

# THE SUMGAI MASSACRES: CONCERNING THEIR CHARACTERISTICS AND DEFINITIONS

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## Abstract

This paper concerns one of the first displays of ethnic violence in the recent history of the USSR that took place in the city of Sumgait in the Azerbaijanian SSR in February 1988 and was the start of violence of an anti-Armenian nature. It is a study of contemporary perceptions, definitions and terminology. Arising from this object, this paper examines the following questions:

- What were Armenian perceptions and characteristics of the Sumgait massacres and the factors that governed their conditions
- What definitions and perceptions were merited as a result of the Sumgait massacres by the Azerbaijanian side
- How were the Sumgait massacres evaluated by the international public and the USSR leadership
- What were the scientific definitions of the terms given to the Sumgait massacres and their characteristics.

Research has been carried out on the basis of specialist literature, archival materials, witness statements, contemporary periodical press etc. Descriptions, analyses, narrative analyses and comparative methods were also utilised in this study.

As a result of the research carried out, the conclusion was reached that the February 1988 massacres of the Armenian population of the Azerbaijanian city of Sumgait by the participants, various political circles and structures, conditioned by several factors, merited different appraisals. On the Armenian side, they were immediately linked, in the collective Armenian consciousness, to the Armenian Genocide realised in the 20<sup>th</sup> century within the Ottoman Empire. The central authorities, arising out of Soviet national policy principles, interpreted the event as “mass unrest.” In its euphemistic definitions, the Azerbaijani side attempted to “neutralise” the ethnically based violence used against a part of the population. The “Armenian intrigue and treachery” theory, as a “legal” explanation of the violence, aims to justify the crimes committed and evade any responsibility for them. The international public saw the Sumgait massacres in an ethnic context, stressing the laudable, necessary measures taken by the central authorities to prevent and stop them.

**Keywords:** Artshakh Issue, Sumgait, ethnic violence, genocide, massacre, slaughter.

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## Introduction

One of the demonstrations of the Gorbachev policies of perestroika and glasnost in the national policies field was the re-opening of the basic Artsakh problem. The extraordinary session of the Nagorno (Mountainous) Karabakh Autonomous Region's regional soviet that took place on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1988, accepted the resolution that the region should be removed from the jurisdiction of the Azerbaijan SSR and placed under that of the Armenian SSR. It also requested that the Supreme Soviets of the Azerbaijan SSR and the Armenian SSR, achieve a favourable solution through the mediation of the USSR Supreme Soviet.<sup>1</sup> Several days later, on February 26<sup>th</sup>, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, addressed the peoples of the Armenian SSR and Azerbaijan SSR and, reminding them of the basic principles of "Leninist national political policies," called upon them to "show civilian maturity and patience, to return to normal life and work and to preserve public order."<sup>2</sup> The national political policy, utilised by the Soviet central authorities for decades for the friendship, brotherhood and the united Soviet nationalities ideal, faced a serious challenge.

The increasing tensions in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations and anti-Armenian sentiment in Azerbaijan reached their summit on February 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>, 1988 in the city of Sumgait, considered to be a symbol of the Soviet Union's internationalism. The national television broadcast on the evening of February 27<sup>th</sup> and the radio broadcast from Baku by Alexander Katusev, the USSR chief military prosecutor, concerning the clash in Askeran in which two Azerbaijanis were killed, both inflamed matters.<sup>3</sup> The thousands of people, mainly young Azerbaijanis, many of whom, according to Viktor Krivopuskov,<sup>4</sup> were already completely organised "with the knowledge of the managers of various establishments and enterprises,"<sup>5</sup> assembled in Lenin Square, Sumgait. The main theme of this rally was the demand made by the Nagorno - Karabakh Armenians to join the Armenian SSR. The "dreadful" stories told by "fugitives" from the Kapan region of Armenia further incited the crowds, resulting in shouts

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<sup>1</sup> *Sovetakan Gharabagh* (Stepanakert), 21 February 1988, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, «Դիմում Ադրբեջանի և Հայաստանի աշխատավորներին, ժողովուրդներին» [Appeal to the Workers and Peoples of Azerbaijan and Armenia], *Sovetakan Hayastan* (Yerevan), 27 February 1988, 1.

<sup>3</sup> At least one of the people who were killed by rifle fire in the clash near Askeran died at the hands of an Azerbaijani policeman. Aleksandr Vasilevskij, «Туча в горах» [Cloud in the Mountains], *Avrora* 10 (1988), 12.

<sup>4</sup> He worked in the USSR Ministry of the Interior and was, in 1990-1991, the head of the urgent action group on its behalf in the Mountainous Karabakh Autonomous Region. The written records he prepared and information he gleaned were collected in a separate work.

<sup>5</sup> Viktor Krivopuskov, *Мятежный Карабах. Из дневника офицера МВД СССР* [Rebellious Karabakh. From the Diary of a USSR Interior Ministry officer] (Moscow: Golos-Press, 2007), 239.

of “Death to Armenians.”<sup>6</sup> Then groups made up of between 10 and 15 Azerbaijanis spread through the city, seeking out and killing Armenians.<sup>7</sup> By its nature and the way this all happened (killings, physical injuries inflicted, torture, burnings, chopping up of corpses and gang rape) and its aim, constituted one of the greatest crimes against humanity of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

According to official data 32 people were killed as a result of the Sumgait massacres (26 Armenians and 6 Azerbaijanis),<sup>9</sup> over 400 people received wounds of various kinds, about 200 homes were invaded and looted, 50 buildings of cultural-living significance were damaged as were more than 100 motor transport vehicles.<sup>10</sup> The organisation of the legal procedures concerning the Sumgait massacres and their “impartiality” left several questions unanswered, one of which was that of the actual numbers of killed and wounded. Apart from official figures, there is other information or data available.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 238.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, transl. Leonid Zilfugharyan (Yerevan: Zangak, 2014), 65.

<sup>8</sup> For the Sumgait massacres and their nature, organisation and realisation, see, for example, Bagrat Ulubabyan, Suren Zolyan et al., *Сумгаит... Геноцид... Гласность?* [Sumgayit... Genocide... Glasnost?] (Yerevan: Obshchestvo Znanie, 1989); Arsen Melik-Shahnazarov, *Нагорный Карабах: Факты против лжи* [Nagorno-Karabakh: Facts against Lies] (Moscow: Volshebnyy fonar, 2009); Igor Babanov, Konstantin Voevodskij, *Карабахский кризис* [Karabakh Crisis] (St. Petersburg: 1992); *Сумгаитская трагедия в свидетельствах очевидцев*, Книга первая [Sumgayit Tragedy in Eyewitness Accounts. Volume 1], ed. Samvel Shahmuradyan (Yerevan: Armjanskij Fond Kultury, 1989); *Сумгаитская трагедия в свидетельствах очевидцев*, Книга вторая [Sumgayit Tragedy in Eyewitness Accounts. Volume 2] (Yerevan: Public Relations and Information Center of Staff of the President of the Republic of Armenia, 2015); *The Sumgait Syndrome. Anatomy of Racism in Azerbaijan* (Yerevan: MIA, 2012); *Сумгаит. Говорят свидетели-азербайджанцы* [The Sumgait: Azerbaijani Witnesses Speak Out] (Yerevan: Public Relations and Information Center of Staff of the President of the Republic of Armenia, 2018); Krivopuskov, *Rebellious Karabakh*; Valerij Kirorenko, “Беспорядки в Баку проходили под теми же лозунгами, что и в Сумгаите” [Riots in Baku were Held under the Same Slogans as in Sumgayit], <https://www.panorama.am/ru/news/2011/01/13/analitika/1005171>, accessed 20.10.2021, as well as Marina Grigoryan, “Sumgait, February 1988: a Crime With No Limitations,” *Asbarez*, 11 March, 2011, <https://asbarez.com/sumgait-february-1988-a-crime-with-no-limitation/>, accessed 20.10.2021.

<sup>9</sup> According to Viktor Krivobuskov, the driver of a military transport went mad as a result of it being set on fire and crashed it into the crowd, killing 6 Azerbaijanis. See Krivopuskov, *Rebellious Karabakh*, 241.

