

# New commander named for Soviet Transcaucasus

by Konstantin George

The Soviet leadership is using the ongoing crisis in Armenia and Azerbaijan to militarize the entire Transcaucasus area, and to place the Armenian-inhabited Nagorno-Karabakh region inside Azerbaijan under direct Russian rule from Moscow. The militarization has been underscored with the naming in June of Gen. Lt. Igor Nikolayevich Rodionov as the new commander of the Transcaucasus Military District. The district embraces the three Transcaucasian republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, and borders on Turkey and Iran, both potential theaters for future Soviet military operations.

Rodionov, an expert in mountain warfare and in the deployment of airborne and spetsnaz (special forces) troops, was commander of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan until early 1987, when he was named first deputy commander of the Moscow Military District.

The previous commander of the Transcaucasus Military District, General of the Army Konstantin A. Kochetov, has been given a major promotion, as the new commander of the Moscow Military District.

Since the Transcaucasus crisis began in February, with KGB-organized pogroms against Armenians in Azerbaijan, the Soviet military has used the crisis to reinforce its troops in the region, and to shift their deployment into Azerbaijan near the Iranian border. With the outbreak of ethnic clashes in southern Armenia in two villages very close to the Turkish border on June 17, a further pretext was provided, to extend the military deployments up to the Turkish border. Both villages are now patrolled by Soviet Army troops with armored vehicles and armored personnel carriers.

According to the Armenian leaders of the illegal "Karabakh Committee," which has led the general strike in Karabakh, 12 people—6 Armenians and 6 Azeris—were killed in these latest ethnic clashes. On June 19, Soviet foreign ministry spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov denied this information, maintaining that "there were no deaths, but eight were wounded on each side."

Soviet "dissident" sources, such as Sergei Grigoryants of *Glasnost* magazine, are now predicting direct rule from Moscow, in the form of giving Karabakh to neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia, but to make it an "autonomous republic" within the Russian Republic.

This evaluation was given further credence through an article that appeared on June 22 in the weekly *Sotsialisticheskaya Industriya*, which announced that the situation in Armenia is "returning to normal," and then praised the Armenians for now "behaving with tact." The article reported the June 15 resolution of the Armenian Supreme Soviet, demanding the incorporation of Karabakh into Armenia, adding that this was rejected by the Azerbaijan Supreme Soviet, which prompted the "Armenian Supreme Soviet to appeal to the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet to make a decision." The article left the question of Karabakh's juridical future totally open, abandoning the litany, standard since February, that "any changes in territorial status are out of the question."

## Toward a crackdown in Azerbaijan

The same KGB hierarchy and Russian nomenklatura who have engineered a near civil war situation between two non-Russian nationalities (Armenians and Turkic Azeris) have also raised the direct rule policy as the means to trigger an Azeri explosion. An explosion in Azerbaijan would grant Moscow the excuse to engage in mass suppression of a Turkic population and to declare Karabakh an "autonomous" part of the Russian Republic, ruled from Moscow.

The shift toward detaching Karabakh from Azerbaijan is intended to drive the situation in Azerbaijan out of control, setting the stage for brutal repression.

There is rising Azeri rage, not only toward Armenians, but also toward Russians, and this is perhaps the major reason why now, in contrast to February during the clashes in Sumgait, Russian Army troops are patrolling the streets of Baku and other Azerbaijani cities, before riots erupt. The mood of the Azeris has not developed this way spontaneously. In the week of June 13-17, during the huge rallies by 100,000 Azeris in Baku, they were addressed by Azerbaijan's new party boss (since May 21), Abdul-Rakhman Khalil Ogly Vezirov, the former ambassador to Pakistan and a KGB-trained specialist on, among other things, promoting inter-ethnic conflicts (one can note the enormous rise in Soviet-directed communal warfare in Pakistan's cities during Vezirov's tenure there, 1986-88). Vezirov told the mob: "I would sooner get rid of my wife than give up Karabakh." Immediately after that speech, leaflets began circulating in Baku, saying: "Armenians go home within three days, or we'll cut you up like dogs." On June 18, an Azeri mob began to march on the Armenian quarter of Baku; and at that point, the Russian Army moved in, to guard both the Armenian and the Russian quarter of the city.

Round One of the Transcaucasus explosion was February-March. Round Two was a more intense series of events preceding the extraordinary national Party Conference at the end of June. Round Three is only a matter of time. It will consolidate the process of militarization of the Transcaucasus and the emergence of direct rule from Moscow—*de jure* in the case of Karabakh, and *de facto* for the region as a whole.