered constituent republics of the Soviet Union. This means that although they were independent, they were subjected to the will of the central party organs. USSR control over its constituent republics was absolute until the introduction of Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost campaigns in the mid-1980s.

**Creation of borders**

After the Turkish and Armenian conflict in 1920, the nations of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan were ceded to the USSR. They were declared Soviet constituent republics, and newly defined borders were drawn. The USSR began the process of National Territorial Delimitation which aimed at redrawning borders that would accommodate the ethnic divisions between the states. However, given the USSR’s limited recognition of underlying ethnic conflicts as well as its innate inability to please all the contradictory opinions on the subject of establishing borders, nations were often created harboring age-old ethnic rivalries and divisions. Some suppose that the failure to create culturally appropriate border lines was part of a larger “Divide and Rule” policy by which the USSR sought to embroil its constituent states in multi-ethnic conflicts in order to secure Soviet control, and specifically to halt the threat of “Pan-Turkish Nationalism”.

The origin of the controversial borderlines between the Armenian SSR, Azerbaijan SSR, and the NKAO can be traced back to the USSR National Territorial Delimitation policy. The faulty borders established by this policy helped to form underling ethnic hatred between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis.

**Glasnost and its effect**

In mid-late 1980’s Mikhail Gorbachev announced his policy of glasnost, “openness”, in which citizens within the USSR were allowed to speak more openly about government policies. This new found freedom of expression allowed for long suppressed issues within the USSR to be voiced and to gain public attention. Specifically, regarding the Armenian SSR, frustration about the NKAO began to grow in prominence.

The implementation of glasnost allowed for formal complaints to be filed to the central powers of the USSR. For example, citizens of the Armenian SSR compiled petitions requesting the return of the NKAO. It also allowed for demands for independence from Soviet member states to be propagated.

Consistent with the policy of glasnost, the USSR under Gorbachev granted constituent republics and satellite states greater independence. This shift to greater national sovereignty created questions about who would now have full control over regions such as the NKAO.

**Rising nationalism**

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4 Bergne, Paul, 2007
Increasing freedoms from Gorbachev’s glasnost policy created a new platform for political disputes. Naturally with a growing freedom of speech a wider array of opinions could be voiced and eventually underlying conflict would be made publicly apparent. New political associations began to form. Members of the ethnic-Azerbaijaniis formed the Azerbaijan Popular Front. An organization built on its desire for independence from the USSR, and known for its outspoken nationalist rhetoric that often included blatant and inflammatory anti-Armenian sentiment.

Members of the ethnic-Armenians formed the Karabakh Committee, an organization founded in 1988 for the purpose of seeing the consolidation of the NKAO and the Armenian SSR. That has continued to increase its nationalistic sentiment in response to escalating conflict with ethnic-Armenians. It is also known for expressing blatant and inflammatory anti-Azerbaijani sentiment.

Politically the lines of division were very clear. There was an ethnic-Armenian political faction and an ethnic-Azerbaijani political faction. They actively clashed and their followers incited acts of violence and political unrest. Both factions desired control of the NKAO and freedom from the USSR’s imposed borders. The competing groups fanned the flame of nationalism, thus contributing to violence between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Violent confrontations between ethnic-Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis became regular occurrences. Each violent act incited calls for revenge against the opposing side, thus reinforcing the age-old cultural distrust each ethnic group harbored against the other. The civil unrest and ethnic violence carried out by both sides in 1988 shed light on the degree of distrust and hatred. On 24 February 1988 a clash between the residents of Agdam and Askeran took place, resulting in 19 people wounded and the deaths of two young Azerbaijanis. On 27 February 1988 groups of ethnic Azerbaijanis attacked and killed Armenians in their homes and on the streets of the seaside town of Sumgait, Azerbaijan. The looting and violence continued for three days, ending with 26 Armenians and 6 Azerbaijanis killed. (Some estimates raise the death toll into the hundreds.) On 27 November 1988 Armenians attacked the village of Vartanly ending with 14 Azerbaijanis massacred.

