

Food crisis and national explosions intensify Soviet succession fight

by Konstantin George

The combined effects of the worsening Soviet food crisis, the explosive situation in the Transcaucasus, and the threat that Poland could again erupt at any time, have touched off a new round in the Soviet succession fight. Signs are multiplying that a full-blown leadership crisis is probable as early as October, when the next Central Committee Plenum is expected to convene. The coming storm can already be predicted; only the extent of the damage and the direction it takes remain open questions. What is definitely on the agenda, and is already being manifested in Moscow's response to the latest crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, is a brutal neo-Stalinist crackdown on national unrest.

The Transcaucasus

The latest explosion in the Transcaucasus was provoked by the KGB itself, to create a climate whereby the KGB can maintain its vast political power and leverage within the Soviet leadership as a whole during the succession battles to come. Recent developments prove this thesis.

On Sunday, Sept. 18, thousands of Armenians came to an officially sanctioned rally in Stepanakert, the capital of the Armenian-inhabited region of Karabakh in Azerbaijan. This marked, suspiciously, the first such *authorized* rally in all the months of mass rallies held in Karabakh, where Armenians have called for Karabakh's incorporation into Armenia. While the crowd was marching through the streets of Stepanakert, a KGB-led gang of Azerbaijani thugs, armed with shotguns and knives, attacked a busload of Armenians en route to Stepanakert, in the Azerbaijani-inhabited village of Khadshaly just south of the city. Eighteen Armenians were wounded, four of them critically (one later died in the hospital). The bus reached Stepanakert; word spread through the crowd, and a peaceful gathering was instantly transformed into a mob, which raced to the Azerbaijani village, and the "ethnic clashes" the Soviet media and the world press have been reporting, then began.

By the next day, when word of what happened reached Armenia, daily mass demonstrations (averaging over 250,000) began in the capital of Yerevan, where strikes also broke out. In Karabakh, a general strike began.

The KGB's "Sumgait II" operation (referring to the February-March massacre of hundreds of Armenians in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait), or pogrom, in the village of Khad-

shaly, produced the intended effect in the Moscow leadership. Whatever other differences may exist in the Kremlin, the decision was taken for a brutal crackdown against Armenia and Karabakh. The chronology of the crackdown emerged, to date, as follows:

Sept. 19: An airlift of Soviet Army troops into Armenia begins, with transport planes spotted landing at 10-minute intervals at Yerevan Airport, itself occupied by Soviet Army units since early July, when Army troops stormed it and cleared it of Armenian protesters, killing nine.

Sept. 20: The airlift continues, around the clock. As many as two divisions have been brought in, to further increase the strength of the over 300,000 Army and Interior Troops in the Transcaucasus, under the command of Gen. Lt. Igor N. Rodionov, a former commander of Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

Sept. 20: Mass demonstrations in Yerevan now reach a peak of 400,000.

Sept. 20: Concerning Armenia and Karabakh, Moscow drops the phony *glasnost* mask. First, the Soviet news agency TASS reported (after a 36-hour delay) that on Sunday, in Stepanakert, the offices of the Karabakh "State Prosecutor were attacked," and "militia as well as employees of the interior ministry received bodily injuries." Then, reporting on the "clashes" in Khadshaly, TASS noted: "Security Troops (KGB) and police succeeded in preventing any further escalation." Then, the TASS warning: "The state of affairs has fallen into one of blatant contradiction to the interests of the working people of both Soviet Republics [Armenia and Azerbaijan], and this *can no longer be tolerated*."

TASS then announced that an "active staff" for Armenia and Azerbaijan, headed by one Arkadi Volsky, had been commissioned and placed in charge of the situation. Volsky, a KGB-linked functionary of the Central Committee Secretariat, under the Politburo's ideology czar and powerbroker, Yegor Ligachov, was dispatched to the Transcaucasus in late July, and has been functioning ever since as Moscow's de facto governor general for the region. Volsky's KGB credentials are impeccable. In late 1982, when former KGB boss Yuri Andropov became General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, he selected Volsky to be one of his personal advisers.

Sept. 21: *Pravda* employs language reminiscent of that

used before Moscow's 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia: "The workers are concerned and have turned to the Party and State with the request that decisive measures be taken to guarantee security, to end the troubles and stop the activities of irresponsible persons who are threatening the normal life of the population."

Sept. 21: At a press conference in Copenhagen, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze responds to a question on Karabakh by revealing the Stalinist program for the region: "It should be evident that the failure to adopt measures to ensure law and order has been disastrous. Serious measures will now be taken to prevent the situation from escalating, and one cannot exclude *extraordinary measures*, within the Constitution, of course."

