



PRESS RELEASE

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“La Tragedia di Sumgait”



The Sumgait Tragedy: Pogroms against Armenians in Soviet Azerbaijan, Volume I: Eyewitness Accounts is as relevant today as it was when it was first published by Zoryan. A new Italian language edition, *La Tragedia di Sumgait: 1988, Un Pogrom di armeni nell'Unione Sovietica* has now been released. The edition was prepared by Pietro Kuciukian and published by Guerini e Associati of Milan and marks the ninth language that Zoryan's work has been published in. This edition includes the preface to the English edition by human rights activist Yelena Bonner, and to the French edition by human rights activist, French politician, and co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières, Bernard Kouchner. The timing of this book is critical when Azerbaijan continues to use bellicose warmongering language.

For three days in February, 1988, the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait became the arena of pogroms against the Armenians. The Sumgait tragedy was a brutal, organized attempt to block a political solution to the peaceful demands of the Armenians of Mountainous Karabagh for self-determination. These events marked the beginning of a premeditated plan to depopulate Azerbaijan of Armenians, and eventually of Russians and Jews.

The book is a compilation of interviews conducted by Armenian journalist Samvel Shahmuradian with Sumgait survivors immediately after events in February 1988, while the memory was fresh. These testimonies give painful answers to critical questions. What happened in Sumgait? Why was the impending slaughter not averted? Why did measures to halt the massacres come too late? Why did the events not receive complete analysis and coverage by the mass media, the government, and judicial bodies? The answers to these questions come from the victims themselves, in halting painful narratives.

In 1988, the Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Oblast was a small, 4400 sq. km. (1699 sq. mi.) Soviet enclave with a population of approximately 153,000, of which 80% was Armenian. It is central to Armenian cultural and historical identity. Since its transfer by Stalin to Azerbaijan in 1921, the government of Azerbaijan pursued a policy of economic and social discrimination and political repression, making life intolerable for its citizens in a variety of ways. In the 1960s and 1970s, the government of Nagorno-Karabagh petitioned the central Soviet government several times for relief from these conditions, without success.

The advent of Mikhail Gorbachev and his policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* encouraged the people of Nagorno-Karabagh to call for self-determination within the existing legal framework and within the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan. Starting in 1987, they signed petitions, held vigils, conducted hunger strikes, demonstrations, rallies and general strikes. Massive marches took place in Stepanakert and Yerevan. On February 26, 1988, Gorbachev tried to calm the situation by asking for a moratorium on the

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demonstrations for one month, after which he would announce a new policy regarding Nagorno-Karabagh. The Armenians agreed to suspend their protests.

A wave of anti-Armenian statements and rallies swept over Azerbaijan. This culminated in three days (February 27-29) of unhindered mass pogroms against the Armenians living in Sumgait, a city of some 250,000 inhabitants, miles away from Nagorno-Karabagh.

The perpetrators who broke into Armenian homes were aided by prepared lists containing the names of residents. They were armed with iron rods, stones, axes, knives, bottles, and canisters full of benzene. According to witnesses, some apartments were raided by groups of 50 to 80 persons. Similar crowds, up to 100 people, stormed the streets.

There were dozens of casualties and 53 murders — most of those were burnt alive after being assaulted and tortured. Hundreds of innocent people were wounded and disabled. Many women, including adolescent girls, were raped. Over 200 apartments were raided, dozens of cars burnt, numerous shops and workshops looted. Mobs hurled furniture, refrigerators, TV sets, and beds from balconies and then burnt them. The direct and indirect results of these atrocities were tens of thousands of Armenian refugees.

The army arrived in Sumgait on February 29; however, it limited its activities to shielding itself against the ravaging Azerbaijani mob that threw stones at the soldiers and did little to protect Armenians.

As the true story behind Armenian-Azerbaijani relations has become obscured by propaganda, oil lobbyists, and economic interests, this volume serves as a valuable document for Italian readers when considering a resolution to the ongoing Karabagh conflict.

The Italian version provides the reader with an abridged version of the interviews, making it an excellent introductory text for Italian readers interested in learning more about the Sumgait tragedy. This new version also arranges the interviews into thematic chapters, making them easy to navigate and providing those who are new to the subject with more context.

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 or telephone 416-250-9807.