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**Mirvari Gurbanova**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8140-5290>

*PhD student at Baku State University, Teacher at the Military Lyceum named after J. Nakhchivanski, Azerbaijan, mirvariurbanova@mail.ru*

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## **The Policy of Ethnic Cleansing Against the Azerbaijani Population in the Armenian SSR: In Academic Research and Memoirs**

### ***Abstract***

*After the 44-day Patriotic War that took place in 2020, and the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories, one of the main issues under discussion is the restoration of the rights of the Azerbaijani population who once lived in the historical territories of Western Azerbaijan. The fact is that throughout the 20th century, a targeted and systematic policy of ethnic cleansing was carried out against Azerbaijanis in the territory now called Armenia, and this process reached its culmination during the Soviet era - in 1948-1953. In 1988-1991, the ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis from Armenia was completed. Currently, the discussions on the restoration of their rights make the study of the history of ethnic cleansing relevant. The article examines the process of the expropriation of property, in addition to the fact that Azerbaijanis who lived in the territory of the Armenian SSR were subjected to discrimination and great torture with the help of the Soviet authorities, were expelled from their historical lands. The information reflected in historical sources and eyewitness accounts were compared with eyewitness accounts, which also made it possible to reveal the socio-psychological aspects of the ethnic cleansing process. The eyewitness testimonies reflected in the study were brought into scientific circulation for the first time.*

**Keywords:** *Oppression of Azerbaijanis, Massacres, Deportation, Eyewitness Memories*



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## Ermenistan SSC'de Azerbaycanlı Nüfusa Yönelik Etnik Temizlik Politikası: Akademik Araştırma ve Anılarda

### Öz

2020 yılında gerçekleşen 44 günlük Kurtuluş Savaşı'nın ve Azerbaycan topraklarının Ermenistan tarafından işgalinin ardından tartışılan temel konulardan biri, bir zamanlar Batı Azerbaycan'ın tarihi topraklarında yaşayan Azerbaycanlı nüfusun haklarının iade edilmesidir. Gerçek şu ki, 20. yüzyıl boyunca, bugün Ermenistan olarak adlandırılan topraklarda Azerilere karşı hedefli ve sistematik bir etnik temizlik politikası yürütülmüş ve bu süreç Sovyet döneminde - 1948-1953 yıllarında - doruk noktasına ulaşmıştır. Azerbaycanlıların Ermenistan'dan etnik temizliği 1988-1991 yılları arasında tamamlanmıştır. Günümüzde, haklarının iadesine ilişkin tartışmalar, etnik temizlik tarihinin incelenmesini anlamlı kılmaktadır. Makale, Ermenistan SSC topraklarında yaşayan Azerbaycanlıların Sovyet yetkililerinin yardımıyla ayrımcılığa ve büyük işkencelere maruz kalmaları ve tarihi topraklarından sürülmelerinin yanı sıra mülklerinin kamulaştırılması sürecini de incelemektedir. Tarihi kaynaklara yansıyan bilgiler ile görgü tanıklarının ifadeleri karşılaştırılarak etnik temizlik sürecinin sosyo-psikolojik yönlerinin de ortaya çıkarılması mümkün olmuştur. Çalışmaya yansıyan görgü tanıklıkları ilk kez bilimsel dolaşıma sokulmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Azerbaycanlılara yönelik baskı, Katliamlar, Sürgün, Görgü Tanığı Anıları

### Introduction

After World War I, as a result of the support provided by the great powers, a state was created for Armenians in the South Caucasus at the expense of territories that were historically controlled by the Azerbaijani state and empire. Even in the area where the Republic of Armenia was established, which included parts of the territories of the Iravan and Nakhchivan khanates, the Armenian population was a minority. Since Armenian migration to the South Caucasus had been ongoing since the 1820s and 1830s, large-scale terrorist incidents, massacres, genocides, and deportations were carried out against the Azerbaijani people to ensure Armenian supremacy. The Armenians, who acquired land from the people with a superior historical culture—the Azerbaijanis—as a gift to build their state, ignored the rights of the indigenous and autochthonous population of the area, the local and long-established residents, and appropriated or destroyed the historical and cultural heritage created here over centuries.

