



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Armenians protest USSR's refusal to honor Nagomo-Karabakh annexation referendum, 1988

February 11

1988

to: February 28

1988

Country: Armenia

Country: Azerbaijan

Location City/State/Province: *Yerevan, Armenia and Nagomo-Karabakh, Azerbaijan*

Goals:

The goal of the protestors was to force the USSR to recognize the referendum of the Nagomo-Karabakh region that voted in favor of seceding from the Azerbaijan Republic and rejoining the Armenian Republic.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 025. Displays of portraits
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 025. Displays of portraits
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 025. Displays of portraits
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 025. Displays of portraits
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Armenians

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Students in Stepanakert in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Armenian Nationalist Leaders

Partners:

Local Communist Leaders

External allies:

Not Known

Involvement of social elites:

Secretary of the Armenian Communist Party Karen Demirchyan

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Armenians in Armenia
- Armenians in Stepanakert
- Students

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Local Communist Party leaders

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 3 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Mikhail Gorbachev and the USSR Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

There was violence by Azerbaijan against Armenians within their own territory with as many as two killed. There are also reports of Azeris stoning buses full of Armenians, setting fire to churches, and damaging Armenian owned properties. These protests also precipitated anti-Armenian pogroms in Sumgait, Azerbaijan where at least 26 Armenians were killed.

The Soviet Union also sent in troops and tanks into the Nagorno-Karabakh region as a show of force, but there are no reports of violence being used by Soviet Union troops.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Although Nagorno-Karabakh is still not part of Armenia, the protests grabbed the attention of Mikhail Gorbachev and resulted in increased attention to the issue with attempts by the Soviet government to resolve it. Additionally, this can be considered the first part of Armenia's movement for independence from the Soviet Union, which it gained three years later.

All groups involved in the protest survived through the campaign.

The protests grew from small isolated protests in Nagorno-Karabakh to mass protests in Yerevan that attracted as much as one-third of the population of Armenia.

Nagorno-Karabakh was an autonomous region in Azerbaijan that USSR's leader Joseph Stalin took from Armenia during the Sovietization of Transcaucasia in the early 1920s, in an attempt to placate Turkey. The citizens of the region predominantly identified as Armenian (approximately 76%) and this also corresponded to a religious identification where Armenians are predominantly Christian while Azeris are predominantly Muslim. For centuries, the national and religious differences caused numerous conflicts between the region and Azerbaijan as a whole with Armenia usually siding with Nagorno-Karabakh, but after the Soviet Union took over the region, the conflict between the neighboring countries mostly stopped.

In early February of 1988, the regional government of Nagorno-Karabakh held a referendum asking its citizens if they wished to secede from Azerbaijan and unite with Armenia. The referendum passed with overwhelming support (approximately 80% to 20%, corresponding to the national breakdown of the region), but the government of Azerbaijan and the Soviet Union refused to recognize it.

As a result, students led unsanctioned protests in Stepanakert, the largest city in Nagorno-Karabakh, on February 11. The first protests started as citizens pasted up posters demanding to rejoin Armenia. Simultaneously, students of all ages began to boycott classes while others took to the streets.

Within a week, the protests in Stepanakert spread to Yerevan, Armenia where they quickly escalated. The first protests began on the 18th with approximately 5,000 protesters, but by the 19th, at least 50,000 protesters (with some estimates saying 100,000) gathered in the streets of Yerevan outside of the opera house in the main square. The Armenians closed down schools, shut down most non-vital stores, and mostly stopped going to work. News outlets reported that local writers, nationalists, and dissidents

took to a lectern in the square and spoke to the assembled crowd. Footage from the event shows columns of Armenians blocking off entire streets as they marched to the square that was full of people standing shoulder-to-shoulder. The footage also shows both the Armenian flag and the Soviet flag waving in the crowd as well as portraits of Gorbachev prominently placed. The protesters hoped to show that the protests were not against the USSR, but for the self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh. This tactic was distinctly different from protests in Estonia, Latvia, and Kazakhstan that had been strongly anti-Russian in nature.

The Armenians held banners that had slogans such as “Karabakh is a test of perestroika” and “Self-determination is not extremism.” From these slogans, it is clear that the Armenians were taking advantage of Gorbachev’s recent policies of perestroika and glasnost or the restructuring and opening of Soviet policies.

