

The Transformation of Ethnic Cleansing into State Policy in the Armenian SSR in the 1980s and the Situation of the Azerbaijani Population

UDC 94 (479.24+479.25)"1980":323.1

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Abstract.

Relevance. The issue of ethnic cleansing and forced displacement remains one of the most sensitive and significant topics in the modern history of the South Caucasus. The transformation of discriminatory practices into an official state policy in the Armenian SSR during the 1980s had profound demographic, social, and political consequences. Studying this process is particularly relevant for understanding the roots of regional conflicts, the violation of human rights, and the long-term impact on the Azerbaijani population who were subjected to systematic pressure, deportation, and loss of historical homeland.

Purpose. The main purpose of this research is to analyze the process through which ethnic cleansing against Azerbaijanis in the Armenian SSR evolved into a state-supported policy during the 1980s. The study aims to examine the mechanisms, driving forces, and ideological foundations of this transformation, as well as to assess its consequences for the Azerbaijani population, including forced migration, socio-economic marginalization, and cultural displacement.

Conclusion. The study concludes that in the 1980s, discriminatory actions against the Azerbaijani population in the Armenian SSR gradually evolved into a systematic and organized state policy characterized by ethnic cleansing. This process was driven by political, ideological, and nationalist factors, which led to the mass expulsion of Azerbaijanis from their historical lands, the destruction of their socio-cultural environment, and significant demographic changes in the region. As a result, the Azerbaijani population faced severe human rights violations, loss of property, and forced displacement. The findings highlight that these events not only reshaped the ethnic composition of the Armenian SSR but also contributed to the escalation of regional tensions, the consequences of which continue to influence the socio-political dynamics of the South Caucasus today.

Keywords: Western Azerbaijan, anti-Azerbaijani policy, ethnic cleansing, violation of rights, state, Azerbaijan

Трансформація етнічних чисток у державну політику у вірменській РСР у 1980-х роках та становище азербайджанського населення

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Анотація

Актуальність. Проблема етнічних чисток і примусового переселення залишається однією з найчутливіших і найважливіших тем у сучасній історії Південного Кавказу. Перетворення дискримінаційних практик у офіційну державну політику в Вірменській РСР у 1980-х роках мало глибокі демографічні, соціальні та політичні наслідки. Вивчення цього процесу особливо актуальне для розуміння походження регіональних конфліктів, порушень прав людини та довгострокових наслідків для азербайджанського населення, яке зазнало систематичного тиску, депортації та втрати історичної батьківщини.

Мета. Головна мета цього дослідження – проаналізувати процес, у результаті якого етнічні чистки проти азербайджанців у Вірменській РСР у 1980-х роках перетворилися на політику, підтримувану державою. Метою дослідження є вивчення механізмів, рушійних сил і ідеологічних основ цієї трансформації, а також оцінки її наслідків для азербайджанського населення, включно з примусовою міграцією, соціально-економічною маргіналізацією та культурним переміщенням.

Висновок. Дослідження показує, що у 1980-х роках дискримінаційні дії щодо азербайджанського населення в Вірменській РСР поступово перетворилися на систематичну та організовану державну політику, що характеризується етнічною чисткою. Цей процес був зумовлений політичними, ідеологічними та націоналістичними факторами, що призвело до масового вигнання азербайджанців з їхніх історичних земель, знищення їхнього соціокультурного середовища та значних демографічних змін у регіоні. Внаслідок цього азербайджанське населення зазнало серйозних порушень прав людини, втрати майна та примусового переселення. Результати свідчать, що ці події не лише змінили етнічний склад Вірменської РСР, а й сприяли ескалації регіональної напруженості, наслідки якої й досі впливають на соціально-політичну ситуацію на Південному Кавказі.

Ключові слова: Західний Азербайджан, анти-азербайджанська політика, етнічні чистки, порушення прав людини, держава, Азербайджан

Стаття надійшла / Article arrived: 06.03.2026 // Схвалено до друку / Accepted: 17.04.2026 // Підписано до друку / Approved for printing: 24.04.2026

Introduction.

