

Great Tragedy Deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia

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The question of “Armenia as Western Azerbaijan”

Until 1918, there was neither Armenia, nor a state called Armenia, in the South Caucasus. The demographic situation in the Irevan khanate of Azerbaijan, which constituted the main part of the current territory of Armenia, was changed to the benefit of Armenians as a result of the policy of resettlement carried out after occupation by the Russian Empire. In May 1918, when the state of Armenia had been established in the South Caucasus, the Muslim National Council officially ceded Irevan city to that state [9,14]. Thus, the Armenian state was established in the territory of Irevan, which was the western region of historical Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis living in these lands “became” citizens of Armenia. The Armenian government pursued a policy of Armenianisation by ousting the Azerbaijanis. At certain stages discrimination against Azerbaijanis in all areas of life was replaced by a strict policy of deportation. As a result every last Azerbaijani was ousted from their historical and geographical lands, from Western Azerbaijan (now the state of Armenia).

Relating to stages of deportation

In the just over 70 years from the establishment of the Armenian state in the South Caucasus in 1918 until the end of the 1980s/early 1990s, Azerbaijanis were subject to mass deportation three times: 1) from 1918-1920; 2) from 1948-1953; 3) from the end of the 1980s to the early 1990s.

Overview of the situation until 1918

Historical research proves that the Irevan khanate belonged solely to Azerbaijan states until it was annexed by Russia as a result of the Turkmenchay treaty (1828). These lands, forming the Western region of Azerbaijan were previously part of the following states: Albania (4th-6th centuries BC), Sais, Salaris, Ravvadis (9th – 11th centuries), Atabeys (1136-1225), Garagoyunlus (1410-1468), Aghgoyunlus (1468-1501) and the Safavids (1501-1736). After the death of Nadir Shah (1736-1747) the Irevan khanate, which had a particular role in the khanates system of Azerbaijan, was formed in these lands. The Russian Empire had been occupying Azerbaijani land since 1801. As a result of this policy, the centre of the khanate, Irevan city, was also occupied, in October 1827. The Irevan khanate was officially included in the structure of Russia [7] as part of the Turkmenchay agreement. In the Russian Empire’s plan to create strategic support, consisting of Armenians, against the Turkic-Muslim population of the region, the process of Armenianising the Irevan khanate was intensified and the positions of Armenians strengthened; they were given special political and juridical benefits. Azerbaijanis had also been ousted. Consequently, a Russian-Armenian colonial regime was established in the lands of Irevan, Western Azerbaijan, as in all parts of the South Caucasus.

The administrative and territorial divisions of the Irevan khanate, which had been shaped historically, were changed. The position of Armenians in the bureaucratic machinery was reinforced. Significant powers were given to the Armenian-Gregorian Church. Armenians also acquired a decisive role in the social and economic spheres. All this was accompanied by a systematic resettlement of Armenians to Irevan and a change in the demographic situation, to Armenian advantage. According to a fiscal census (1828-1831) implemented after the occupation of the Irevan khanate by the Russian Empire, 1807 Muslim families (almost all of them Azerbaijanis), or 7331 persons, were registered in Irevan city, while Armenians numbered 2176 persons. 1763 Armenians were resettled from Iran and the Ottoman Empire. So, on the eve of the Russian occupation, 9700 persons lived in Irevan city, 75.58 per cent of whom were Azerbaijanis [13, 543-546]. This figure was even higher in the Irevan region. As a result of the resettlement policy carried out by the tsarist government, the number of Armenians in the Irevan region was growing rapidly. According to information in the Caucasus Almanac, the number of Armenians in the Irevan province was brought up to 669,871 persons (59.8 per cent). Azerbaijanis numbered 373,582 persons (33.35 per

cent) [11].

The policy of ethnic cleansing conducted against Azerbaijanis, the indigenous population of the region, also played an important role in changing the ethnic make-up of the population of the Irevan region. This situation took on an even more acute form during the period known as the “Armenian-Muslim clashes” [6]. During World War I, Armenians, benefitting from Russian victories on the Caucasus front, began to acquire territory for the Armenian state where Armenians prevailed by means of ethnically cleansing Azerbaijanis.