The rising nationalism that led directly to an upsurge in violent confrontations was not created by the dispute over the NKAO but was a part of historical ethnic divisions and cultural conflicts. It was directly related to the two differing religious majorities and ethnic groups that inhabited the region prior to the imposition of Soviet rule. This is best exemplified by chants heard at ethnic-Armenian rallies across the NKAO and Armenian SSR: “Armenia is for Armenians”, and “Clear Armenia of the Turks”. Although these anti-Azerbaijani chants have been professionally documented, it is certain that anti-Armenian chants by ethnic-Azerbaijanis were also recited at rallies; these are referenced in news sources but not directly recorded.

**Religious Discrimination**

When looking for the origin of the ethnic-Armenian and ethnic-Azerbaijani conflict one is always presented with the religious differences between the two ethnic groups. The conflict is intrinsically related to the groups’ religious differences, specifically the Azerbaijani majority faith of Islam and the Armenian majority faith of Christianity. The divisions between Christianity and Islam span across many countries, cultures, and time periods and stem from adversarial beliefs about Biblical cannon, religious practice, and salvation. There are
many examples of both sides specifically targeting the opposing side on the basis of religion. For example, the destruction of a mosque in Yerevan by Armenians on 19 February 1988. There are also reports circulating of crosses being burned into the backs of ethnic-Armenians, the majority Christian group, during the ongoing Baku pogroms.

**Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

**Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast**

The disputed region between the southeast of Armenia and western border of Azerbaijan, geographically within the Nagorno-Karabakh. Semi-autonomous oblast overseen by the Azerbaijan SSR. The region is claimed by the Armenian SSR due to the ethnic majority of Armenians within the NKAO. It is a USSR constituent Republic.

**Armenia Soviet Socialist Republic, Armenia SSR**

A former territory of the Ottoman Empire that was ceded to the USSR in 1920: a constituent republic of the USSR. Throughout the early and mid-1900s, the Armenian SSR became an industrial hub for the USSR, having previously been mostly farmland. In 1989 the population is reported to be around 3.3 million.

**Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, Azerbaijan SSR**

A former territory of the Ottoman Empire. Ceded to the USSR in 1920: a constituent republic of the USSR. The Azerbaijan SSR is primarily in charge of supplying oil to the USSR and its allies, with 60% of the USSR’s oil coming from the Azerbaijan SSR. In 1989 the population is reported to be seven million.

**Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, USSR**

A nation comprised of multiple united Soviet states with its capital in Moscow. The USSR is a single party state under the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Although not directly involved in the clash over the NKAO region, it is the foremost power uniting all three bodies engaged in the border dispute. Its political actions have direct impact on the situation, and all regions involved in the NKAO situation are under the sovereignty of the USSR.

**Timeline of Events**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1985-1991</td>
<td>Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost, “openness”, allowed for Soviet citizens to express issues freely and openly. This allowed for opinions about the NKAO to grow in prominence.</td>
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October 18th, 1987

At a rally for the curtailment of pollution in Yerevan, a group begin appealing to the crowd and collecting signatures in favor of the transfer of the NKAO to Armenia.

Ethnically Armenian Citizens of NKAO submit a request to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union for the transfer of the NKAO to Armenia. These requests, accompanied by signed petitions, continue into January of 1988.

December 1st, 1987

Inter-ethnic tensions escalate, leading to conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis throughout the NKAO. Tensions between Azerbaijanis and the Armenian ethnic majority specifically in the Ghapan and Meghri regions result in waves of refugees. The numbers of Azerbaijanis and Armenian refugees increase as tension and conflict continue. The claims of forced dispersion of Azerbaijani citizens are disputed.

January 25th, 1988

Armenian protests for the NKAO’s transfer to the Armenian SSR are ongoing. The first counter-protest begins in the Azerbaijan capital of Baku. Tensions escalate due to continued violent confrontations between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis.

February 19th, 1988

Soviet leaders of the Karabakh region vote in favor of the NKAO being transferred to the Armenian SSR.

February 20th, 1988

Two Azerbaijani students are raped in Stepanakert Hospital; the perpetrators are widely presumed to be Armenians. This incident is a contributing factors for the Sumgait pogroms.

February 22nd, 1988

Fighting breaks out in city of Askeran between between ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis, resulting in the death of two teens. This incident likewise incites the Sumgait pogroms.

