

try, including within Soviet Armenia. And if at first the authorities only confiscated church property and arrested priests from rural areas, starting in 1937 they began repressing the top leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church with its Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin. In the 1930–1940s, more than 160 priests were arrested, including seven from the Armenian Catholic Church and one from the Armenian Protestant church; 91 of them were shot. According to some reports, in 1938 the head of the Armenian Church, Catholicos of All Armenians Khoren I Mouradbekian was strangled by the secret agents of the NKVD.

About the Author:

Dr Eduard Melkonian, holds PhD and DA degrees in History and is Senior Researcher at the Armenian Institute of History.

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1937: “Great Terror” in Azerbaijan

By Eldar Ismailov, Baku

Abstract

This article describes the “Great Terror” in Azerbaijan. It began with Beria’s order and proceeded to kill thousands of individuals. There is ample evidence of the brutal methods used to kill and torture innocent people. Posterity will remember these events for the crimes that they were.

The Significance of the Terror

The phenomenon of “1937” is one of the most horrible pages in Soviet history. Chronologically, it is broader than its one-year dimension. The mass repressions associated with “1937” encompass more than two years—from summer 1936 to autumn 1938. It is understandable that this period has a particular place in the history and in the historical memories of the peoples of the former Soviet republics. In this relatively short historical period of time, the Soviet totalitarian system systematically used the methods of state terror in order to achieve its goals and objectives, going even farther than before in openly violating the rights of its citizens, including their personal security. This was a period of outright lawlessness, which led to heavy casualties and

According to Manukian, a total of 14,904 individuals fell victim to the purges in 1930–1938 in Soviet Armenia, 8,837 of them in 1937–1938. Out of the 4,639 people who were executed, the vast majority (4,530) were shot in 1937–1938. Only one person was shot in 1936. This brutal repression campaign waged by Stalin and later called the “Great Terror of 1937–1938,” resulted in the death of the young elite and has largely predetermined the country’s future history.

the denial of rights and freedoms to the great mass of people. These events are properly called “The Great Terror.”

Azerbaijan has not yet attempted a comprehensive study of this phenomenon. Meanwhile, a study of this topic could provide a better understanding of the origins of many contemporary national problems and contribute to the elimination of many obstacles that stand in the way of historical progress for the independent state of Azerbaijan and its people, the Azerbaijani nation.

Beginnings

In Azerbaijan, as throughout the entire South Caucasus, the signal for the beginning of the “Great Terror” was an article written by Lavrentiy Beria—First Secre-

tary of the Trans-Caucasus Regional Committee of the Communist Party, published on August 21, 1936, in all the central newspapers under the title "Turn the enemies of socialism to dust."

In the autumn of 1936 the first powerful wave of arrests swept Azerbaijan. Initially, they arrested the former oppositionists within the Bolshevik Party, anyone suspected of disloyalty to the Stalinist leadership and the former members of the non-Bolshevik parties. The process of identifying the "insurgent" groups among the peasantry also began.

In Azerbaijan, at the VI plenary session (March 1937) of the Central Committee of the Communist Party the officials with nomenklatura ranking lost their immunity from the repressions. This was followed by mass expulsions from the party and the arrests of party, government and executive leaders.

1937

In June 1937 a new phase in the repressive campaign began in the USSR. At the plenary session of the CPSU (b) in late June 1937, it became clear that Stalin had no intention of slowing down the pace of repressions; indeed, he was convinced about the need to expand them. Decisions were made to create the so-called "Troikas" and to set the quantitative indicators for the number of individuals who would be subject to repressions.

The "Troikas" were established in the republics, in autonomous republics, territories and regions. As a rule the members of the "Troikas" were the head of the local organ of internal affairs, the representative of the prosecutor's office or the court, and the local party leader. Each "troika" had a quota for the number of people to be shot within the next four months, subject to long-term imprisonment, or banishment. On July 10, 1937 the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b) adopted its decision on the repressions, including instructions for Azerbaijan. The section on Azerbaijan approved: "To be shot 500 kulaks and 500 criminals; subject to expulsion 1,300 kulaks and 1,700 criminals." Additionally it allowed Troikas "to consider the cases of counter-revolutionary insurgent organizations, with the execution of 500 people, deportation of 750 people and eviction of 150 families of bandit groups to the camps of the NKVD". Thus, the decision was made to shoot 1,500 people, to imprison in camps 3,750 people, and to evict 150 families.

Simultaneously with the creation of the "Troikas," the Visiting Sessions of the Military Collegiums of the Supreme Court became very active. The "Troikas" and Collegiums had approximately equal powers. They were empowered to consider cases on a list provided by the security organs, to hold meetings without the involve-

ment of representatives of the public prosecutors and lawyers, and to convict and determine punishments, including the use of the death penalty. Accordingly, the capacity for prosecutions rose sharply.

