

= Operation Ring =

Operation Ring (Russian : ????????? « ?????? » , Operatsia Koltso ; Armenian : « ????? » ?????????????? , Oghak gortso?ut 'yun) , known in Azerbaijan as the Chaykend Operation (Azerbaijani : Çaykənd təmliyyatı) was the codename for the May 1991 military operation conducted by Soviet Internal Security Forces and OMON units in the northern regions (Shahumyan , Shusha , Martakert and Hadrut) of Nagorno @-@ Karabakh Autonomous Oblast of the Azerbaijan SSR and in a number of bordering regions of the Armenian SSR (Noyemberyan , Goris and Tavush) . Officially dubbed a " passport checking operation , " the ostensible goal launched by the Soviet Union 's internal and defense ministries was to disarm Armenian militia detachments that had been organized in " [illegally] armed formations . " The operation involved the use of ground troops who accompanied a complement of military vehicles , artillery and helicopter gunships to be used to root out the self @-@ described Armenian fedayeen .

However , contrary to their stated objectives , Soviet troops and the predominantly Azerbaijani soldiers in the AzSSR OMON and army forcibly uprooted Armenians living in the 24 villages strewn across Shahumyan to leave their homes and settle elsewhere in Nagorno @-@ Karabakh or in the neighboring Armenian SSR . British journalist Thomas de Waal has described Ring as the Soviet Union 's first and only civil war . Some authors have also described the actions of the joint Soviet and Azerbaijani force as ethnic cleansing . The military operation was accompanied by systematic and gross human rights abuses .

= = Background = =

The Nagorno @-@ Karabakh movement that had originally begun in Armenia during the late 1980s called for the Karabakh enclave to be united with that country , despite it being behind the borders of Azerbaijan . With a population that was 75 percent Armenian , official petitions were sent by Armenian leaders to the Soviet government in Moscow in order to address the issue but were rejected by General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev . The demands to annex the region came in the middle of Gorbachev 's reform policies , Glasnost and Perestroika . First implemented in 1985 , when Gorbachev came into power , the liberalization of political and economical constraints in the Soviet Union gave birth to numerous nationalist groups in the different Soviet republics who insisted that they be given the right to secede and form their own independent countries .

By late 1989 , the Communist Parties of the republics of Armenia , Azerbaijan , Georgia , Estonia , Latvia and Lithuania had largely been weakened in power . In Nagorno @-@ Karabakh , the intercommunal relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis had worsened due to violence and pogroms . Gorbachev 's policies hastened the collapse of the Soviet system and many Armenians and Azerbaijanis sought protection by arming themselves with Soviet military weaponry . His preoccupation in dealing with the numerous demands by the other republics saw the disappearance of vast amounts of assault rifles , rocket @-@ propelled grenades , and other small arms munitions stored in caches throughout Armenia and Azerbaijan .

Foreseeing the inevitable conflict that would unfold after the Soviet Union disintegrated , Armenian volunteers from both the Republic and the Armenian diaspora flocked to the enclave and formed detachments of several dozen men . Gorbachev deemed these detachments and others in Karabakh as illegal entities and banned them in a decree in July 1990 . Despite this promulgation , these groups continued to exist and actively fought against Azerbaijani " special @-@ purpose " militia brigades . The volatility of the attacks led the Soviet government to position military units in the Armenian capital of Yerevan and along the five @-@ kilometer gap between the Armenian border and Nagorno @-@ Karabakh .

Shahumyan had a population of about 20 @, @ 000 , of whom 85 percent were ethnic Armenian . While the Armenian volunteers pledged to defend and protect civilians living in Shahumyan from Azerbaijani incursions , many of them were told to stay away by the inhabitants themselves to save the villages and the entire district from violence .

= = Origins of planning = =

It is widely believed that Operation Ring was conceived by Soviet authorities in order to intimidate the Armenians . The Armenian SSR had boycotted the All @-@ Union referendum , though Armenian sources allege that Baku had planned measures against the Armenians long before the referendum . Although the execution of Operation Ring was not proposed to Soviet officials until mid @-@ April 1991 , Mutalibov insisted in an interview that such plans had originally been formulated as early as 1989 .

Viktor Krivopuskov , who visited Karabakh in 1990 , writes :

Early in November 1990 our fact @-@ finding group got hold of secret materials of the authorities of the Azerbaijan SSR on the total deportation of the Armenian population from the villages of Khanlar and of former Shahumyan regions . At the session of the Supreme Council of Azerbaijan SSR , which took place in February 1991 , the plan of deportations of the Armenian population from Azerbaijan was actually approved .