For many years, the investigation into the ethnic cleansing policy against the Azerbaijani population in Armenia has been hindered, and these chapters of history have not been examined in detail. Years later, the deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia between 1948 and 1953 was assessed from a legal and political standpoint by Heydar Aliyev, the national leader of the Azerbaijani people, through a decree dated December 18, 1997. The decree ordered the creation of a state commission to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the large-scale deportation

of Azerbaijanis from their historical and ethnic lands in the Armenian SSR, to assess this historical crime at the state level, and to present the findings to the international community.

The decree stated that *"as a result of the policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide deliberately carried out against Azerbaijanis in the Caucasus over the last two centuries, our people have suffered heavy losses, national tragedies, and immense suffering. As a consequence of this gradual, inhumane policy, Azerbaijanis were expelled from their native historical and ethnic lands, which they had inhabited for thousands of years, and were subjected to mass murders and massacres. At the same time, thousands of historical and cultural monuments belonging to our people were destroyed"* (1948—1953-cü illərdə azərbaycanlıların Ermənistan SSR ərazisindəki tarixi-etnik torpaqlarından kütləvi surətdə deportasiyası haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin Fərman, 1997).

### **1. From the History of the Armenian Massacre and Genocide Policy Against Azerbaijanis**

Since the early 20th century, the Armenian state has pursued a systematic policy of massacre, genocide, and deportation against the indigenous Azerbaijani population in the territories of Western Azerbaijan. Over time, these actions became more organized, persistent, and insidious. As a result of Armenian aggression and influence, the Azerbaijani population of Western Azerbaijan was subjected to mass deportations on two separate occasions in the 20th century—first between 1948 and 1953, and again from 1988 to 1991. In the 1920s, following the entry of the 11th Red Army of Bolshevik Russia into Azerbaijan, the collapse of the Republic, and the establishment of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, the policies implemented toward Armenians were, in fact, a continuation of those pursued by Tsarist Russia. To overthrow the Dashnak government in Armenia, Sovietize the country, and win over the Armenian population, Bolshevik Russia made enticing promises of land to Armenians, attempting to address their claims regarding Zangezur, Nakhchivan, and Karabakh. Consequently, when the Bolsheviks seized power in Armenia, they pressured the leader of the Azerbaijan SSR, Nariman Narimanov, to issue statements supporting the transfer of these regions to the Armenian SSR. However, the strong Soviet-Turkish relations of that time, coupled with Turkey's influence on regional dynamics, compelled the Bolsheviks to mask their anti-Turkish and anti-Azerbaijani policies through various means. Despite this, even after the establishment of Soviet rule in Armenia, ethnic cleansing policies continued in different forms. Under various pretexts, Azerbaijanis who had fled to other regions to escape the genocide and massacres committed between 1918 and 1920 were prevented from returning to their ancestral homeland.

## **2. The Deportation of Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR and the Transfer of Armenians: Causes and Influencing Factors**

The complete breakdown of Soviet-Turkish relations during World War II once again rendered the "Armenian card" a relevant geopolitical instrument. This development created an opportunity for the leadership of the Armenian SSR to pursue their long-standing objective of deporting the Azerbaijani population. The idea of resettling Armenians from abroad to Armenia was first introduced by representatives of the Armenian diaspora during the Tehran Conference in 1943. During the conference, members of the diaspora held discussions with Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Union's Minister of Foreign Affairs, in an attempt to gain the approval of the Soviet leadership for the planned resettlement of Armenians to the Armenian SSR. After consulting with Joseph Stalin, Molotov expressed consent to advancing this agenda. These discussions and subsequent decisions directly contributed to the reactivation of the ethnic cleansing policies advocated by Armenian nationalists, leading to heightened ethnic conflicts and increased tensions in the region (Həsənoğlu, 2007, p. 98). After World War II, the removal of Turkic-Azerbaijani populations from the border areas with Turkey became a key objective for the USSR. To "de-Turkify" Armenia, which was originally intended to serve as a buffer zone between the Anatolian Turks and Azerbaijan, the deportations of 1948–1953 were initiated.

