

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2025.21.1.221>

## POGROMS IN GANDZAK (KIROVABAD) AS ANOTHER MANIFESTATION OF GENOCIDAL POLICY IN AZERBAIJAN

Iskuhi Avanesyan\*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2491-5058>

*Institute of History of NAS RA, Armenia*

In the context of the nationwide movement in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988, the anti-Armenian policy in Azerbaijan took the form of a large-scale and regular violence. The pogroms against Armenians organized on 27-29 February 1988 in the city of Sumgait (Azerbaijan) marked the beginning of a new stage of discriminatory policy against Armenians, which was to organize regular mass pogroms against Armenians. The next waves of Sumgayit crimes took place in November 1988 in Gandzak (Kirovabad) and nearby Armenian-populated areas, and in January 1990 in Baku.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the pogroms committed by Soviet Azerbaijan in 1988 against the Armenian population of Gandzak (Kirovabad) and their consequences. The research suggests that the pogroms organized against the Armenians in Gandzak (Kirovabad) and nearby settlements in 1988 were motivated by national hatred and aimed at the physical destruction of a specific nation, the Armenians. The research shows that the pogroms against Armenians in Gandzak (Kirovabad) were organized with the cooperation of local authorities and law enforcement agencies, and the aim of the pogroms was to kill and deport Armenians. The methodological basis of the article is the methods of analysis, research of facts, and comparison of various materials.

As a result of the study, we conclude that Azerbaijan committed a crime against the Armenian population of its republic during the Soviet years - ethnic cleansing, which was also a manifestation of Armenianophobia.

**Keywords:** Armenianophobia, intimidation, demonstrations, attack, violence, pogroms, self-defense, impunity.

### Introduction

Crimes against peace, humanity, and equality persist as significant threats to global peace and security in the modern world. Among these crimes are manifestations of xenophobia, notably the Armenianophobia prevalent in Azerbaijan, marked by its

\* iskuhi82@mail.ru

Received: 09.07.2024

Revised: 29.07.2024

Accepted: 13.08.2024



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brutality and intolerance. The aggressive state-sponsored promotion of Armenophobia in Azerbaijan commenced in the early years of the state's formation, but in the last decade, it has escalated to an unprecedented level of propaganda.

Thus, between 1988 and 1990, crimes against the Armenian people were orchestrated and executed in Sumgait, Baku, Gandzak (Kirovabad), and other Azerbaijani settlements under the high patronage of the Soviet authorities of Azerbaijan. These actions were not only intended to suppress the movement in Nagorno-Karabakh and intimidate the population but also stemmed from entrenched Armenophobia. It should be noted that the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan in 1921 marked the beginning of a prolonged phase in the Karabakh conflict. The struggle took on a nationwide character and evolved into a national movement in 1988, when the extraordinary session of the NKAO Regional Council of the 20th convocation decided to petition the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan SSR and the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR to transfer the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast from the Azerbaijan SSR to the Armenian SSR. This historical event led to mass rallies in the squares of cities in Armenia and Karabakh.

The impunity for the atrocities organized by Azerbaijan led to the perpetuation of further genocidal actions against Armenians in subsequent years.

The purpose of this article is to address the subsequent manifestations of Armenophobia in Azerbaijan in 1988, specifically focusing on the pogroms against Armenians living in Gandzak (Kirovabad). To achieve this objective, the following tasks have been outlined:

- To present the causes and consequences of the massacres organized in Gandzak (Kirovabad).
- To reveal the self-defense efforts of Armenians.
- To examine the results of the mischaracterization of the crime.

The study was conducted through a comprehensive examination and comparison of available facts. As a result of the research, we concluded that the 1988 pogroms in Gandzak (Kirovabad), organized to evict Armenians from Azerbaijan, are a direct continuation of the events in Sumgait and can be classified as acts of genocide.

### **Pogroms and other crimes committed against the Armenian population in Gandzak (Kirovabad)**

The anti-Armenian sentiment in Azerbaijan originated under the influence of Turkey's extremist nationalist policies, beginning with the establishment of the Azerbaijani state in 1918 and the efforts to create the so-called Azerbaijani people in the 1930s. This sentiment intensified during the Soviet era, particularly from the 1960s onwards, and continues its systematic expansion to the present day.

