One year in Baku

On the night of 19 January 1990, more than 100 people died and about 400 were injured when Soviet troops invaded Baku following riots and pogroms which had been taking place against the Armenian population of the city. However, even the Armenians have questioned the timing of the Kremlin’s intervention days after the violence had taken place. The purpose, it has been suggested, was not to protect lives but to curb the growing power of the Azerbaijani Popular Front.

According to witnesses, soldiers fired indiscriminately. Some of those hurt were unarmed, innocent civilians. They included old people, women and children. Whether it was indeed an attempt to restore the power of the Communist Party, or harshly to reestablish order in a discontented region, what took place was an example of severe and largely gratuitous violence by Soviet troops. As the following eyewitness report and photographs show, it was nothing short of a massacre.

Below: At about midnight on 19 January 1990, as this bus approached Salyanskie Kazarmy, the driver, Aliev Rustam Shakhveled, saw a crowd of people running away from a volley of gunshots. He stopped the vehicle, allowed everyone to board, and drove them to safety. He returned twice to the area to help others escape. The third time he was shot at the wheel. He died on 25 January.

Right: “Shall we forget the tears of our mothers, sisters and fathers?”
One year in Baku USSR

'The bodies were of no interest'

The motor transport station where I am manager is on Tbilisi Prospect, opposite the central entrance to the military section, known as Salyanskie Kazarmy.

On 19 January 1990 at 20.00h, I left the chief engineer, Comrade V. Omarov, on night duty. At about 00.30h on 20 January I was woken by gunfire. I telephoned the garage. An unfamiliar voice answered. On hearing my name, the voice informed me that people were being shot, like cannon-fodder. Shooting could be heard at that moment, and he, too, was wounded. Omarov came to the phone and reported that the garage had been blockaded with buses which had been smashed by tanks. A crowd had collected at the entrance and was being crushed against the walls of the garage by the tanks. The garage wall was covered in blood, there were many wounded and it was impossible to get through. My last conversation with Omarov was at 4am. At 7.30 I reached the garage on foot. There I saw a terrible scene. The door to my office was covered in blood and on the wall was an inscription in Azerbaijani: 'Avenge us!' Traces of blood were visible all over the garage. On the cars with the registration plates GAZ-52 No 25-71 AGA, 56-32 AGG, 73-32 AGB, 73-92 AGA and 57-75 AGS, there were also inscriptions in blood: 'We'll die rather than give in!' 'Jan-Azerbaijan!'

Until about 11 o'clock on 20 January, soldiers were shooting into five-storey housing blocks situated to the left and right of the entrance to the military section. When the volleys died down, we came out of the garage. By the garage wall was a private car, registration number GAZ-21 62-03 AZV, which had been smashed by a tank, a shot-up tractor, a bulldozer, and the gate and fence of the garage. On the pavement by the garage, around the bus stop, we saw the most terrible sight of all — 12 mutilated corpses, run over by cars. The military were busy towing away motors, the bodies didn't interest them. With the help of cranes, workers from the station and I picked up the bodies and transported them to the morgue. I myself removed the jaw and eyes of one of the dead from the asphalt.

During the towing of vehicles, the military destroyed the bus stop, asphalt and pine trees. And, during towing, an Icarus 21-56 AGL was crushed by a tank, despite my protest.

When we heard that in the Tbilisi Prospect area, at about 24.00h, the driver of our special car, I. Prokhorov, had been wounded, we towed the car back to the garage. There we found that the car had been shot at seven times in the front. I. Prokhorov was taken to hospital by ambulance. At the garage, we also found out that the son of metalworker Kharis Alimov had been killed.

At the garage, drivers Rafael Matdzhanov and Hasan Elshad informed me that before my arrival, at approximately 6am, 4 KAMAZ military lorries had come and removed bodies which were lying in the street. Drivers Vakhruz Kerimov, Habib Ibadullaev and Shukyur Veliev reported that at about 7am, from the pavement on the Kazarmy side, troops had removed about 20 bodies.

On 5 December 1988, when a crowd of many thousands was dispersed from Lenin Square by General Tyagunov's soldiers, there was not one victim. How, then, can it be that in dispersing a crowd of 200 persons, a great number of unarmed people were killed? This is premeditated murder. We demand that those who sanctioned this murder be named before a military tribunal.

Translated by Ann Kodicek