The purpose of the USSR Council of Ministers Resolution No. 4083, dated December 23, 1947, titled *"On the Resettlement of Collective Farmers and Other Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR to the Kur-Araz Lowland of the Azerbaijan SSR,"* was to facilitate the mass deportation of Azerbaijanis living in the Armenian SSR (Verdiyeva & Əlizadə, 2020, s. 66). It also aimed to accommodate the resettlement of Armenians from abroad into Soviet Armenia. Between 1948 and 1953, under this resolution, large-scale deportations of Azerbaijanis were carried out in Armenia. These actions led to the forced relocation of the local Turkic population and significantly altered the region's ethnic composition.

Between 1946 and 1949, a large number of Armenians living abroad were brought to Soviet Armenia. Officially, this process was described as "repatriation," implying a return to their homeland. However, this term was fundamentally inaccurate, as the Armenians brought to Soviet Armenia, along with their ancestors, had never lived in the territory of Western Azerbaijan or the Armenian SSR, nor had they been dispersed from these areas. From this perspective, labeling the process as repatriation was misleading. As part of the program to import and settle Armenians from abroad into the Armenian SSR, extensive measures were implemented, addressing social, economic, and cultural aspects. These included providing the incoming Armenians with housing, employment, and social security to ease their transition to

a new environment. Conversely, the 1948–1950 decision to resettle the Azerbaijani population from the Armenian SSR was officially presented as a voluntary initiative. However, both the content and the application of this decision indicate that the process was, in reality, a coercive deportation operation.

According to the first paragraph of the resolution, the Azerbaijani population residing in the Armenian SSR was to be relocated to the Kur-Araz lowlands of the Azerbaijan SSR. The plan included resettling 10,000 people in 1948, 40,000 in 1949, and 50,000 in 1950 (Qasımlı, 2016, p. 278). Although the resettlement process was officially presented as voluntary, the figures clearly demonstrate that it was not voluntary but rather a forced deportation. Furthermore, during the implementation of this decision, no specific measures were taken to encourage the voluntary relocation of the population. On the contrary, the resettlement process was carried out using coercive methods.

According to historian Musa Gasimli, Armenians brought from foreign countries to the Armenian SSR were placed in houses belonging to Azerbaijanis. However, the Azerbaijani side was unprepared to accommodate the Azerbaijanis deported from Armenia or to provide them with housing. This disparity was further highlighted by the fact that the decision to resettle Armenians from abroad to the Armenian SSR did not include provisions for allocating loans or offering assistance. The settlement of Armenians from foreign countries on lands belonging to Azerbaijanis starkly revealed that Joseph Stalin's policies were no different from the imperialist strategies previously pursued under Tsarist rule (Qasımlı, 2016). From the outset of preparations for the resettlement, numerous facts indicated that the process was not voluntary but forced. The number of people to be resettled was predetermined, and specific plans were drawn up to execute the operation. Those being resettled were not allowed to take their movable property with them, and a deliberate shortage of railway wagons further hindered their ability to relocate properly. No accommodations were made for the resettled population in Armenia; most were left stranded in the steppe, suffering as victims of this emergency resettlement policy. The situation was exacerbated by the prohibition against advertising property sales in newspapers, which prevented Azerbaijanis from selling their homes. Additionally, the Armenian leadership actively encouraged them to leave without taking their belongings, further compounding the hardships faced by the deported population.

The decisions regarding the resettlement of Azerbaijanis were not limited to a single period but were part of a long-term and extensive strategy. One significant example, Resolution No. 3850, was signed by Deputy Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers N. Bulganin and Director of the Council of Ministers M. Pomazkevich on September 6, 1950. This resolution,

as a continuation of earlier decisions, expanded the scope of the operation and systematized the resettlement of Azerbaijanis from Armenia (Qasımlı, 2016). In the 1960s, the policy of discrimination against Azerbaijanis living in the Armenian SSR continued, leading to significant social and economic tensions. The policies implemented during this period worsened the living conditions of the local Azerbaijani population, forcing many to migrate from their ancestral lands. Faced with the hardships caused by systemic discrimination, many Azerbaijanis chose to migrate temporarily or permanently to Azerbaijan. In October 1961, during a plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia, a decision was made to allocate a special housing fund for Armenians resettled from abroad and to provide them with schools and other social facilities. This decision was aligned with the USSR's policy of repatriating Armenians living abroad to Armenia. As a result, beginning in 1962, the Armenian SSR resettled 7,000 Armenians from countries such as Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, the USA, Turkey, Uruguay, and Argentina. By 1973, the total number of Armenians resettled from abroad had reached 26,000 (Arzumanlı & Mustafa, 1998). The policy of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) introduced in the USSR during the 1980s reawakened nationalist movements in Armenia, leading to the emergence of various legal and illegal nationalist organizations. Several factors contributed to the rise of nationalist sentiment in Armenia, one of the most significant being the arrival of Armenian groups from foreign countries. Among these groups, the psychology of hatred toward Turks was particularly strong.