The Russian human rights organization Memorial reports the expulsion of civilians in this region as early as 1989 @-@ 90 , when the inhabitants of the Kushi @-@ Armavir , Azat , and Kamo were forced to abandon their homes . The Azerbaijani OMON , a special paramilitary unit known as the " black berets " , had similarly been engaged in various " acts of harassment against Armenian villages in the enclave , including raids on collective farms and the destruction of ... communal facilities . "

In 1991 , Gorbachev set 17 March as the date of the All @-@ Union referendum that the republics would take part in to decide the fate of the Soviet Union . Offering to grant greater autonomy to the individual republics , Armenia , Georgia , along with several other republics , vowed not to take part in the referendum and instead seek independence from Moscow . Meanwhile , Azerbaijan 's Communist Party head , Ayaz Mutalibov , continued to support Gorbachev 's attempts to keep the Union together and took part in the referendum ; with 92 percent of voters agreeing to remain a part of the Soviet Union . Mutalibov 's staunch loyalty to Gorbachev allowed him to garner backing from Moscow and , in effect , he now had the support to discourage the aspirations of Armenians desiring to unite with Armenia or to force them to leave the region altogether .

The operation 's codename , Ring , referred to the encirclement of the towns of Getashen and Martunashen by the Soviet MVD and armed forces . A date in late April was chosen for the commencement of the operation , which called for Soviet troops to surround the towns and search the villages for both illegally procured weapons and Armenian guerrilla fighters . Reacting to the growing violence , Gorbachev had also assigned units of the Soviet 4th Army 's predominantly Azerbaijani 23rd Motorized Rifle Division , stationed along the Armenian @-@ Azerbaijani border , to serve as a buffer force . The 23rd Division and other elements of the Fourth Army were selected along with the Azerbaijani OMON to take part in Ring .

= = Implementation = =

= = = First operation = = =

On 30 April , the Soviet troops and OMON converged toward Getashen and Martunashen , which were approximately twenty @-@ five kilometers north of Karabakh , meeting little , if any , resistance on the way . Accompanying the normal ground troops were an assortment of tanks , armored personnel carriers , artillery and attack helicopters . While approaching the villages in Shahumyan , the military would announce their intended actions with a loudspeaker and called for the inhabitants to display proof of their citizenship (known as a " passport @-@ regime " check) in an effort to root out the fedayeen groups led by Tatul Krpeyan , a local schoolteacher . The following ultimatum was issued to residents in a village in Shahumyan :

Within one hour , all citizens of this village will be required to go through a passport regime . Comrade citizens , we implore you to show no resistance to the MVD . Should you choose to ignore

this warning , the MVD will take the strictest measures to defend itself . I repeat , we will use the strictest measures to defend ourselves , the strictest measures . We will be waiting for you at the location of this loudspeaker one hour from now .

However , this served only as a pretext as civilians were subjected to grueling interrogations and many were taken out of their homes and beaten . The troops also arrested several adult males , often without any conclusive evidence , who they accused of being members of the militia . Additionally , if there was no response by the villagers to the ultimatum issued by the troops , an artillery barrage was launched above and over the village itself to further intimidate the civilians .

After Soviet units completed the operation in the towns , they ordered a full @-@ scale deportation of all resident Armenians in the two towns , helicoptering them to Nagorno @-@ Karabakh 's capital , Stepanakert , and later to Armenia proper . Supplanting the previous occupants were Azerbaijani refugees who had fled from Armenia to Azerbaijan during the previous three years of fighting . Initial public outcry denounced the launching of the operation as the Soviet and Azerbaijani governments went on to defend it , stating that the villagers of Shahumyan were providing aid and harboring the militias in their homes . The Armenian government , along with the Soviet media , including Pravda and the Moskovskiye Novosti , condemned the operation and described the acts of violence carried out by the army and OMON as excessive and unnecessary ; the operation continued until the first week of May .

= = = Second operation = = =

On 7 May , a second operation was conducted by the same units , this time in a town in the northern Armenian town of Voskepar . Under the same pretext as the previous operation , the joint forces entered Armenia with tanks and other armored vehicles , claiming that militia units were staging attacks from that area into Azerbaijan . The operation was conducted in a similar manner but with deadlier results . In addition to the arbitrary arrests of twenty men in towns surrounding Voskepar , a bus carrying thirty Armenian policemen was attacked by elements of the 23rd Division , killing eleven of the officers and arresting the rest . The OMON units also took part in razing and looting the outlying villages around Voskepar . Residents were similarly forced to leave their homes and thus ceded them after signing a form which stated that they were leaving their homes at their own volition .