<sup>10</sup> Следственные документы: Обвинительное заключение. По уголовному делу № 18/60232-08/ [Investigative Documents: Indictment. On Criminal Case No. 18/60232-08] [http://karabakhrecords.info/documents\\_investigation\\_obvinitelnoe-zaklyuchenie-ud-1860232-08.html](http://karabakhrecords.info/documents_investigation_obvinitelnoe-zaklyuchenie-ud-1860232-08.html), accessed 20.10.2021.

<sup>11</sup> For detailed figures of the number of dead and wounded see Ulubabyan, Zolyan et al., *Sumgayit*, 55; Melik-Shahnazarov, *Nagorno-Karabakh*, 285; Krivopuskov, *Rebellious Karabakh*, 149; Hrayr Ulubabjan, «В Сумгаите погибло 32 человека. Ложь!» [32 People Died in Sumgayit. False!], *Jepoha* 4 (1990) [http://karabakhrecords.info/publication\\_articles\\_sumgait\\_lozh.html](http://karabakhrecords.info/publication_articles_sumgait_lozh.html), accessed 20.10.2021; Hrayr Ulubabyan, «Սուճգայիթում հայերի ցեղասպանության զոհերի թվի մասին» [About the Number of Armenian Genocide Victims in Sumgait], *Luyts* 163 (2011): 1-2; Mariam Avagyan, Hovik Avanesov, «Սուճգայիթի և Բաքվի ցեղասպանությունների զոհերի թվի շուրջ» [About the Number of Victims of the Sumgait and Baku Genocides], <https://www.lragir.am/2020/03/07/524751/>, accessed 20.10.2021.

## **The Sumgait massacres: Armenian perceptions and characteristics**

The Sumgait massacres provoked a great reaction in Armenian reality. In the first instance they were linked to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Armenian Genocide that took place in the Ottoman Empire. This mentality was especially noticeable in popular perceptions. Its first expression occurred on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1988, when thousands of women (as well as men) marched in sorrow to the Armenian Genocide memorial complex at Tsitsernakaberd.<sup>12</sup> A khachkar (cross stone) commemorating the memory of those who died in Sumgait was erected within the Armenian Genocide memorial complex on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1988.<sup>13</sup> The identification of the Armenian Genocide with the massacres in Sumgait also found expression on March 8<sup>th</sup> and November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1988 and on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1989 and in the wording on the banners displayed on the sorrow marches that took place on those days, as well as in pictures, schematic depictions and on maps.<sup>14</sup> Among them ~~was~~ were? “События в Сумгаите – продолжение геноцида 1915 г.” (The events in Sumgait are the continuation of the 1915 genocide), “Нежелание признать геноцид 1915 г. привело к геноциду 1988 г.” (Those who didn’t want to recognise the Genocide of 1915 ended with that of 1988), “Sumgait is the continuation of the Mets Yeghern” and other similar statements on posters and banners. The people’s dissatisfaction with the progress of the judicial enquiries regarding the massacres was expressed by banners and posters stating, “The Sumgait satire,” “The Moscow trial soils the memory of the Armenian victims of Sumgait.”<sup>15</sup> As Harutyun Marutyan pointed out,

The people’s synthesis of the Medz Yeghern and the Sumgait massacres had detrimental expressions, some of which had the nature of belief, iconographic solutions, reflections of collective and historic memories with dates and place names that were, at the very least, enumerated etc.<sup>16</sup>

Witnesses of the crimes committed in Sumgait described what happened, in their testimonies, as genocide.<sup>17</sup> In one of the trial sessions on October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1988, relating to the events in Sumgait, Karina Melkumyan, speaking on behalf of all those who had suffered, stated

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<sup>12</sup> Harutyun Marutyan, *Հայ ինքնության պատկերագրությունը: Հատոր 1. Ցեղասպանության հիշողությունը և Ղարաբաղյան շարժումը* [Iconography of Armenian Identity: The Memory of Genocide and the Karabagh Movement. Volume 1] (Yerevan: Gitutyun, 2009), 126.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 129-133.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>17</sup> Ulubabyan, Zolyan et al., *Sumgayit*.

that “preparations were made and realised to commit genocide in Sumgait” and insisted that the crime had to be given due importance, so that truth could be revealed.<sup>18</sup>

It is also significant that in the perceptions of Armenians, Azerbaijan gradually became synonymous with the perpetrator of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Armenian Genocide – Ottoman Turkey - and its pan-Turanist political plans. The very similar political plans made by Turkey and Azerbaijan may have been expressed for the first time in 1987, in an address to Mikhail Gorbachev made by the Armenian Academy of Sciences.<sup>19</sup>

In various works, Armenian scientific circles basically presented the Sumgait massacres as proof of genocide. The Sumgait massacres were described and analysed in detail, classing those that took place between February 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> their repercussions as dreadful events.<sup>20</sup> The analysis of the evidence produced by Armenian researchers allows the separation of the following basic theses.

1. The object of the Sumgait massacres was to prevent the growth of the Karabakh movement and to block the implementation of the rights to self-determination by the Armenians of the region.
2. To separate the preliminary setting up and organising of the subsequent events (the planned fanning of anti-Armenian sentiment, previously listing Armenians’ addresses, preparing cold weapons in factories in the city, the eliminating traces of crimes by the local authorities, etc.)
3. To present the methods used to realise the massacres and the squads involved (the organising and arming of special groups, as well as the distribution of anaesthetics, antipsychotic drugs and alcohol among them, the plunder and looting of the Armenian population, killing of Armenians, burning people alive and gang rape).

To demonstrate the genocidal nature of the Sumgait massacres, the Armenian scientific mentality was to refer to the 1948 “Convention on preventing and punishing genocide.”<sup>21</sup> Quotations from the 4<sup>th</sup> article were used, which sets out the punishment for the crime of genocide, independent of the fact that the perpetrators were constitutionally responsible leaders, officials or specific people.<sup>22</sup> The 36<sup>th</sup> article of the USSR constitution, in which equal

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<sup>18</sup> Armen Oganessian, «Водораздел» [Watershed], *Kommunist* (Yerevan), 2 November 1988, [http://karabakhrecords.info/publication\\_articles\\_sumgait\\_vodorazdel.html](http://karabakhrecords.info/publication_articles_sumgait_vodorazdel.html), accessed 20.10.2021.

<sup>19</sup> Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 55.

<sup>20</sup> Ulubabyan, Zolyan et al., *Sumgayit*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

rights for all citizens of the USSR were enshrined, irrespective of national or racial affiliations, was also invoked.<sup>23</sup>

Armenian authors also alluded to part of the work “Права человека: Сборник международных документов” [Human Rights: A collection of International Documents] which referred to “quantitative standards” relating to genocide victims. It was especially stressed that “the quantitative standard for the crime of genocide is not definitive; genocide is the killing of several representatives of a national group if it had been perpetrated with the object of destroying it.”<sup>24</sup>

In their speeches, appearances and appeals, contemporary Armenian orators, journalists, writers and cultural activists present the Sumgait massacres as having a genocidal nature.<sup>25</sup>

As far as official statements from the Armenian SSR are concerned, their first official explanation about the Sumgait massacres was given by Karen Demirchyan, the First secretary of the Central Committee of the Armenian Communist Party, on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 1988, in an interview on Armenian television. He stated the fact that there had been clashes in Azerbaijan: “There were several incidents of uncontrolled hooligan unrest and violence fomented in the city of Sumgait on February 28<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>26</sup> In those days, articles were published in the daily newspaper “Sovetakan Hayastan” concerning the “good examples” of the “brotherhood” of the Armenian and Azerbaijani peoples and about “socialist internationalism.”<sup>27</sup>

