

GORBACHEV ON KARBAKH
Excerpts from his <Memoirs>

Mikhail Gorbachev, MEMOIRS. New York and London: Doubleday, 1996; 769pp.
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THE KARABAKH EXPLOSION [pp. 333-340]

In February 1988 the population of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast (which was 85-per-cent Armenian) of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic demanded that it be made a part of the Armenian Soviet Social Republic. A resolution was passed by the oblast Soviet and immediately supported by thousands of people at demonstrations and meetings in Armenia. These demonstrations were carried out in an organized way, without excesses. The marches carried large posters supporting perestroika and glasnost. Law-enforcement agencies only maintained order, without taking stronger measures—anyway, there was little they could have done against this sea of people.

This produced a sharp response in Azerbaijan, where mass meetings were likewise held, this time directed against Armenia.

In February the Politburo examined the Nagorno-Karabakh question. We received information about the position of the leaders of the republics. The Azerbaijan leader, [Kiamran] Bagirov, insisted that Moscow should guarantee the unchanged status of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian leader, [Karen] Denmirtchyan [sic], suggested that the appeal of the Nagorno-Karabakh oblast Soviet should be considered in the Supreme Soviets of Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Soviet Union. It became clear that the arguments between Baku and Yerevan over Stepanakert would have to be resolved by Moscow.

[Nikolai] Ryzhkov said that we must 'act in accordance with the Constitution'. [Vikyor] Chebrikov reported that these events were having a bad effect in other republics. In Estonia there was a growing sentiment in favour of leaving the Union. Tajikistan was debating its claim to Bukhara and Samarkand.

I believed that the problem had to be resolved by political means, that the Central Committee should declare any change of borders unacceptable, and that we needed to draft economic, social and cultural proposals aimed at improving the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. We should let the Armenians and Azerbaijanis get together and decide the status of Nagorno-Karabakh for themselves, and we ought to accept any decision they made. I felt that the Russian intelligentsia and workers should join in their discussions. We decided to send Politburo representatives to both republics to lend assistance to the local leadership. [Yegor] Ligachev and [Georgy] Razumovsky flew to Baku, and [Aleksandr] Yakovlev and [Vladimir] Dolgikh to Yerevan. Their mission was to establish contacts and reassure the people in those republics.

On 26 February I appealed to the peoples of Azerbaijan and Armenia, asking them to show understanding, responsibility and prudence. I said that we would not sidestep frank discussions of various proposals, but that this must be done calmly, within the framework of the democratic process and legality.

My speech contributed to some normalization. The continuous mass meetings in Yerevan stopped, and reassured people returned to their homes. I tried to get a dialogue going and explore ways of finding a compromise, which I was firmly convinced was the only way out of the situation.

The dispute over Karabakh goes into the distant past. From time immemorial two peoples have lived side by side on this fertile land. It passed from hand to hand; for centuries it was part of Persia. But mainly it was populated by Armenians. Immediately after the [Bolshevik] revolution their ancient dream of reunification with the motherland almost came true. However, although the Azerbaijani leader of that time, Nariman Narimanov, initially gave his consent to this, he soon rescinded it. Afterwards, the question was raised many times, including after the war, but was never resolved. The result was that almost 500,000 Armenians lived in Azerbaijan, mainly in Karabakh, while 200,000 Azerbaijanis lived

in Armenia. First of all, we had to address practical problems. Soon after the unrest started, a resolution was adopted to provide assistance to Nagorno-Karabakh, calling for 400 million rubles to be allotted for emergency needs there. Initially, this made a strong impression, but after two or three months, we began to receive indications that the authorities in Azerbaijan were distributing the monies from the centre according to their own wishes, with only a small part reaching the intended recipients. We had to send commissions to verify these assertions. It appeared, however, that most of the needs of the local people had indeed been met.

If this had been done ten years earlier, if [Geidar] Aliyev had conducted a valid internationalist policy, a catastrophe could have been prevented. By 1988 it was already too late.

Events snowballed. Acts of violence broke out, the peak being the bloody pogrom of 27-29 February against Armenians in Sumgait, where there was a large number of Azerbaijani refugees.

Troops were sent in. Unarmed soldiers tried to bring the brutal hooligans to their senses. Many young soldiers were wounded, some permanently disabled. However, I believe the consequences would have been even more severe if the soldiers had been armed.

We have often been reproached for 'showing weakness'. But when we were forced to bring in the militia and military units to avoid further bloodshed, we again fell under fire of criticism, this time for using force. There is no doubt that the government had to act in the way they did. Extreme measures were due to extreme circumstances. The same thing would have been done in any democratic state.

The massacres in Sumgait produced universal outrage, everyone was shaken. At the same time, sympathy was shown in the Muslim republics for the people of their faith. Events threatened to get out of control.

