

Azerbaijan war brings Soviet leadership crisis to a head

by Konstantin George

The Soviet leadership crisis will come to a head at the next Central Committee Plenum Feb. 5-6. The formal agenda will be the Baltic crisis and "preparations for the 28th Party Congress." But such formulations from the Soviet news agency TASS can only be greeted with laughter. The real agenda is defined by the totality of the crisis which is engulfing the Russian empire. This plenum will be a brawl, filled with accusations and counteraccusations, as each tries to pin the blame on the other for the avalanche of social, political, and economic disasters.

The shift toward truly cataclysmic internal developments is dramatized by developments in the Transcaucasus, Ukraine, and actions taken by the Soviet military command.

Military occupation of Azerbaijan

In the Transcaucasus, the Soviet military occupation and massacres of thousands in Azerbaijan has created a totally new situation. The irreversible process of a protracted Azeri guerrilla war against Russian occupation has begun. At some point during 1990, sooner or later, armed resistance will spread to the large Turkic populations of the Central Asian republics across the Caspian Sea from Azerbaijan. For Moscow, the nightmare of a decade or more of very bloody insurgency along its entire Moslem southern rim, has now become reality.

TASS reports on Jan. 25 that "the situation in Baku is normalizing" are lies, but are in any case irrelevant. In Baku itself, as even the Soviet media admit, shooting continues, and the Azerbaijan general strike continues uninterrupted as we go to press on Jan. 27. What Moscow reports as signs of "normalization," the partial re-opening of food shops and some urban transport, merely reflect decisions taken by the Azerbaijan Popular Front strike and resistance leadership to

ensure that people receive food staples during the general strike.

Baku, in any case, is only one city, and by no means representative on all counts of what is going on elsewhere in Azerbaijan. Indeed, the Azerbaijani guerrilla war against the Soviet Army is *not* occurring in Baku, but in the hilly and mountainous interior provinces of that republic. It is there that most of the massacres and nearly all the heavily armed resistance has been going on. If one reviews all Soviet media coverage of Azerbaijan since the military intervention began on Jan. 20, one will find not a shred of actual news on what has been happening on the ground in the interior provinces of Azerbaijan, in southern Azerbaijan near the Iranian border, and in the Azerbaijan exclave of Nakhichevan, positioned between Armenia and the Soviet border with Iran and Turkey. In short, *wartime censorship* has been imposed over what is really going on.

The first official Soviet admission of how serious the guerrilla war already is, was provided in figures released by Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov Jan. 26, when he asserted that the Red Army, KGB, and Interior Troops are facing at least 40,000 well-armed guerrilla fighters, "well-organized," supplied with radio equipment, and coordinated by "command centers."

Callup of Army reserves

The second indication of a shift in the nature of the crisis was the partial mobilization of Soviet Army reservists announced by Defense Minister Yazov on Jan. 18, timed to coincide with the decision to pour troops into the Transcaucasus. The callup, which involved no more than 100,000 troops, was, from a purely military standpoint, not that significant, and certainly, strictly measured from the standpoint

of what additional capacity it added to the Soviet Army and where it added that capacity, represented no immediate military threat to the West.

But the mobilization, from a historical-strategic standpoint, was extremely important: It means that a political point of no return has been crossed. For the first time in Soviet postwar history, a reserve callup was necessitated because of a war inside the U.S.S.R.'s borders. Reflecting the extreme instability among the empire's non-Russian populations, the callup was confined to reservists from Russia and the areas of eastern Ukraine with large mixed populations of Ukrainians and Russians. Moscow did not dare call up reservists from the Baltic or Transcaucasian republics, or from the Turkic republics of Central Asia.

The reserve callup was not popular. The families of recently demobilized Afghanistan War veterans—the bulk of those called up—were not exactly elated at the prospect of sons and husbands being sent to fight in a “second Afghanistan” in Azerbaijan. Demonstrations, led by mothers and wives, against the mobilization were held in cities throughout southern Russia and the eastern Ukraine. To avoid a total explosion against the mobilization, Moscow's Defense Ministry was forced to categorically declare that none of the reservists called up would be sent to the Transcaucasus. Moscow has never before felt compelled to issue such a statement.