The legislative body of the Armenian SSR, the Supreme Soviet, in a stance that differed from that of the “Centre,” adopted a resolution on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1988, titled “Concerning the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>24</sup> Sumgayit Tragedy in Eyewitness Accounts, Volume 1, 7. *Права человека: Сборник международных документов* [Human Rights: A Collection of International Documents], ed. Lev Shestakov, (Moscow: Moscow University Press, 1986), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Aydin Morikyan, «Քարերը հավաքելու ժամանակը» [Time to collect the stones], *Avangard* (Yerevan), 11 November 1988, 3-4; Oganesyanyan, *Watershed*; Suren Zoljan, Kim Balajan, «Сумгаит. Испытание гласности» [Sumgait. Test of Glasnost], National Archives of Armenia (hereinafter: NAA), f. 1159, I. 1, c. 8. p. 1-11; «Սիլվա Կապուտիկյանի բաց նամակը ուղղված գիտության, մշակույթի և տպագրության գործիչներին» [Silva Kaputikyan's Open Letter Addressed to the Figures of Science, Culture and Publishing], NAA, f. 1159, I. 4, c. 90, p. 1-19; «Զորի Բալայանի բաց նամակը Գորբաչովին» [Zori Balayan's Open Letter to Gorbachev], NAA, f. 1159, I. 6, c. 74, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> «Հայաստանի կոմկուսի Կենտկոմի առաջին քարտուղար Կ. Ս. Դեմիրճյանի ելույթը հայկական հեռուստատեսությանը 1988 թ. փետրվարի 29-ին» [Speech by the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia K. S. Demirchyan on Armenian Television on 29 February 1988], *Sovetakan Hayastan*, 1 March 1988, 1.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, «Ուղևորություն Արարատի շրջան» [Trip to Ararat Region], «Ժողովուրդների բարեկամությունը մեր ուժի հիմքն է» [Friendship of Peoples is the Basis of Our Strength], «Բարեկամության կամուրջներ» [Bridges of Friendship], *Sovetakan Hayastan*, 2 March 1988, 1, 4; Baqil Aliev, Razmik Meliqjanyan, «Նույն ճանապարհի ընկերներ» [Friends on the Same Road]; Manzara Sadixova, «Եվ ամենակարևորը՝ սրտանց...» [And Most Importantly – from the Heart], *Sovetakan Hayastan*, 3 March 1988, 1; Jabar Guliev, «Մեկ սիրտ, մեկ նպատակ» [One Heart, One Goal]; S. Esayan, «Հաշտ ու խաղաղ» [Peaceful and Tranquil], *Sovetakan Hayastan*, 4 March 1988, 1; S. Abdullaev, «Հաջողության գրասխանը» [The Key to Success], S. Humbatov «Բարեկամության քվե» [Friendship Vote], *Sovetakan Hayastan*, 6 March 1988, 2.

condemnation of the crimes committed in the city of Sumgait in the Azerbaijan SSR,” in which it expressed its condolences to the victims, their families and loved ones and sympathy for those who suffered losses.<sup>28</sup> The question of the genocidal nature of the Sumgait massacres was officially raised in the July 18<sup>th</sup> 1988 session of the leadership of the USSR Supreme Soviet by Vardges Petrosyan, President of the Armenian Writers’ Union, who stated his opinion that genocide had been attempted in Sumgait.<sup>29</sup> The genocidal nature of the massacres in Sumgait was also referred to in the resolution made in the joint meeting of the Armenian SSR Supreme Soviet and the Nagorno (Mountainous) Karabakh Autonomous Region’s National Council on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1989. The resolution described the massacres as a “genocidal act.”<sup>30</sup>

Considering the Sumgait massacres as having a genocidal nature in Armenian circles was further established after the Baku massacres that took place in 1990. At that time Soviet Armenian newspapers were full of comparisons between the Sumgait and Baku massacres (“Because we didn’t see where Sumgait was taking us,” “An unpunished crime leads to a new one,” “A second Sumgait or a new Baku?”) with the basic emphasis that the Sumgait crime being left unpunished resulted in the Armenian population of Azerbaijan’s capital city, Baku, suffering a new massacre.<sup>31</sup> For the Armenian side, the Sumgait massacres confirmed the impossibility of Nagorno (Mountainous) Karabakh and its Armenian people remaining within Azerbaijan’s jurisdiction. It should be underlined that the Armenian SSR’s official discourses expressed these same thoughts in their announcements and speeches about Azerbaijan’s anti-Armenian policies and were based on the latest incidents.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> «Հայկական ՍՍՀ Գերագույն Սովետի որոշումը Ադրբեջանական ՍՍՀ Սումգայիթ քաղաքում կատարված ոճրագործությունները դատապարտելու մասին» [Decree of the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR on the Condemnation of Crimes Committed in the City of Sumgait of the Azerbaijani SSR], *Sovetakan Hayastan*, 16 June 1988, 2.

<sup>29</sup> «ՍՍՀՄ Գերագույն Խորհրդի նախագահության նիստը» [Meeting of the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR], *Grakan tert* (Yerevan), 22 July 1988, 1.

<sup>30</sup> «Հայկական ԽՍՀ Գերագույն խորհրդի և Լեռնային Ղարաբաղի Ազգային խորհրդի որոշումը «Լեռնային Ղարաբաղի ինքնավար մարզում իրադրությունը նորմալացնելու միջոցառումներ մասին» ԽՍՀՄ Գերագույն խորհրդի 1989 թ. նոյեմբերի 28-ի որոշման մասին» [Decree of the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR and the National Soviet of Nagorno-Karabakh "On measures to Normalize the Situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region," resolution of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of 28 November 1989] <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=3154>, accessed 20.10.2021.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, R. Aleqyan, «Չպատժված հանցանքը նոր հանցանք է ծնում» [Unpunished Crime Begets New Crime]; A. Markosyan, «Որովհետև չտեսաք, թե ուր է տանում Սումգայիթը» [Because You Haven't Seen where Sumgayit Leads], *Yerekoyan Yerevan* (Yerevan), 15 January 1990, 1; Ashot Nazaryan, «Դարձյալ Սումգայիթ» [Again Sumgayit], *Yerekoyan Yerevan*, 16 January 1990, 1; Hakob Srapyan, Margar Menechyan, «Երկրորդ «Սումգայիթ» թե՛ նոր «Բաքու»» [Second "Sumgayit" or New "Baku"?], *Khorhrdayin Hayastan* (Yerevan), 18 January 1990, 1.

<sup>32</sup> “President Serzh Sargsyan's speech at the PACE January session,” <https://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2018/01/24/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-speech-at-the-session-of-the-PACE/>, accessed 20.10.2021; “Statement by the Foreign Ministry of Armenia on the 33<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the anti-Armenian massacres in Sumgait,” <https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2021/02/27/sumg/10816>, accessed 20.10.2021.

Generalising, the conclusion may be arrived at that the Armenian people's historic experience, memories and collective knowledge equated the Armenian genocide that took place at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century with the Sumgait massacres of 1988. The Armenian scientific and public mind with its arguments, decided that the massacres were of a genocidal nature and fell within the terms of the 1948 Genocide Convention. The Sumgait massacres having a genocidal nature were found its formulation in official discourses, being articulated in the resolutions made by the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR. Appraisals of the Sumgait massacres within the Armenian reality happened, not because of "orders made to the people from above," but in accordance with public perceptions

### **The Sumgait Armenian massacres: Azerbaijani characterisations and perceptions**

The official characteristics made on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1988, during a meeting of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party concerning the Sumgait massacres had special significance. The session examined the question of the "great deficiencies in the organisation of the population of the city, the lack of political foresight and lack of activity by Sumgait's political committee's bureau in the matter of preventing the lamentable events."<sup>33</sup> In the resolution adopted concerning the Sumgait massacres, they were described as "lamentable events," "acts of robbery carried out by criminal elements," which ended with human victims. Similar "lamentable events" were considered to be "the result of the indifference and short-sightedness of the leadership of the Sumgait party's city committee with regard to the instruction given to workers and young people in party political idealism and internationalism."<sup>34</sup> The person responsible was considered to be the First secretary of the Communist Party Sumgait city committee, Jahangir Muslimzade who, despite prior warnings, wasn't able to show that he returned from his holiday. Several people responsible for preventing or halting the Sumgait massacres were dismissed and given "strict reprimands." Stressing internationalism and the ideals of friendship and the brotherhood of peoples, the resolution adopted and handed to the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party included several recommendations and points to be carried out followed up.<sup>35</sup> Thus the official discourse concerning the Sumgait massacres considered them to be the result of neglect and mistakes made in the area of Soviet national policy.