1918-1920

This deportation policy was the first stage in the history of the forced ousting of Azerbaijanis from their ancestral lands, which had already “become” Armenia. The deportations were carried out directly by the newly established Armenian state. Other forms of ethnic cleansing were also conducted, especially massacre. According to calculations made on the basis of Armenian sources, 565,000 of the 575,000 Azerbaijanis living in the territory of Armenia were killed or ousted at the end of World War I. Armenian author Z.Korkadyan wrote: “In 1920, after the Dashnaks, there remained a few more than 10,000 Turkic people (Azerbaijanis – K.Sh.). There were 72,596 Azerbaijanis after the return of 60,000 refugees in 1922” [2, 35]. Another Armenian author, A.Lalayan, wrote that the Armenian Dashnak government “killed 60 per cent of the Azerbaijani population during its period of government (May 1918 - November 1920)” [2, 35].

Information from Scotland Liddell, the British military reporter, further confirmed these facts. He wrote that when he was in Shusha, in January, he told one British officer that he was going to the Zengezur circle to ascertain the condition of 40,000 Muslims, all of whom had suffered at the hands of Armenians [10, 241].

During Sovietisation, first in Azerbaijan (28 April 1920), then in Armenia (29 April 1920), a certain number of Azerbaijanis who had been deported from Armenia returned to their former lands. They would fall victim to the later deportations of 1948-1953.

1948-1953

The Sovietisation of Armenia in November 1920 took the policy of Azerbaijani deportation in a more insidious direction. From 1920-30 ideological declarations like “proletarian internationalism” were actually screens for organising the oppression of Azerbaijanis in the Armenian SSR [12]. On the contrary, special conditions were demanded for Armenians living in Azerbaijan and other Soviet republics. As a result, in 1923 the Mountainous part of Karabagh, which is historically and geographically a region of Azerbaijan, was artificially separated from the lower part of the region and given autonomous status. Thus, the Autonomous Region of Mountainous Karabagh (ARMK) was established [5]. During a period when national state building was being conducted, the non-Azerbaijani leader of Azerbaijan, S.M.Kirov (1922-1926) and others did not raise the question of giving similar status to Azerbaijanis living in the Armenian SSR. Consequently, Azerbaijanis living in the Armenian SSR remained outside the political structures. Firstly, Armenia obtained a favourable opportunity for further oppression of Azerbaijani citizens who remained without autonomy. Secondly, Armenia began to incite the Armenians who had gained autonomous status for the ARMK of Azerbaijan to separatism. Soon after World War II (November-December 1945), the Armenian authorities raised with the USSR leadership the question of transferring Mountainous Karabagh to Armenia. This question was not resolved [4, 76-80]. A short time later, on 23 December 1947, Stalin signed a resolution by the Council of Ministers of the USSR on the resettlement of Azerbaijani kolkhoz members and other Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR to the lowlands of the Kur and Araz rivers. On 10 March 1948, a further resolution on resettlement was signed [3]. The period between the dates of the resolutions reveals another problem. A resolution on resettlement affecting the destiny of more than 10,000 people was adopted hastily and related actions were worked out later. Thus, it is clear that there was a close connection between the USSR leadership’s consideration of Armenia’s claim to the ARMK of Azerbaijan and the resolutions concerning resettlement of Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR. Actually, in this way the USSR leadership had also defined the sequence of these two problems. In other words, first, Azerbaijanis were resettled from Armenia and then the question of the destiny of the ARMK found its solution.

Textual study of the resolutions by the Council of Ministers of the USSR shows that they had complete disregard for human and civil rights. Azerbaijanis were removed, not from certain territories, as stated, but from the whole of Armenia and they were settled only in the lowlands of the Kur and Araz rivers. It becomes clear that the aim was to oust all Azerbaijanis from Armenia. According to the last, 11th, Article of the resolution dated 23

December 1947, it was intended to settle foreign Armenians in Armenia in place of the deported Azerbaijanis.

