

= Battle of Kalbajar =

The Battle of Kelbajar took place in March and April 1993 , during the Nagorno @-@ Karabakh War . It resulted in the capture by Armenian military forces of the Kelbajar region of Azerbaijan .

Kelbajar lay outside the contested enclave of the former Nagorno @-@ Karabakh Autonomous Oblast , but within Nagorno @-@ Karabakh geographic region of Azerbaijan , that Armenian and Azerbaijani forces had been fighting over for five years . The offensive was the first time Armenian forces from Nagorno @-@ Karabakh had advanced beyond the boundaries of the enclave . Kelbajar rayon , located between Armenia and the western border of former NKAO , was composed of several dozen villages and its provincial capital , also named Kelbajar . According to Russian sources mountain troops from the 128th Regiment (7th Russian Army) stationed in Armenia participated in the seizure of Kelbajar in a blitzkrieg operation . After initial heavy resistance , the Azerbaijani defenses quickly collapsed and the provincial capital fell on April 3 , 1993 . Kelbajar is currently under the control of the Nagorno @-@ Karabakh Republic .

= = Background = =

An autonomous oblast during the Soviet era under the jurisdiction of the Azerbaijan SSR , Nagorno @-@ Karabakh 's population was approximately 75 % ethnic Armenian . As the Soviet Union 's disintegration approached during the late 1980s , the enclave 's government expressed its desire to secede and unite with the neighboring Armenian SSR . By 1991 , Armenia and Azerbaijan were independent countries but the nascent Nagorno @-@ Karabakh Republic remained internationally unrecognized despite its government 's declaration of independence . Small @-@ scale violence had flared up between the two ethnic groups in February 1988 but soon escalated to use of Soviet @-@ built tanks , helicopters , and fighter bombers appropriated by both sides after the collapse of the Soviet Union .

On May 9 , 1992 , Armenian forces captured the mountain stronghold of Shusha but remained on the defensive until the next year . Fighting between Armenians and Azeris continued in other parts of the enclave , including Lachin , Khojavend , and Aghdara . However , nearly all offensives launched by Azerbaijan failed or could not hold on to captured territory . By the spring of 1993 the Azerbaijani military , which had the upper hand in the initial stages of the war , had been largely reduced to unorganized and incoherent fighting groups . By March 1993 the fighting had shifted to west and south of Karabakh .

Kelbajar was a raion surrounded by several canyons and an elevated mountain range known as the Murov Mountains . In the attack , Armenian forces from four directions , including Armenia proper , assaulted and captured an area of over 1 @, @ 900 square kilometers . This linked Armenia with Nagorno @-@ Karabakh and opened a second " corridor " for Armenia to send aid through .

= = The region of Kelbajar = =

= = Rationale for its taking = =

Kelbajar is located between Armenia and the western boundary of former Nagorno @-@ Karabakh Autonomous Oblast . Situated between a steep mountain range , its wartime population of approximately 45 @, @ 000 ? 60 @, @ 000 was primarily made up of ethnic Azeris and Kurds . Throughout the war , the Armenians of Nagorno @-@ Karabakh had been voicing their discontent over seventy years of Azeri rule and said that they were defending themselves from Azerbaijan 's aggression . Their capture of the towns of Khojaly and Shusha stemmed from security concerns in silencing artillery bombardments positioned in those towns , albeit the capture of the former resulted in the Khojaly massacre . They stated that Karabakh had historically been an Armenian region and that their claims for territory did not extend beyond its boundaries .

In March 1993 , military incursions by Azeri forces and artillery barrages were reported to have

been coming from the region , prompting military leaders to announce an offensive against the rayon . However , a different reason was given by the Armenians ' most successful commander of the conflict , Monte Melkonian . According to Melkonian , the commander of the southern front in Martuni (Khojavend) , the decision to take the town was a matter of certainty rather than choice . He stated , " This is a historical issue ... of course this is historical Armenia ... And we 'll vindicate that reality [to the Azeris] with our guns . Unfortunately ! It would be nice if the Azeris would understand that reality is reality , agree and say OK , it 's yours , and that 's that . " Questioned on the possibility of a large expulsion of civilians if the region was captured , Melkonian responded , " A lot of blood has been spilled on both sides ... The emotions are high and that isn 't conducive to living together in near or medium future . "

= = The battle = =

= = = Heavy resistance = = =

Defeats in late March already had the Azeri military evacuating civilians out of the region to the northern town of Yevlakh and Azerbaijan 's second largest city , Ganja . The Armenians had assembled a force of several hundred men to enter Kelbajar from four different directions : Melkonian 's own detachment of tanks and troops from Karabakh would attack from the southeast , one fifty @-@ man unit from the town of Vardenis , Armenia would enter from the west ; the third force would attack from the village of Aghdaban in the north , and the primary attacking force would come from the village of Narinclar .

The battered village of Charektar in Kelbajar had already seen extensive fighting in earlier weeks and was reinforced by both Azerbaijani and foreign fighters as the Armenian offensive commenced on March 27 . However , instead of launching a simultaneous attack , only the units in Aghdaban and Narinclar moved out . Melkonian 's armored column did not move out until later on and his units faced tenacious resistance on an embankment of entrenched defenses where his forces were forced to retreat . The troops in Vardenis began their assault shortly thereafter but their advance was slowed since they had to trek through the snowy passes of the Murov Mountains .

On March 28 , Melkonian 's forces counterattacked Charektar and an eight @-@ hour battle ensued until his forces were able to break through the defenses . The stretched out Azeri forces deployed through the region allowed them to advance twenty @-@ nine kilometers , reaching the Tartar River on March 31 . Within another twenty kilometers of his forces ' positions was the Kelbajar 's namesake capital , a crucial road intersection that led to Lachin and the village of Zulfugarli . By March 29 , Armenian forces encircled the town of Kelbajar . A journalist reported seeing intensive bombardment of Kelbajar , including Grad artillery , originating from Armenia proper .

