

East bloc ethnic unrest flies out of control

by Luba George

A long hot summer of mass unrest in the Captive Nations of the Russian Empire has begun, while new outbreaks threaten to explode at any time in the East European satellites. The Transcaucasus crisis has boiled over with the announced secession of the Armenian-ethnic region of Nagorno-Karabakh from the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. As this occurred, while Mikhail Gorbachov was away in Poland, mass eruptions and a general strike escalated in Armenia, triggered by the shooting by Soviet troops of Armenian civilians at Armenia's Yerevan Airport; mass protests have occurred in the Ukraine; and protests in the Baltic Republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania continue on a non-stop basis. In Eastern Europe, a new strike wave is brewing in Poland, and in Czechoslovakia a demonstration of 150,000 Catholics demanding religious freedom was held at the beginning of July.

Anything can happen now, after the Communist Party and government leadership of Armenian-inhabited Karabakh on July 13 declared Karabakh's secession from Azerbaijan, and its incorporation into neighboring Armenia. A Karabakh party spokesman was quoted saying: "They [Moscow and Azerbaijan] can decide what they want; we've already decided for ourselves." The declaration of secession, voted up unanimously by the Karabakh parliament, was read on local radio: "The Soviet of People's Deputies of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region declares its secession from the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic."

Only a day earlier, the Soviet government newspaper *Izvestia* carried the strongest denunciation to date of the Karabakh protests and general strike (in effect since May 23), stating that the leaders of the Karabakh protests want to "provoke clashes with Azerbaijanis and with the troops who

have been sent there." That same day, Radio Moscow carried an ominous warning from Vezirov, the recently installed Azerbaijan party boss, that "the Communist Party will spare no effort to put a stop to the activities of those forces who are fanning inter-ethnic tensions"

The latest crisis in the Transcaucasus, far more severe than that of February-March, illustrates how the current rebellions sweeping the U.S.S.R. have gone out of Moscow's control. The crisis began in February as an operation contrived by Moscow, via a KGB-directed pogrom against Armenians in Azerbaijan, to create a "camp-fire level" crisis in the region, whereby Karabakh could be placed *de jure* under direct rule from Moscow, and the entire region militarized and *de facto* placed under military rule. The Soviet leadership played with fire, and got burnt. The "camp fire" has now become a "forest fire."

The sending of thousands of troops, including brigades of elite paratroopers, into Armenia, Karabakh, and Azerbaijan, marks the first phase of the Kremlin's establishing military rule over the region as a whole, while moving to bring Karabakh into the Russian Federation (RSFSR) as yet another "autonomous" region of the Russian Republic.

These moves will not end the crisis. More intense military preparations are under way, to deal not only with the Transcaucasus, but with expected outbreaks in the Baltic, the Ukraine, and Eastern Europe. It was noteworthy that soon after the conclusion of the recent Soviet Party Conference, an unusually long Warsaw Pact defense ministers meeting (July 5-8) was convened in Moscow to work out emergency preparations on East bloc security.

The gravity of the crisis in Armenia and Azerbaijan was

underscored by the announcement of Radio Moscow on July 13 that on July 18, after Gorbachov's return from Poland, the Presidium of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet will meet in emergency session to discuss the Karabakh question. The background to this emergency session is as follows.

The massacre by Soviet Army troops at Yerevan Airport has created a turning point in the Armenian mass protests, pushing the situation out of control, both in scope and in content. As the consequence of the killing of at least five Armenians by Soviet troops, the unrest has now become directed against Moscow and "the Russians." The massacre also triggered a general strike throughout Armenia, no end in sight. Moscow is in a quandary. Heavy troop deployments can seize airports, patrol streets, prevent mass demonstrations, but cannot break the strike, as proven already in Karabakh, where despite a very large Soviet troop presence, a general strike called on May 23 is still in effect.

The Soviet troop build-up in the Transcaucasus, bordering on Turkey and Iran, accelerated by a secret airlift of crack paratroopers during the Party Conference, continues. It is confirmed that airborne units were flown into Armenia. Some reports identify them as one or two brigades from the Airborne Division based at Pskov, in the Leningrad Military District, south of Leningrad and east of Estonia. Other reports mention regiments of mechanized infantry flown into Baku during June, from Minsk in the Belorussian Military District.