The question of Nagorno-Karabakh was considered at the an extraordinary Politburo meeting on 3 March, where I noted that the situation had reached a critical stage, that we had been late in dealing with Sumgait and had underestimated its implications.

'Protective measures may be required,' said I, 'in order to prevent loss of life, as occurred in Sumgait. The main thing is to use political methods. However, authority must always be authority. And when it must be used, it must be used in time. The law must rule.'

I demanded that those responsible should be swiftly brought to justice, and that steps must be taken so that chaos would not 'spill over' again. However, I also demanded that we avoid further attempts at a 'quick fix' in favour of working together patiently with our Armenian and Azerbaijani comrades.

Even before these tragic events I had a fairly complete picture of the sources of the conflict. Let us recall that the Armenians had suffered both from Persians and from Turks. Could they really erase from their memory the genocide of 1915, when the Turks slaughtered a million and a half Armenians and scattered two million through the world? Eventually they turned to Russia, not out of love for their tsar, but in the hope of safety. They came to the Russian people for protection.

But the roots of the Azeris in Karabakh also went deep. Lenin had understood the complexity of this problem and commissioned [Georgy] Chicherin, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, to look into the matter. Under Stalin those who were in charge of nationality affairs lacked subtlety. Problems and difficulties accumulated over the decades. The Azerbaijan leadership did not treat the Karabakh population in the spirit of the traditions of Lenin, and sometime they simply acted in an inhumane way. Problems of language and culture arose, and serious mistakes were made in the cadre policy. All of this was brought to light under glasnost. Problems quickly came to a head.

In both republics many highly placed officials had soiled themselves by corruption. But when perestroika began and they sensed that the ground was shaking under them, it was these elements who tried to provoke ethnic conflicts. The national feelings of people became the object of merciless exploitation. In their hands Karabakh was a mine laid underneath perestroika.

We decided: (1) to publish our analysis of the situation in the press; (2) that the General Secretary should speak on television; (3) the question should be taken up in the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet; (4) the report of the procurator's office on the investigation of the events in Sumgait should be published; (5) administrative agencies were to decide on the stationing of troops at flash points, but without imposing a curfew.

The Azerbaijan and Armenian leaders were again told to come to an understanding. This they were unable to do. Again the question was sent back to us for a decision.

At the Politburo session of 6 July 1988, I expressed the opinion that some people in the higher levels of power in the republics were fanning the flames and igniting passions. 'The one thing that we can never agree to is to support one people to the detriment of another,' I said. 'We must never be blackmailed into this. We will not permit, we must in no case allow the truth to be sought through blood!'

Under pressure from public opinion, the deputies of the Armenian Supreme Soviet resolved to agree to the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, and asked the USSR Supreme Soviet to consider this matter. Two days later the Azerbaijan Supreme Soviet declared this to be unacceptable, and announced measures to accelerate the social and economic development of Nagorno-Karabakh. On 25 June public meetings were held in Stepanakert. The people were angry that the local press had not reported the February resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Soviet concerning its exit from Azerbaijan.

Tension grew rapidly. Meetings and strikes in Stepanakert continued. Then, on 6 July, the airport in Yerevan was blockaded. The Nagorno-Karabakh oblast Soviet again passed a resolution 'on withdrawal', but in Baku it was again declared to be illegal.

What could we do? What was the way out of the situation? [Andrei] Gromyko suggested the usual solution: 'The army will appear on the street and order will be restored immediately.' [Viktor] Chebrikov objected. Yakovlev proposed that the administration of Nagorno-Karabakh should be transferred to Moscow. [Eduard] Shevardnadze was in favour of immediately giving Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous republic status. Ligachev tried to synthesize all of these ideas: 'There are already 20,000 refugees. People are homeless. If republic status for Nagorno-Karabakh does not help, we must bring in the troops, dismantle factories, dismiss the Party organizations and Soviet executive committees and establish order.'

I supported the proposal to set up an autonomous republic, but I felt that this matter had to be resolved by the conflicting sides themselves.

The Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet met on 18 July. All parties were invited to present their views. The session was broadcast on television, so that everyone's position would be clear to the general public. Our position--that of the central authorities--was supported by most people.

'How do you wish to solve this problem? I asked. 'Victory at any price? Armenia wants to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan does not intend to allow this and will not yield even a millimetre. This is all unrealistic! We must find a compromise that will suit everyone. Only a common victory will be a real victory. You cannot resolve issues while you are fighting one another. This is a political blind alley. Sumgait and other events concerning Nagorno-Karabakh have already made a deep imprint on the relations between the two peoples and it will take time for this to be smoothed over even a little. But even so, we must meet each other half way and find a compromise.'

