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'OPERATION RING' BRINGS FEAR, CONFUSION TO ARMENIAN VILLAGE

MOSCOW ACCUSED OF USING CAMPAIGN TO BOOST AZERBAIJAN COMMUNISTS

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By David Remnick

ARTZVASHEN, U.S.S.R. -- On a clear spring morning a few days ago, Gegtik Apresian looked up and saw "mechanical birds" flying in over the mountains to the east. Then she heard a voice in Russian, shouting over a loudspeaker: "Give up your arms! We will destroy those who do not disarm!"

The younger people of Artzvashen, those who had been listening for days to radio reports of the Soviet army's attacks on other Armenian villages, knew immediately why the tanks and helicopters had descended upon them. They knew all about Moscow's "Operation Ring," a military campaign to disarm Armenian militia that has left around 50 dead after raids along the republic's border with Azerbaijan.

"Others knew, but I was stunned," Apresian said. "I was born here 75 years ago, I am an old woman, and I'd never seen anything like this. We are simple people here in the mountains. I thought we were safe."

As the Soviet empire disintegrates, there is little safety in such hot spots as the Transcaucasus. Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis have been fighting for years, but now Moscow itself has entered the clash. Although Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev says his troops are only out to disarm Armenians firing across the border, Armenians see Operation Ring as an attempt to support the Communist leadership in Azerbaijan while trying to intimidate the pro-independence leadership in the Armenian capital of Yerevan.

In Artzvashen, a village of Armenian shepherds and potato farmers four miles inside Azerbaijan, the operation was swift and terrifying. Using tanks and armored personnel carriers, troops surrounded the village. Children huddled in their classrooms, crying. Helicopter blades whipped up dust storms, and the sheep scurried away, bleating.

The local police sergeant, Agvan Yeremian, said the soldiers issued an ultimatum: "They told us that if we didn't give up our guns, they'd destroy the town. I think they would have. It's all the same to them that women and children and old people are living here."

The villagers said they were not harboring any militants and handed over about three dozen hunting rifles and a few grenades. The army officers were furious and insisted there must be more. "You are armed to the teeth," one said. The troops fired warning shots from machine guns and tanks, but finally retreated to positions in the green, windswept hills up the road. RE-0038

Now the 3,000 people of Artzvashen live in terror and confusion, surrounded by tanks and troops. "Moscow wants to scare us. They want to show us the price of trying to secede from their country," said Grigori Arakilian, a young farmer.

"It wasn't a real attack," insisted Lt. Col. Sergei Kurmachov, one of the commanders of the unit surrounding the village. "We were just practicing. . . . Call it an exercise."

The assault on Artzvashen was part of the Soviet army's attempt to carry out Gorbachev's order to disarm Armenian "bandits" accused of firing at their rivals in neighboring Azerbaijan.

Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrossian has accused Gorbachev of waging "virtual war" on Armenia. So far there have been no deaths in Artzvashen, but in other villages, Operation Ring has been brutal. Red Army troops, according to Armenian Interior Ministry officials, have killed at least 48 Armenians, captured a dozen villages and taken more than 90 prisoners, some of whom are feared to have been executed.

Hundreds of Armenians have been evacuated to Yerevan from villages inside or near Azerbaijani territory.

In the border village of Voskepar a week ago, troops opened fire on a busload of Armenian police, killing 11 of the officers. A film of the devastation there shows a row of bullet-riddled corpses.

"It was an out-and-out bloodbath, a massacre," said Anatoly Shabad, a member of the Russian republican parliament who visited the scene.

Army troops also devastated the Armenian villages of Getashen and Martunashen inside Azerbaijan, killing at least 37 townspeople and torching many of the houses there, Armenian government officials said.

Reports of atrocities abound. Garik Grigorian, chief of physicians at the Republic Hospital in Yerevan, said many of the corpses brought to the city morgue from Getashen were mutilated, with ears sliced off and eyes gouged out.

"Methods from the Dark Ages are being used," said the liberal Moscow daily, Komsomolskaya Pravda.

Soviet army officials and Azerbaijani Communist Party officials have denied such accusations and blame the Armenians for bringing the violence on themselves. Gorbachev has used the army, the KGB and the Azerbaijani republican "Black Beret" police to go "hamlet to hamlet" in search of Armenian militants.

The military and official media have reported the "success" of the mission, saying they have discovered arms caches and even seized artillery guns.

The Armenians claim that small groups of their militia officers stationed in some villages along the border are under legal republican authority and have not initiated any attacks on Azerbaijan. They say Moscow has wildly exaggerated the number of rogue militiamen as a pretext to intimidate the pro-independence Armenians and show armed support for the Communist government in Azerbaijan. RE-0038

"You do not disarm people using such methods," said Ter-Petrossian. Moscow, he added, "wants to terrorize the Armenian people and force the legal authorities to resign."

Mistrust between the two sides is so great, the passions so intense, that it is often impossible to sort out truth from emotion, fact from rumor. That has long been the case in the Transcaucasus. In the wake of the disastrous December 1988 earthquake here, many Armenians were convinced that Azerbaijan had set off the tremors with nuclear weapons.

Azerbaijanis routinely describe what turns out to be Armenian villagers with hunting rifles as armed bandits with artillery. Now, citizens of Armenia are convinced that Moscow is getting ready to invade the republic and topple the government.

In 1988, the Armenians seized Gorbachev's new policy of glasnost, or openness, as a chance to campaign for national rights and the end of Azerbaijani control over the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh.

"In those first days, we carried Gorbachev's picture to our demonstrations. We believed in him," said Garo Kalionjian, an engineer in Yerevan. "But it turned out that Armenians are the most naive people in the Soviet Union. As soon as we tried to begin asserting our independence, there was Gorbachev, standing in our way. He is a much greater enemy to us than anyone in Azerbaijan."

Ter-Petrossian, a scholar of ancient Middle Eastern languages who spent time in jail three years ago for his leadership of the pro-independence Karabakh Committee, has tried to take advantage of political and social turmoil throughout the Soviet Union to maneuver Armenia slowly out of Moscow's reach.

In less than a year, his government has converted 60 percent of the land to private ownership. One collective farm after another has been broken up into private plots. Later this month, the government will begin auctioning off hundreds of retail stores and small businesses. Armenia even confiscated the republican Communist Party's properties, a move that Gorbachev has declared illegal.

But Ter-Petrossian, unlike his counterparts in the Baltic states, said he is willing to play by Gorbachev's rules for secession. Armenia is scheduled to hold an official referendum Sept. 21 on the question of independence. Ter-Petrossian said he believes the vote is a sure thing: The population of 3.3 million is 93 percent Armenian.

Ter-Petrossian also is prepared to go through a pre-independence transition period that could last up to five years.

For the past three years, the most persistent problem for Armenia has been the inflammation of its ancient territorial dispute with Azerbaijan, particularly over Nagorno-Karabakh. The rivalry has become so bitter that Soviet commentators speak of Nagorno-Karabakh as the country's Beirut or Ulster.

The arrival of the Soviet army in the southern Caucasus has only tended to aggravate the tension.

In Artzvashen, there is even confusion among the soldiers themselves. The 4th Army, which has been carrying out Operation Ring, has a high percentage of Azerbaijani soldiers, but it seems few of them take any pleasure in the attacks along the border with Armenia. RE-0038

"They tell us the Armenians are shooting people, but the truth is I have no idea exactly why we're here," said Elkhair Mamedov, a lieutenant from the Azerbaijani capital, Baku.

"They tell us we're on maneuvers, exercises," said Arzu Geidarov, another lieutenant from Baku. "I just wish we could go home. Here, no one wins."