Despite the fact that in the official documents this process was called a resettlement, it was in all respects an act of deportation (deliberate, unexpected and compulsory). An inquiry by the Minister of the Interior, dated 3 May 1948, makes this clear. The inquiry, conducted on the basis of agents' reports, lists the main reason as being the settlement of foreign Armenians, other reasons: an anticipated war between the USSR and Turkey, distrust of Azerbaijanis and hostile actions by Armenians were also given. Opinions about the compulsory character of the resettlement and the serious protests made against it were also recorded [1].

From 1948-1953, when the deportation was implemented (after Stalin's death this process was halted) about 150,000 Azerbaijanis were expelled from the Armenian SSR. All the property, history and cultural monuments belonging to these people were left in the Armenian SSR. The Armenian government and Armenians increased their wealth with this property.

The arbitrariness of Armenian governmental bodies, hostile actions by Armenians against Azerbaijanis, mass acts of force, incorrect selection of the location for resettlement in the Azerbaijan SSR etc. during the deportation process, resulted in innocent people being condemned to death.

The deportation of Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR from 1948-1953 was one of the harshest episodes in the history of Soviet deportations taking place at that time (deportations of: Koreans in 1937; Germans at the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942; Poles in November 1942, Crimean Tatars on 18 May 1944 and others).

The end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s

The Armenian SSR and the USSR leadership that supported Armenia were not completely successful, as they were not able to deport all Azerbaijanis from Armenia. Before the process was finished, some of those deported returned to their native land after Stalin's death.

The Armenian government maintained its anti-Azerbaijani policy. In the early 1960s, during the Cuban crisis, relations between the USSR and the USA became strained. Turkey, as a member of NATO, was drawn into the conflict and this cooled Soviet-Turkish relations. In this context, in the mid 1960s Armenia was granted permission to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the events of 1915 which took place in the Ottoman Empire. This was accompanied by mass violence against Azerbaijanis lived in the Armenian SSR. This situation recurred every year at the same time. In 1977, during the adoption of the constitution of the USSR, Armenia failed once more with its claim on Mountainous Karabagh and this exacerbated the anti-Azerbaijani policy. In 1987, with assistance from the USSR leadership, the Mountainous Karabagh issue was included on the agenda. At the beginning of the 1980s there were further deportations of Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR in order to press territorial claims on Azerbaijan. The deportations were on a large scale and more than 250,000 Azerbaijanis were ousted from 1988-1989 [8]. The last Azerbaijani location, the village of Nuvadi, which had withstood Armenian pressure for nearly three years, was evacuated in August 1991. Thus, as a result of the deportation policy deliberately and systematically implemented by Armenia, the expulsion of Azerbaijanis was completed. In fact, Armenia's claim on Mountainous Karabagh developed into undeclared war on Azerbaijan. The Mountainous Karabagh region and seven surrounding districts of Azerbaijan, in all 20 per cent of the Azerbaijani territory, were occupied. Armenia captured the historical homeland of Azerbaijanis by means of deportations; also infringing the internationally-recognised territorial integrity of Azerbaijan by occupying its lands.

Comeback: desire or reality?

The Azerbaijani people know well the history of the deportations of Azerbaijanis from Western Azerbaijan (now Armenia) and its bitter consequences. The Azerbaijani government adopted important political resolutions on this issue. In a decree by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated 18 December 1997 "On the mass deportation of Azerbaijanis from their historical and ethnic lands in the territory of the Armenian SSR from 1948-1953" it is noted that as a result of such an inhumane policy, implemented step-by-step, Azerbaijanis had been exiled from their historical native lands, where they had lived for a thousand years. They had been exposed to mass slaughter and thousands of their historical and cultural monuments and habitats had been destroyed or ruined.

All this left an indelible mark in the memory, literature, art and political history of the Azerbaijani people. The return of Azerbaijanis to their historical native land is a necessity. If there has been deportation, there should be return!

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