With the creation of the "Troikas" and the enhanced framework of the Visiting Collegiums the bloody orgy reached its peak. The most ominous period of the "Great Terror" began. It continued until the fall of 1938. The repressive machine decimated the ranks of the nomenklatura officials regardless of their personality or ethnicity. Over the course of 1937 in Azerbaijan 22 People's Commissars, 49 secretaries of district committees, 29 chairmen of district executive committees, 57 directors of factories and industries, 95 engineers, 110 soldiers, 207 council and trade unionists, and 8 professors were arrested. Almost all of them were shot. As a result, for political crimes in 1937 only by the decisions of the Troika 2,792 people were sentenced to death and 4,435 people to long terms of imprisonment.

1938

Although the repressive machine slowed down in the next year, up to November 1938 it continued its destruction. On January 31, 1938 the Politburo of the CPSU (b) adopted its ruling "On the anti-Soviet Elements," which approved additional quotas allowing more individuals to be subject to repression. As a result of this decision, in the Azerbaijan SSR, 2,000 people were condemned to the maximum penalty. During the entire year of 1938 at least 10,000 cases were reviewed in total. Troikas alone considered the cases of 7,241 people; 5,061 people were accused of political crimes and 2,180 were branded criminals. 1,108 people were sentenced to be shot for anti-Soviet agitation. People were condemned for intent to commit terrorism, for espionage, for sabotage.

Additionally, people were convicted by the Military Collegiums, military tribunals, and by ordinary court proceedings. But there was a large group of arrested people who were not condemned by the "Troikas" or Visiting Collegiums, and whose fate was resolved only in 1939–1940, by the Special Collegium of the NKVD of the USSR. They were in most cases condemned, however, most were not sentenced to be shot. But even if the accused were sentenced to one year of imprisonment, regardless of the sentence, the accused person was held in prison indefinitely. When he was due to be released, older charges were used to re-imprison him.

Many of the convicts did not survive to be rehabilitated. People who were arrested and sentenced to confinement in the camps in 1937–1939 who lived to see the post-Stalin rehabilitation in 1954–1956, spent 16–19 years in the camps.

The Victims

Recently, Moscow's "Memorial" group published the so-called "Stalin's Lists". These lists contain the names of people sentenced to death. Stalin and several other members of the country's leadership handed down a final verdict for the people on these lists. Usually the lists contained the names of officials with nomenklatura ranking. In other words, it was only necessary to gain permission from the country's leaders to punish leading Party and Soviet officials, People's Commissars, persons holding senior positions in the areas of governance and the economic and ideological life of the society. These lists of executives from the Azerbaijan SSR have been preserved; they contain the names of 870 people.

Mostly, however, ordinary citizens became victims of the terror. The peasants were the most affected since it was easiest to carry out punishments against them. And these punishments were implemented. Each district of the NKVD put together a plan of repression grouped by the "First" (shot) and the "Second" Categories, and then made schedules for the villages.

But, we must ask, are the only victims of the "Great Terror" those who were arrested and condemned? Of course not. The framework of the repressions was much wider. It embraced the inhabitants of the border zone from Astara to Julfa, who were considered to be "suspicious elements" and deported to Kazakhstan. The victims of the "Great Terror" were the wives of the "enemies of the nation" who were exiled to remote areas, predominantly in northern and central Asia without any judicial proceedings just for being married to a convicted "enemy". The children of repressed parents are to be considered as the victims of the "Great Terror"; their fate was terrible. As a rule, children of the repressed families were sent to orphanages. For many years they were condemned to live in deprivation, were branded "children of the enemies of the people" and, therefore had limitations in terms of educational and employment opportunities, and establishing their own personal life. Quite often the close and distant relatives of the "enemies" became the victims of repressive policies. Thus, in general, the figure given by many authors including myself, for the number of victims of mass repressions in Azerbaijan in 1937–1938 is 80,000–100,000 people. The Soviet government as a whole was extremely severe towards the residents of the republic.

The Use of Fear and Torture

The nightmare of the "Great Terror" can be explained, but difficult and even impossible to justify. This phenomenon was caused by the leadership's desire to instill fear in people's souls, to demonstrate the impotence of man before the omnipotence of the state monster. At the

same time the state tried to include additional amplifiers to expand the general chorus of approval for its foreign and domestic policy. Through the use of fear, the state sought to stop not only protests but also the usual activeness; and that's why part of the population was condemned and sentenced. And to show how "nice" the government was, it accelerated the speed of its attack on the population; but not forever, just for a while, making it clear that if it is necessary they would not be too soft in reacting. The government applied all purely criminal methods to prove its lack of accountability. If a person is arrested, he must admit his guilt; and not balk. It was quite appropriate to use physical force. Torture was, in fact, legalized. Whoever was arrested must admit that he was an enemy. And if he refused, physical force was used; he was forced to admit his crime. There is plenty of evidence preserved documenting such facts.