On June 20, 1985, the USSR Council of Ministers adopted a decision to continue the repatriation of Armenians from abroad to the USSR, further influencing the socio-political dynamics in the region (Əhmədov, 2015). In November 1986, K. Demirchian, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia, sent a secret letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, requesting the resettlement of Armenians from foreign countries (Qasımlı, 2016). The letter noted that since the early years of Soviet power, Armenians had been brought to Armenia from foreign countries. According to the letter, more than 230,000 Armenians had been resettled in Armenia during the years of Soviet rule. Karen Demirchian also mentioned in his letter that Armenians living in countries of the Near and Middle East (Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan) expressed a desire to settle permanently in the Armenian SSR. At the end of the letter, the political significance of bringing Armenians to the Armenian SSR was highlighted, and a request was made to extend the implementation period of the Central Committee of the CPSU and the USSR Council of

Ministers' decision from June 20, 1985, until the end of 1990. However, as with previous letters, the use of the term "repatriation" in this letter did not align with historical realities.

### 3. The Events and Processes in the Memories of Witnesses

Mahluga Garamanly, an Azerbaijani witness who experienced the discriminatory policies in the Armenian SSR during the 1960s, was born on October 13, 1962, in the Dilijan Valley, Chambarak District (formerly Krasnoselo), Meshakand (until 1978, it was called Yanikh Peysa – G.M.). She lived there throughout her early years. In her account of the events that occurred, she reflects:

*“There were only two Armenian villages in our Dilijan Valley, and the residents of these villages had come from Turkey and Iran. One of these small villages was Martuni (70 houses), and the other was Tutuju (60 houses). Both villages were located very close to the region. Historically, Armenians were afraid of Azerbaijani Turks, but in recent times, they had started to become more active. During the deportations of 1948-1953, when my grandmother Khalilova Saadat (whom we called Grandma Savad, she was 58 years old) and her cousin Rustamov Daghistan (whom we called Mustached Daghistan, she was from the village of Golkand) underwent appendectomy surgery, Armenian doctors left scissors inside and killed them. My teacher Ramazanov Novruz also lost his life in the same way, at the age of 34. At that time, there were no Azerbaijani doctors in the district hospitals, only Armenian doctors worked. The hospital had two surgeons: Ohanyan and Sarbekyan. In 1978, Ohanyan performed an operation on me. Despite his good relationship with my father, he operated without administering any anesthetic. During the procedure, I could see everything through the mirror above and screamed in horror. Ohanyan reacted as if nothing was wrong, simply saying, "Shut up" I thought this was how operations were supposed to be, but when I told my father what had happened after the surgery, his anger made it clear that this was not normal. Their response to my father was, "He's a child, he can't be anesthetized." I suffered from this trauma for many years, and that memory still lingers in my mind. No matter how many times I've been injured or had accidents, I will never forget that operation” (Məhluqə Gülməmməd qızı Xəlilovanın (Qaramanlı) (Dilican dərəsi, 2024).*

In the 1980s, Armenian terrorist organizations, which had already taken root and become deeply entrenched, trained inhuman terrorists and incited them to commit atrocities against the Azerbaijani population. One such event was the large-scale provocation carried out by Dashnak terrorist-armed groups in Armenia on April 24, 1983. This date, when Armenians commemorate the fake “Armenian genocide,” was deliberately chosen to execute the provocation. On that day, organized attacks in the Masis (Zangibasar) region, particularly