February 26th, 1988

Gorbachev appeals to NKAO citizens in a televised program. He declares the impossibility of changing the existing borders of the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijan SSR.
February 27th, 1988

The Sumgait massacres take place in Sumgait Azerbaijan. For three days large mobs, made up of ethnic Azerbaijanis, attack ethnic Armenians within the city. MVD forces were dispatched to Sumgait. The official death toll is estimated to include twenty-six Armenians and six Azerbaijanis dead. These numbers are disputed.

March 10th, 1988

Mikhail Gorbachev announces that the borders of the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijan SSR will not change. This announcement was defended by citing Article 78 of the Soviet Constitution. Gorbachev sought to avoid creating a precedent by allowing the redrawing of Soviet borders, fearing that other Soviet states would demand territorial changes as well. This decision was met with frustration and resentment by ethnic Armenians, while ethnic Azerbaijanis side with Gorbachev’s position. In order to quell frustration, Gorbachev promised a 400 million ruble project to replace previously scarce Armenian language textbooks, and Armenian television programs in the NKAO region.

July 18th, 1988

At a meeting of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet the topic of the border dispute between the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijan SSR over the NKAO is discussed. It is decided that the borders cannot not be changed to accommodate the will of the Armenian ethnic majority. In the wake of the decision, troops were sent to Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, in order to quell protests and any potential escalation of violence.

November 18th, 1988

Reports circulate of twenty to twenty-five ethnic Azerbaijanis burned to death by ethnic Armenians in the village of Vartan, Armenia.

December 7th, 1988

An earthquake in Armenia leaves thousands displaced and 25,000 dead. The USSR and the Armenian SSR governments immediately allowed international aid to reach Armenia and the NKAO.

December 11th, 1988

The Karabakh Committee is arrested in Moscow after being charged with blocking humanitarian intended to aid Armenia in the wake of the earthquake. The Karabakh Committee was established in mid-1988 for the purpose of “reuniting” the NKAO with Armenia. Many Armenians saw members as the “de-facto leaders” of Armenia, their arrest furthered distrust between the Kremlin and Armenians.
January, 1989
The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union "imposes direct control" of the NKAO. The decision was welcomed by ethnic Armenians who felt Moscow had failed to effectively curtail the conflict thus far. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union relinquished direct control in November.

May 31st, 1989
Members of the Karabakh Committee are freed.

September 25th, 1989
The Azerbaijani Popular Front, APF, orchestrate a railway blockade of goods and humanitarian aid to the Armenian SSR, and the NKAO. Due to a majority of Armenian aid arriving by rail, this action greatly increased hostility between both ethnic groups.

December 1st, 1989
The Armenian SSR Supreme Soviet passes the resolution "On the accession of Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenian SSR". The resolution formally declared the consolidation of the NKAO with the Armenian SSR, specifically by including the NAKR in their budget and allowing citizens in the NAKR to vote in Armenian elections. The Armenian flag was raised over Khakendi in the NKAO. Ethnic Azerbaijanis saw this as unconstitutional. This action likewise directly incited the Baku turmoil.

January 12th, 1990
The Baku atrocities begin in Baku, Azerbaijan. Huge crowds gathered in Lenin square under the APF, and an organized mass attack on ethnic Armenians followed. Estimates of Armenian deaths range from twenty-five to ninety. Many ethnic Armenians, and those presumed to be ethnically Armenian, were beaten, raped, tortured, and forced out of the city. Homes were ransacked and burned. The local police force and Azerbaijani military forces failed to quell the riots. It is reported that Azerbaijani forces deliberately allowed the anti-Armenian persecution to continue, though this has yet to be proven.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events
The United Nations has yet to pass any resolutions on the topic of the situation in the Armenian SSR, Azerbaijan SSR, or the NKAO. However, there are certain UN documents that should be utilized within the debate on the topic for the most effective and UN applicable resolution.

