

SPRING 1918: ARMENIAN TERRORISM AND THE TURKIC-MUSLIM GENOCIDE IN AZERBAIJAN

Camil Hasanli
(Azerbaijan)

It is impossible to compare the complex and contradictory events which occurred in 1918 in Baku - the historical, economic, and cultural center of Northern Azerbaijan - with any part of what was then the Russian Empire. The most tragic event among them is the March genocide. This event, having been called a "civil war" in Soviet Azerbaijani historiography, is more tragic than the Bartholomew Night Massacre in which three thousand Huguenots were slaughtered by Catholics in Paris on August 24, 1572. It is a great shame that the most tragic and instructive event of our history has not yet received political recognition. The scale of the Turkic-Muslim genocide in Azerbaijan committed by the Armenian political-military units with the support of the Bolsheviks was so immense that one of the first steps of the young Azerbaijani government was the establishment of an Extraordinary Investigation Committee under the leadership of the lawyer Alekber bey Khassmammadov in August of that year. The Commission was to analyze the facts of the aggression which the Transcaucasian Muslims suffered and count up the losses.

It was determined that the materials prepared by the Commission would be published in various languages. But although some of the materials compiled were distributed among several foreign missions present in Baku and Paris ¹, nothing came of it.

Under Soviet rule, this incident was kept hidden. The facts about the violence, the war crimes, the list of names of the martyrs, the documents dealing with the damage to property, investigative questionnaires ² the testimony of witnesses, and photo-materials confirming the events were covered up. These documents are still kept in the Newest History Archive – 1061 of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Archive of the History of Political Parties and Social

Movements ³. The literature published by emigrants and some valuable materials in foreign historical research which appeared after twenty years of Soviet occupation do not fully reflect the objective reality because they were not written on the basis of original sources, i.e., the archive materials and the press of the Times. Disclosing historical truth connected to this matter, discovering the character of the anti-human Armenian psychology as it emerged in the early twentieth century, and revealing the very essence of the Armenian concept of getting moral pleasure out of murdering a Turk could help to clarify the true nature of our present troubles and, along with this, portray an objective picture of the national conflicts which have been torturing hundreds of peoples and have been taking place in our territory for years. An objective investigation of this matter is also useful to illuminate a series of problems in Azerbaijani history. The study of the March events leads us to conclude that such schemas as "civil war" or "Musavat revolt" or "counter-revolutionary revolt" which we were coerced into repeating for decades have no connection with historical reality. In fact, the Bolshevik government in Baku was established not in November 1917, as Soviet historians hold, but in March 1918. In that period, the Bolshevik-Dashnak coalition came to power on the backs of thousands of corpses of innocent Turkic-Muslims.

The British consul in Baku, Mac Dowell, wrote, "There weren't any Muslims in the town except corpses." The Armenians, who organized the Turkic-Muslim genocide, seized power in Baku from March through September 1918, entering into various coalitions. Their chief aim was to perpetrate this genocide. The documents which were later presented to the Versailles Conference indicated that the Armenians, having committed genocide against the Muslims in March, intended "to exile the local population of Baku from the town to appropriate its resources and, ultimately, to claim this ancient Azerbaijani city to be Armenian land" ⁴.

The Armenian press after World War I openly wrote that the Armenian forces had occupied Baku in the course of World War I, and therefore the city

belonged to them. The Bolshevik Blumin, who lived in Baku, then stated that Armenian Dashnaks murdered twenty thousand poor Muslims in the Spring of 1918⁵. The March events of 1918 bore a political and national character. M. A. Rasulzade wrote, "There is no resemblance between what Shaumyan perpetrated in Baku and the operation in Moscow and Petrograd (St.Petersburg). There, it was a class struggle, but here, a national genocide was committed under this name. The Dashnaks took revenge. Arms were exploded upon the heads of the Turkic Democracy of Baku from March 18 to 20. The mistreatment of the Muslims had as its aim nothing but the destruction of those who lived with the Azerbaijan Idea, with the sole aim of independence and autonomy".⁶

The incidents which happened during these three days were thought out in advance with great care. As a preliminary stage, Armenians murdered three thousand Turks in Yashilyayla near Arzurum to preoccupy the Ottoman Empire. Before the March genocide, in meetings at the Baku Soviet and other places, Shaumyan panicked the Christian population and propagated the idea that Rasulzade was a symbol of danger and Muslim military forces supported by the Turkish Sultan⁷. From January through March 1918, Dashnaks and other Armenian nationalist parties and the Bolsheviks resorted to different provocation to perpetrate genocide against the Muslims and Soviet organs placed some decisive posts at the Armenians' disposal. Some leading figures of Azerbaijan began to feel a presentiment of approaching catastrophe. At the end of World War I, the Christian people of the Caucasus were being armed very skillfully. On the eve of the March genocide, the appeal by the Russian National Council was issued to the Christian inhabitants of the Transcaucasus. In this appeal, it was stated that all the Russian youth between the ages of 19 to 25 were to be mobilized from March 11 through 18. The military mobilizations were to be completed by March⁸. In consequence of the liquidation for the Caucasian front, the Russian regiments began to sell their arms and ammunition for next to nothing to Russians (Molocans)⁹ and to Armenians.