Problem definition. The consequences of the unsuccessful policies pursued in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s led to increased tension in interethnic relations. Radical Armenian nationalists, who enjoyed significant support from Armenian organizations, strengthened their ties with the Soviet leadership, which resulted in intensified repression, persecution, and violence against the Azerbaijani population, forcing people to migrate through the imposition of restrictions. The main objective was the complete Armenization (it is a policy) of the territory of Western Azerbaijan by displacing and eliminating all traces of the local Azerbaijani population, as well as transforming Armenia into a mono-ethnic state.

Over time, the policy of discrimination acquired a systematic character, causing large-scale clashes between the two peoples. Local personnel were subjected to persecution and removed from administration, control over the mass media was strengthened, and they were progressively shut down, while increasing restrictions and repression in the field of education made people's lives more difficult.

During the Tehran conference held from November 28 to December 1, 1943, Armenians appealed to the USSR Foreign Minister V. Molotov and requested the transfer of Armenians living in Iran to the USSR. After V. Molotov received the consent of I. Stalin, Armenians living in Iran were allowed to be transferred to the Armenian SSR. On October 19, 1946, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR adopted a decision on the transfer of Armenians living in foreign countries to the territory of the Armenian SSR. However, Molotov's proposal was significantly changed after the Armenian leadership agreed with Stalin. It was decided that Armenians to be resettled should be resettled in Armenia, and Azerbaijanis living here should be resettled in Azerbaijan instead. Thus, with the guidance and blessing of the Center, the next stage of expulsion of Azerbaijanis from their ancestral lands in the territory of the Armenian SSR began. The implementation of the resettlement was formalized on December 23, 1947, by the decision of the Council of Ministers of the USSR No. 4083 "On the resettlement of collective farmers and other Azerbaijani population from the Armenian SSR to the Kur-Araz plain of the Azerbaijan SSR". Later, a concrete action plan was prepared, which was added to that decision, to speed up the implementation of this process. According to this decision, 100,000 Azerbaijanis, including 10,000 in 1948, 40,000 in 1949, and 50,000 in 1950, were to be relocated to Azerbaijan in 1948-1950 "based on the voluntary principle". The eleventh article of the decision stated that the Council of Ministers of the Armenian SSR should be allowed to use the buildings and residential houses vacated by them in connection with the resettlement of Azerbaijanis to house the Armenians who were transferred from foreign countries to the territory of the Armenian SSR. (Mammadova and Babayeva, 2025)

The purpose of the research is to research the

transformation of ethnic cleansing into state policy in Armenian SSR in the 80s years and the situation of the Azerbaijan population.

Analysis of the research and publications. In reality, these processes were carried out in a systematic manner and without public disclosure. The official policy of the leadership of the Armenian SSR was to create the appearance of protecting the interests of the peoples living on its territory. However, an analysis of the cultural and informational life of the Azerbaijani population living in the Armenian SSR at that time reveals the actual situation. For example, control over the publication of one of the newspapers of that time, "Soviet Armenia", in the Azerbaijani language was strengthened, and Yerevan Radio was allowed to broadcast in the Azerbaijani language for only half an hour per day (Ağamaliyeva, 2017).

Binnet Asgar, who worked as a printer in the Armenian SSR, is one of the witnesses of that period. In his interview, he describes in detail the difficulties they faced and explains the reasons for the closure of the Azerbaijani-language press. Binnet Asgar notes that the only Azerbaijani person buried in the honorary alley in Yerevan was Rza Valibayov, who in 1947-1949 held the positions of People's Commissar of Justice of the Armenian SSR, Deputy Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, Deputy Minister of Education, as well as editor of the newspaper "Soviet Armenia."

An analysis of the fate of the subsequent editors of this publication shows that they were systematically subjected to threats and pressure of a violent nature, as a result of which many of them were forced to emigrate to Azerbaijan.

According to Binnet Asker, by November 1988, about 90 percent of the staff of the newspaper "Soviet Armenia" were forced to resign. Persecution, pressure, and attacks on residential houses occurred on a daily basis. Binnet Asker's own house was attacked three times, and each time more than 10 Armenians threw stones and axes at it. Many employees were subjected to beatings. Adil Irevanli (the brother of Akbar Irevanli) and a number of other representatives of the intelligentsia were also subjected to physical pressure. In general, the attitude toward the Azerbaijani intelligentsia was widely known in society, which made further stay on the territory of the Armenian SSR impossible: they were arrested, defamed, subjected to violence, and forced to leave the republic and move to Azerbaijan or other countries.