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<sup>33</sup> «Ադրբեջանի կոմկուսի կենտկոմում» [In the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan], *Sovetakan Hayastan*, 20 March 1988, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



The Azerbaijani people's perception was a belief in the "treachery" theory. Bill Keller was the first western journalist permitted to visit Sumgait after the Soviet authorities banned journalists from entering the city. He arrived there in August 1988, six months after the massacres and wrote that the massacres were "delicately" called the "February events."<sup>36</sup> The writer noted that the majority of Azerbaijanis accepted that the Sumgait massacres that occurred between February 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> were "deliberately organised by Armenian extremists to obtain world goodwill in the battle to discredit Azerbaijan."<sup>37</sup> Despite the Azerbaijan prosecutor Ilias Ismailov saying, in an interview, that there was no proof of this,<sup>38</sup> over a period of time this Azerbaijani perception was "corrected" and presented as the "absolute truth." This was pointed out in 1989 by David Remnick, the "Washington Post" reporter in Sumgait. It was obvious from his article that the point of view, according to which Sumgait massacres were an Armenian "plot" to present the Azerbaijanis as killers, had gained firm credibility among the Azerbaijanis.<sup>39</sup> According to them, Armenians who were fluent Azerbaijani speakers had collected "Azerbaijanis who had escaped from Yerevan, given them drugs and distributed arms among them. When these 'escapees' had gone mad, they went from door to door to punish those Armenians who had not made donations the 'Krunk'<sup>40</sup> committee."<sup>41</sup> As "proof" of their point of view, the Azerbaijanis referred to the distribution of photographs of the Sumgait massacres and to the swift construction<sup>42</sup> of the memorial<sup>43</sup> dedicated to the victims of the Sumgait massacres.

The first reaction to the Sumgait massacres made by Azerbaijani scientific circles was by the historian and member of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan Ziya Buniatov who, in January 1989, in his article titled "Почему Сумгаит? [Why Sumgayit?]"<sup>44</sup> insisted

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<sup>36</sup> Bill Keller, "Riot's Legacy of Distrust Quietly Stalks a Soviet City," *The New York Times*, 31 August 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/31/world/riot-s-legacy-of-distrust-quietly-stalks-a-soviet-city.html>, accessed 20.10.2021.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> David Remnick, "Hate Runs High in Soviet Union's Most Explosive Ethnic Feud," *The Washington Post*, 6 September 1989, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/09/06/hate-runs-high-in-soviet-unions-most-explosive-ethnic-feud/38ac827c-17a0-474c-9647-39189d0415ec/>, accessed 20.10.2021.

<sup>40</sup> The public-political organisation that was formed in Nagorno (Mountainous) Karabakh in March 1988 which, acting with the "Karabakh Committee" working in the Armenian SSR, organised the Karabakh Armenian struggle for self-determination, with the object of reuniting the region with the Armenian SSR.

<sup>41</sup> Remnick, "Hate Runs High."

<sup>42</sup> A khachkar [cross-stone] (sculpted by Smbat Hakobyan) in memory of the victims of the Sumgait massacres was erected near the Armenian Genocide memorial on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1988.

<sup>43</sup> Remnick, "Hate Runs High."

<sup>44</sup> Ziya Buniatov, «Почему Сумгаит? (Ситуационный Анализ)», *История Азербайджана по документам и публикациям* (под ред. З. Бунятова) ["Why Sumgayit? (Situational Analysis)" in *History of Azerbaijan according to documents and publications*, ed. Zia Buniatov] (Baku: Elm, 1990), 207-211. The article was first

that the Sumgait massacres were planned and realised by the Armenians themselves.<sup>45</sup> This article by Buniatov started the tale that one of the people taking part in the massacre of Armenians, Eduard Grigoryan, who until then had only a minor role in the Azerbaijani “proofs,” later became the foundation stone of the “Armenian treachery” theory.<sup>46</sup>

In any event, there also were exceptions in Azerbaijani public-intellectual circles. This especially refers to the well-known writer Chingiz Husseinov<sup>47</sup> and the secretary of the Azerbaijan Writers’ Union, the writer Akram Aylisli. The latter, in a letter addressed to Sergey Baruzdin, the editor of the monthly journal “Дружба народов [Druzhba narodov],” wrote about the negative essence of chauvinism and its effects. He further wrote that since his childhood he had faith in the representatives of other nationalities but, in his surroundings, did not find anyone who lived up to his human ideals.<sup>48</sup> He added, in his letter, that he felt hurt and ashamed about “the monstrous Sumgait events.”<sup>49</sup> It should also be noted that, more than twenty years after the Sumgait events, Akram Aylisli attempted to promote the truth in the novel “Stone Dreams” published in 2012. He was pursued after it was published and his works were burnt in Gandja [Gandzak] and in his home village of Aylis. He was also forbidden to leave the country by its political leadership.<sup>50</sup>

Testimony was provided about the nature, organisation and even about certain circles connected with the Sumgait massacres by people in important roles in the Popular (National)

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published in the January 1989 edition of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences monthly journal «Известия Академии наук Азербайджанской ССР» [Izvestija Akademii nauk Azerbajdzhanskoj SSR].

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Grigoryan was an individual with a criminal past who was one of the hundreds of people who took part in the massacres, being remembered in only one criminal action. He was of mixed Armenian-Azerbaijani (or Russian) parentage, while his perception of himself was not as being Armenian. 82 of the people arrested were Azerbaijanis and one was Russian. (de Waal, *Armenia and Azerbaijan*, 77.) The USSR government security committee chairman, V. Kiporenko, personally interviewed him (Kiporenko, “Riots in Baku”), stating that Grigoryan was recorded as being an Azerbaijani and had a very negative attitude concerning Armenians. At present official Azerbaijani historiography is based on “Grigoryan’s activities” to prove “traces left by Armenians” (see, for example, Ibrahim Mammadov, *Secrets of the Soviet Empire. The Sumgayit Provocation Against Azerbaijan. “The Grigoryan Case,”* (Baku: Tahsil, 2014); Aslan Ismayilov, *Sumgayit-Beginning of the Collapse of the USSR* (Baku: Çaşıoğlu, 2011). For details of the Azerbaijani point of view see De Waal, *Armenia and Azerbaijan*, 72; Marina Grigoryan, ““Sumgait”: Ilham Aliyev Insults His Own Nation”, Part 1, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/996562/>, accessed 20.10.2021; Marina Grigoryan, “Sumgayit – a Case of Azerbaijan’s KGB,” part 2, [http://karabakhrecords.info/english\\_publication\\_articles\\_azerbajjans-kgb.html](http://karabakhrecords.info/english_publication_articles_azerbajjans-kgb.html), accessed 20.10.2021.

<sup>47</sup> Oganesyanyan, “Watershed”.

<sup>48</sup> Akram Aylisli, «Пока в нашем доме будет существовать любовь... Письмо С. А. Баруздину» [“As Long as There is Love in Our House... Letter to S. A. Baruzdin”], *Druzhba narodov* 3 (1989): 170-171.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Grigor Atanesyan, Magerram Zejnalov, «Как Азербайджан и Армения распространяют теории заговора о карабахском конфликте» [How Azerbaijan and Armenia are Spreading Conspiracy Theories about the Karabakh Conflict], <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-51549094>, accessed 20.10.2021.

Front in contemporary Azerbaijani political life.<sup>51</sup> This was especially true of Leyla Yunus in her work “Из советского лагеря в азербайджанскую тюрьму” where, referring to the anti-Armenian violence, she emphasised the deliberate nature of the Ministry of the Interior’s and government security committee’s lack of activity.<sup>52</sup> She wrote:

Carefully analysing the events in which those dreadful crimes were committed, one may understand that they were incited and organised by the USSR government security committee and certain forces in the CPSU Central Committee that were led by the country’s law enforcement agencies. The massacres were, in some places, initiated by their appointees, the government security committee functionaries and representatives of Heydar Aliev’s clan network.<sup>53</sup>

Another member of the Popular (National), Zardusht Alizade recalled Khitir Aloyev in his memoirs, the person who articulated the slogan “Death to Armenians” in a public rally in Sumgait, after which the first groups of killers began to move against the previously determined addresses of the Armenian population of the city.<sup>54</sup> Khitir Aloyev later became the chairman of the Sumgait city’s “New Azerbaijan” political party organisation that Heydar Aliev created. He became deputy chairman of the city’s executive authority in 1995. Alizade also mentioned his meeting, ten days after the massacres, with workers from the Sumgait aluminium factory, who testified to the fact that the mob had been led by unknown young men.<sup>55</sup> It should also be noted that Musayev who was, at the time of the Sumgait massacres, the secretary of the Baku city committee, stressed, in an interview with the journalist De Waal in 2000, that he had been forced to curtail his holiday and return to Baku as the city had a very tense atmosphere as “certain forces were stirring people up by every means in their power by preaching.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> A group of Azerbaijani intellectuals created a “Baku City Scholars’ Club” in the summer of 1988, on which the “People’s Front Initiative Group” was based. This group, in November 1988, united with the “Varlez” (Existence) nationalist intellectual group and became the “Azerbaijan People’s Front” political party. For details see Tatevik Naugapetyan, ««Աղբրեջանի Ժողովրդական ճակատ» կուսակցության ձևավորումը և գործունեությունը (1988-1990 թթ.)» [Formation and Activities of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (1988-1990)], *Arevelagitut’yan harts’er* 7 (2014): 140-144.