In response to the aspiration of Artsakh Armenians to realize their right to self-determination, a wave of pogroms against Armenians erupted in Azerbaijan, marked by

unprecedentedly brutal killings, violence, and looting. Thus, in February 1988, an anti-Armenian propaganda campaign began in Azerbaijan, marked by calls for the extermination of Armenians, which soon escalated into open violence and pogroms against the Armenian population. (Avanesyan, 2019, p. 5). The genocide of Armenians in Sumgait resulted in a syndrome of impunity, which facilitated the escalation of subsequent events. As a consequence, Armenians in various parts of Azerbaijan began to be attacked by Azerbaijani.

Following the pogroms of Armenians in Sumgait in February 1988, the next wave of large-scale attacks occurred in November of the same year in Gandzak (Kirovabad), the third-largest city of Soviet Azerbaijan (*historically known as Gandzak in the province of Utik of Great Armenia, called Kirovabad in the USSR and now Ganja*), as well as in the surrounding areas. In the fall, the situation sharply deteriorated, and starting from November 20, direct and open discussions about the forcible expulsion of Armenians from Azerbaijan were broadcast on Azerbaijan's state television.

Prior to the pogroms, rallies were organized in Baku from November 17 to December 5 of the same year, during which Azerbaijani nationalism became central to the so-called National Awakening Movement. (Encyclopedia, 2004, p. 9). Since then, the propaganda of hatred towards Armenian identity has been pervasive, manifesting itself at public events and gatherings, as well as in the media, and has continued unabated into the present.

On the eve of the pogroms, the total population of Gandzak (Kirovabad) amounted to 280 thousand people, 45 thousand of whom were Armenians.

Even after the Armenian-Tatar clashes of 1905 and the events of 1918-1920, Gandzak (Kirovabad) remained divided into Armenian and Azerbaijani quarters. *The Armenian quarter of Gandzak (Kirovabad) was established 70-80 years prior, following the Armenian-Tatar interethnic clashes of 1905-1906 and the Armenian pogroms of 1917-1920. At that time, it was decided that Armenians and Tatars (Azeris) would live in separate neighborhoods* (The Republic, 19 July 2018). The Armenian quarter of the city was separated from the Azerbaijani quarter by a river. The situation for Armenians in the city sharply escalated in February 1988, during the days of the Sumgait pogroms. According to various testimonies, around 200 young people, accompanied by the city police, marched through the Armenian quarter, breaking windows and doors of Armenian apartments and committing acts of physical violence against Armenians they encountered. This procession was halted only due to the resistance of engineering workers and the intervention of military personnel (Sharafyan, 2022, p. 81).

In the following months, demonstrations were held in various cities of Azerbaijan where Armenians were depicted as enemies, and discussions centered on the necessity of evicting Armenians from Azerbaijan. Under these conditions, on 21 November 1988, a rally was organized in Lenin Square in Gandzak (Kirovabad) with the participation of students and industrial workers, where they chanted "Death to

Armenians" and "Go away Armenians" (Parks M., Soviet Tells of Blocking Slaughter of Armenians, 27 November 1988). The demonstration included members of the party committee bureau of the city, the chairman of the city executive committee S.V. Mammadov, the first secretary of the Kyapaz district party organization of Gandzak (Kirovabad) city S. Huseynova, directors of large production complexes, the city prosecutor Fataliyev, numerous employees of the Department of Internal Affairs (police), and other responsible officials (Kharatyan, 2015, p. 87). Thus, after thorough preparations at the state level, a program of mass deportation of Armenians was launched in Gandzak (Kirovabad), leading to ethnic cleansing, looting, and pogroms against Armenians. Numerous catastrophic incidents were registered during this period.

Just as during the pogroms in Sumgayit and Gandzak (Kirovabad), the protesters were armed with the identical batons and stones (Kharatyan, 2015, p. 88). On the same day, armed protesters accompanied by the police moved to the Armenian quarter, beating Armenians they met on the way. After reaching the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator, the crowd started pogroms. However, having met resistance in the area of the village Karmir, they retreated, burning Armenian apartments along the way. In the evening of the same day, the Armenian quarter of Gandzak (Kirovabad) was surrounded by Soviet military units.