against Ulukhanli and other Azerbaijani-inhabited villages, were both violent and destructive. The saboteur groups razed village cemeteries and vandalized numerous cultural and historical monuments. According to testimonies from the residents of the villages who witnessed the events, the attackers attempted to break into homes, shouting, "They will take revenge on the Turk from the Turk." In response to the violence, some villagers were forced to seek refuge in border posts along the Turkish-USSR border to protect themselves from these atrocities. The population was left unarmed and defenseless in a warlike environment, facing grave danger (Əroğul, 2009, p. 54). Mirheydarli Mirfaig Mirabbas oğlu, born on July 17, 1966, in the village of Demirchi, Zangibasar region, is one of the witnesses of the atrocities committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis in the 1980s. His account reveals that after the provocations against ordinary Armenians in Sumgayit, led by an Armenian terrorist, aggression against Azerbaijanis in Armenia intensified. The list of Armenians living in Sumgayit who refused to contribute money to Armenian terrorist organizations for the "pan-Armenian cause" was pre-determined by the Dashnaks, and attacks were organized on their homes. At that time, M. Mirheydarli was traveling on the Nakhchivan-Sumgayit route, from Yerevan to Gazakh. He recalls that there were 3-4 Azerbaijanis and several Armenian women on the bus. To prevent a brutal attack by Armenians, the driver changed the route inscription on the bus, replacing "Sumgayit" with "Baku." Despite this, the police stopped the bus at the exit of Yerevan and deliberately created conditions for a group of radical Armenians to attack it. M. Mirheydarli recalls:

*"I understood Armenian. They were shouting, 'Open the door,' 'We'll kill them as soon as they open it.' They were trying to break the bus door with a cutting tool from their car. The Armenian women on board had come from Azerbaijan to change houses in Armenia, and they told the attacking Armenians, 'If you kill anyone here, they will kill all of us in Azerbaijan.' That's when they retreated. Those 2-3 minutes of the incident took 50 years off my life. I was very healthy at the time, but what I went through has now turned me into a diabetic and someone with high blood pressure" (Mirfaig Mirabbas oğlu Mirheydərlinin verdiyi məlumat (Zəngibasar rayonunun Dəmirçi kəndi, 2004).*

In early 1988, violent attacks against Azerbaijanis in the Gafan region—led by an individual named Mkrtichyan, who operated under the guise of a communist—resulted in significant loss of life and widespread destruction. As a result of these assaults, approximately 2,000 Azerbaijani Turks were forced to abandon their homes and became refugees. Eyewitness accounts indicate that Armenian attackers set fire to Azerbaijani homes in Gafan and



surrounding villages, while subjecting elderly individuals and women to physical violence, verbal abuse, and humiliation. Many of the displaced fled to nearby regions within Azerbaijan, while others sought refuge in Sumgayit and various villages and settlements across the Absheron Peninsula.

According to reports from Azerbaijanis in Yerevan, in February 1988, the Armenians set fire to the Blue Mosque, a renowned architectural treasure of the city. The monument to Mashadi Azizbekov was destroyed, and both the Mirza Fatali Akhundov Secondary School and the Jafar Jabbarli Yerevan State Drama Theater were attacked. The attackers also issued an ultimatum to cease the operations of these cultural and educational institutions and demanded that the Azerbaijanis working there leave. These events severely damaged the cultural and historical heritage of the region and caused significant hardships for the local population (Əroğul, 2009).

On December 6, 1988, the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers of the USSR adopted a resolution titled "On the Unacceptable Actions of Individual Officials of Local Authorities of the Azerbaijan SSR and the Armenian SSR in the Forced Departure of Citizens from Their Places of Permanent Residence." Unfortunately, this resolution came too late. In Yerevan, only those Azerbaijanis who were unable to exchange homes with Armenians remained, and they faced significant difficulty finding a place to go (Əroğul, 2009). Special commissions were established for the safe relocation and settlement of refugees, but these commissions proved ineffective and were soon disbanded. By the end of 1988, before the earthquake, more than 20,000 Azerbaijanis were effectively held hostage in the Amasya (Aghbaba), Spitak (Hamamli), Gugark, and Stepanavan (Jalaloglu) regions of Armenia.

The day before the Hamamli earthquake, Major O. Vladikin, the special correspondent for the *Krasnaya Zvezda* newspaper, who was the first to arrive in the village of Heydarli in the Gugark region, wrote in his article, "Justice Activists": "*At the entrance to the village of Heydarli, I saw officers and armed soldiers who had blocked the road with a tank. Lieutenant Vitaly Naklonny explained that their task was to prevent clashes between the Armenians and the Azerbaijani population. The officer added: 'It is very difficult to witness all this. They (the Azerbaijanis) are essentially under blockade. Transport isn't working. There is no electricity. Bread and other products have not been delivered for 20 days. They remain by the tank day and night, afraid to leave'*" (Ağamalıyeva, 2017, p. 133).