That same afternoon, Moscow proclaims a State of Emergency for Karabakh. The announcement is read on local TV and radio in the name of Volsky.

By the evening, the Soviet Army and Interior Troops are not only patrolling all of Karabakh, but move in to Yerevan, and tanks and troops take up positions at all major intersections, squares, and in front of all party and government buildings.

Sept. 22: The demonstrations in Armenia end, but the general strike has spread from Yerevan to all of Armenia.

Moscow's Poland tactic

Behind Moscow's current brutality against the Armenians is the compelling urgency to crush national movements inside the U.S.S.R. *before* the next, inevitable Polish crisis erupts. Neo-Stalinism is also on the agenda for Poland, but for the reason we have just cited, plus the crucial consideration of keeping Poland calm before the November U.S. presidential election and the Soviet October Central Committee Plenum, the Stalinists in Poland, led by Interior Minister Gen. Czeslaw Kiszczak, have adopted the time-buying tactic of "round table negotiations" with the Solidarity trade union. Under Moscow's orders, Kiszczak will do anything to keep the illusion of "compromise" alive until November, and the promise of "concessions" and even—for the short-term—the actual granting of concessions can be expected.

To attempt to give credibility to this game, the Polish Politburo gladly sacrificed the "government" of Prime Minister Zbigniew Messner, which resigned Sept. 19, after a Polish Parliament "vote of no confidence." Even by communist standards, the show put on was ludicrous; the vote was unanimous, 359-0.

The October crisis

The signal for the coming storm in the Soviet leadership was given by Soviet television coverage on the first day (Sept. 12) of Gorbachov's tour of the Krasnoyarsk region in Siberia. Here one saw a deliberate decision to portray the general secretary as weak and indecisive, surrounded by people screaming: "We have no meat! We have no fish! The shops

are empty, see for yourself! We have no hot water! [this, in Siberia], Mikhail Sergeyevich, do something!" Gorbachov could only reply: "What can I do? What is there to do? You tell me, what is there to do?"

Two days later, during Gorbachov's stop in the town of Norilsk, he was quoted by Radio Moscow, "We have to shake up the leadership"—but carefully, because the situation among the leadership is so explosive: "We have to avoid splitting our country into camps, so that no head-on collision occurs. Today's problems cannot be solved with the methods of 1937"—meaning a violent purge of the party leadership as occurred under Stalin. But a "peaceful" purge is on the agenda for Gorbachov: "We have to implement changes through party elections."

By rebuking the "methods of 1937" of the KGB's predecessor, the NKVD, Gorbachov was delivering an unmistakable message to the KGB itself. On the same day, the weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta* published an article which declared how the KGB had played the crucial role in the October 1964 overthrow of Nikita Khrushchov. The author was Fyodor Burlatsky, a KGB officer and confidant of the late Yuri Andropov. Despite the fact that Burlatsky's article attacked the overthrow of Khrushchov by the pre-Andropov KGB, and also attacked Leonid Brezhnev, it is widely seen as a KGB warning shot at Gorbachov. One of Brezhnev's "cardinal sins" listed, was having dared to place his own people in top KGB posts, as a check on Andropov's political power.

Till now, Gorbachov has never touched the KGB, and this may be changing. If so, it means that Gorbachov has the backing of the military in this endeavor. No other explanation is possible.

The food crisis

Gorbachov, during his Krasnoyarsk tour, also underscored the gravity of the Soviet food situation, repeating over and over again, that solving the food crisis "is our top priority." That crisis will dramatically worsen during autumn and winter. Gorbachov himself broke the bad news in a speech in Krasnoyarsk Sept. 17, when he denounced Soviet ministries for being responsible for "mistakes in the agrarian sector," and stated that "the amount of grain harvested rose from 178 million tons in 1985 to 211 million tons in 1987, but this year we will not achieve this level, because in many regions, in Siberia, in Kazakhstan, and on the Volga, production was lower."

The official Soviet preliminary estimate is 205 million tons. Such estimates are invariably 10-15 million tons above the actual amount of grain harvested that survives the appalling losses caused by inefficient storage, transport, and food processing facilities. Thus, in reality, the grain harvest will be only 195 million tons, and perhaps even lower. The minimal requirement for the population, by Soviet standards, is 234 million tons. This shortfall means either record or near-record grain imports, or an impending famine catastrophe.