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* JANUARY 1990 *
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Comment:

I am circulating the attached paper, done by the Soviet Military Studies Group at SHAPE. It provides a lot of very interesting detail relevant to the utility of Soviet military forces in an internal security situation.

THE USE OF SOVIET ARMED FORCES IN THE TRANSCAUCASUS:
JANUARY 1990

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INTRODUCTION

The ethnic issues that generated the recent unrest in Armenia and Azerbaidzhan have a long and deep rooted history in the region. In more recent times these differences have focussed on the region of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), an Armenian enclave within Azerbaidzhan. The last two years have seen a succession of military and political efforts to maintain the region in the status quo established under Stalinist rule. Gorbachev's policies of glasnost' and perestroika have, however, taken the lid off of a simmering pot and the result has been racial conflict split along religious and national lines. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the application of Soviet military force under the "extraordinary situation" that occurred in the region in January of this year.

THE ISSUE

As a result of previous ethnic violence in 1988, a substantial number of Armenian and Azeri refugees sought sanctuary in their own ethnic territories. The pressure on the Armenians who remained in Azerbaidzhan, especially in the NKAO, Baku and the border rayons became intense. The spark that set off the most recent violence was the decision by the Armenian Supreme Soviet to include the NKAO in their economic development plan. Azerbaidzhan took this as an encroachment on their sovereignty. Demonstrations and localized violence in early January rapidly gave way to more organized repression against the Armenians throughout Azerbaidzhan, especially in the NKAO and Baku. Pogroms (systemized violent eviction of a minority by mobs) began in Baku on the evening of 14 January after a rally attended by 150000 people.¹

THE OPPOSITION

Many in Azerbaidzhan have long felt that the organs of Communist and Soviet power had given up their right to rule by not pursuing the NKAO issue to a satisfactory conclusion. A power vacuum developed to be gradually filled by the People's Front, a nationalist, and indeed, Islamic fundamentalist organization with a large following. The core of the fighters appears to have come from among the 165000 disaffected Azeri refugees from Armenia.² On 26 January, 1990, General Yazov estimated the number of armed fighters in Azerbaidzhan (probably on both sides) at 40000.³ It is apparent that Soviet authorities in Moscow drastically underestimated the extent of organization and support for the People's Front, and the extremes to which they were prepared to go to achieve their aims. Thefts of

military arms and ammunition have been epidemic in this area throughout the last year and the Azeri fighters were (and probably to a large extent, still are) well armed with Kalashnikov automatic rifles, machineguns, mortars, grenade launchers and "hail-control" guns (effective as anti-helicopter weapons). In some cases, the "extremists" were able to capture or steal armored vehicles as well. In addition, much of the border control between Azerbaidzhan and Iran was dismantled and it is assumed that a large amount of equipment was supplied in this manner.⁴ This may account for the unexplained extremist use of orange helicopters with painted over identification numbers for air-assault and ground attack missions against Armenian settlements.⁵

The Armenians as well were well-armed though not as substantially as the Azeris. Their arsenal included primarily privately owned hunting rifles, though automatic weapons appeared as a result of the storming of various Ministry of Internal Defense (MVD) arms stores and they were able to capture or steal some armored vehicles. In fact, storming isolated garrisons became the primary means of acquiring weapons on both sides. This sometimes took on the character of tragic comedy, for example, when the Yerevan Great Patriotic War museum was looted and an unserviceable World War II tank, two 76 mm guns and an anti-aircraft gun were stolen.⁶

Command and control of the People's Front was organized around the "Provisional Defense Committees" set up throughout Azerbaidzhan. Direct command and control within Baku was located on a ship within the harbor.⁷ 50 radio-equipped cars gathered intelligence on Soviet army and MVD units during the intervention in Baku itself.⁸ MVD and army units also reported that their own radio nets were being jammed.⁹ The high degree of organization of the People's Front was revealed following a raid on the organization headquarters in Baku where weapons, ammunition, propaganda leaflets, and 1000 uniforms were found.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, the catch included insignia designating military ranks from private to general.

The opposition facing the Soviet army and MVD units was substantial, organized, well-armed and extremely determined. Comparisons to the fighting in Afghanistan were obvious and were so stated by some of the officers.¹¹ The difference was that the Soviet armed forces were now fighting a three way battle, and not against Mujahideen, but against Soviet citizens themselves.

