

31 March - Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis

After the signing of the Gulustan (12 October 1813) and Turkmanchay (10 February 1828) treaties, a very rapid mass resettlement of Armenians in the Azerbaijani lands took place, and the subsequent artificial territorial division emerged.

Although Armenians, who were settled in the territories of Azerbaijani Khanates of Iravan, Nakhchivan and Karabakh were less in numbers compared to Azerbaijanis living there, they managed, with support of their patrons, to establish on an administrative unit called the "Armenian oblast" on the basis of Iravan and Nakhchivan Khanates.

In reality, this policy paved the way for the expulsion of the indigenous Azerbaijani people from their historical lands and mass atrocities against them. The idea of "Greater Armenia" was put forward that envisaged claims, among others, to the Azerbaijani lands. In order to establish this mythical "state" in the Azerbaijani lands, the Armenian side resorted to the falsification of history and the use of violence, including terror, against Azerbaijani population.

Between 1905 and 1907, Armenian nationalists, driven by the idea of creating "Greater Armenia", carried out a series of bloody massacres against Azerbaijanis in the territory of the present-day Azerbaijan as well as in Azerbaijani villages located in the territory of the present-day Armenia. Hundreds of Azerbaijani settlements were destroyed and razed to the ground, and thousands of civilians were brutally killed.

Taking advantage of the First World War as well as the February and October revolutions of 1917 in Russia, Armenian nationalists attempted to realize their claims under the banner of the Bolsheviks that had seized power in Baku (the leader of the Russian Bolsheviks Vladimir Lenin appointed ethnic Armenian Stephan Shaumyan as Extraordinary Commissar of the Caucasus. The latter was actively cooperating with the nationalistic Armenian party "Dashnaksutyun"). From March 1918, the Baku Soviet under the pretext of combating counter-revolutionary elements, began to implement a plan to eliminate Azerbaijanis from the whole of the Baku province.

Massacres that started on the night of 30-31 March, 1918, continued for several days. As a result, tens of thousands of peaceful civilians in Baku, Shamakhi, Guba and other cities of Azerbaijan were killed on ethnic and religious grounds, settlements were destroyed, cultural monuments, mosques and cemeteries were razed to the ground. Subsequently, Armenian nationalists continued their barbaric acts, carrying out mass killings, looting and ethnic cleansing in Karabakh, Zangazur, Nakhchivan, Irevan, Lankaran and other regions.

Within a single day 30,000 people were killed in the Baku province alone. In total, in March-April of 1918, armed groups of the Armenians-Bolsheviks killed more than 50000 Azerbaijanis.

As acknowledged by S.Shaumyan, 6000 soldiers of the Baku Soviet and 3000-4000 strong national forces of Dashnaksutyun (an Armenian nationalistic party) took part in the massacre of Azerbaijani civilians¹.

¹ <https://story.karabakh.center/en/genocide-of-azerbaijanis-in-1918>

The March 1918 massacre got special attention following the proclamation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. In order to investigate violence against the Azerbaijani population, on 15 July, 1918 the Council of Ministers adopted a decision on the establishment of the Extraordinary Investigation Commission.

At the first stage, the Commission investigated the March genocide, the brutalities and grave crimes committed by Armenians in the provinces of Shamakhi and Iravan. A special structure was established at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to increase awareness in the world of the truth about this tragedy. In 1919 and 1920, Azerbaijan Democratic Republic commemorated 31 March as a national day of mourning. In fact, it was the first attempt to give a political and legal assessment of the genocide perpetrated against Azerbaijanis and to the occupation of Azerbaijani lands, which lasted for more than one century. However, the fall of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic made it impossible to complete this work.

After restoring its independence in 1991, the Republic of Azerbaijan resumed the work of giving proper political assessment of the March 1918 genocide. On the eve of the 80th anniversary of the tragedy, on March 26, 1998, the then President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev issued a Decree announcing 31 March - the Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis. The Decree said: "All tragedies, which occurred in the 19th-20th centuries in Azerbaijan, accompanied by the seizure of the lands, constituted various stages of the systematic genocide policy carried out by Armenians against Azerbaijanis. Attempts were made to give political assessment to only one of these events – the March 1918 massacre. Today, the Republic of Azerbaijan, as a successor of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, in a logical continuation of the decisions that it could not fully implement at that time, recognizes as its historical duty to give a political assessment of the events of the genocide"².

Numerous new facts and documents have been collected in the past years based on researches in this direction. The mass grave unearthed in Guba city reveals one of the bloody episodes of this tragedy. In April-May 1918, in Guba province alone 167 villages were razed to the ground. The grave was discovered accidentally on April 1, 2007, during excavation works for construction purposes. In 2009, under the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Plan of action to perpetuate the memory of mass murder victims in Guba district" was approved and a decision was made to construct a memorial complex and carry out renovation works in the site where mass graves were discovered. In 2007, employees of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences launched a large-scale research in the mass grave. As a result, more than 400 corpses of people of different ages were found, including 50 children, 100 women, and the elderly. The research revealed the mass grave as evidence of the genocide committed by Armenians against the local population in 1918.

The official opening ceremony of the Guba Genocide Memorial Complex which was constructed at the site was held on September 18, 2013. Addressing the ceremony, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev said: "History was falsified during the Soviet times, so clearly the truth was also concealed from us. For many years, criminals like Shaumyan and others, who shed the blood of the Azerbaijani people were portrayed as heroes. I think this is a great tragedy. For many years, those who committed atrocities against our people were presented in Soviet history as heroes and were remembered by

² <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/4684>

statues erected in many cities of the USSR. Only after independence did we restore justice. We cleared our beautiful city, our Baku from these statues, and in their place today there are beautiful parks, including the Sahil Park. In other words, history and justice prevailed. Today we return to our history. We know and should know all aspects of our history. The younger generation also needs to know what disasters our nation was faced with in the past.”

On January 18, 2018, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev signed an Order on commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the 1918 genocide of the Azerbaijanis. The Order read: “The historical evidence revealed that the geography of bloody acts committed in March-April of 1918 and in later periods was much more widespread and the victims of this tragedy were far more numbered than previously estimated.”³

³ <https://en.president.az/azerbaijan/memories>