

Soviets ready 'direct rule' solution in Transcaucasus

by Luba George

Only two weeks before the June 28 Soviet All-Union Party Conference, the situation in the Transcaucasus region had exploded to the point where both government spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov and the official Communist Party paper *Pravda* have publicly admitted that the situation is "out of control" of the Communist Party authorities.

The conflict between the Armenians and Azeris over the Autonomous Region of Nagorno-Karabakh has reached such an impasse that the party youth paper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* is now warning of the "danger of anarchy" and of the making of "our Northern Ireland." Red Army troops have been deployed to the area. Rumors are circulating that the Kremlin is preparing for a "direct rule" solution. So much for Gorbachov's *glasnost*, the "openness" so much touted by Western liberal media.

Meanwhile, bloody riots between Christians and Muslims have been reported in Soviet Georgia and, in the Baltics, a new round of mass demonstrations, despite the Soviet leadership attempt to coopt the protesters, is taking a new toll.

The Transcaucasus heats up

On June 15 the Supreme Soviet of Armenia voted unanimously for calling on the Soviet leadership to place the Autonomous Region of Nagorno-Karabakh, the center of mass demonstrations and ethnic disputes, under Armenian rule. Radio Moscow the same day reported that the decision would be "totally unacceptable" to the Azeris.

The Armenian party boss, Suren Artunyan, handpicked by Gorbachov, led the demand for the territorial change, seeing it as the only way to end an unprecedented mass strike that paralyzed the Armenian capital, Yerevan, on June 13.

The new strike wave had erupted over the previous weekend following a decision taken at the June 9 meeting in Moscow of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, chaired by Yegor Ligachov, the second-

ranking party official after Gorbachov. The Central Committee had made it plain once again that any change in the status of Nagorno-Karabakh was not acceptable in the "multi-national" Soviet Union.

Large-scale demonstrations took place in both Baku, Azerbaijan, and in Yerevan, Armenia. In Armenia, 10-20,000 participated in a general strike demanding that Nagorno-Karabakh be returned to the Armenians. Some demonstrators in Armenia chanted slogans first denouncing "Stalin, Beria, Ligachov," and then praising, "Lenin, perestroika, Gorbachov."

In Baku, the number of demonstrators had reached 500,000 by June 12. The protests took a violently anti-Armenian tone. One Armenian activist reported renewed anti-Armenian "pogroms" in the area with demonstrators chanting slogans like "heroes of Sumgait," honoring those who were involved in anti-Armenian riots in February of this year, which left scores of Armenians dead. They shouted, "Death to the Armenians, we will kill you like dogs." There were also reports that armed Azeri youths went into the subway in Baku, pulled out knives and terrorized Armenians. Unconfirmed reports say that several were killed in the incident.

The inter-ethnic conflict has led to the militarization of the entire region. Special measures have been enforced to protect Armenians against further violence, including the deployment of Soviet Army troops and Soviet policemen. On June 13, when 10,000 Azeris in Baku protested the reunification idea, Soviet militiamen blocked the roads to the Armenian quarter of the city, Radio Moscow reported June 15. In the Baku protest, Soviet troops and armed militiamen and special riot policemen with shields circulated through the crowd.

Soviet troops were also stationed in Yerevan on June 15, marking the first appearance of Soviet military there since March.

Russian nomenklatura manipulates conflict

As for the Russian *nomenklatura*, the ruling elite bureaucracy, and the KGB, the secret service, they are using the Armenia-Azerbaijani explosion—on the eve of the party conference—to manipulate coming personnel changes and prepare tough policy shifts for the coming period of greater autarchy and police-state crackdown inside the Russian empire and its Eastern European satellites.

Rumors are circulating in Moscow that Yegor Ligachov and those allied to him, are behind a covert “plot” to “manipulate” the ethnic tensions in the Transcaucasus, with the aim of discrediting Gorbachov’s “democratization” projects. Failure to calm the exploding conflict, say some, may even force a delay of the planned All-Party Conference at the end of June.

According to the French daily *Le Figaro*, the Shi’ite-Islamic Azeris would be particularly malleable to such manipulation, since it was Gorbachov, several months back, who forced the resignation of the KGB strongman among the Azeris, Geidar Aliyev, from the Politburo.