THE INTERVENTION: PHASE I

Approximately 52000 Armenians lived in the Nasiminiskyi Rayon of Baku, a city of over a million inhabitants. This became the immediate focus of the pogroms. By the evening of 15 January, 32 people, mostly Armenians, had died, and scores of flats had been ransacked.¹² Armed attacks by large groups of Azeris on Armenian settlements, in some cases supported by helicopters, took place in rural regions. The Armenian Supreme Soviet appealed to Moscow for help; It was not long in coming as the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet declared a State of Emergency in the NKAO, adjacent rayons and the border zones. It also directed additional MVD, Army, Navy and KGB troops to reinforce

the 6000 troops already in place.¹³ Possibly in fear of inflaming further nationalist violence, the state of emergency did not initially extend to Baku. Instead, the discretion was left to the Azerbaidzhan Supreme Soviet "to take all the necessary measures, including the introduction of a curfew in the towns of Baku, Gyandzha [formerly Kirovabad] and other populated settlements...".¹⁴ The Azerbaidzhan Supreme Soviet chose not to do this and this proved to be Moscow's first serious mistake.

The brunt of the initial fighting fell on the local militia and MVD troops. With local reinforcement these troops numbered 7720 militia, 5900 MVD and 3000 volunteer militia in Baku itself.¹⁵ Their immediate task was to protect the Armenians; this was partially successful but took the form of evacuating Armenians from high risk areas leaving their property and homes to the mercy of the extremists. The militia and MVD took casualties themselves in the course of these actions, largely because the militia were generally unarmed and the MVD was operating under very strict rules of engagement.

Reinforcing army, MVD and KGB troops began arriving in the region but found themselves blockaded within garrisons and the Gyandzha airport. Once again, there was a general reluctance to use force to break the blockades. The result was that the initial military intervention was absolutely ineffective in stopping the violence, protecting the Armenians or cowing the People's Front.

THE MOBILIZATION

The order to mobilize recently discharged reservists in Krasnodar and Stavropol Krays and the Rostov Oblast in North Caucasus Military District apparently went out on 15 January.¹⁶ The mobilized reservists were to secure military and civil facilities in the troubled area thereby freeing up regular military units to conduct more active operations. If it was thought that calling up troops from this particularly Russian area was a safe move, the authorities were desperately wrong. The callup sparked immediate and vocal protests from those areas where the reservists were located. In a rambling interview on 17 January, Yazov defended the callup, saying, "Without the troops...it would be impossible to implement the imposed state of emergency or curfew".¹⁷ It is interesting as well, that the callup apparently did not apply to the Georgian Republic, even though it borders both Armenia and Azerbaidzhan, this possibly reflecting a perception that such troops would not be reliable, especially after the events in Tbilisi in April last year. The public outcry forced the Commander of the North Caucasus Military District to announce on the 19th that the reserves would be demobilized since the troops "...had ensured the fulfillment of urgent tasks" and would all be home by the 24th of January.¹⁸ That the callup was a mistake is clear, but the carrying out of the mobilization order itself was also botched: "Some of the [military commissariats] treated people callously and violated established drafting procedure. In an endeavor to fulfill their orders at any cost, they sent to the troop units reservists not liable to the draft, invalids, parents of large families, and materially responsible people given no time to transfer their

assets".¹⁹

By 20 January, five days after the emergency decree and the introduction of an additional 11000 troops, the situation in Armenia and Azerbaidzhan had not stabilized in the least. By that time 67 people had died in the pogroms in Baku, 1200 flats had been ransacked and 15000 Armenians were refugees.²⁰ Attacks on outlying villages and on militia and MVD posts for the purpose of seizing weapons continued. In addition, the flow of traffic across the border with Iran continued unabated in both directions. The one major development of this period was that the troops were finally authorized on 17 January to fire their weapons in order to protect lives, installations or if fired upon. It was apparent that the situation was more desperate than originally thought and called for dramatic steps. These came early in the morning on 20 January.

THE INTERVENTION: PHASE II

On the night of 19-20 January at least two regiments of Soviet paratroopers [probably from the division stationed in Gyandzha] moved on Baku from "west and east" determined to enter the city.²¹ The Airborne Troops (VDV in Russian) were probably used for a number of reasons: They are predominantly Slavic, they are an elite and politically reliable force, they have a high number of combat veterans from Afghanistan and they have previous experience in dealing with domestic unrest. There was considerable fighting but by the end of the day the troops had established themselves and the radio station had been seized. The casualties reflected the effectiveness of the operation: 51 civilians killed and 287 wounded. Among the troops, 3 MVD and 3 soldiers were killed and 36 were wounded.²² This action sprang from a second declaration of a State of Emergency on 19 January, this time for Baku. A curfew was immediately established from 2300-0400 daily and the new city Commandant Lt Gen V.S. Dubinyak broadcast the news that a state of emergency and curfew were now in force. Simultaneously with operations in Baku, Soviet army and MVD troops began destroying the blockades and opening roads to garrisons and the airport. Additional KGB Border Guards were flown in and the 720 km border with Iran was again taken under control. Airborne units also moved into the Azerbaidzhan enclave of Nakhichevan in Armenia which had "seceded" from the Soviet Union.²³ However, instead of recognizing the inevitable, "guerrillas" [as they were now called] continued to fight. Dubinyak's daily radio reports recounted a litany of casualties, arrests and strikes. Dubinyak admitted the difficulties of getting complete control of the city when "35-40000 people were demonstrating in front of the Central Committee headquarters every day".²⁴ There were no newspapers being published, extremists had blown up the television power station and there were no businesses or public transport in operation. At least one pirate radio station (Azadlyk [Freedom]) was broadcasting.²⁵ Evacuation of dependent families of army, MVD and Border Troops as well as of Armenians continued. These evacuations were by sea, air and rail. Accommodation was found throughout the Soviet Union in Moscow [to include in the garrisons of the Taman and Kantemir Divisions], Odessa, Kiev and in Central Asia.²⁶ The