<sup>52</sup> Leyla and Arif Yunus, *Из советского лагеря в азербайджанскую тюрьму* [From Soviet Camp to Azerbaijan Prison] (Wroclaw: Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe, 2018), 269-280.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>54</sup> Zardusht Alizade, «Азербайджанская элита и массы в период распада СССР (Статья-мемуары о бурном времени)» [Azerbaijani Elite and Masses during the Collapse of the USSR (Article-Memoirs about the Turbulent Time)], [http://old.sakharov-center.ru/publications/azrus/az\\_0055.htm](http://old.sakharov-center.ru/publications/azrus/az_0055.htm), accessed 20.10.2021; Yunus, *From Soviet Camp*, 269-280.

<sup>55</sup> Ализаде, *Azerbaijani Elite and Masses*.

<sup>56</sup> de Waal, *Armenia and Azerbaijan*, 60.

It would not be superfluous to note that, at one of the trial sessions of Y. Djafarov, who was accused of participation in the Sumgait massacres, his mother, E. Djafarova testified that the real organisers of the massacres had not been held responsible and that her son had been a blind tool in their hands.<sup>57</sup> She further declared that the people responsible were Heydar Aliev, Kyamran Baghirov and Jahangir Muslimzade.<sup>58</sup>

It is possible to say, by generalising, that the characteristics and definitions of the Sumgait massacres from the Azerbaijani point of view, with certain exceptions, were euphemistic and designed to disguise the scope of the actual events and their nature. Official, popular and scientific circles in Azerbaijan gradually settled on the “Armenian intrigue and treachery” theory. A similar stance was conditioned by two factors: on the one hand the use of the “intrigue” view, as an explanation of the violence, provided the opportunity for the Azerbaijanis to successfully utilise it in their internal and international communications; on the other, it absolved the criminals from responsibility for anti-Armenian violence and punishment. This is how the study of a number of important factors concerning the realisation of criminal intentions and the organisation of violence opened. The atmosphere of freedom from punishment was important in terms of the subsequent increase of anti-Armenian violence in Azerbaijan.

### **The USSR central authorities’ responses and characteristics**

The USSR central authorities had their own approaches and characteristics regarding the Sumgait massacres. The first response by the official press organisation, TASS (Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union), was issued on March 1<sup>st</sup>. In a short statement it said that “Hooligan elements fomented unrest in the city of Sumgait on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1988. Violent incidents and atrocities took place.”<sup>59</sup>

The February 29<sup>th</sup> session of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was of great significance. Mikhail Gorbachev, referring to the Sumgait events, stressed the lack of action by the local police and said: “This means that this was deliberate and a reply to the Armenians, giving them a curt answer.”<sup>60</sup> The Soviet government leadership was looking for ways to overcome the reality that had been created.

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<sup>57</sup> *The Sumgait: Azerbaijani Witnesses Speak Out*, 48.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> «Сообщение» [Message], *Izvestija* (Moscow), 1 March 1988, 2.

<sup>60</sup> «Заседание Политбюро ЦК КПСС (29 февраля 1988 года)» [The Meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU, 29 February 1988], <http://sumgait.info/sumgait/politburo-meeting-29-february-1988.htm>, accessed 20.10.2021.

Gorbachev stressed the importance of “getting to grips” with the situation, noting “there were 14 deaths in just one night” and, with the news reaching Armenia, there might be a reaction from there, therefore “...Armenia must be restrained so a reaction doesn’t take place.”<sup>61</sup> Aleksander Yakovlev, a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union noted that, for feelings to subside, it was necessary to announce, as quickly as possible, that unlawful acts had taken place and that the criminals had been arrested.<sup>62</sup> Defence Minister of USSR Dmitriy Yazov suggested that military units be deployed in Sumgait to restore order.<sup>63</sup> Speaking about the stance that the central authorities had adopted, Gorbachev noted that these events could not be ignored in the relations between the two republics, as similar problems existed everywhere and, if they didn’t cease, civilian dissent would spread throughout the country.<sup>64</sup> It is no coincidence that the Sumgait massacres were presented to the USSR central authorities as actions instigated and carried out by certain – hooligan – elements and being “mass unrest.”<sup>65</sup> The position adopted by the USSR’s highest leadership was conditioned by the events being presented as being of a similar nature in the minds of the Soviet public.<sup>66</sup>

The highest USSR authorities expressed themselves even more objectively about the Sumgait massacres on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1988, during the chairmen’s meeting of the Supreme Soviet, when Vardges Petrosyan, the secretary of Union of Writers of Armenia, stated that “an attempt at genocide” had been made in Sumgait. Gorbachev immediately recorded:

Genocide is a plainly political, racist, organised act and is not of a spontaneous nature. The ferocious attacks in Sumgait, however, were carried out by the dregs of society. It has become obvious who they were. Genocide is the conscious destruction of any people or

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> «Обстановка в Сумгаите» [Situation in Sumgayit], *Kommunist* (Moscow), 5 March 1988, 3; V. Itkin, «Сумгаит: Прокуратура продолжает следствие» [Sumgayit: Prosecutor's Office Continues Investigation], *Izvestiya*, 20 August 1988, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Yu. Arakelyan, Z. Kadymbekov, G. Ovcharenko, «Эмоции и разум. О событиях в Нагорном Карабахе и вокруг него» [Emotions and Reason. On the Events in Nagorno-Karabakh and Around It], *Pravda* (Moscow), 21 March 1988, 3 (Y. Arakelyan, resigned from being a “Pravda” correspondent after the article had been published with his signature under it without his knowledge); S. Dardykin, R. Lynev, «Встречи после митингов» [Meetings After the Rallies], *Izvestiya*, 24 March 1988; A. Vasil'kov, G. Ovcharenko, «Подстрекатели: Ещё раз о событиях Нагорном Карабахе и вокруг него» [Instigators: Once Again about the Events of Nagorno-Karabakh and Around It], *Pravda*, 4 April 1988, 3.

minority as a political act. Why are you trying to ascribe the crimes committed to the whole of Azerbaijan? What genocide are you talking about?<sup>67</sup>

In essence, the leader of the USSR had emphasised that, according to his perception, the violence was of a spontaneous nature and he rejected the description of the massacres by the Armenian side as genocide and basically negatively labelling the crimes committed as premeditated and organised acts. Gorbachev, at the same time, refuted the ethnic nature of the attacks on the Armenian population of Sumgait, ascribing them as being carried out the “dregs of Soviet society.” In this way he removed the problem from the area of national relationships and placed it in that of class relationships in Soviet society.

Official positions of a similar nature were adopted during the examination and subsequent trials relating to the Sumgait massacres. By the decision made by the USSR prosecutors, the legal work concerned with the Sumgait massacres was split into 80 parts with the trials basically taking place in Azerbaijan. 94 people were arrested, of whom about 80 were convicted, with one being condemned to death. In all the cases, the accused were prosecuted for “hooliganism.”<sup>68</sup>

It is important to note that apart from official discourses and, in opposition to them, there were condemnatory speeches made by progressive soviet intellectuals. This was especially true in February 1989, on the first anniversary of the Sumgait massacres, when a group of intellectuals (L. Gozman, L. Patkin, G. Staravoytova, Y. Levada, V. Chalikova, M. Yezorova and others) sent a letter, addressed to their “Armenian comrades” sharing the Armenian people’s anger, stating, “the dreadful crimes – genocide – have not been examined and tried properly ...”<sup>69</sup> There were articles in the press that attempted, under soviet censorship conditions, to publish the more or less correct descriptions of the Sumgait massacres or parts of them.<sup>70</sup>

It is of significance that the former president of the USSR, M. Gorbachev, in his article titled “Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective” published in August 2021, looking back on the basic Artsakh (Mountainous Karabakh) problem, confessed that the central

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<sup>67</sup> «ՍՍՀՄ Գերագույն Խորհրդի նախագահության նիստը» [The Session of the Presidency of the USSR Supreme Council], *Grakan tert*, 22 July 1988, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Babanov, Voevodskij, *Karabakh Crisis*, 12.