Journalist Mane Papyan, currently residing in Vanadzor, published an article titled "*Events in Gugark: How Azerbaijanis Were Beaten in Armenia*" on April 29, 2015, on the website [www.epress.am](http://www.epress.am). The article provides information about the tragic events that took

place in the village of Vartanly. Papyan visited the village and met with eyewitnesses who had lived through the events.

The article draws on information provided by Grigory Shahveridyan, who was the prosecutor of the city of Kirovakan (now Boyuk Garakils) during the Vartanly massacres. Shahveridyan shared an official document showing the dismissal of 634 Azerbaijanis from their jobs in the Gugark district between March and November 1988. District leaders were instructed to complete the operation to cleanse Armenia of Azerbaijanis by November 28. The *Коммунист* newspaper (Russian), a publication of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia (CP MK), the Supreme Soviet, and the Council of Ministers, reported on the massacres in its December 13, 1988 issue. In an article titled "*The Moment of Disaster, the Moment of Responsibility*," the newspaper discussed the events of that period. According to the article, on November 26, at the instigation of activists from the *Karabakh* movement, a group of 500 people marched towards the village of Kirovakan (formerly Shaumyan, now Vartanly). The article notes that there were fatalities as a result of the two-day clashes and armed confrontations. It also mentions that massacres were carried out in the village of Kuybyshev (historically known as Chubukhlu, now Urasar), where additional casualties occurred. It is also emphasized that "self-defense groups," established with the help of activists from the *Karabakh* movement, set up strict security posts on the roads. These groups also attacked Armenians who provided food aid to Azerbaijani villages.

The massacres committed by Armenians in the villages of Vartanly and Kuybyshev (Chubukhlu) were covered up by official authorities using vague phrases such as "there was shooting, there were casualties." Despite the fact that the village of Vartanly was located near the city of Kirovakan (Boyuk Garakils), it was administratively part of the Gugark district. In the early 20th century, the population of Vartanly consisted entirely of Azerbaijanis, but by the end of 1988, Armenians had become the majority. On the night of November 25-26, Armenians attacked the village with weapons. The population faced extreme hardships due to the cold and snowy weather at that time. Most Azerbaijanis were forced to flee the village and seek refuge in nearby forests. Armenians from the neighboring area, who had lived alongside the Azerbaijanis for years, did not offer protection. Instead, they aided the terrorist groups by guiding them to the hiding places of the fleeing Azerbaijanis. The brutal group was led by J. Arakelyan, the chairman of the Vartanly village council (Mustafa, Qurbanov & Əlili, 2018). According to Medina Bakhshaliyeva, a resident of Qabagli village in Keshishkend, the Armenians treated the women and children very harshly during the deportation of the population from Armenia. M. Bakhshaliyeva recalls:

*"The Armenians gave us no chance to gather anything. Our cooking pots were left on the coal stoves, and we were forced to leave our homes hungry and dirty. They placed us in poor, useless trucks for resettlement. In such a situation, all we could think was that they would take us, dump us somewhere, and burn us. The people's condition was truly pitiful. There were only tears, fear, and sadness on their faces. A Russian officer among us shouted at the crying people, 'I will shoot you if you do not calm down.' They searched our cars and belongings, and those who protested were beaten. One of them was Mehrali's son, Qeyis. The Armenians referred to the axe as 'tapo.' When Qeyis protested, one of the Armenians shouted, 'Take that tapo, shoot him.' The other then shot and injured Qeyis"* (Baxşəliyeva Mədinə Vəli qızının verdiyi məlumat (Yexeqnadzor (Keşişkənd), 2024).