grim business of tracking down the People's Front fighters also continued, but not without additional casualties. By 22 January, 75 civilians and 18 troops had been killed. By 26 January, 80 "terrorists" had been arrested and the headquarters of the People's Front as well as the command and control ship had been taken by paratroopers.²⁷ The blockade of Baku harbor was also broken. Newspapers finally began to publish on 27 January and the fighting began to die down. In a final burst of violence, a major firefight west of Lenkoran on 27 January resulted in 5 extremists killed and 54 captured at a cost of an army Senior Lieutenant. The Lenkoran section of the People's Front announced it was going underground. The casualties from 20-27 January were 98 civilian and 25 military dead. By the end of the month the situation was relatively calm but the deep seated animosity between Armenian and Azeri and now, the Soviet Armed Forces remains, simmering just below the surface. Ominously, on 23 January, Nakhichevan television presenters appeared in Islamic dress and for the first time broadcast verses from the Koran.²⁸

THE DEBATE ON DOMESTIC USE OF SOVIET ARMED FORCES

The Soviet Armed Forces will surely examine a host of 'lessons learned' as a result of the experience in the Transcaucasus in order to find practical solutions to such difficult military circumstances. Some of those lessons are no doubt finding application in Dushanbe today. More critical however, is the question of the domestic role of the Soviet military during this turbulent, transitional period in Soviet history. Following the ruthless suppression of an unarmed nationalist demonstration in Tbilisi, Georgian SSR in April of 1989, there was a series of articles debating this very issue published in the journal Kommunist Vooruzhenikh Sil [Communist of the Armed Forces].²⁹ One of the contributors to the debate was Army General V. Varennikov, CinC of the Ground Forces and a 1st Deputy Minister of Defense.³⁰ His main point was that a legal basis should be provided for domestic use of armed force and that the troops should be trained and equipped in order to effectively perform that mission. General Varennikov was also in Baku on 20 January and details of an interview given to an "Izvestia" correspondent reaffirms his previously published views. In the interview, Varennikov describes in military terms what had transpired the night before but goes on to say that "...this is not an army operation...MVD troops are primarily involved in suppressing the armed groupings; we are only giving them assistance, trying to lift the blockade from our own military camps, and clearing the approaches to the airfields...".³¹ He goes on to state that the People's Front used nationalism as a cover to actually overthrow Soviet power in the region and break with Moscow. This is key as it appears to be the code justifying use of the armed forces in domestic crises. Both declarations of states of emergency included this element: (15 Jan 90) "Matters are going so far as killings, robberies, attempts at the armed overthrow of Soviet power and forcible changes to the state and social system which is fixed by the USSR Constitution". (20 Jan 90) "The actions of extremist forces...have become...anti-state, anti-constitutional, and anti-

popular in nature....there was virtually no attempt to conceal the aim of seizing power in the republic by force".

The alleged disagreement between Shevardnadze and Yazov on the real purpose of the military in Transcaucasus was made much of in the Western media.³² In fact, there was no disagreement. Shevardnadze said that the purpose of the intervention was not to suppress dissent but end the bloodshed. Yazov's direct statement that "...the army's actions aim...to destroy the organizational structure of the People's Front..." was not incompatible with that. In fact, the first Decree of a State of Emergency shows that Moscow recognized early that this was a direct challenge to Soviet rule and that the Party and Soviet authorities had lost any ability to control the situation. The second decree condemned the Supreme Soviets of both Armenia and Azerbaidzhan for letting things get out of control. The attacks on the Armenians were the prelude to a seizure of power by the People's Front.

