

20 Years of the Sumgait Pogroms:  
Intolerance and Violence as a State Policy  
Speech by H.E. Dr. Vahe Gabrielyan

at a commemorative meeting held at the House of Lords Committee Room 3.

27 February, 2008,

My Lords,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here today to commemorate the massacre of Armenians in the Azeri city of Sumgait that took place 20 years ago, still in the Soviet Union and to pay tribute to the innocent victims of the events that became known in recent history as the Sumgait pogroms. The peak of the atrocities took place from February 27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup>, 1988.

What happened in Sumgait and what are the characteristic features of these pogroms?

The following aspects should be mentioned as important indicators of the nature of the event:

1. The pogroms or massacres were organized and instigated on the level of local and national authorities of Sumgait and Azerbaijan;
2. It was a planned, cohesive, violent campaign aimed at freeing Sumgait of any Armenian presence;
3. The mobs killed and looted with pleasure and creativeness;
4. The tools/weapons, such as sharpened steel rods, knives, axes, etc were pre-ordered centrally to be made at different factories of the town;
5. The police and other law enforcement bodies were fully aware of what was going on, were often present and often assisting.
6. Other government and public structures of Azerbaijan did their best first to maximize casualties and the death toll and then to cover up what had happened.

7. Not only were not the perpetrators and participants punished, they were acquitted and glorified and some later achieved prominence in their society;
8. The central Soviet and the national Baku governments did everything to downplay the pogroms and portrait them as separate unrelated acts of hooliganism.

It is important to point out that several days before the actual pogroms, the mobs, with the obvious help of state structures had prepared lists of all Armenian nationals. Addresses and names and phone numbers were all made available to the numerous groups of 50-80-100 strong marauders and murderers who would raid Armenian homes, torture and kill everyone whom they found at the provided addresses, information which they could not have gained without administrative help. Eyewitness accounts are numerous, but one struck me and cannot be forced out of my mind:

A woman's two grown-up sons were brutally killed by a group of angry Azeris armed with various metal rods, knives, axes, etc in front of their mother in their own flat. While she pleaded for help from the policeman who appeared to be in the flat at the time of the killing, the latter paid no attention to her, instead climbed on the table and started bringing down the chandelier that he liked. Such cases were numerous: when dozens were killed and hundreds maimed and beaten, women of all age, including adolescent girls, raped, when property was vandalized, the police were either invisible or indifferent, or even encouraging the mob.

The phone lines in Armenian homes were switched off and help unavailable not only because of inaccessibility. When you read about a victim who asked an ambulance crew to help his wounded mother and you learn that they refused to take her saying that Armenians deserved worse than that, when you read that the poor woman with concussion and haemorrhage and broken bones was nevertheless carried to a hospital where they still did not take her in, what do you feel? I feel sick. I feel sick when I read how the mob of young Azeri men cut, on one occasion, the breasts of two women whom they had

unclad and humiliated, chopped the head of another and took the skin off a young girl. This is not fiction, nor the script of a horror film. This is evidence shared by the then Minister of Defence of the Soviet Union, General Yazov, during a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, held on the 29<sup>th</sup> of February, 1988. For years the minutes of this meeting that Michael Gorbachev called in order to discuss the situation in Sumgait were top secret. The events, however, were not since they happened in broad daylight for a few days. I am not going to cause any further distress to you by describing other deaths, raping of elderly woman, public group rapes on the streets and mutilation of bodies. Dozens were killed, official numbers being from 32 to 58 but unknown in reality, partly because many corpses were moved to morgues in other cities so that there would not be a concentration of bodies in one place, partly because many people are missing and their fate is unknown. At least four hundred people were wounded, over 200 flats raided, dozens of cars burnt, all belongings of all persons identified as Armenians -- destroyed. Characteristically, everything was taken, first of all money and valuables, but also even the meals families have cooked and were about to eat, and the only things not seen as worth carrying were books. These were burnt, ripped of or spoilt by pouring water on them. For those, who would like the accuracy of specific names and details, these can be found in the criminal cases from the few trials that were held in the aftermath of the events to calm sentiments in Armenia and save face abroad. Evidence on this heinous crime comes from many sources: the then prosecutor's office, courts, law enforcement and state bodies in Moscow, Azeri witnesses and Armenian survivors.