On the first day of the pogroms, Roza Melkumyan was killed in her house. Despite witness testimonies, her cause of death was later falsely documented as a heart attack on a forensic medical certificate. By November 22, the courtyard of St. Gregory the Illuminator in Gandzak (Kirovabad) was crowded with abused Armenians. The Armenians of Gandzak (Kirovabad) were given an ultimatum: leave the city by November 24 (The 30th Anniversary of the Deportation of Gandzak Armenians, 19 December 2019).

A number of tragic events unfolded during those days. Azerbaijani pogromists broke into a city nursing home, taking hostages and brutally murdering 12 elderly Armenians who had sought refuge there. Their dismembered bodies were discovered only in the summer of 1990 on the outskirts of the city. This crime was first reported in a February 1990 issue of the Moscow newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda." The report noted that a criminal investigation team from the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs confirmed the abduction of 12 elderly Armenians from the Kyapaz nursing home in Ganja (formerly Kirovabad) and their subsequent murder. On the bank of the Kur River, 40 kilometers northwest of Ganja, 12 buried corpses were found – 11 women and 1 man. Among the victims were elderly individuals. According to General Yevgeny Nechaev, deputy head of the city department of the USSR Interior Ministry, on the same day, 14 February, the military discovered six more corpses near the former Armenian village of Hajikend in Khanlar district, 20 km from Gandzak (Kirovabad). Only years later were the names of these martyrs revealed—in response to a question from Armenian deputies, Vladimir Kryuchkov, Chairman of the USSR KGB, reported their identities (Komsomolskaya Pravda, 15 February 1990).

For approximately two weeks, Azerbaijanis armed with various weapons held large processions through the streets, shouting threats against Armenians. Similar to the events in Sumgait, the pogromists knew the addresses of Armenian residents, particularly in the Azerbaijani part of the city, where Armenians lived scattered and were unable to organize collective defense. It was primarily in these areas that Armenian families, left unprotected, were attacked by mobs. The pogroms against Armenians in the city continued until 26 November, with local incidents persisting until all Armenians had left the city. The inaction of the city's law enforcement during the pogroms, and the treatment of Armenians in hospitals, further demonstrate that these organized crimes received state support.

In those days, local authorities declared their inability to protect Armenians and urged them to leave the country (Melik-Shahnazaryan, 1996, p. 12). When discussing evidence of police involvement in the pogroms and their failure to intervene, it raises the question of whether such uniform behavior among law enforcement representatives across different regions of Azerbaijan during the Soviet era could occur without explicit directives or instructions on the matter.

There is evidence of the organized eviction of Armenian patients by the hospital's chief physician, the deaths of three Armenian women in the hospital, and attempts to throw Armenian patients out of hospital windows (Sharafyan, 2022, p. 87). The healthcare system's failure to provide necessary medical care to Armenians and the interruption of essential services in the Armenian quarter created conditions aimed at the physical destruction of the Armenian population in the city.

Students, in particular, took an active part in the pogroms, as evidenced by the testimonies of some pogromists who were captured and interrogated by Armenians (Kirovabad (Gandzak), 1988. History of Pogroms and Self-Defence, 21.11.2021). At that time, the Azerbaijani media also showed anti-Armenian behaviour. Some Azerbaijani personalities, speaking on Baku television, called for the cleansing of Azerbaijan from Armenians.

It should be added that in 1988, beginning in November, there were attacks on the Armenian population in other settlements of the Azerbaijani SSR including Khanlar, Dashqesan, Ghazakh and others.

The events in Gandzak (Kirovabad) showed that the above-mentioned crimes were not isolated episodes of violence motivated by nationalism, but another manifestation of the Armenianophobic policy planned and implemented at the state level. As a result of this policy, thousands of ethnic Armenians were forcibly deported from Soviet Azerbaijan.

### **Self-defense of Gandzak (Kirovabad) Armenians**

In response to the threat of a recurrence of the Sumgait events in Gandzak (Kirovabad), an initiative group known as the Gandzak Committee was established on November 21 as the governing body for self-defense.