<sup>69</sup> «Открытое письмо друзьям в Армении» [Open Letter to Friends in Armenia], NAA, f. 1159, I. 2, с. 20. p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> Vasilevskij, *Cloud in the Mountains*, Viktor Loshak, «Сумгаит, месяц спустя» [Sumgayit, a Month Later], *Moskovskie novosti* (Moscow), 17 April 1988, 13; Sergej Baruzdin, «Эмоции и факты» [Emotions and Facts], *Druzhiba narodov* (Moscow), № 3 (1989), 171-174.

authorities were sceptical, at first, of the scale and severity of the problem.<sup>71</sup> In his opinion, the Artsakh problem was for the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijan SSR to solve, while the role of the centre was “to help them normalise the situation and, in particular, solve the economic problems.”<sup>72</sup> This was, according to Gorbachev, the correct way to solve the problem, but the two countries were unable to create a dialogue. “The situation unravelled rapidly. In late February 1988, there was bloodshed in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait. Troops had to be sent in to stop the massacre.”<sup>73</sup> Gorbachev thus confessed that the massacres of the Armenian population of Sumgait were only halted thanks to military means.<sup>74</sup> The military, however, did not record the fact that operations by the USSR military forces were significantly late in starting, starting only after a portion of the Armenian population had been massacred.

Thus, the Soviet central authorities presented the Sumgait massacres as mass unrest, carried out by certain elements of the public. They did not differentiate between the group identities of the murderers and those massacred, without Azerbaijanis being shown as being the aggressors and Armenians the victims. This is explained by the fact that the official discourse was conditioned by soviet national policy. For the central authorities, the most important thing was to swiftly disguise the Sumgait massacres, moderate their extent and nature and to prevent the spread of inter-national dissent. According to the assumptions made by the centre, unanimously raising the importance and real nature of the Sumgait events would deepen the conflict between the Armenians and-Azerbaijanis and sharpen inter-ethnic relations, creating serious threats concerning physical security, both in the many thousands-strong Armenian community in Azerbaijan and for the Azerbaijanis living in Armenia. No less important were the circumstances concerning the central authorities’ responsibility. In the end,

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<sup>71</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, «Понять перестройку, отстоять новое мышление» [Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective] <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/perestroika-and-new-thinking>, accessed 20.10.2021.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> The USSR Defence Ministry, to stop the anti-Armenian Sumgait massacres, deployed 3,000 USSR Interior Ministry soldiers and aircraft to the city. (Vladimir Gurov, «Вооруженные силы СССР в армяно-азербайджанском (Карабахском) вооружённом конфликте (1988-1991 гг.)» [Armed Forces of the USSR in the Armenian-Azerbaijani (Karabakh) Armed Conflict (1988-1991)], *Izvestija Samarskogo nauchnogo central Rossijskoi akademii nauk* 14, no. 3 (2012): 110). The 137<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment (commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel V. Khatskevich) was also brought to Sumgait which was able to reimpose order in the city. The troops were, initially, ordered to remain neutral and not to use weapons, resulting in them often responding to cries for help by the officers and soldiers saying just that. (Ibid., 111). This resulted in the Azerbaijanis attacking soldiers of the regiment’s sub-units, causing 140 casualties. (Ibid.) According to the information provided by V. Krivopuskov, the head of the operational examining group of the USSR Ministry of the Interior in Mountainous Karabakh (Artsakh), 270 soldiers were injured during the clashes. (Krivopuskov, *Rebellious Karabakh*, 149). It was only on the evening of the February 28<sup>th</sup> that, after decisive action taken by the troops, the massacres ceased. The clash between the Sumgait murderers and the soldiers, as the number of wounded testified, meant that the massacres of the Armenian population that were taking place were only stopped with great difficulty and that, without the intervention of the military units, the massacres would have been much more extensive.

the crimes committed against the Armenian population of Sumgait had taken place during the time of soviet rule and the central authorities were also responsible for its citizens' right to life and security. Thus, the means used by the highest soviet leadership showed that it hadn't appreciated the nature of ethnic conflict, its possible repercussions and was found to be unready to stop resurgent violence.

### **The Sumgait massacres: international responses and characteristics**

The international press also reported on the Sumgait massacres. In the beginning, they just gave news of the events, presenting it as TASS-provided information from official sources.<sup>75</sup> There were unofficial reports and eyewitness accounts could be found in its pages too.<sup>76</sup> The writers of the articles concerning the events in Sumgait basically described them as "pogroms," "ethnic violence" or "ethnic riots".

The Sumgait massacres also received attention and were noted by the European Union parliament. This was especially true as shown in its resolution concerning the Armenian SSR of July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1988, which took note of the worsening political situation (which resulted in Armenian massacres in the city of Sumgait), as well as very serious acts of violence in Baku. It called upon the soviet authorities to protect the security of the 500,000 Armenians living in Azerbaijan and was convinced that the anti-Armenian massacres were fomented, or at least

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<sup>75</sup> International press report cuttings are held in the Armenian National Library's archives concerned with the Artsakh movement, See NAA, f. 1159, I. 3, c. 105. William J. Eaton, "Soviets Enforce Curfew After Ethnic Rioting," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 March 1988; William J. Eaton, "Several Killed in Rioting in Azerbaijan, Soviets Say," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 March 1988; Thom Shanker, "Violence Reported by Armenia's Neighbour," *Chicago Tribune*, 1 March 1988; Thom Shanker "Armenian Riots: Deaths Confirmed," *Chicago Tribune*, 3 March 1988; Gary Lee, "Tass Reports New Violence in Azerbaijan," *The Washington Post*, 1 March 1988; Garry Lee, "Rioters Draw Soviet Troops: Azerbaijani City Termed 'Calm but Tense,'" *Washington Post*, 2 March 1988; Philip Taubman, "Soviets Report a Major Oil Centre in Azerbaijan is Shaken by Riots," *The New York Times*, 1 March 1988; Felicity Barringer, "Soviet Armenians Mourn Their Dead," *The New York Times*, 9 March 1988; Christopher Bobinski, "Soviet Troops Enforce Curfew in Riot City," *Financial Times*, 2 March 1988; John-Thor Dahlburg, "'Hooligans' Spread Ethnic Turmoil in Soviet Azerbaijan," *The Washington Times*, 1 March 1988; Robert Evans, "Troops Enforce Rare Soviet Curfew in Riot-Torn Ethnic City," *The Washington Times*, 1 March 1988; Philip Taubman "Soviet Army Enforces Curfew in Riot-Torn Caspian Capital," *The Fresno Bee*, 2 March 1988.

<sup>76</sup> David Remnick, "Soviet Tanks, Troops Said to be at Site of Ethnic Violence: Witnesses Put Armenian Toll at 350 Dead," *The Washington Post*, 12 March 1988.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/03/12/soviet-tanks-troops-said-at-site-of-ethnic-violence/966c8cd2-287b-4972-8bdb-5262c7bf1ce3/;](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/03/12/soviet-tanks-troops-said-at-site-of-ethnic-violence/966c8cd2-287b-4972-8bdb-5262c7bf1ce3/)

David Remnick, "Soviets Report 31 Killed in Ethnic Rioting," *The Washington Post*, 4 March 1988.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/03/05/soviet-report-31-killed-in-ethnic-rioting/e0ba7100-9cf9-492e-9447-02cf9ecf6cd4/;](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/03/05/soviet-report-31-killed-in-ethnic-rioting/e0ba7100-9cf9-492e-9447-02cf9ecf6cd4/)

"Soviets Tell of 'Pogroms' by Rioters in Azerbaijan," *The Washington Post*,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/03/16/soviet-tells-of-pogroms-by-rioters-in-azerbaijan/56dc16e1-9aeb-40cd-9ffd-0f176a55a223/;](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/03/16/soviet-tells-of-pogroms-by-rioters-in-azerbaijan/56dc16e1-9aeb-40cd-9ffd-0f176a55a223/)