Vasily Churashov worked in the state security bodies of Azerbaijan from 1932 to 1954. He recalls that in 1936–1938 arrests were made on the basis of the untested evidence provided by prisoners. The evidence was extracted by severe beatings and torture. He testified that the "stand" was used on detainees, an interrogation that lasted for several days during which the arrested man was not allowed to sit. In such a way the interrogated person had blood circulation problems and swollen feet; only a few endured this torture and many fainted.

One of the surviving defendants in the case of Ali Bayramli, a former chairman of a collective farm village, Garatugay Aliaga Safarov, in 1956 testified: "I was arrested on August 5, 1936 by the NKVD. Indeed, I signed these protocols during the investigation, because I was beaten until I lost consciousness. When I was unconscious, the investigators forced me to sign these protocols."

A former employee of the Traffic Police, Ganiev, in his complaint reported: "I was subjected to frequent beatings. I was thrown to the floor and the three of them were beating me with a rubber truncheon". The witness testified that when he persisted, he was again beaten. In the end he was forced to sign the protocol.

The former chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the republic, S.M. Efendiyev, had a tragic fate. One witness testified that his interrogation was conducted in the presence of a People's Commissar named Sumbatov-Topuridze. The former investigator H. Haldybanov said: "I personally watched with my own eyes, as Zinman and detective Nick Musatov questioned Chairman of the Supreme Council S.M. Efendiyev, beat him, and abused him. Zinman, derisively calling him "president," humiliated him".

In 1954 a former employee of the NKVD Azerbaijan S. Zykov said: "I witnessed the beating of the

former People's Commissar for Education Dzhubarlinsky". Another former officer of the same Commissariat I. Krotkov reported: "One day, by order of the investigator, 5–6 investigators "circled" Sher Dzhubarlinsky and beat him with rubber truncheons and a wet doormat. Dzhubarlinsky fell, but was raised and again kicked and punched".

And this is what the investigator Agha Rahim Aliyev testified in 1939: "Working in the Bailov Prison together with Garushyan and Maksimov, I attended and participated in the beatings of arrested Iranians. At the same time Perelman was questioned, and he said: "Due to the strong beatings of Gendzhali Yusuf Oghlu, the latter died". Then, according to Perelman, they decided to draw up a statement in which the death was to be presented as a result of natural causes. In this case, an employee of the NKVD said: "Khentov beat to death a man right in his office, and nothing happened to him."

Thus, it is clear how and in what circumstances the evidence and statements were fabricated. And it is obvious that whoever authorized the executors understood that their level of professional training would inevitably lead to an orgy of lawlessness. It was about solving the political issues as quickly as possible. The actions of the executors were ruled by the bureaucratic psychology of the official who has to accomplish the command of the chief without thinking.

Conclusion

In 1955, the Prosecutor of the Azerbaijan SSR Salmanovich Adil Babayev wrote a memo to the first secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan I.D. Mustafayev

about his impressions from analyzing the investigation files of the times of the "Great Terror". He wrote that "It seems that all sectors of the Azerbaijani population were active in counter-revolutionary activities and were members of a variety of counter-revolutionary organizations. Old party members were declared enemies of Soviet power, the governing party and government workers literally recruited each other into various counter-revolutionary organizations, the Armenians became the Musavat, Russian workers fought for the establishment of a bourgeois-nationalist government in Azerbaijan, and old professors became militants in terrorist groups." He claimed that the reason for this was the political and cultural backwardness, "which led to the fact that those arrested were presented the most absurd accusations, such as sabotage by using poor quality paper, wrecking wagon wheels, rejection of Azerbaijan's ZSFSR (Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) status to become a union republic and, finally, the separation of Azerbaijan State University from the state".

The time came when the repressions of the "Great Terror" were judged to be wrong. It was recognized that the repressions in most cases were without any base, accompanied by massive violations of the law, and truly brutal methods of punishing the innocent. This period can be called a black spot on the relatively short history of Soviet society. A spot that was impossible to wash away with the Soviet propaganda machine's words or declarations of the great achievements of socialism. The crime was committed. And it will be remembered as such by posterity for ever.

About the Author:

Eldar Ismailov, a Doctor of Historical Sciences, is a Professor at Baku State University.