Demonstrations in the Ukraine

On the very weekend that the massacres of the Soviet Army and security forces inaugurated the guerrilla war in the Transcaucasus, an even bigger shock rocked the Kremlin. This one came from Ukraine, with 50 million inhabitants, by far the largest of the non-Russian republics.

The occasion was Sunday, Jan. 21, the 72nd anniversary of Ukraine's 1918 anti-Bolshevik declaration of independence from the Russian Empire, and the creation of a republic. Over 1 million Ukrainians demanding independence formed a 500-kilometer-long human chain, from the western Ukrainian city of Lvov to the capital of Kiev. Mass rallies were held in Kiev, Lvov, and some 30 other Ukrainian towns and cities, with heavy worker representation, especially from the miners. At each rally, the main slogans were for independence and “Down with the Communist Party!”

These rallies are only the beginning of a “Ukrainian Spring.” The leading role of the miners and industrial workers in the protests points to a new mass strike wave in the republic. The Ukrainian coal miners of the Donbass and other regions already had played the key leadership role in the coal miners' strikes that swept the Soviet Union last summer. As the events of last summer showed, a Ukrainian strike wave will not occur in a vacuum. It will inevitably be joined by strikes and protests among the Russian work force.

In short, the period in which the crisis was mainly confined to the empire's rim has ended. From now on, both the outlying regions and the Slavic core will both be in revolt.

Events are moving rapidly. Until Jan. 13, when the Transcaucasus crisis erupted, the Soviet leadership was expending its energy on dealing with the Baltic Republic of Lithuania's campaign to leave the Soviet Union. By Jan. 25, only 12 days later, that same Soviet leadership would give up their dachas in exchange for returning to the “paradise” of Jan. 12, when the main immediate crisis was that in Lithuania.

The Ukraine eruption, coming immediately on top of the mess in the Transcaucasus, triggered a full-scale leadership crisis in Moscow. On Jan. 22, an emergency Politburo meeting was held. Decisions taken at that meeting, combined with an announcement made in Vienna that same day by Gen. Mikhail Moiseyev, Chief of the Soviet General Staff, revealed the profundity of the crisis.

The Politburo decided to postpone the next Central Committee Plenum from Jan. 29 until Feb. 5. Only three days before that decision, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov had stated “definitively” that the next plenum would be held on Jan. 29; thus, Gorbachov had been overruled by a Politburo majority. His close ally, Aleksander Yakovlev, was also gruffly overruled. It was Yakovlev who had been responsible for preparing the draft documents for 28th Party Congress—documents that will be discussed and voted on at the Feb. 5-6 plenum. The Politburo rejected the drafts, and made a point of not only returning them for amendments, but returning them *personally* to Gorbachov, so that *he* would have to do the amending. In plain English, Gorbachov was told to choose between Yakovlev and the will of the majority. That majority, of course, includes the military.

It was, therefore, most revealing that it was the Soviet General Staff, through General Moiseyev, that revealed—on the same day as that Politburo session—that the Warsaw Pact's highest organ, the Political Consultative Committee, was no longer chaired by the General Secretary of the CPSU (Gorbachov), but by a dual chairmanship consisting of the Soviet President (Gorbachov) and prime minister (Nikolai Ryzhkov).

Moiseyev's declaration marked the second major whittling-down of Gorbachov's military-related executive powers since November, when Ryzhkov's Politburo colleague, Lev Zaikov, who like Ryzhkov, stems from the U.S.S.R.'s military-industrial complex, was named first deputy chairman of the U.S.S.R. Defense Council, in reality the country's highest executive organ. That move made Zaikov nominally “number two” on that body, under its chairman, Gorbachov. But in reality, it placed Zaikov in charge of running the crucial Defense Council on a day-to-day basis.

Gorbachov's trouble is merely a surface reflection of the crisis that will continue to escalate, regardless of who is nominally at the helm. The process of dissolution, so evident in the events of the two weeks between Jan. 13 and Jan. 25, has inaugurated a new page in history, filled with hope for the rebirth of sovereign states, but equally filled with danger from a mortally wounded beast.