What was more troubling is that not only the local authorities and those in Baku played a part either by lack of action or by being directly engaged, but that fact that the central power in Moscow as well contributed either by direct intent or lack of action. When two prominent members of Armenian intelligentsia met Michael Gorbachev in Moscow on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, 1988, he, instead of reassuring them that order would prevail, warned that Armenians in Yerevan should think of the 207,000 Armenians living in Baku.

When a few days earlier, the first demonstration took place in Stepanakert on February 14<sup>th</sup>, the first response from Baku was by some Assadov, of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, who threatened that 100,000 Azeris stood ready to enter Karabakh and make carnage. He was not punished and measures were not taken. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February some eight thousand Azeris from the town of Aghdam marched into Askeran, an Armenian town, but were confronted by the local Azeri police. Two Azeris were killed, one of them, as later confessed by his own brother, being shot by an Azeri police officer. In the evening of Feb. 26<sup>th</sup>, Alexander Katushev, the military prosecutor of the USSR, gave an interview on the Azeri TV and mentioned the two killed people. He specified their nationality but failed to mention the 25 wounded Armenians, and failed to specify who killed one of the Azeris and what these thousands were doing in another town. Whether this was intentional or not, we can only guess. But we know other facts for certain. When the pogroms were taking place, the Azeri TV was airing concerts. The Soviet media was silent in the first days after the pogroms and the Soviet troops came to Sumgait on the third day of the massacres. Michael Gorbachev later said 'We were only late for three days...' I would like to clarify that Sumgait is half an hour's drive from Baku. In order to make the situation clearer to this public and would like to draw a parallel: they say three days was the time needed for the British troops to reach the Falkland Islands, the distance to be covered equals that to Windsor. May I also add that it was decided during the earlier quoted Politburo meeting that the troops sent to Sumgait should have guns but no bullets in them....?

#### Now why did this happen?

The history of carnage, ethnic cleansing, deportations and repressions by the successive Azeri authorities is so long and dire that it has taken volumes to document. Also, perhaps, as it is suggested, the Soviet Union, about to disintegrate, did after all, use the same immoral arsenal of causing ethnic wars and slaughters that the Russian Empire did at the turn of the previous century. Probably, the reason why the trials were separated into smaller cases, in order not to give an impression that such atrocities were possible in

the internationalist USSR, were not only to avoid disgrace in the eyes of the international community, but were also meant to prevent the authorities' own guilt from being revealed. But whether the central government in Moscow was directly or indirectly guilty or not, it was the existing atmosphere in Azerbaijan that allowed these atrocities to happen on such scale and go unpunished. This atmosphere is the reason why Sumgait was not an isolated incident. It is the reason why the killings in Sumgait were repeated in Sushi, Baku, Kirovabad (Ganja), Mingechaur and other places, and very straightforward ethnic cleansing of Armenians took place in all these and other parts of Azerbaijan. This atmosphere is the reason why of the about half a million Armenians living in Azerbaijan, no one is left there outside Karabakh now probably apart from a theoretical handful in mixed marriages, trapped in impossibility of choice. This atmosphere is the reason why when peaceful demonstrations and lawful meetings took place in Stepanakert and Yerevan, when people's deputies assembled lawfully and passed resolution according to the existing laws, the Azeri reaction was not that of a proposal to hold a dialogue, but threats of carnage initially, then the carnage itself and military aggression against the peaceful population.