This planned "cleansing" began to manifest itself already in the 1980s. Azerbaijani personnel, removed from leadership positions under numerous pretexts, were replaced by numerous Armenian nationalist cadres. Among them were many Armenians brought from abroad under the guise of "repatriation." At that time, these Armenians, resettled on the territory of the Armenian SSR with various promises, were required not only to be settled but also to be provided with jobs, which was

resolved through the expulsion of the local Azerbaijani population.

The migration of Armenians living abroad to these territories was one of the main issues of interest to chauvinistic forces. The leadership of the Armenian SSR attempted to increase the number of Armenians through political methods. For this purpose, they established connections with the leadership of the USSR and sought decisions in their favor. One such decision was the resolution of the Council of Ministers of the USSR dated June 20, 1985, on the continuation of the “repatriation” of Armenians from abroad to the USSR [3, p. 9]. In addition, in November 1986, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia, Karen Demirchyan, wrote a secret letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union requesting the arrival of Armenians from abroad (Qasimli, 2016).

Karen Demirchyan, in his letter, noted that from the first days of the establishment of Soviet power in Armenia, a process of resettlement of Armenians from other countries took place. He stated that during the years of Soviet rule, a total of more than 230,000 Armenians were brought to Armenia, and declared that Armenians living in the countries of the Near and Middle East (Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan) wished to reside permanently in the Armenian SSR. He also noted that the policy of bringing Armenians to the Armenian SSR had important political significance and requested to extend the implementation period of the decision of the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers of the USSR dated June 20, 1985, until the end of 1990. However, all historical facts show that the use of the term “repatriation” in this decision is incorrect, demonstrating that the resettled Armenians were in fact unfamiliar with these territories.

The anti-Azerbaijani policy, which rapidly intensified since the time of Karen Demirchyan, was also reflected in the restrictions he imposed on the Armenian director Sergei Parajanov. Armenians turned the director into an object of condemnation for his love of Azerbaijani culture, burning photographs taken by him in Baku and Sheki for the film “Ashik Kerib.” Sergei Parajanov appeared on stage with a Karabakh carpet, thereby expressing his protest against an Armenian film about the “genocide,” which was banned by the Armenian leadership because it did not align with their point of view. Despite all this, the Armenian director said: “Ashik Kerib is my testament, the Azerbaijani music in the film is my voice” (Report Information Agency, 2024).

The main material. The policy of extremism toward Azerbaijanis became increasingly harsh with each passing day. The inability of the leadership to intervene in the situation and the disregard for the complaints of the indigenous population led desperate people to leave the lands they had built and improved over the years and to turn to Azerbaijan. Propaganda created

negative perceptions among people that were practically irreconcilable and seemingly endless. Over time, even ordinary Armenians became involved in this unbearable policy, which had previously been carried out by chauvinistic forces. Azerbaijani Turks faced insults and threats in all public institutions (Qasimli, 2015). Patients were not treated, and medical assistance was refused to those in need of emergency care. According to Miraslan Bekirli, one of the witnesses of that period, after the escalation of the conflicts, hospitals did not accept Azerbaijani patients, and doctors refused to treat them. “For this reason, Nazakat Demirchieva and Rukayya Demirchieva, who were shocked and suffered a heart attack after the incident, died. Their relatives did not even have time to erect a gravestone for the deceased” (Qurbanova, 2025).

Not only the Armenian, but also the Azerbaijani leadership showed indifference to what was happening; in some cases, it stood aside without taking any countermeasures. They only tried to calm the population, behaving as if there was no danger. This is also evidenced by information from the informational document of the Republican Committee for State Security on the situation in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh for 1987–1989. Thus, the document states that on February 21, 1988, 70 Azerbaijanis expelled from Kapan came to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan and informed the republican leadership about the impossibility of living in Armenia. Responsible officials from the Azerbaijani leadership, having listened to the complainants, advised them to convey their complaints to the Armenian leadership (Qasimli, 2015).