Philip Taubman, "Soviet Reports Deaths of 31 in Azerbaijan Rioting," *The New York Times*, 5 March 1988. See <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/05/world/soviet-reports-deaths-of-31-in-azerbaijan-rioting.html>

All of the above accessed 20.10.2021.



participated in by the people deemed guilty who should be punished in accordance with USSR law.<sup>77</sup>

The European parliament also referred to the Sumgait massacres in its resolution of January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1990 which, condemning the massacres that were continuing in Baku, the attacks carried out in Shahumyan and Getashen areas and other circumstances, called upon the European Commission and parliament to present its resolution to the USSR authorities and to "...ensure that they guarantee the defence of the Armenian population of Azerbaijan, by sending troops there."<sup>78</sup> The resolution also called for a protest to be presented to the soviet authorities that all the circumstances pertaining to the massacres of the Armenians, especially the pogroms that took place in Sumgait and Kirovabad be revealed.<sup>79</sup>

The third time it was mentioned in the European parliament was on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1991, in the resolution titled "The blockading of Armenia and the human rights reality there." The resolution included the statement that the 300,000 Armenians who had escaped from the Azerbaijani city of Baku and the massacres in Sumgait were living in extreme poverty and needed immediate assistance.<sup>80</sup>

As far as international public opinion was concerned, it is significant that the September 1990 edition of the monthly journal "New York Review of Books" published the letter-address regarding the Armenian massacres that had taken place within the USSR. This initiative had been made by intellectuals of the Paris College of Philosophy and the French supervisory committee of the Helsinki Accords body.<sup>81</sup> The letter had been signed by 133 famous scientists and advocates from Europe, Canada and the USA. The authors stressed that the repeated pogroms carried out against the Armenian people in Azerbaijan and their nature forced them to think that they weren't just incidents or spontaneous explosions, but a "continuous practical, if not official, policy carried out by Soviet Azerbaijan."<sup>82</sup> The letter ended with an appeal to

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<sup>77</sup> "Resolution on the Situation in Soviet Armenia, adopted on 7 July 1988," <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:51988IP0538&qid=1631174857109>, accessed 20.10.2021.

<sup>78</sup> "Resolution on the Situation in Armenia, adopted on 18 January 1990," <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:1990:038:FULL&from=EN>, accessed 20.10.2021.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> "Resolution on the Blockade of Armenia and the Human Rights Situation There, adopted on 14 March 1991," [https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:JOC\\_1991\\_106\\_R\\_0102\\_01&qid=1547723161105&from=EN](https://eurlex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:JOC_1991_106_R_0102_01&qid=1547723161105&from=EN), accessed 20.10.2021:

<sup>81</sup> Jacques Derrida, Isaiah Berlin et al., "An Open Letter on Anti-Armenian Pogroms in the Soviet Union," *The New York Review*, Vol. 37, 27 September 1990, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/09/27/an-open-letter-on-anti-armenian-pogroms-in-the-sov/>, accessed 20.10.2021:

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

the international public to condemn the anti-Armenian pogroms and racist ideals which were utilised to justify the crimes committed.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, the international press, organisations and public-intellectual activists basically used the terms “pogrom” and “massacre” with regard to the Sumgait massacres. Their critical responses, in the first instance, stressed and gave importance to the ethnic nature of the violence, its nationalistic basis and its continuation in Armenian-inhabited areas in Azerbaijan. They also underlined the necessity of halting anti-Armenian violence and holding those responsible for it to account,

### **The genocidal terms used for the Sumgait massacres and their content**

Several terms used to describe the Sumgait massacres, as appear in this study, are based on several immediate perceptions and characteristics of the events themselves. They are “genocide,” “pogrom” (massacre) and “slaughter”.

Genocide, in international law and specialist literature, is defined as the premeditated destruction of people because they belong to a specific race, religion, ethnic or other group. The primary source for this perception is Rafael Lemkin’s work published in 1944 titled “Axis Rule in Occupied Europe.” This is the signpost to the definition of the term genocide for its examination in the context of international law. Lemkin defines genocide as being the destruction of a nation or ethnic group.<sup>84</sup> He explained that, although the term “genocide” describes, in itself, the annihilation of a group, it does not mean that such destruction must happen without any delay. In Lemkin’s opinion, genocide rather means the aim of eliminating a group through co-ordinated plans directed at the essential bases of its existence.<sup>85</sup> Thus Lemkin’s definition is wider than simple physical destruction. He includes groups’ culture, language, national feelings, political and social institutions and economic existence. Genocide is aimed at people – not at their individual abilities – but as members of a national group.<sup>86</sup>

The meaning and content of the word “genocide” is, in international law, governed by the UN Assembly’s convention of December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1948, titled “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Lemkin Raphael, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe. Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), 79.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocitycrimes/Doc.1\\_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocitycrimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf), accessed 20.10.2021.

Both Lemkin's definition and the convention's main meaning are that the aim of genocide is the complete or partial annihilation of any group. One of the methods of achieving this is the slaughter of the individuals in the group but includes any plan to exterminate part or whole of the group itself by other means, such as the prevention of procreation in the group or inflicting psychological damage to it.<sup>88</sup>

Although there are other definitions of the term "genocide,"<sup>89</sup> all international legal bodies condemn such crimes in accordance with the convention. The form of the genocide convention has, on many occasions, resulted in theoretical discussions and disputes. For a crime to be described as genocide, it is vital to establish the specific aim of eliminating a group (*dolus specialis*). It is this aim, in the opinion of many researchers and theoreticians, which defines genocide.<sup>90</sup> This means that the criminal commits a crime definitely striving to either totally or partially annihilate a given group. There are two most important, specific things connected with a plan to commit genocide: firstly, that it is almost impossible to obtain persuasive proof of the plan and, secondly, that the genocide plan may either be evident or hidden.<sup>91</sup>

The next important thing concerning the definition and content of the term genocide is linked to the expression "wholly or partially". Those studying the subject are basically in agreement that a group's "annihilation" usually has to include its physical mass destruction.<sup>92</sup> The expression "partially" is often used for complete clarity to denote the slaughter of a "substantial" part of a group. However, some lawyers (among whom are William Schabas and Chile Eboe-Osuji) consider the restriction on the definition of the term "genocide" as dangerous with regard to the mass killings of a "substantial" number of a group, taking the convention's aim of "preventing" it into account.<sup>93</sup> According to the opinion of another lawyer, David Alonzo-Maizlish, the "quantitative standard" of genocide contradicts the object of the definition of the convention and its aims.<sup>94</sup> In this case, the characteristics and perceptions of genocide are of even greater importance, not because of some numerical threshold when mass killings become genocide but more often, because of the plans to commit it. In essence, the

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<sup>88</sup> Rudolph J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 33.

<sup>89</sup> Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction: Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 16-20.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>91</sup> Kurt Jonassohn, Frank Chalk, "A Typology of Genocide and Some Implications for the Human Rights Agenda," in *Genocide and the Modern Age: Etiology and Case Studies of Mass Death*, ed. Isidor Wallimann, Michael Dobkowski (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), 4-5.

<sup>92</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 24.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>94</sup> David Alonzo-Maizlish, "In Whole or in Part: Group Rights, the Intent Element of Genocide, and the 'Quantitative Criterion,'" *New York University Law Review* 77 (2002):1375.

number of victims is important as proof of the plan, not as an evolved plan in itself or as a prerequisite.<sup>95</sup>

As far as the term pogrom (massacre) is concerned, it originated from the Russian word “гром” (meaning thunder, thunderbolt or lightning) and the “по” prefix (meaning method or target). The literal translation of the term means “sudden ethnic eruption [of flame] against a specific target”<sup>96</sup> This definition of ethnic violence is basically utilised in works concerning genocide to describe the anti-Jewish massacres that took place in Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>97</sup>

Turning to the term’s content, it is important to note that researchers do not have, in this connection, any final formulations. Thus, Paul Brass considers a pogrom as attacks made, with the involvement of the government or high-ranking government political officials, on the individuals of ethnic, racial or other groups and their assets.<sup>98</sup> He considers the involvement of the government as pivotal, to differentiate them from massacres taking place during riots.<sup>99</sup> W. Bergmann, however, stresses that the term “government control” originates, in the context of the anti-Jewish massacres, from an historically incorrect approach, therefore a pogrom must be viewed as a form of spontaneous riot.<sup>100</sup> According to Bergmann, pogroms organised at a low level differ from murder, massacre and genocide. At the same time, he states that the theoretical forms of ethnic violence are not easy to apply to any given incident, because pogroms often take place in the context of international or political wars or genocide.<sup>101</sup>

In any event, most researchers, when they use the term “pogrom”, accept that a government or certain of its officials participated in them, or at least refused to act to prevent or stop imminent massacres.<sup>102</sup> The significant points for characterising massacres (pogroms) are, basically:

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 1383-1384, also William A. Schabas, “Was Genocide Committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina? First Judgments of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 25, no. 1 (2001); 23-53.