Y.M. Primakov, Chairman of the Soviet of the Union of the USSR Supreme Soviet also recognized the extreme nature of the situation and hence, the necessity for force. In Baku on 16 January, Primakov stated that "Additional measures will be necessary [to restore order]...But we can tell you firmly, order will be restored".³³ This is after the declaration of a State of Emergency by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. Contrast that with his statements in Washington in October 1989 when he said that future domestic use of military force would only be authorized by a declaration of martial law approved by [the entire] Supreme Soviet and its larger parent body, the Congress of People's Deputies.³⁴

CONCLUSION

The dividing line between dissent and the violent overthrow of Soviet authority is not so easily drawn. It can be expected that further incidents of Soviet military intervention will occur and that the military will become more proficient at suppressing domestic unrest (from practical experience if nothing else). The challenge to Soviet power is to ensure that the legal procedures and limitations on the use of force are strictly defined and understood by the nation at large. Otherwise, the perception of the armed forces as a violent tool of the center will win out and the military will be estranged from the people they are sworn to protect.

ENDNOTES

1. Moscow home service, 1630 GMT 15 Jan 90; As appeared in BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Part I (USSR) (hereafter SWB), 16 Jan 90.
2. Tass, 1509 gmt 24 Jan 90; SWB 26 Jan 90.
3. Interview with Army General Yazov, Izvestia, 27 Jan 90; SWB 29 Jan 90.
4. Komsomolskaya Pravda, 18 Jan 90.

5. Moscow home service, 1600 gmt 15 Jan 90; SWB 17 Jan 90.
6. Yerevan in Armenian, 1700 gmt 24 Jan 90; SWB 26 Jan 90.
7. Yazov interview, Izvestia, 27 Jan 90.
8. Ibid.
9. Interview with Army General Varrenikov, Izvestia 21 Jan 90; SWB 22 Jan 90.
10. Tass in Russian, 0811 gmt 25 Jan 90; SWB 26 Jan 90 and Tass in Russian, 1749 gmt 26 Jan 90; SWB 29 Jan 90.
11. Komsomolskaya Pravda, 16 Jan 90.
12. Moscow home service, 0430 gmt 15 Jan 90; SWB 16 Jan 90.
13. See SWB 17 Jan 90 for the decree; The numbers of troops in the region and the number reinforcing do not appear in any detail in Soviet sources; I have use "The Killing Zone", Time, 29 Jan 90.
14. SWB 17 Jan 90.
15. Izvestia, 18 Jan 90.
16. Interview with Army General Lizichev, Soviet television, 1800 gmt 19 Jan 90; SWB 22 Jan 90.
17. Interview with Army Gen Yazov, Moscow home service, 2345 gmt 17 Jan 90; SWB 19 Jan 90.
18. Interview with Col Gen Shustko, Soviet television, 1530 gmt 19 Jan 90; SWB 22 Jan 90.
19. Izvestia, 23 Jan 90.
20. Tass, 1723 gmt 20 Jan 90; SWB 22 Jan 90.
21. Interview with Col Gen Omelichev, Izvestia, 21 Jan 90.
22. MVD report, Tass, 1548 gmt 20 Jan 90; SWB 22 Jan 90.
23. Izvestia, 24 Jan 90.
24. Interview with Lt Gen Dubinyak, Soviet television, 2112 gmt 22 Jan 90; SWB 24 Jan 90.
25. Tass, 1448 gmt 22 Jan 90; SWB 24 Jan 90.
26. Moscow home service, 1530 gmt 24 Jan 90; SWB 26 Jan 90.
27. Interview with Rear Admiral Lyashenko, Moscow home service, 1600 gmt 27 Jan 90; SWB 29 Jan 90.

28. Tehran Domestic Service in Persian, 1030 gmt 24 Jan 90; appearing in Foreign Broadcast Information Service- Soviet Union, 24 Jan 90.
29. For an analysis of the debate see Stephen Foye, "Domestic Role of Soviet Armed Forces Debated," Radio Liberty Report on the USSR, Vol. 2, No. 3, Jan 19 90, pp. 7-9.
30. V. Varennikov, "Prednaznachenii sovetskikh vooruzhennykh sil," Kommunist vooruzhennykh sil, No. 18, 1989, pp. 22-25.
31. Izvestia, 21 Jan 90.
32. For Shevardnadze's comment, see Tass in Russian, 1924 gmt 27 Jan 90; SWB 29 Jan 90. For Yazov's statement, see interview published in Izvestia, 27 Jan 90.
33. Moscow home service, 1300 gmt 17 Jan 90; SWB 19 Jan 90.
34. Brian Taylor, "Internal Function of Soviet Army Discussed", Soviet Defense Notes, Vol. 1, No. 6, Nov-Dec 89, published by Soviet Security Studies Working Group, MIT, pp. 4-6.