Armenians who lived and grew up together with Azerbaijanis were also unable to provide help. Since they were also being monitored and punished, they had no opportunity to help anyone. Irada Rzazade, who was among the witnesses, notes that “the number of rallies held in Yerevan increased, and houses were subjected to searches. They also attacked the house of chemistry teacher Hasan Muallim. They were unable to catch anyone in the house because they had gone down to the basement. A neighboring Armenian told the attackers that there was no one in the house” (Qurbanova, 2025). From the information provided by Irada Rzazade, it is clear that the Azerbaijani population could no longer receive help from anyone. Even neighbors who had lived in the same place for years could not save one another. Quote: “One morning, when I was leaving the house, our Armenian neighbor who worked in the army told me: ‘Irada, I did not sleep last night. A car came, they looked into your window and the window opposite our house (where the daughter of that teacher Hasan, Sofi Khanum, Qadir, and their children Fatma and Safar lived). I was afraid that they might suddenly attack me, what could I do? After that, we thought about finding a house and leaving’” (Qurbanova, 2025).

All of this became the result of a biased policy carried

out against Azerbaijanis in Armenia, which chauvinistic forces, having waited for the right opportunity for years, took advantage of and implemented their plans without hesitation. In schools, classes were deliberately closed, and restrictions on education were introduced. In the 1980s, textbooks used in schools of the Armenian SSR intentionally distorted maps: territories belonging to Azerbaijan were deliberately presented as lands belonging to Armenians. The existing press and mass media continued their activities in a strongly pro-Armenian spirit. All these circumstances were part of a policy of “ethnic cleansing,” which Armenians had been planning for years. With the aim of creating an “Armenia without Turks,” Azerbaijani-owned cemeteries were destroyed, and mosques and mausoleums where they sought refuge were burned and set on fire (Ağamalyeva, 2025).

Despite all official propaganda, Armenians did not refrain from the atrocities committed against the local Azerbaijani population. Irada Rzazade reports that in 1988, a Russian journalist filmed a documentary at a school about ethnic relations in Armenia. During the filming, the Russian language teacher (whose husband at the time worked for the newspaper “Soviet Armenia”) stated without hesitation: “we, Azerbaijanis, are a tolerant nation. We live here without any discrimination, but we and our children are treated very poorly.” This opinion was also confirmed by the school student Telman Gasymov. This interview caused them serious difficulties in their later lives.

After the program was aired, a group of Armenians passing by the school noticed the teacher being interviewed on the school balcony and attacked the school. Despite the difficulties, the school staff somehow managed to rescue the teacher. After this incident, the teacher was soon forced to leave not only the school but also the Armenian SSR as a whole (Qurbanova, 2025).

Armenians, who sought to displace Azerbaijanis from their historical lands through lies and slander, were eventually able to realize their intentions. Slander was one of the most effective instruments they could use. Seeing that people were defenseless, they became even more cruel. The policy carried out throughout the 20th century and the conflicts that reached their peak in the late 1980s also began to manifest on the territory of Azerbaijan. For this purpose, Armenians living there were also mobilized. Thus, the unrest in Sumgait, carried out in February 1988, became a scene of violence planned by a group of Armenians with special skill. In an interview with the newspaper “Khalq,” deputy Sabina Salmanova noted that: “the events in Sumgait were a pre-planned scenario. On February 27-29, 1988, Armenians in Sumgait acted according to their own scenario. Thus, according to a pre-developed plan and with their direct participation, as a result of the mass unrest that took place in Sumgait on February 28-29, 26 Armenians and 6 Azerbaijanis were killed, and 87 out of 198 people who received various bodily injuries were hospitalized. In addition, during the

events, 60 apartments were looted, 14 cars were burned, 8 cars were damaged, and the windows of 16 commercial premises were broken. 17 vehicles of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Azerbaijan SSR were crushed. It should be especially noted that the houses in Sumgait were damaged specifically by Armenians who did not pay money to the organization ‘Krunk.’

