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Ressort: Politik

The Road to Freedom

The Netherlands, 18.01.2025 [ENA]

Independence and freedom are rarely achieved easily. Similarly, the former Soviet republics did not gain their independence without struggle.

... The late 1980s and early 1990s marked the decline of one of the greatest empires of its time, the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). When giants fall, there are always those who get crushed beneath them, and this was true during the collapse of the USSR.

The country was in a state of complete economic, political, and social disarray. Voices advocating for independence began to grow louder in various parts of the union. Alarmed by this, the empire's leaders attempted to enforce their usual imperial policy: divide and rule. And so, the processes began.

... The Caucasus nations—Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia—were already feeling the empire's impending collapse. In an attempt to maintain control, the imperial leadership succeeded in pitting these nations against each other. Unrest began in Karabakh, an ancient Azerbaijani land. The famous Topkhana forest in Shusha was being destroyed by Armenians, with direct support from the empire's leadership.

In response, the Azerbaijani people rose in protest. Azerbaijanis were once again deported from lands where they had lived for centuries, now part of the Armenian SSR. The Soviet secret service, the KGB, orchestrated operations in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgayit against Armenians, creating the narrative that Azerbaijanis were massacring Armenians. Similar events occurred in Georgia, where Abkhazia expressed its desire to leave the Georgian SSR and become independent. Thus began demonstrations across the Caucasus, including in Azerbaijan.

On December 17, 1988, the Azerbaijani National Freedom Movement began (a date the Azerbaijani people have celebrated as Revival Day since 1992).

The first steps toward independence were being taken, not only in Azerbaijan but across the empire. On April 9, 1989, an incident in Tbilisi resulted in 21 deaths and 290 injuries. This event became a turning point for Georgia's independence movement. In March 1990, Estonia and Lithuania, followed by Latvia in May, declared their independence. The USSR refused to recognize these decisions. In January 1991, Soviet troops used force against peaceful demonstrators in Vilnius and Riga, killing dozens. These events

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accelerated the USSR's collapse and strengthened the independence movements in the union republics.

At the end of December 1989, in Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan region, the USSR-Iran border fences between Northern and Southern Azerbaijan were destroyed. Events clearly indicated that the empire's end was near.

... By January 1990, tensions in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, were at their peak. Rumors spread that Soviet troops would enter Azerbaijan. People built barricades at all the city's entrances, but they were unarmed, relying only on their determination. No one believed that the empire's army—once considered their own “homeland” (legally still so, though no longer viewed as such)—would turn its weapons on them. At that time, I was 16 years old. In our settlement of Kürd?xan?, we also built barricades.

Day and night, in shifts, we stood guard, believing we could stop the imperial army with our bare hands.

On January 19, tensions reached their peak. KGB agents, disguised as ordinary people, infiltrated our area, trying to provoke us. Later, representatives of the local movement and the Azerbaijani Popular Front came, urging people to disperse, warning, “The army has been ordered to attack; there will be bloodshed.” But it was a time of uncertainty, and no one knew who to trust. After several days in the cold, I fell ill and returned home with my father. In the middle of the night, we were awakened by the chilling sound of car horns. Confused, we tried to understand what was happening.

The television was not working; later, we learned that the KGB had blown up the power block of the TV station, leaving people without information.

By morning, we discovered the horrifying truth: massacres had occurred across the country, particularly in Baku. Following the orders of then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, massacres were carried out in Baku and other parts of Azerbaijan. During the night of January 19–20, over 131 innocent people were killed, 744 injured, and 841 arrested. Despite the massacres, the Azerbaijani people rose in protest the following day, January 20. The victims were buried, and the fight for the release of those arrested began.

The USSR's end was drawing near. From March to May 1990, the Baltic republics—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—declared their independence. On April 9, 1991, Georgia declared independence, followed by Armenia on September 21, 1991, and Azerbaijan on October 18, 1991. Other Soviet republics also declared independence. On December 25, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned, and on December 26, the Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin, marking the dissolution of the USSR.

Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the USSR, is fondly remembered in Western countries, which is understandable. He played a significant role in accelerating the USSR's collapse, which benefited many

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Western nations.

For example, the reunification of Germany after being divided post-World War II was a rightful victory for the German people and state. This and similar events explain why Gorbachev is admired in the West. However, the bloodshed he caused among the peoples of the former Soviet Union remains an undeniable fact.

For this reason, this year, the Azerbaijani public called on Mr. Jørgen Watne Frydnes, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, to revoke Gorbachev's Nobel Peace Prize.

While those who made this appeal likely do not expect it to happen, they consider it a form of protest.

This year marks 34 years since the January 20, 1990, Baku massacre, and through this appeal, the Azerbaijani people once again strive to make their voices heard worldwide.

Niccolò Machiavelli wrote in *The Prince*: "The memory of liberties lost will never die, nor can it." Indeed, nations that were once independent and later occupied by Russia and then the USSR did not forget their lost freedoms. At great cost, even with their blood, they reclaimed their independence.

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