The leading members of the group included Ter-Sahak Sahakyan, Grisha Hovhanezov, H. Sargsyan, S. Hakobyan, N. Minasyan, Juletta Verdyan, K. Khachatryan, Al. Balasanyan, V. Asryan, M. Yesayan, V. Baytalov, and others (Encyclopedia, 2004, p. 9). Within a short period, the group set up watch posts in Armenian neighborhoods, organized the transportation of Armenians from Azerbaijani neighborhoods and nearby villages to zones under Armenian control, and provided them with basic necessities.

The center of defense was the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator, where a medical station for the wounded and a canteen for people displaced from the Azerbaijani quarter and left homeless began to function. Barricades on streets and crossroads were constructed using sandbags, metal beds, and barrels, while Molotov cocktails were made for defense. At night, groups of Armenians infiltrated Azerbaijani neighborhoods to rescue compatriots who remained there. Additionally, the self-defense group engaged in negotiations with representatives of the city authorities, police, and internal troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs. At the same time, self-defense districts were established, and their leaders were appointed. Grigory Oganezov, a council member and the organizer of Gandzak (Kirovabad) self-defense, testified that Azerbaijanis held daily rallies in Lenin Square, even at night around 10:00 or 11:00 PM, with voices calling to kill Armenians and expel them from Gandzak (Kirovabad). The number of rally participants gradually increased from 100-150 people to 1,000-2,000 people, with rallies becoming more frequent. Armenians also held rallies, speaking in Russian because there were many Russian officers present, and they wanted them to hear that they were not against the Soviet Union. Oganezov emphasized that without this self-defense, they would have suffered more casualties (1988 Gandzak self-defense through the eyes of an eyewitness, 02.02.2019).

The site of the first major clash between the opposing sides was the bridge over the Gandzak River, which divided the city into two parts: the Armenian quarter on the right and the Azerbaijani quarter on the left. Just as Armenians had been killed and brutally abused nine months earlier in Sumgait, there was an attempt to replicate this violence in Gandzak (Kirovabad). However, the difference in Gandzak (Kirovabad) was that the local Armenians primarily lived in the Armenian quarter and were able to organize their self-defense. The local Armenians understood the power of unity and organization, which enabled them to resist and confront a vicious mob, even On November 24, Azerbaijani assailants launched an offensive, attempting to cross the river bridge separating the Armenian quarter from the Azerbaijani part. Russian serviceman Ivan Chugunov testified that tens of thousands of people were threatened with brutal massacres. The mob attack was halted at the cost of the lives of five Soviet soldiers and one officer, who fell victim to the atrocities of the Azerbaijani mob (Kirovabad (Gandzak) 1988. History of Anti-Armenian Pogroms and Self-Defense, 05.03.2021) supported by the authorities.

About the events in Gandzak (Kirovabad), Russian serviceman Ivan Chugunov testifies that tens of thousands of people were threatened with brutal reprisals: The mob attack was halted at the cost of the lives of five Soviet soldiers and one officer, who fell victim to the atrocities of the Azerbaijani mob (Kirovabad (Gandzak) 1988. History of Anti-Armenian Pogroms and Self-Defense, 05.03.2021).

Notably, unlike in Sumgait, the Soviet army acted decisively in Kirovabad. The self-defense efforts of the Armenians in Gandzak (Kirovabad) continued until December 10. Despite this, the initiative group remained active until February of the following year. The situation was somewhat alleviated when additional army units were deployed to the city and surrounded the Armenian quarter. It was only through well-organized self-defense that a large-scale massacre was avoided. However, over the next few months, the entire Armenian population – about 45,000 Armenians (Rost, 1990, p. 124) – was forced to flee the city, leaving their homes and property behind and relocating to Armenia and Artsakh.

### **Consequences of the Gandzak (Kirovabad) crime**

The unprecedented violence committed by the Azerbaijani leadership against the Armenian population in Sumgait and Gandzak (Kirovabad) in 1988, followed by Baku in 1990, aimed to intimidate Armenians and force them to abandon their legitimate constitutional demands. This campaign sought to expel Armenians not only from their settlements but also from Artsakh as a whole.