I am not going to analyze the Azeri psyche, but will bring a couple of real-life examples and leave conclusions to you. In 2005, in Budapest, at a NATO language training course, an Azeri military officer bought an axe and hid in his room to sneak into his fellow Armenian officer Gurgen Margaryan's room and kill him in sleep. This being, called an Azeri officer, was glorified in Baku and recognized man of the year by one of the leading political forces.

In Nakhichevan, (*another part of historical Armenia presented to Azerbaijan by the Bolsheviks keen on securing Turkish friendship in the difficult years of the USSR's birth and hoping to export revolution, not to mention the oil factor, making Baku particularly important*), before all Armenians were ousted, in one graveyard only there were around 10,000 Armenian khachkars or cross-stones, ancient, artistically unique monuments. By the time the military actions ended and ceasefire was established in Karabakh, only 3,000 khachkars were left in Nakhichevan. Please note that there was no war in Nakhichevan, no

military actions, it is hundreds of miles away from Karabakh and far away from the boarder with Armenia. Two years ago all of the remaining monuments in this cemetery were bulldozed and a military shooting range was built upon them, so that all traces of the centuries-old culture of the once indigenous Armenian population could be erased. All of this is duly documented in photographs and on video film. Azeri authorities have since prevented, under various pretexts, international observers from visiting the region. Instead they launch books on alleged cultural crimes by Armenians. In wide yet shallow efforts to re-write history they do not pause for such little niceties such as elementary logic or well-known truth. The absurdness reaches as far as naming a monastery in Amaras where the inventor of our alphabet, Mesrop Mastots taught it to his students in the beginning of the fourth century, an Azeri monument. Even for a people so desperately obsessed with the idea to prove the improvable, it is difficult to comprehend what kind of human beings attack graves and how big their hatred of everything Armenian is.

*[Vitali Danielov, in his article of 29<sup>th</sup> February, 2000, entitled " Why Sumgait?," refers to a historical document of 1963, the minutes of a meeting of the then Cuban Ambassador to the USSR, Carlos Olivares Sanches, who came to the Central Committee of the CPSU to complain of the treatment and beatings of Cuban students in the Soviet Azerbaijan City of Sumgait that very year. He explains the pogroms by the long present intolerance of non-Azeris in that city.]*

While this may shed some light on the atmosphere of xenophobia in Azerbaijan in general, there are more chilling accounts of the attitude towards Armenians that was prevalent among the Azeris for very long stretches of history. The Azeri writer Um Al Banin, who spent her childhood in Baku, but later lived in France, wrote in her memories entitled "Caucasus Days":

*"On holidays, we would play a game called Armenian massacre, which we preferred over any other game. Overwhelmed with anti-Armenian passions, we would 'sacrifice' a girl named Tamar (her mother was Armenian) for the sake of our atavistic hate. We would accuse her of killing Moslems and would immediately 'gun her down', over and over again, to*

*extend the pleasure. Then we would tear her apart, cutting her extremities, head, intestines that we threw to the dogs to show our derision of Armenian flesh."*

Several generations of Azeris, parents and grandparents of our contemporaries, grew up in such spirit.

But enough of this. We only refer to facts and to identifiable people, like Baroness Cox and John Eibner and their book on ethnic cleansing in Karabakh, like Andrey Sakharov who called for a fair trial, or like George Soros who in the Moscow Znamya Journal accused Azeri local gangs, the Azeri government and then First Secretary of Communist Party, Heidar Aliiev, later to become Azerbaijan's President, in organizing the pogroms. Various human rights organizations, political activists, and parliaments of some countries strongly criticized these pogroms and called for the protection of Armenians. The European Parliament adopted a resolution on 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1988, reaffirming that Nagorno Karabakh was historically a part of Armenia annexed to Azerbaijan in 1923 and that in 1988 Armenians suffered from a massacre in Sumgait.