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948
- The Charter of the United Nations, 26 June 1945
Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

There have yet to be any attempts by the United Nations to solve the issues within the Armenian SSR, the Azerbaijani SSR, or the NKAO. Administrators within the USSR, like Mikhail Gorbachev, have attempted to quell the fighting between ethnic-Armenians and ethnic-Azerbaijanis by making concessions to ethnic-Armenians while still preserving the NKAO’s attachment to the Azerbaijan SSR. This plan was executed by making a 400-million-ruble investment to bring Armenian textbooks and television programming to the NKAO, while still keeping the NKAO under the Azerbaijani SSR’s jurisdiction.

The USSR has attempted to provide immediate solutions to large scale uprisings throughout the Armenian SSR, the Azerbaijani SSR, and the NKAO by deploying Ministry of Internal Affairs, or MVD, forces to areas of immediate concern. For Example, force was utilized to subdue atrocities committed in Sumgait. In all situations where the USSR deployed force, only short term peace was achieved. As of yet no long term solutions have been effectively implemented by the USSR.

However, there is consensus among both sides in the conflict that the USSR has failed to take firm action in favor of either side engaged in the conflict. The lack of action on behalf of the USSR has alienated both ethnic-Armenians and ethnic-Azerbaijanis. This only adds to the complexity of the conflict, as now there is growing distrust and dissatisfaction with the USSR and the previous order they had instituted on the NKAO.

Outside of the USSR and UN there has been little action to solve the issue within the Armenian SSR. However, due to a massive earthquake in the Armenian SSR in December 1988, minimal humanitarian aid groups were allowed entrance into the region by the USSR. They have since stayed to deal with the ongoing conflict between ethnic-Armenians and ethnic-Azerbaijanis that has been categorized as the Nagorno-Karabakh War.

Possible Solutions

There is no clear road to peace. The dispute is complex and multi-layered. In order to effectively deal with the issues brought forward, and to secure minimum peace and stability to the region, a plan for future reconciliation must be devised. The solutions must be wide ranging and deal with all aspects of the issue. Any resolution will fail if it does not effectively address all aspects of the conflict. For example, if the existing the religious discrimination is ignored, it will only continue to spark division and negate any positive change implemented by other parts of a resolution.

The best way to attack the issue is by dividing it into portions relating to immediate solutions, long-term solutions, and preventative measures. These sections would need to deal with both the political and social conflict.

The Baku atrocities are ongoing and the Security Council should attempt to stop the violence and bloodshed. This could be achieved by sending third party forces or USSR forces into Baku. The Security Council could suggest a guidelines for the Azerbaijani SSR’s armed forces and police to follow within Baku in order to ensure that violence against ethnic-Armenians is not ignored. It
would be wise to clearly define the Security Council’s position on the ongoing turmoil. This will facilitate formulating clauses with a common objective. At the moment it is not imperative to address the NKAO since the immediate focus must be on the Baku. A long-term solution to the border disputes between the Armenian SSR and Azerbaijani SSR is nevertheless paramount into to achieve peace and stability to the region.

The long-term solutions should take up the bulk of the resolution, as they are the only way to truly ensure peace. Clauses focusing on mending ethnic-divides could include the establishment of a unitary required education system that would take into account and respect the diversity of all ethnic groups. A UN referendum in the NKAO might be necessary in order to discern the will of the population of the NKAO in regard to independence.

The creation of a summit or meeting brokered by an un-biased third party might also allow for open dialogue between leaders of the USSR, the Armenian SSR, and the Azerbaijani SSR and help curtail hostility between the nations. Proposing the implementation of a UN initiated political reform program for Armenian SSR and Azerbaijani SSR, especially if they seek independence from USSR, might well help combat future mass protests, civil disobedience, and violent confrontation.

Instituting preventative measures are essential for long-term peace. Consideration should be given to the inclusion of a clause or clauses referencing investigations into the crimes committed during the ongoing turmoil in Baku and the previous incidents of violence throughout the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. Justice must be upheld and the guilty parties must be punished for their violations of human rights. Otherwise, an absence of due process may lead to people blaming entire ethnic groups for the violence they experienced rather than the immediate perpetrators. A UN affiliated task force could be sent to oversee this investigation, especially since there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the Baku atrocities against ethnic-Armenians are organized and systematic rather than frenzied acts of violence.

Bibliography