In Azerbaijan, cases of persecution, beatings, torture, and killings of large numbers of the Armenian population have once again become commonplace. The Armenian pogroms in Gandzak (Kirovabad) served as a bloody bridge between the pogroms in Sumgait and Baku, highlighting their role in the chain of state-sponsored genocide against the Armenian people in Azerbaijan. During those days, hundreds of houses belonging to Armenians were set on fire in the Armenian quarter of Gandzak (Kirovabad) (Soviet Armenia, 26.01.1990).

According to the data provided by A. I. Kondratov, senior investigator of the Prosecutor's Office of the Soviet Union, head of the investigative group for the investigation of cases, 1628 reports of crimes were received in connection with what happened in Gandzak (Kirovabad) between 21 and 26 November, of which 1141 reported the destruction of flats and houses (Sharafyan, 2022, p. 92).

There are contradictory data on the number of Armenians killed in the city. According to data provided by the initiative group, between November 21 and 27, 10 people were killed; as of November 30, 63 were severely beaten and wounded, and 250 people received first aid. The number of missing Armenians reached 55, some of whom were later found. According to international sources, 130 Armenians were killed (Sharafian, 2022, p. 93).

During the same period, attacks on the Armenian population occurred in other settlements of the Azerbaijan SSR. The Armenian populations of Mingechevir, Shamkhor, Khanlar, Dashkesan, Vardashen, and Sheki were particularly targeted en masse. Many catastrophic incidents were recorded during this time. The pogroms of Armenians in Gandzak (Kirovabad) and its neighboring districts significantly impacted the emigration of the Armenian population from Azerbaijan.

Forcibly displaced Armenians were demanded to sign statements asserting that they were leaving the city voluntarily and had no property claims. In the first days of December, the initiative group managed to convince the Armenians of the city to halt the exodus. However, the catastrophic earthquake that occurred on December 7 in the northwestern part of Armenia made the Armenians of Gandzak (Kirovabad) even more vulnerable. Under such circumstances, a meeting of the initiative group was held in the churchyard on December 14, during which the speakers suggested that those gathered seek individual solutions for exchanging or moving flats. They also expressed readiness to assist Armenians in difficult situations (Kharatyan, 2015, p. 77). Perhaps the saddest consequence of the events in Gandzak (Kirovabad) was the complete eviction of Armenians from the city and neighboring settlements.

After the forced departure of Armenians, the city underwent a process of Turkification. In Gandzak, which was again renamed Ganja, and in the surrounding areas, as well as in all settlements of Azerbaijan, state programs were implemented to eliminate all traces of Armenian presence. The pogroms against Armenians in Gandzak (Kirovabad) were not adequately addressed by the political and judicial-legal systems of the USSR, and the organizers of the pogroms went unpunished. The Armenian Communist Party issued a statement on the events in Sumgait, characterizing them and subsequent events as a direct continuation of the Sumgait pogroms, constituting acts of genocide (Minasyan, 2014, p. 182).

The organizers of these atrocities were never brought to justice by the international community. And Azerbaijan not only rejected the crime committed against Armenians in Sumgait, Gandzak (Kirovabad) and then in Baku, but also falsified it by accusing Armenians of carrying out the so-called genocide of Azerbaijanis.

It was this impunity that gave rise to new crimes against the Armenian people.

## Conclusions

Summarizing the issue under consideration, we have come to the following conclusions:

1. *Deep historical roots of national hatred:* The inculcation of national hatred towards Armenians in the Azerbaijan SSR had a history of decades. The policy of Armenianophobia in Azerbaijan and the accompanying societal sentiments were not formed merely as a result of the territorial conflict around Nagorno-

Karabakh. Instead, these discriminatory attitudes and policies were long-standing, and the Karabakh movement emerged as a response to this ongoing national discrimination against Armenians.

