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CONTACT: Patil Halajian

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Tel: 416-250-9807

**Yelena Bonner—a Commanding Voice for Human Rights & Heroic Figure for Karabagh Armenians Passes Away**



photo by Mikhail Lemkhin

Armenians mourn the loss of Yelena Bonner, a great humanist, and a leading combatant against the injustices of the Soviet era. She will forever remain relevant and inspirational to people worldwide, and to Armenians particularly, because of her forceful advocacy on behalf of the people of Karabagh.

Yelena Bonner, the wife of Andrei Sakharov, the Soviet Union's most prominent dissident scientist, and developer of Russia's first hydrogen bomb, was co-founder the Moscow Helsinki Group in the 1970s. By relentlessly challenging state oppression, it quickly became the most active rights group in the entire movement. The organization's mission was to publicize Soviet violations of the Helsinki Accord signed in 1975, recognizing Soviet hegemony in return for assurance of fundamental freedoms and human rights guarantees.

Throughout her lifetime, Ms. Bonner lent her voice to many causes. She spoke very passionately on the human rights violations committed by Azerbaijan in Karabagh and virtually from the onset of the national liberation movement there, she defended the right of the Armenian nation to self-determination. She did so from the highest platforms, calling international attention to the issue.

Among her public appearances was a lecture on "Nationalities in the Soviet Union: Possible Solutions within the Framework of a Revised Constitution," which she made under the auspices of the Zoryan Institute and the Amnesty International Group of Harvard Law School in 1990. She reported that while the Soviet Army seemed incapable of halting violent pogroms by the Azeris against Armenians, Jews and Russians living in Azerbaijan, troops had begun deporting Armenians from their native villages surrounding Karabagh

Ms. Bonner contributed a powerful foreword to *The Sumgait Tragedy: Pogroms against Armenians in Soviet Azerbaijan*, compiled and edited by Samvel Shahmuratian and published by the Zoryan Institute. The book contains the oral testimonies of forty-five eyewitnesses and victims, who tell what they saw and suffered during the infamous attacks against Armenians in February 1988. The book was published even as further pogroms were being committed in Azerbaijan. Those pogroms led to war between the Armenians of Karabagh and Armenia with Azerbaijan, which is still unresolved and remains an obstacle to peace in the region.

In her foreword, Ms. Bonner wrote: "Sumgait shook the Armenian people. It stunned with its brutality and with its cynicism...History will undoubtedly pass its verdict on the Sumgait genocide. But judgments

of living history always come too late, bringing further misfortune....Beginning with the first mistakes made in Karabagh, the Sumgait events—which remain without official condemnation—brought an avalanche of tragedies down on our country [the Soviet Union], tragedies that will take long to fully comprehend.”

Being the eldest child of Bolshevik revolutionaries Gevork Alikhanyan, who once was party chief in Armenia, and Ruth Bonner, Yelena noted in her foreword, “Perhaps I, being half-Armenian and half-Jewish should not be the one to write this foreword. Perhaps it would be better written by the Azerbaijani woman who saved an Armenian family; this book contains her words: ‘Look what’s happening out there, my child is seeing all of this, tomorrow he’ll be doing the same things.’ This is a warning for all of us on this earth. If we do not find a way to make each state, be it large or small, a state for the people and not the other way around then our children and our grandchildren will become a brutal, unhuman mob.”

Being of Armenian and Jewish descent, it was natural for Ms. Bonner to refer to the Sumgait pogroms as genocide, in the same manner that the Armenians of Karabagh did. To everyone at the time, the events recalled vividly the atrocities committed during the Armenian Genocide, which was still within living memory.

Yelena Bonner’s legacy continues to inspire countless people around the world as a commanding voice for human rights and remains a heroic figure for Karabagh Armenians.

The Zoryan Institute is the parent organization of the International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, which runs an annual, accredited university program on the subject and is co-publisher of *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* in partnership with the International Association of Genocide Scholars and the University of Toronto Press. It is the first non-profit, international center devoted to the research and documentation of contemporary issues with a focus on Genocide, Diaspora and Armenia. For more information please contact the Zoryan Institute by email [zoryan@zoryaninstitute.org](mailto:zoryan@zoryaninstitute.org) or telephone (416) 250-9807.