The soldiers were aware of the hard life that was in store for them in their homeland, and therefore they preferred to stay in Baku for a piece of bread. Afterwards, Shaumyan and Company deployed these forces against the Muslims very skillfully. The local people began leaving Baku in February 1918, seeing the armament of the Armenian and Russian political forces. Just a week before the March events, the Dashnak party proclaimed the need to seize power in Baku, being "worried" about the situation in the city. The creation of self-defense forces was considered to be urgent by Muslim societies because they had presentiments of an approaching catastrophe. By their own initiative, the creation of military units in Baku, Lenkoran, and Ganja began, as well as the training of officers in the Baku Cadet School. But this process was going very slowly. On the other hand, the member countries of the Entente were interested in the armament of the Christian inhabitants of the Caucasus. Local Christians were expected to support the Entente in the Caucasus until British forces arrived from Mesopotamia. As Armenian politicians were practicing an Anglophilic policy after the disintegration of the Russia Empire, Muslim provinces stated to the Transcaucasian Committee their objection to the British forces' intervention in the Caucasus and demanded an end to negotiations with the British delegation.¹⁰

The Armenians endeavored to achieve their aims with the support of the Bolsheviks while the Entente forces were far away. Writing about their perfidious position, Narimanov said "*The Dashnaks are ready to take on different disguises only to achieve their goal of Greater Armenian. During Golits' days, the Dashnaks considered themselves a revolutionary party, and then they flattered V.Vorontsov-Dashkov and passed to the counter-revolutionary front. When the Soviet government is established, they will wear the Bolshevik mask*"¹¹. It was indicated in the documents presented to the Versailles Conference that the existence of "real Bolsheviks" cannot be excluded, "but it cannot be said about most Bolsheviks in the Transcaucasus. The Muslim population suffered the consequences of the Bolsheviks' treacherous

position. Mirzoyan, who had worn the Bolshevik mask, for a long time and who issued the orders for the most cruel terror of the proletarians against the Turkic population in Azerbaijan in the 20s, wrote afterwards, "Some consider wrongly that the Soviet government's stand-by in 1918 were the Dashnaks. It is not so. In fact, the Soviet government abused the Dashnaks for their own purposes" ¹².

One can come across such errors in Shaumyan's articles, too. The expansion of the Azerbaijan nationalist movement and the increase of the Azerbaijani nationalist party Musavat's prestige might have turned into an obstacle to Greater Armenia. So during the elections to the Baku Soviet in October 1917, the Musavat won over 40% of the votes, three times more than the votes won by the Bolsheviks. The Dashnaks planned to liquidate the Musavat's social basis, i.e., the local Muslim population, leading to the March events in Baku. Afterwards, in order to mislead public opinion and to justify the genocide against the Turkic-Muslims, Armenian propaganda insinuated the idea in Europe and Russia that Musavat and the Ittihad party members intended to create a Greater Azerbaijan or a vast Muslim state from India to the Volga ¹³. The Armenians dared to justify their bringing seven thousand Armenian troops from different fronts on the grounds that the creation of Greater Azerbaijan might lead to the abolition of Christian culture in Europe and the creation of such a state can't be admitted by them. Moreover, 70% of the army which had been created under the name of the Red Guards consisted of Armenians. ¹⁴

Special propaganda was spread in the Caspian Fleet which consisted chiefly of Russians. In addition to this, there were created emergency Russian-Muslim armed forces in Shemakha and Mugan. The Molocan forces entered from Lenkoran. An active participation in these incidents, the Bolshevik Assiryans, wrote in his memoirs, "In February 1918, Amirov assembled us together and told us about Shaumyan's and Gapparidze's orders, which were to be fulfilled. Shaumyan warned us beforehand that there would be a signal given at 1 p.m. Upon this signal, we were to attack and to occupy the Musavat's staff" ¹⁵. But a pretext was needed. The conflict over the Evelina filled this purpose. After

Azerbaijani millionaire H. Z. Taqiev's son Mohammad Taqiev, an officer in the Lenkoran army, died in a military accident, all the officers of the Muslim regiment came to Baku to participate in his funeral. After the funeral, the officers returned to Lenkoran in the ship Evelina. Seizing the opportunity, Armenians began to spread among the Russian National Council, Caspian sailors, the Mensheviks, and the Social Revolutionaries the rumor that the officers on the Evelina were assigned to annihilate the Russian-Molochan villages with the support of Muslim military forces in Lenkoran ¹⁶.