2. *Systematic pogroms against Armenians*: The pogroms and other crimes committed against Armenians in Gandzak (Kirovabad) and the surrounding settlements were directed against the entire Armenian population living in Azerbaijan. These acts of violence were clearly premeditated and organized, driven by national hatred. They were carried out with the at least tacit approval, if not outright support, of the law enforcement agencies and authorities of Azerbaijan.
3. *Qualification of crimes against humanity*: If the international legal platform, despite the evident anti-Armenian nature of the pogroms, does not recognize that the threshold for proving the specific intent of genocide has been met, the events of 1988-1990 should at least be qualified as crimes against humanity committed through extermination.
4. *Role of Gandzak's self-defense*: The self-defense efforts in Gandzak (Kirovabad) played a crucial role in saving the overwhelming majority of the Armenian population of Gandzak from physical annihilation. These organized efforts allowed not only for the protection of those within the city but also facilitated the safe relocation of residents from nearby Armenian villages to Armenia and Artsakh, thus preventing further loss of life.
5. *Continued policy of intimidation and ethnic cleansing*: In the 21st century, under conditions of complete impunity, Azerbaijan continued its policy of intimidation against the indigenous Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. This included an inhuman blockade, starvation, and ultimately, the forcible eviction of Armenians from Artsakh through ethnic cleansing in September 2023, carried out despite legally binding decisions by the UN International Court.

### Conflict of interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

### Ethical standards

The author affirms this research does not involve human subjects.

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**ԳԱՆԶԱԿԻ (ԿԻՐՈՎԱԲԱԴ) ԶԱՐԴԵՐԸ՝ ՈՐՊԵՍ ԱՌՐԲԵԶԱՆՈՒՄ  
ՑԵՂԱՍՊԱՆԱԿԱՆ ՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ  
ՀԵՐԹԱԿԱՆ ԴՐՄԵՎՈՐՈՒՄ**

**Իսկուսի Ավանեսյան**

1988թ. ԼՂԻՄ-ում ծայր առած համազգային շարժման համատեքստում Աղբեջանում տարվող հայատյաց քաղաքականությունը լայնածավալ ու կանոնավոր բռնությունների տեսք ստացավ: 1988թ. փետրվարի 27-29-ին Աղբեջանի Սումգայիթ քաղաքում հայերի նկատմամբ կազմակերպված ջարդերով տրվեց հայերի դեմ տարվող խտրական քաղաքականության նոր փուլի մեկնարկը, որով ենթադրվում էր հայերի դեմ կանոնավոր զանգվածային ջարդերի կազմակերպում: Սումգայիթի ոճագործության հաջորդ ալիքները տեղի ունեցան 1988թ նոյեմբերին Գանձակում (Գիրովարադ) և հարակից հայաբնակ վայրերում, 1990թ. հունվարին՝ Բաքվում:

Սույն հոդվածի նպատակն է վեր հանել 1988թ. Խորհրդային Աղբեջանի կողմից Գանձակի հայ բնակչության նկատմամաբ իրագործած ջարդերը և դրանց հետևանքները:

Իրականացված հետազոտության արդյունքում կարելի է պնդել, որ 1988թ. Գանձակում ու հարակից բնակավայրերում հայերի հանդեպ կազմակերպած ջարդերը իրականացվել են ազգային ատելության շարժադիրով, ուղղված են եղել կոնկրետ ազգի՝ հայերի նկատմամբ ֆիզիկական ոչչացմանը:

Հոդվածում բերված փաստերը վկայում են, որ Գանձակում հայերի ջարդերը եղել են կազմակերպված՝ տեղական իշխանությունների, իրավապահ մարմինների համագործակցության պայմաններում, իսկ ջարդերի նպատակը եղել է ազգությամբ հայերի սպանությունը և բռնագաղթը:

Հոդվածի մեթոդաբանական հիմքը կազմում են վերլուծության, փաստերի քննության, տարբեր նյութերի համադրման մեթոդները:

Հետազոտության արդյունքում հանգում ենք այն եզրակացության, որ Աղբեջանը խորհրդային տարիներին իր հանրապետության հայ բնակչների նկատմամբ իրագործեց ոճագործություն՝ էթնիկ գտում, որը նաև հայատյացության դրսւորում էր:

**Բանալի բառեր՝ հայատյացություն, ահարեկել, ցույցեր, հարձակում, բռնություններ, ջարդեր, ինքնապաշտպանություն, անպատճելիություն:**