Suggestions were made at the meeting for strengthening the guarantees to the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh in order to prevent a repetition of the violence. In the past there had been many promises, but they had turned out to be hollow -- essentially a fraud. I proposed that a special commission for consideration of all proposals be set within the framework of the Council of Nationalities of the USSR Supreme Soviet. This commission was created and carried out useful work. Rasul Gamzatov's speech made a strong impression on me. He proposed that the administration of Nagorno-Karabakh be transferred temporarily to the Union's central agencies. Subsequently, the commission of the Council of Nationalities put forward the very same proposal.

On 20 July the resolution of the Presidium, reiterating that a change of boundaries was impossible, was published. On 26 July the Party Central Committee and the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium passed a resolution to send an emissary, Arkady Volksky, to Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the situation did not normalize. On 21 September a state of emergency was declared and a curfew was put into effect in Stepanakert and the Agdam districts.

After the autumn session of the USSR Supreme Soviet on 3 December I met with deputies from Azerbaijan and Armenia and the leaders of both republics and Nagorno-Karabakh. Ryzhkov, Slyumkov, Chebrikov, Lukyanov and Razumovsky were also present. 'We are on the brink of diaster,' I told them. 'You, the respected representatives of the two peoples, must sit down and together find a way out of this mess.'

.... [Discussion of the earthquake in Armenia]

Today I am even more convinced that the nationality issue can never be resolved by force. The tsars fought wars for decades in North Caucasus, creating a system of fortresses, Cossack settlements, punishing, threatening, destroying, and all to naught, for nothing good came from all this. The only positive results came from trade, co-operation among peoples, the establishment of an alliance with the ruling elite and tribal elders, which brought them closer to the tsar's court, honours and privileges. A kind of new association developed after the October Revolution. In spite of all the faults of this union, a certain balance of interests was preserved.

The peacemaking process was extremely complicated. It was even made more difficult by, among other things, the general atmosphere that had developed in the country, in the Supreme Soviets of the USSR and Russia. Essentially, there were two positions. One was that the moment the conflict developed – especially after the events in Sumgait – it was necessary to strike decisively against the 'instigators' of the disturbances in Nagorno-Karabakh and nip the riots in the bud. The other position was to ask: since the people of Karabakh wished to reunite with their motherland, and we recognized the right of nations to self-determination, why not allow this? After all, the Nakhichevan autonomous republic is a part of Azerbaijan, even though separated from Azerbaijan by Armenian territory. The Nagorno-Karabakh question could be solved in exactly the same way.

At some point it seemed that a possible solution was to give Karabakh, like Nakhichevan, the status of autonomous republic, while keeping it as part of Azerbaijan. There was a time when this proposal was on the point of being implemented. However, it was just at this moment that the Supreme Soviet in Yerevan passed a resolution to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Armenia and so everything fell apart. It fell apart because of internal antagonism, because the battle for power, for replacement of the ruling elite, was already in full swing there. It fell apart because the Armenian national movement, which was formed on the basis of the Karabakh committee, was in a hurry to seize power.

In this connection another possibility was mentioned in the Politburo meeting: the central authorities should use the armed forces to preserve the status quo. In other words, preserve the status quo in favour of Azerbaijan; at least this would be done not by Azeri extremists, but by forces of legitimate power. I asked my colleagues: 'OK, so we introduce rule from the centre. The what?' I did not get a clear answer.

Some members were very strongly in favour of 'imposing order'. Under such conditions it was not easy to defend my position. Nevertheless, I held to it from beginning to end, even though in extreme cases we were unable to avoid strictly limited harsh measures.

During this time, 1987-8, I strove to work out a uniform democratic approach to disputes between nationalities. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh did not at all push into the background other, seemingly more tranquil, but no less significant processes which were gaining strength in the Baltic republics, Moldova and Georgia, and which have begun in Central Asia and in Ukraine. Issues such as the languages of indigenous people, economic sovereignty, and expanding rights were raised more and more frequently in various regions. To counter Russification, people often went to the other extreme, thus introducing a spirit of confrontation into the mass consciousness. However, in 1987 no-one raised the question of withdrawal from the Union except, perhaps, for extremist groups such as the Estonian independence association, J. Barkans's group in Latvia, and certain nationalist groups in Lithuania.

But we were unable to achieve harmony of interests, where should the way out be sought? In patiently and persistently working for the achievement of a compromise, but mainly in changing the very conditions that produced the conflict. Indeed I believed that a lasting solution to the problems between nationalities could be found only in the general context of economic and political reform. By the end of my time as President I had no doubt that preservation and renewal of the Union could keep the peace.

A formula was put forward: 'A strong centre and strong republics.' Others expressed it differently: 'Strong republics and a strong centre.' Either way, it basically comes down to the same. After all, the new centre was to be formed on different foundations, to deal with issues such as security, co-ordination of the fundamentals of economic and social policy, co-ordination of foreign policy, maintaining order at borders, and so forth. And, of course, playing the role of arbiter when conflicts arose.

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