Back in March, Gorbachov has already been publicly blamed for the rioting in Armenia and Azerbaijan by one party member. Lecturing before employees of the Leningrad TV, the party figure (unidentified by the *Washington Post* which reported on this) lambasted Gorbachov for his close relationship with the economist Abel Aganbegyan, an Armenian, who, it was said, made nationalistic comments that encouraged the Armenian protests. As one observer put it: “The events in the Soviet Transcaucasus will hit Gorbachov very, very hard, it all plays against him, and it may cost him his power.”

‘Our Northern Ireland’

In his press conference in Moscow June 14 Soviet government spokesman Gerasimov admitted that an Azeri policeman had been shot and killed during the unrest, adding that the situation was “out of control” of the Communist Party authorities.

The next day, just hours before the Armenian Parliament decision, the official Communist Party youth newspaper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, in the one article to appear in the Soviet press, sounded an ominous note. “What is happening around Karabakh is a blow against *perestroika* [Gorbachov’s slogan for “restructuring”], maybe the most severe of all the recent setbacks.” Writer Raphael Guseinov blamed the crisis on “imperialistic propaganda promoting nationalism and undermining the socialist order in the Soviet Union. It is their intention to corrupt the Socialist system, to present nationalism as a natural, normal state of affairs.” “Anyone who undermines one of the walls of this house should remember,” warned Guseinov, “that this house has a common roof.”

The *Komsomolskaya Pravda* article stressed that it was shocking how many “hostile nationalistic expressions” were becoming visible in the U.S.S.R., and it was “especially

shocking” how many of these expressions were contained in letters from young people who reflect the hostile nationalist view. In an appeal to the security services to contain these protests, Guseinov warned that there is a “danger of anarchy” in the Transcaucasus, and that this region could turn into “our Northern Ireland.”

One solution to the Karabakh crisis increasingly being mooted is that Nagorno-Karabakh will be placed under direct Moscow rule—which, of course, would mean Red Army occupation of Nagorno. The British daily *The Independent* reported from Moscow that Nagorno-Karabakh could be declared an “Autonomous Republic” which would be “something akin to direct rule for Moscow.”

The “direct military rule” line strongly hinted in the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* article has aroused contempt among many Armenians. “It is typical of the Moscow press. They use all the old clichés in a different order and call it *glasnost*,” said Eduard Pogosyan, one of the activist student members of the Armenian organizing committee in Moscow, “We Armenians can depend on nobody but ourselves.”

Meanwhile, strikes in Nagorno-Karabakh continued on June 16 and 17 despite the action of the Armenian parliament. One party official said: “Nothing has changed.” In Stepankert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenians in a truck convoy were injured when Azerbaijanis threw stones at them as they were driving into the city.

On June 13, the Presidium of the Azerbaijan Supreme Soviet said that any reunification of the Karabakh region was unacceptable, and would undermine the system of “multi-national friendship” on which the U.S.S.R. is based.

Now the Baltic powderkeg. . . .

The Baltic region of the Soviet Union is also becoming politically very hot. On June 15, for the first time since World War II, the Soviet Communist government in Latvia officially *coordinated* demonstrations to protest Stalin’s 1941 first wave of deportations of the Latvians to Siberia. This official support was intended to coopt dissent, out of fear that the protests otherwise would have gotten out of control of the authorities and would have fed political unrest in the area.

However, the effect this had was that, in the words of Britain’s *Daily Telegraph*, “the Latvian capital [Riga] witnessed one of the largest demonstrations recorded under Soviet rule.” Some demonstrators chanted, “Red Army Go Home!” and shouted anti-Soviet slogans. Many carried national flags.

The Riga demonstration was only one of several that occurred in the Baltic in the same week as the outbreaks in the Transcaucasus. In the Latvian town of Liebau, 1,000 people gathered. In Vilnius, Lithuania, there was an illegal demonstration of 6,000 people, who chanted anti-Soviet slogans, called for national independence, and sang the old Lithuanian national anthem. In Tallin, Estonia, 1,000 people gathered at the national memorial.