The second operation provoked further anger from the Armenian government , which saw the operation as an encroachment against its sovereignty . Armenia 's president , Levon Ter @-@ Petrosyan claimed that the Soviet government was exacting retribution against his country for not taking part in the All @-@ Union referendum by depopulating the towns . Reacting to media reports of unprovoked atrocities by the OMON , four members of the Russian parliament intervened on behalf of the Armenians , arriving in Voskepar on 15 May . Anatoly Shabad , the leading parliamentary member , secured the return of the captured Armenian policemen as the Soviet forces desisted from continuing out the rest of the operation . In total , five thousand Armenians were deported from Getashen and Martunashen , with an estimated 20 or 30 of them killed . Krpeyan was killed in fighting with Soviet troops in Getashen .

= = Human rights abuses and legality = =

Human rights organizations documented a wide number of human rights violations and abuses committed by Soviet and Azerbaijani forces . These included forced deportations of civilians , unlawful killings , torture , kidnapping harassment , rape and the wanton seizure or destruction of property . Despite fierce protests , no measures were taken either to prevent the human rights abuses or to punish the perpetrators . Approximately 17 @,@ 000 Armenians living in twenty @-@ three of Shahumyan 's villages were deported out of the region .

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Professor Richard Wilson of Harvard University , who presented a report to the First International Andrei Sakharov Conference , noted that his fact @-@ finding group did not find any " evidence , in spite of diligent enquiry , that anyone recently deported from the village of Getashen left it voluntarily . " The delegation of the International Andrei Sakharov Conference concluded that :

Azerbaijani officials , including President of Azerbaijan Ayaz Mualibov and the second secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan Victor Polyanichko , keep on approving these deportations , presenting them as a voluntary resetting of the inhabitants of NKAO . However , we have irrefutable evidence proving that these actions were carried out with a brutal use of force and weaponry , which led to murders , mutilations and the loss of personal property .

The final report of the Committee on Human Rights of the Supreme Council of the RSFSR also concluded that the documents signed under the use of force cannot serve as evidence of voluntary departure of residents . The United States Congress (17 May 1991) and the European Parliament (14 March 1991) likewise passed resolutions condemning the Operation Ring .

= = Aftermath = =

On 4 July , Gorbachev declared that the region was stabilizing , and announced an end to the operation . In both military and strategic terms , Operation Ring was a failure . The aim of disarming the Armenian volunteer groups was never achieved . Despite the presence of the helicopter gunships and armored vehicles , the militiamen managed to elude and evade capture . Ring , however , managed to reinforce the ethnic divide between Armenians and Azerbaijanis , " virtually precluding , according to Michael Croissant " the possibility of further coexistence between the peoples within " Azerbaijan 's borders . Gorbachev and other Soviet officials maintained that Ring was necessary to prevent the region from further deteriorating into chaos and as the militias ' presence contravened the July 1990 presidential decree . According to Shabad , however , the operation 's objectives were impractical and Gorbachev had been misled on the general situation in Karabakh :

Evidently Mutalibov had persuaded Gorbachev that there was a powerful partisan army of fedayeen there and that its actions would lead to the secession of Armenian populated territories from Azerbaijan , that they were bandits and that they had to be liquidated . And Gorbachev ? it was a great stupidity on his part of course ? agreed to this operation . He probably understands now that an operation of that sort was doomed , it was impossible . We see in Chechnya that a war against partisans is an empty undertaking .

Armenia fiercely contested the legality of the operation and within two months declared its independence and seceded from the Soviet Union . Within several months , the fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia worsened and precipitated the open @-@ phased segment of the Nagorno @-@ Karabakh War .

= = In popular culture = =

A series of documentary films titled " Wounds of Karabakh " (1994) were shot by Bulgarian journalist Tsvetana Paskaleva . The documentaries , shot during different phases of the operation Ring , give a detailed account of the events .

In June 2006 , the film Destiny (Armenian : ????????? ; Tchakatagir) premiered in Yerevan and Stepanakert . The film stars and is written by Gor Vardanyan and is a fictional account of the events revolving around Operation Ring . It cost \$ 3 @. @ 8 million to make , the most expensive film ever before in the country , and is the first such film made about the Nagorno @-@ Karabakh War .