<sup>96</sup> Henry Abrasmon, *A prayer for the government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 109.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>98</sup> Paul R. Brass, “Introduction: Discourses of Ethnicity, Communalism, and Violence,” in *Riots and Pogroms*, ed. Paul R. Brass (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>100</sup> Werner Bergmann, “Pogroms,” in *International Handbook of Violence Research*, ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer, John Hagan (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 352.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>102</sup> Brass, “Introduction,” 33, John K. Roth, “Pogrom,” in *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Edward Kessler, Neil Wenborn, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 346; Avraham Greenbaum, “Bibliographical Essay,” in *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, ed. John D. Klier, Shlomo Lambroza (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 373.

- The fomenting of massacres by governmental, political party, military or senior law-abiding officials or their lack of activity during them
- To stir mobs up and involvement in massacres
- The gradual reduction of the massacres after they reached their peak
- The low organisational level of the massacres.

A number of researchers underlined the genocidal nature of the massacres, considering them to be genocidal massacres. Thus, the famous student of genocide, Leo Kuper, considered that the annihilation of a group – men, women and children – and lesser killings, such as the obliteration of complete villages, to be genocidal massacres.<sup>103</sup> Israel Charny, writing like Kuper, determined genocidal massacre as being small-scale mass killing.<sup>104</sup> Definitions of a similar nature, in his opinion, allow many massacres, mass annihilations and mass killings to be described in this way. Although they are no less tragic for the victims, the number of dead is relatively small compared to those killed in acts of genocide.<sup>105</sup> Schabas also writes that examples of genocidal massacres may be pogroms and mass death sentences.<sup>106</sup> In Paul Mojzes' opinion, "a more accurate meaning for the word pogrom is genocidal massacre, in other words a mob's semi-spontaneous attack created by an explosion by a majority ethnic or religious group against a minority."<sup>107</sup> Ben Kiernan's interpretation of genocidal massacre is also very significant; he considers such events as being much shorter, limited episodes, aimed at a specific local or regional community that had been targeted for being part of a larger one.<sup>108</sup> It should be noted that the Armenians of Sumgait were targeted by Azerbaijan on the basis of ethnic identity because they belonged to a larger group – the Armenian nation.

Another theoretician, Benjamin Lieberman, links massacres to ethnic cleansing policies, noting that they usually precede more forcible events of a similar nature or may happen in political circles.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 10.

<sup>104</sup> Israel W. Charny, "Toward a Generic Definition of Genocide," in *Genocide: Conceptual and Historical Dimensions*, ed. George J. Andreopoulos (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1997), 77.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> William A. Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crimes of Crimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 240.

<sup>107</sup> Paul Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), 5.

<sup>108</sup> Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>109</sup> Benjamin Lieberman, *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe* (Chicago: Iva R. Dee Publisher, 2006), xiv.

Genocide expert Vahagn Dadrian views massacres as a conception of “retributive genocide.” In his opinion, this kind of genocide is limited to being localised ferocious attacks, “as a form of punishment for a portion of a minority that had issued challenges or threatened the larger group.”<sup>110</sup> The author maintains that it has a cautioning and (or) intimidating effect on the minority, which also moves to prevent a repeat of problems previously created.<sup>111</sup> The previously mentioned conception best expresses the origin of the Sumgait massacres. The Armenian population of Mountainous Karabakh began its struggle for self-determination and reunion with their historic homeland, Armenia, in 1988. By this, the Armenian population of the whole of Azerbaijan, as a minority, became a target group for Azerbaijan government repressive policies and the use of violence. In response to the re-opening of the Artsakh problem, the Azerbaijan side used “punitive” measures, organising the massacre of the Sumgait Armenian population, thus terrifying the Armenians and attempting to preclude the future expansion of the movement.

Turning to the term “massacre”, it should be noted that it has a French origin.<sup>112</sup> The researcher Mark Levene stresses the one-sided nature of massacres. In his opinion, massacres happen when at least, at the given time, people who cannot defend themselves are killed by another group that has the physical means and strength with which to carry out killings without physical loss to itself.<sup>113</sup>

Speaking about the 1894-1896 Abdul-Hamid massacres, Robert Melson defines massacre as the deliberate killing of significantly large numbers of defenceless people by political agents.<sup>114</sup> In his opinion, genocide and massacre differ by the nature of their aims and scope. According to this researcher, massacres are utilised by governments as a form of terror, not to eliminate, but to change the ways certain community groups live or their status.<sup>115</sup>

As can be seen, there are quite a few theoretical approaches to the terms “pogrom” and “massacre”. They have no legal form and, in essence, are part of other international crimes (genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity).

Finally, turning to the definitions question in genocide studies, it must be underlined that the genocide scholar Israel Charny has warned about the pointless “definitions struggle”, which

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<sup>110</sup> Vahagn Dadrian, “A Typology of Genocide,” *International Review of Modern Sociology* 5 (1975): 207.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Mark Levene “Introduction,” in *The Massacre in History*, ed. Mark Levene and Roberts Penny (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 9.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Melson, “A Theoretical Inquiry into the Armenian massacres of 1894-1896,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 3 (1982): 482.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 483-484.

occasionally simply eliminates the extent of this or that event, importance and its great human tragedy.<sup>116</sup> It is thought, in this sense, the main problem for researchers should not be the precise classification and definition of this or that kind of terror, but the progress of the development of terror, the reasons for its advance and the revelation of its consequences.

## Conclusion

Generalising research results, the conclusion may be reached for the parties, political circles and different structures involved, the Sumgait massacres have been characterised as follows:

- The Armenian side has defined and characterised the Sumgait massacres as a genocidal act, linking them to the Armenian genocide inflicted by the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also stresses the importance of their being organised and of an ethnic nature.
- It is noticeable that the Azerbaijan side euphemistically defines the Sumgait massacres as “the February events.” The notion of “Armenian intrigue and treachery” was put into circulation, which as a “lawful” explanation, had the aim of justifying the crimes that were committed and passing the blame onto the victim.
- The USSR central authorities avoided emphasising the identity of the group, describing the events as “disorders” and “hooligan acts” taking care, looking to the future, not to stir up inter-ethnic problems, not just in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, but throughout the entire country.
- The international press, organisations and the public were not impeded by such interests and accepted formulas and, in condemnatory statements, called the Sumgait massacres “massacres,” underlining the biased, ethnic nature of the anti-Armenian violence in Azerbaijan.

It may be seen, comparing perceptions of the Sumgait massacres, that the Armenian and international evaluations contain certain generalisations. The emphasis, in both instances, is placed on the one-sided, ethnic nature of the violence, the separation of its prevention and the question of the security of the Armenian population of Azerbaijan, through appropriate methods and political evaluation. Against this approach, characteristics made by the USSR central authorities and Azerbaijani side separated them using euphemisms, with the aim of minimising the scale of the massacres, their essence and consequences.

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<sup>116</sup> Israel Charny, “The Psychological Satisfaction of Denials of the Holocaust or Other Genocides by Non-Extremists or Bigots, and Even by Known Scholars,” *Idea: A Journal of Social Issues* 6, no. 1, <https://www.ideajournal.com/articles.php?id=27>, accessed 20.10.2021.

As for using the term “genocide” for the Sumgait massacres, this is mainly because of the immediate perceptions and definitions of the events. The terms generally used for the Sumgait massacres are genocide and massacre.

The Sumgait massacres became the immutable point in Artsakh-Azerbaijan antagonism. It had great importance for both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides. The Armenian side regarded them in the context of the realising of the genocide of the Armenian people and the possibility of the Armenians in Azerbaijan living there. The Azerbaijan side used the theory of “Armenian intrigue and treachery” to justify the violence and to evade responsibility. It became obvious to both sides that it was impossible to come to any sort of peaceful arrangement.

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