Madina Bakhshaliyeva recalls:

*"In this dire situation, we made our way to a place called 'Kurdish haystack,' located between the villages of Kermenesh and Gabakhli. Azerbaijani and Russian soldiers from Nakhchivan arrived to assist us there. They helped the wounded and the sick. Doctors and nurses bandaged the wounded and treated those with high blood sugar. The bread brought by the people of Nakhchivan felt like a 'gift from the heavens' to us. Before we reached this point, we had been hoping for a loaf of bread that a woman had secretly tied around her waist as she left her house. She broke the bread into pieces, threw them in the air, and shared them with us. Since our children were suffering from hunger, we gave them these small pieces"* (Baxşəliyeva Mədinə Vəli qızının verdiyi məlumat (Yexeqnadzor (Keşişkənd), 2024).

The eyewitness accounts also highlight another crucial point. It becomes evident that despite the blockade of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic at that time, the local population made every effort to assist, offering shelter, clothing, and food. Additionally, they helped those who wished to travel to Baku, using various means to ensure their safe passage. (Baxşəliyeva Mədinə Vəli qızının verdiyi məlumat (Yexeqnadzor (Keşişkənd), 2024). The Azerbaijanis who were forced to relocate were citizens of the Armenian SSR. They had contributed to the development of the economy in this republic for many years, and their ancestors had lived there for centuries, making them the rightful owners of the land. However, the Armenian government disregarded all of this, including the norms and principles of humanitarian law. Professor V. Abdullayev notes that the Armenian government ignored the needs of the Azerbaijanis during the resettlement process. Instead, through their connections with Moscow, they sought to carry out their malicious plans against the Azerbaijani population (Siyasi elmlər doktoru, professor Vaqif Abdullayev: "1988-1989-cu ildə deportasiya olunanlar Ermənistan vətəndaşlarıdır", 2023).

The removal of Heydar Aliyev from the leadership of the Azerbaijan SSR and later the USSR, under various pretexts and methods, provided an opportunity for the government of the Armenian SSR to carry out ethnic cleansing in Western Azerbaijan. As a result, the Armenians intensified their ruthless pressure on the Azerbaijani population, and the process of ethnic cleansing culminated in the complete expulsion of Azerbaijanis from Armenia. While approximately 250,000 Western Azerbaijanis were forced to leave their homes in 1988-1989, today the number exceeds 500,000. Their ancestral homeland, once known as Western Azerbaijan, is now referred to as Armenia (Siyasi elmlər doktoru, professor Vaqif Abdullayev: “1988-1989-cu ildə deportasiya olunanlar Ermənistan vətəndaşlarıdır”, 2023).

#### **4. The Issue of Restoration of Rights and Repatriation of Victims of the Ethnic Cleansing Policy**

The research conducted proves that throughout the 20th century, a deliberate ethnic cleansing policy was executed against Azerbaijanis in the territory now known as Armenia. In order to rectify the consequences of this ethnic cleansing, representatives of Western Azerbaijanis are demanding the recognition and restoration of their rights from the Armenian government, within the framework of international law. Their appeals to the Republic of Azerbaijan, the only existing state representing all Azerbaijanis worldwide, also emphasize the need for legal and diplomatic measures to ensure the restoration of their lost rights, invoking the principle of kinship (Siyasi elmlər doktoru, professor Vaqif Abdullayev: “1988-1989-cu ildə deportasiya olunanlar Ermənistan vətəndaşlarıdır”, 2023). The demand from the majority of informants who participated in the survey related to the conducted research concerns the removal of obstacles preventing their return to their historical homeland and the restoration of their violated rights. In this context, the West Azerbaijan Community has developed a Return Concept to address these issues (Qərbi Azərbaycanın xronikası, Paşinyan Qərbi azərbaycanlılarla bağlı məsələni niyə inkar edir?, 2024).

#### **Conclusion**

The discriminatory policies directed at the autochthonous Azerbaijani population within the Armenian SSR during the Soviet era had a profound impact on the ethnic heterogeneity and cultural fabric of the South Caucasus, significantly reshaping the region's sociopolitical dynamics. These policies yielded far-reaching social and economic repercussions for Azerbaijani communities residing in the Armenian SSR. Scholarly investigations indicate that, although the policy of ethnic cleansing was carried out with considerable thoroughness, it ultimately failed to eradicate the historical consciousness embedded in the collective memory

of the region's indigenous Azerbaijani population. Consequently, individuals who were once subjected to forced displacement, along with their descendants, continue to pursue repatriation efforts to reclaim their ancestral homeland.

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