Throughout the protests, outside observers (of which there were few due to Soviet policies preventing tourists and journalists) noted a lack of violence by Armenians in both regions. Although this was partially due to the lack of a physical opponent in Yerevan, it can also be attributed to firm rules that the leaders of the protest created to ensure there was no violence. First, the protesters banned alcohol consumption before and during the rallies and agreed to honor a curfew by the Yerevan City Council that restricted rallies to between the hours of 10 am and 11 pm only. Additionally leaders required the demonstrators to sit down whenever people started pushing or there was a risk of losing order. These rules, especially the ban on alcohol consumption, were unique to the Armenian protests and not a common practice throughout other Soviet territories protesting around the same time.

A British tourist reported on the demonstrations calling them “cheerful” and saying they filled every street in the city. He noted that, while the crowds were big during the day, they would quickly disappear at night. According to him, there was a “vast network of private apartments” where demonstrators stayed each night.

Protests in Stepanakert continued and grew, too. Although they were not the focal point, they did draw Moscow’s attention to a degree. A spokesperson for Moscow later said that the protesters in Stepanakert were using a system of “rolling protests,” whereby groups of demonstrators would protest with different shifts to ensure the streets were always full. This suggests that the protests became a well-planned event in Nagorno-Karabakh.

On the 22nd, the Soviet Union first acknowledged the protests by sending two members of the politburo to Stepanakert and two more to Yerevan. Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party in the USSR, also held a meeting with the Central Committee to discuss issues of nationalism as they pertained to perestroika and glasnost. On the same day, the local Soviet party leader appeared on television in Yerevan asking for calm. Simultaneously, Soviet authorities in Moscow fired the Communist Party leader of Nagorno-Karabakh, an Azeri, and replaced him with an Armenian.

These actions coupled with some statements by Gorbachev and other party leaders in Moscow show that the Soviets were not opposed to letting Nagorno-Karabakh unite with Armenia, but were afraid that, by doing so, they would set a dangerous precedent for the future should other nationalist groups protest—a reasonable fear given several nationalist outbreaks in 1986 and 1987.

By February 25, 200,000 protesters were in the streets in Yerevan and as many as 100,000 gathered in Stepanakert. Additionally, leaders of the protest threatened a general strike if Soviet parliament members did not meet to address the issue. Simultaneously, Armenian government officials, all members of the Soviet party, made clear their support for the protesters and their demands. Karen Demirchyan, the first secretary of the Armenian Communist Party, even placed himself as the spokesperson for the nationalist demands. His connection with Moscow gave him a particularly strong voice, though it would eventually lead to Gorbachev firing him from this position.

The next day, the Soviets sent troops and tanks into the area as a show of force. It was widely known by the Armenians that the Soviets had stationed paratroopers nearby and that snipers were in many of the buildings throughout Yerevan, but no violence occurred. However, in Nagorno-Karabakh, reports of violence soon surfaced as Azeris stoned a bus and set fire to a school. Reports suggest that the Azeris killed as many as 70 Armenians. This did not stop the protesters, as their numbers grew to nearly

1 million in Yerevan and 120,000 in Stepanakert.

On February 27, Gorbachev appeared on television and radio in Armenia appealing for the cessation of protests and the restoration of order. He also threatened that continued protests could lead to “serious consequences.” Considering the normal Soviet response to nationalist uprisings, Gorbachev also made the surprising statement that he did not wish to “evade a sincere discussion.” But rather than quelling the protests, this actually had the opposite effect. In response, the Armenian Communist Party passed a resolution asking Moscow to establish a commission to look into the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh.

On February 29, Armenian nationalist leaders called for a one-month halt to demonstrations under conditions that Gorbachev would personally look into the Nagorno-Karabakh—apparently a response to the resolution previously given to Moscow. Protest leaders made this decision because Gorbachev had shown a willingness to talk. Leaders also promised that if Moscow did not reach a favorable decision by March 23, they would resume the protests in Yerevan.

Over the next month, the Soviet Union was quiet on the issue until they declared on March 23 that they would not allow Nagorno-Karabakh to rejoin Armenia. Simultaneously, Gorbachev sent a massive number of Soviet troops to Yerevan and Stepanakert to prevent protests from resuming and fired Demirchyan for his earlier support of the protests. The troops were effective in preventing new protests from beginning by threat of force and the Soviet Union never solved the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh before its collapse in December 1991.

Conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region continue to this day.

Research Notes

Influences:

Not Known

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Additional Notes:

It could be beneficial to find more academic sources for this research. I could not find any books, dissertations, or such on this subject that did not mention the protests more than just in passing. Consequently, all of the sources used are Western media outlets—none of which give much specific information about how the protests started or the interplay of the leadership

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Matthew Heck 05/12/2010

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