S. Salmanova also stated that research and eyewitness testimonies confirm that the organizer of the events was Eduard Grigoryan, who had previously been convicted twice. It is no coincidence that Vladimir Kalinichenko, a former investigator for especially important cases under the USSR Prosecutor General’s Office, also confirmed in his interviews that Grigoryan was the leader of a criminal group: “Grigoryan was the leader of a criminal group. According to eyewitness accounts, before his arrest he was sometimes portrayed as a Lezgin, sometimes as a Dagestani, sometimes as an Avar—in short, as a representative of the North Caucasus.” Numerous eyewitness accounts also confirm that he personally killed 6 people and raped 3 women of Armenian origin. E. Grigoryan, sentenced by the court to 12 years of imprisonment, was transferred to Armenia to serve his sentence and was later released” (Salmanova, 2025).

For many years, evidence was discovered that this incident had been planned for terrorist purposes. After this incident, the fate of the oppressed people living in the Armenian SSR became even more tragic, and the process of their expulsion from their homeland continued at a rapid pace.

This became one of the key tools for concealing the failed policy of “perestroika” in Soviet Russia, especially that of Mikhail Gorbachev. Despite being aware of what was happening, Mikhail Gorbachev, ignoring the situation, tried to demonstrate complete indifference. For this reason, his warning to the Politburo on March 3, 1988, stating that it was wrong to ignore the emerging problems, was in fact a misleading instruction aimed at protecting his authority in public opinion (Waal, 2003). The essence of his position was reduced to the protection of Armenians living on the territory of Azerbaijan. In each of his speeches, under the guise of national policy, Mikhail Gorbachev consistently emphasized the need to protect Armenians.

In 1988, when the final stage of ethnic cleansing began, more than 170 villages in the Armenian SSR were inhabited only by Azerbaijanis, and in approximately 90 villages Azerbaijanis made up the majority of the population. The total number of settlements inhabited by Azerbaijanis exceeded 300. Just one year later, in 1989, 90 percent of the 3.5 million population of the Armenian SSR were Armenians, 5 percent were Azerbaijanis, 2 percent were Russians, and 3 percent were representatives of other nationalities (Əliyev, 2022).

The situation became even more acute in March–April. According to information from the Azerbaijani KGB for this period, by the beginning of April 1988,

6,000 Azerbaijani refugees had fled from Armenia (Qasımlı, 2015).

During the period of increasing tension, the First Secretaries of both the Azerbaijan SSR and the Armenian SSR were replaced. Abdurrahman Vezirov replaced Kamran Baghirov, and Suren Harutyunyan replaced Karen Demirchyan (Arutyunyan A. A., 2024). However, this change in leadership did not in any way alleviate the violence against Azerbaijanis; on the contrary, it intensified the anti-Turkic policy.

On June 15, 1988, at a session of the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR chaired by Suren Harutyunyan, a decision was made to approve the inclusion of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast of the Azerbaijan SSR into the Armenian SSR. He noted that if the Armenian people, with the support of the Armenian leadership, seriously demanded the inclusion of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast into the Armenian SSR, the leadership of the Soviet Union would not ignore it and would concede this territory to the Armenians (Арутюнян, 2009).

Conclusions.

This racist and extremist policy, carried out by

Armenia at the state level, is once again confirmed by a leaked video recording of a speech delivered by the country's former president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, on July 23, 1993. In this speech, Ter-Petrosyan describes the ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis from Armenia and the occupied Azerbaijani territories as their "historical achievement."

The fact that Levon Ter-Petrosyan, while serving as president, declared this policy of occupation and ethnic cleansing as a state policy pursued during his rule constitutes irrefutable evidence of Armenia's responsibility as a state for the crimes in question, as well as for their continuous and systematic commission (Zahid, 2025).

As a result of his rigid nationalist policy, the Azerbaijani population was completely expelled from the lands of Western Azerbaijan during his rule. Despite the "pleading" calls for peace from both the Soviet and Azerbaijani leadership against what had occurred, the ruling circles of the Armenian SSR fundamentally resolved the issue of expelling the local Azerbaijani population, showing no humanitarian initiative whatsoever.

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