

AN OPEN LETTER TO INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC OPINION ON ANTI-ARMENIAN POGROMS IN THE SOVIET UNION*

An era which we all thought had ended, the era of pogroms, has resurfaced. Once again this year, the Armenian community of Azerbaijan has been the victim of atrocious and intolerable premeditated massacres.

As scholars, writers, scientists, political leaders and artists we wish, first of all, to express our profound indignation over such barbaric acts, which we wanted to believe belonged to humanity's past.

We intend this statement as more than an after-the-fact condemnation. We want to alert international public opinion to the continuing danger that racism represents to the future of humanity. It forebodes ill that we are experiencing the same powerlessness when faced with such flagrant violations of human rights a half century after the genocide of the Jewish people in Nazi concentration camps and forty years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It would be inexcusable if, because of our silence now, we contributed to the suffering of new victims.

The situation of Armenians in the Caucasus is, in fact, too serious for us to remain silent. There are moments when we must assume the moral obligation to assist a people in peril. Our sense of obligation leads us today to appeal to the international community and to public opinion.

More than two years ago, active persecution against Armenians began in Azerbaijan. The pogroms of Sumgait in February 1988 were followed by massacres in Kirovabad and Baku in November 1988. As recently as January 1990, the pogroms continued in Baku and other parts of Azerbaijan. The mere fact that these pogroms were repeated and the fact that they followed the same pattern lead us to think that these tragic events are no accidents or spontaneous outbursts.

Rather, we are compelled to recognize that the crimes against the Armenian minority have become consistent practice--if not official policy--in Soviet Azerbaijan. According to the late Andrei Sakharov (New York Times, November 26, 1988), these pogroms constitute "a real threat of extermination" to the indigenous Armenian community in Azerbaijan and in the autonomous region of Mountainous Karabagh, whose inhabitants are 80 percent Armenian.

Horror has no limits, especially when we remember that the threat is against the Armenian people who in 1915 paid dearly for their right to be different in the Ottoman Empire. There, Armenians lost half their population to genocide, the worst consequence of racism. Furthermore, if the recent pogroms have revived nightmares of extermination not yet overcome, the current total blockade of Armenia and Mountainous Karabagh - imposed since August, 1989 - has created the prospect of yet

another genocide. It is well known that all supplies imported into Mountainous Karabagh and 85 percent of those into Armenia pass through Azerbaijan; it would not be an exaggeration to maintain that such a blockade amounts to the strangulation of Armenia. In a land devastated by the earthquake of December 7, 1988, the blockade has paralyzed the economy and dealt a mortal blow to the reconstruction efforts.

It is our sincere hope that perestroika will succeed. But we also hope for the success of glasnost and democratization. We recognize that the passage from a totalitarian state to a rule of law cannot be achieved overnight. It is nonetheless necessary that in the process of transition, the government of the Soviet Union promote, legalize and institutionalize such critical forces for democracy as human rights, the principle of toleration, and democratic movements. There is no better defense and demonstration of democracy. At any rate, that is the only way to avoid the worst. In the case of a multinational state, the worst may mean threats to the right of a people or a minority to exist. It is during periods of transition and uncertainty that rights of peoples--today Armenians, tomorrow another people or minority--are threatened or denied. In this respect, the ease with which we see today the development in the USSR of racist movements, especially the anti-Semitic movement known as Pamyat, is for us cause for grave concern.

In the name of our duty of vigilance, we demand that Soviet authorities as well as the international community condemn unequivocally these anti-Armenian pogroms and that they denounce especially the racist ideology which has been used by the perpetrators of these crimes as justification.

We ask from the Soviet authorities and the international community that all necessary measures be taken immediately to ensure the protection and security of Armenians in the Caucasus and other parts of the Soviet Union. This can begin by bringing about a definitive lifting of the Azerbaijani blockade. It should be clear that the forceful deportation of Armenians is not the solution to the problem of Mountainous Karabagh which, in essence, is a problem of human rights.

The international community of states under the rule of law must prove the authenticity of its commitment to human rights in order to ensure that, due to indifference and silence bordering on complicity, another genocide does not occur.

* This is a joint initiative of the Helsinki Treaty Watchdog Committee of France and intellectuals from the College International de Philosophie, Paris. c/o 500 Park Avenue, #36, New York, NY 10022.

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