This provocation succeeded: All the non-Azeri political and military forces supported the idea of disarming the Evelina. They immediately created the Revolutionary Defense Committees of Baku and its regions. Shaumyan, Gaparidze, Sorganov, Sukharatsev, Saakyan, and Yolchiyan were included in the committee. Narimanov's inclusion in that committee by Soviet Azeri historians was needed to disguise the March genocide as a class struggle. Narimanov did not take part in the Committee's activities ¹⁷. On the initiative of the Revolutionary Defense Committee, the Evelina was stopped as it headed for Lenkoran and the officer staff in the ship was disarmed. The Muslim people who were offended by this incident and by Talishkhanov's imprisonment began to assemble in the mosques and to demand that their arms be returned. The representatives of the Turkic nationalist organizations realized what was happening and came to the Revolutionary Defense Committee [RDC] and attempted to get back the arms through the Muslim Bolshevik Committee Hummat. Despite the agreement reached in a meeting between Narimanov and Shaumyan on March 30 and at Resulzade's meeting at the RDC and the pledges that the seized arms would be returned, the Bolshevik-Armenian coalition broke their promise because they did not trust Hummat and because they were dissatisfied with Narimanov's "Rightist" tendencies, joining the majority around himself ¹⁸ (?).

So, in accordance with the agreement reached in advance, the Bolshevik-Armenian coalition had done all the preparatory work as Shaumyan ordered and

began attacking all along the front. The first shooting occurred in Baku at 5.p.m on March 30. The Dashnaks and the Armenian National Council, having declared their neutrality up to the March genocide, began to support the Baku Soviet after the shooting broke out. Not only Armenian soldiers, but also Armenian intellectuals joined the fighting from the Soviet side. The March genocide, which went down in history as a bloody tragedy, lasted three days. After the first shooting, the city was filled by armed forces. Armenians began to dig entrenchment and to raise barricades of earth and stone. It turned out that the negotiations by the leaders of the Armenian National Council and the Dashnaks with the Muslim societies on March 30 were provocations. In such a dangerous situation, the leader of the Baku Mensheviks, Ayolla, claimed that they would defend the Soviet.

The leader of the Social Revolutionaries, Saakyan, stated that they would fight against "Pan-Islamism". Even the Kadets, for all their loathing of the Bolsheviks, pledged that they would support them because they were fighting for "the Russian cause." The Bolsheviks' solidarity with the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries and even with the Kadets and the Dashnaks, had a national and religious basis, notwithstanding the Bolsheviks' long-standing struggle with the Mensheviks. As soon as the events began, all non-Azeri inhabitants of the city joined against the Turkic-Muslim population on the basis of Christian solidarity, regardless of their position in society. Besides the Bolsheviks and the Dashnaks, whose chief leaders were Armenians, no one expected the events to end so tragically. They offered their assistance against the Musavatists, but these united forces were in fact used against the entire Muslim population of the city and not only to repulse the Musavatists.

NOTES

1. Versailles Peace Conference: January 18, 1919 – January 21, 1920
2. Archive – 1061: Central State New History of the Republic of Azerbaijan
3. The Republic of Azerbaijan, Archive of History of Political Parties and Social Movements, fund 277, list 2, cases 13-16, 25-27, etc.
4. Ibid., fund N 276, page 2, case 20, points 18-19.
5. Ibid.
6. Istiglal, March 31, 1919
7. The Republic of Azerbaijan, Archive of History of Political Parties and Social Movements, fund 276, page 2, case 20, point 18
8. Ibid., fund 276, page 7, case 212, page 1.
9. Molocans: Sect of Russians who were moved to the Republic of Azerbaijan because of their language differences. Mainly inhabiting in the Mugan part of Azerbaijan.
10. The Republic of Azerbaijan, Archive of the History of Political Parties and Social Movements, fund 276, case 175, point 1.
11. Ibid., fund 609, page 1, case 42.
12. Memoirs 26, Materials on the Baku Commune's history, 1918, Baku, 1922, page 29.
13. See: Memoirs 26... page 27.
14. The Republic of Azerbaijan, Archive of the History of Political Parties and Social Movements, fund 276, page 2, case 20.
15. Ibid., fund 276, page 2 case 20, point 76.
16. Ibid., fund 276, page 2, case 22, point 74.
17. Isvestiya Bak. Soveta, April 11, 1918.
18. The Republic of Azerbaijan Archive, fund 276, page 2, case 20, point 47.