Unfortunately, even these condemnations were not enough to stop what happened later. What followed meant that the Sumgait pogroms were not an isolated dramatic phase in the history of the Armenian nation. Unchecked, they proved to be a 'harbinger' of calamities of much larger scale and significance.

The Sumgait pogroms were the first ethnic cleansing campaign and large scale xenophobic violence in the Soviet Union. Because they were not prevented and perpetrators and rank-and-file criminals not punished, they triggered a chain reaction first in the Soviet Union and then farther beyond. They showed that the mighty Soviet Union was now unable or unwilling to put an end to violence, intolerance and xenophobia.

After Sumgait, encouraged by the lenient stance of the Soviet authorities, the Azeri nationalist government of Baku decided to get rid of all Armenians living in Azerbaijan. From May to September, they deported Armenians of Shushi and started using its geographical position for everyday bombardment of Stepanakert, Karabakh's capital city. The snowball started rolling to other cities. Even the Soviet press described how in Kirovabad the Azeri mob broke into a nursing home for the elderly and killed 12 helpless men and women, including disabled ones. Khanlar, Shamkhor, Getabek, Dashkesan, Baku, Nakhichevan, Mingechaur were all to come. The organized killings and deportations of Baku, a capital of a Soviet socialist republic in 1990 meant a no-turning point: there was no attempt to conceal government involvement and encouragement. There could be no claims of unawareness. However, simply killing was not enough, people were to be burned alive, the abdomens of pregnant women were to be ripped open, cruellest forms of killings were to be exercised to satisfy the mobs hungry for Armenian blood. As the campaign ravaged, other nationalities were to suffer as well. Tens of thousands of Russians, Jews, Lezgins and other minorities had to leave their homes. South Caucasus was soon ablaze with violence and human tragedy of an incredible scale. Things even get worse when the Azeri armed forces started an outright military aggression against Karabakh, the inhabitants of which they claimed to be their own citizens.

To conclude,

The Sumgait pogroms could be said to have had two major consequences:

1. They did not receive an adequate political and legal consideration and were a signal to the people that they were on their own. This was destined to transform the nature of problem of Nagorno Karabakh, from an essentially peaceful democratic human rights issue into one of the world's long standing intricate ethnic conflicts and
2. By conducting the pogroms in Sumgait, the Azeris let the mythical Genie of national hatred permissiveness out of the bottle.

That they considered deportation and killings of their own citizens as the best way of dealing with them explains why the problems rose in the first place. But

the point I am trying to make today is not that. Their own short-sighted enthusiasm of carrying the fire of xenophobia around other cities and the inability, unwillingness or miscalculation of the Soviet leaders to put an end to these crimes backfired on a much larger scale. There was no more restraint to stifle nationalist's sentiments elsewhere, no credibility or strength to implement reforms or improve human rights and living standards. The impotence of resolving the national issue formerly dormant in the Soviet Union because of fear of repression and due to erroneous arrangements in the beginning in the first place, contributed to a speedier demise of the Soviet Union and to the creation of today's so-called frozen conflicts. As for the Azeris, not only did they lose any control of Nagorno Karabakh which became independent following the same laws that Azerbaijan did and furthermore, was able to defend its independence in a bloody war, but they also lost control over some other territories around the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh. These now serve as a buffer zone, safeguarding the safety of the population from everyday shelling and military raids. Instead of putting blame on Armenians in public rhetoric of its officials and in various international fora, Azerbaijan should take responsibility for what happened and should repent. They should finally understand that peace and stability can be only achieved by respecting other peoples and their rights and by admitting realities, not by living in militant dreams fuelled by oil revenues and uncompromising rhetoric, not by creating departments of academy of sciences that are overtly ordered to re-write not only their own history but also that of the region or just to simply invent it, not by killing people or destroying the places of their final rest. I am also certain that other countries, the international community have a role to play in helping our neighbours to realize these realities. Dialogue and honesty do seem to yet difficult for them now, but they are the only way forward.

Thank you.