= = = Melkonian 's advance = = =

The following two days saw a massive refugee column of cars and trucks " laden with bundles ... bumper to bumper " trudging through the intersection . Melkonian ordered his forces to halt their advance until the remnants of the column dried up in the early afternoon of April 1 . Assessing that most refugees had left , he ordered his units to advance and sent a detachment to guard a vital tunnel leading south towards Zulfugarli . While his troops had assumed that most civilians had left Kelbajar , they encountered a GAZ @-@ 52 transport truck in the tunnel and , thinking it was a military vehicle , fired and destroyed it with rocket @-@ propelled grenades and assault rifles . As they observed the wreck of the vehicle , the troops realized they had taken out a vehicle filled entirely with civilians : twenty @-@ five Kurd and Azeri kolkhoz workers . Four of them , including the driver of the truck and his daughter , were killed . The rest were ordered by Melkonian to be taken to a hospital in Karabakh 's capital of Stepanakert ; however , as many as eleven of them died .

After the Zulufgarli incident , his forces pushed forward and reached another vital intersection leading to Ganja , fifteen kilometers away from the capital . Civilians in Kelbajar continued to be evacuated by both air and the through the intersection and Melkonian halted his advance by a further forty hours to allow the traffic column to move through . On April 1 , his forces issued a radio message to the governor of the region , instructing his forces to leave the capital . An ultimatum was placed until 2 pm of the following day . Identified by his radio codename , " Khan " , the governor responded and stated , " We 're never going to leave ... we 'll fight to the end . "

= = = Final push = = =

As the deadline passed on April 2 , Melkonian 's armor entered the intersection and encountered a line of Azeri tanks and infantry . A firefight ensued but lasted for only several minutes as the defense line was soon battered and destroyed . Many of the Azeri forces were ill @-@ prepared for the attack as Melkonian noted when pointing out to their lack of equipment . Despite having his force reduced down to a total of sixty @-@ eight men , a force too weak to take the capital , he ordered them to continue forward .

By April 3 , the Armenian forces had encircled the capital and resistance had weakened . Azeri commander Suret Huseynov and his 709th brigade , which had been tasked to defending the Murov Mountains , had retreated to Ganja after political and military problems began to unravel upon in the battlefield . An account of the war @-@ weariness afflicting the inhabitants of the town was described by Melkonian 's elder brother , Markar :

A downcast enemy soldier with a bandaged hand and a burned leg rides up on a donkey and surrenders . An old man in a faded jacket studded with medals from the Great Patriotic War weeps before leaving his home forever . An elderly woman in a black yazma , waving a torn sheet on a stick , greets Monte and Abo [his radio operator] in Azeri Turkish , then suddenly kneels to the ground to kiss Monte 's feet . Surprised and awkward , Monte tries to pull back . Yok ! he shouts , " No ! " He reflexively bends over and brings the woman up by her arm . " What are you doing ? " he asks in Anatolian Turkish , " Don 't ever do that ! " ... [Melkonian] found [in the capital] a row of neat but bleak storefronts and a few chickens . The townsfolk ... had not bothered to grab the chickens as provisions for the road . The only other sign of life was a BMP idling in the middle of the road through the center of town .

Although his contingent did not reach in time for the fighting , the city 's capital was taken . Aside from some farm life , the town had been largely abandoned . The taking of the region marked a continuous swath of territory held by Armenians stretching from Karabakh to Armenia proper , a total of 3 @,@ 000 square kilometers . In the retreat through the Omar Pass of the Murov mountain range , many Azeri refugees froze to death . With the last helicopters leaving on April 1 , they were forced to walk through the heavy snow at freezing temperatures . Nearly 39 @,@ 000 civilians were processed into the camps at Yevlakh and Dashkesen with as many as 15 @,@ 000 unaccounted for . Four Azerbaijani MI @-@ 8 helicopters ferrying refugees and wounded out of the conflict zone crashed , the last of which was hit by Armenian forces . Human Rights Watch findings concluded that during the Kalbajar offensive Armenian forces committed numerous violations of the rules of war , including forcible exodus of civilian population , indiscriminate fire and hostage @-@ taking .

= = Political ramifications = =

The offensive provoked international criticism against both the Armenians in Karabakh and the Republic . Vafa Guluzade , the chief adviser to then president of Azerbaijan , Abulfaz Elchibey alleged that the region was taken too easily because help arrived from the Russian 128th Regiment (7th Russian Army) stationed in Armenia . This charge was refuted by the operation 's commander , Gurgen Daribaltayan , and others since " Moscow [i.e. , the Russian government] was not in total control of Armenian military operations . " Armenia 's western neighbor , Turkey halted humanitarian aid coming through its borders . The United States also condemned the offensive , issuing a " sharp rebuke " and sending an accompanying letter to the Armenian government .

On April 30 , 1993 , Turkey and Pakistan co -sponsored United Nations Security Council Resolution 822 which called for Armenians in the region to withdraw immediately from Kelbajar and other areas of Azerbaijan . Turkey 's President Turgut Özal called for military intervention on Azerbaijan 's side and set forth on a tour of Turkic former Soviet republics on April 14 . (Özal would die of a heart attack just three days later) . Iran also condemned the offensive since many refugees in Azerbaijan were fleeing south towards its borders . In an attempt to end the hostilities , U.S. , Russia and Turkey reiterated the call for withdrawal of Armenian troops from Kelbajar region of Azerbaijan on May 6 , which would be followed by formal peace talks .