Repeated appeals and limited "concessions" have failed to stop the Armenian general strike and daily waves of mass protests. To date, two dramatic televised appeals by Vazgen I, the head of the Armenian Church (July 7 and 9) and daily televised appeals by Armenian party head Suren Arutunyan to the population to end the general strike, have failed. On Sunday afternoon, July 10, Arutunyan announced that the Presidium of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet had agreed to "debate the Karabakh question . . . very soon," and disclosed that he had met with Gorbachov and President Andrei Gromyko right after the Party Conference, to present Armenia's demand that Karabakh join Armenia. Coupled with his announcement, the Soviet Army again pulled its troops out of Yerevan.

These so-called concessions not only failed to stop the general strike, but led to a resumption of huge protests in Yerevan. On Sunday evening, over 200,000 gathered near the city center (the center, including the Opera Square, remains sealed off by militia and KGB), to demand the incorporation of Karabakh into Armenia. Moscow's other "concession," announced on July 11, was that the trial of the Sumgait rioters will be moved to "courts in the Russian Republic." One of the demands in Armenia has been that the trial be moved out of Azerbaijan and held by the U.S.S.R. Supreme Court in Moscow.

In reality, these "concessions," the new Supreme Soviet Presidium "discussion" on Karabakh, mark two big steps on the road to formalizing direct rule for Karabakh and de facto military rule for all of the Transcaucasus.

Unrest hits the Ukraine

On June 16, some 6,000-8,000 people marched in protest in the Soviet Ukraine, and on June 21, some 50,000 demonstrated at the University of Lvov, the large western Ukrainian city, located near the Polish border. Both incidents, despite overwhelming evidence and confirmation received, were for some strange reason not covered in the Western press. The June 16 meeting was initiated by the "Ridna Mova" (Native Language) Society, which reportedly had been denied access to the official local House of Culture. The main speakers, from an independent newspaper, *Ukainian Herald*, demanded autonomy and stated that Ukrainian delegates to the 19th Communist Party Conference in Moscow could not represent the Ukrainian population, because they were involved during the regime of Leonid Brezhnev in repression and Russification policies in the western Ukraine. Delegates attending tried to address the rally, but were heckled by the protesters.

The Ridna Mova Society announced that the meeting would continue every first Thursday of the month near the Ivan Franko (Ukrainian poet-writer) statue, in front of the Lvov State University. The following Thursday, June 21, an estimated 50,000 gathered at the university, despite the fact that the evening before, leaflets, presumably issued by state authorities, appeared in mailboxes in the city calling upon the population not to attend and "not to succumb to agitation." KGB police intervened into the demonstration to disperse the crowds.

The mass protests in the Ukraine are likely to reach Armenian proportions if the anti-Soviet pro-autonomy protests are linked with growing protests over the horrendous shortages in food and other basic necessities in the shops. The issue of food shortages is an especially sensitive issue with Ukrainians, as most families have still vivid memories of the 1932-33 famine. The famine, deliberately instigated by Stalin, resulted in over 7 million deaths among Ukrainians.

The outbreaks in Lvov are especially significant, because of its proximity to Poland, where the situation is again heating up. On July 1, without any prior warning, a new round of price increases occurred; the price of gasoline and alcohol skyrocketed; car prices went up by 40%, and car insurance by 70%.

Demonstrations and protests are now almost a daily phenomenon in the Baltic Republics. On the weekend following the Party Conference, a crowd of 100,000 gathered in Vilna, the capital of Lithuania, to demand "full autonomy" for Lithuania. In Estonia, from July 4-9, every single day, crowds demonstrated in front of the Estonian Supreme Court Building in Tallinn to demand the release of three Estonian nationalists, arrested in February. The demonstrations persisted despite repeated warnings to the crowd by Estonian Interior Minister Marko Tibar that they could be arrested. What is happening now in the Baltic is but a foretaste of what is certain for late August, the next anniversary of the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact, under which the Soviet Union annexed the Baltic Republics.