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22nd ANNIVERSARY of THE BLACK JANUARY

On January 20, the people of Azerbaijan commemorate a tragedy, which became a turning point in the nation's struggle for independence from the former Soviet Union and one of the most tragic events in its recent history.

On the night of January 19-20, 1990, the Soviet Army stormed Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, which was then a part of the former USSR. As a result, 130 civilians were killed, over 700 wounded, and still hundreds more were rounded up and detained. Soviet tanks were running over cars carrying senior citizens, shooting at random civilians in the streets and the people looking out of the windows of their apartments, as well as ambulances carrying the victims. The purpose of the invasion, as it was acknowledged by then - USSR Defence Minister Dmitri Yazov, was to prevent the collapse of the Communist regime and to crush Azerbaijan's bid for independence.

In a report titled "Black January in Azerbaijan", Human Rights Watch put the events into a larger perspective: "the violence used by the Soviet Army on the night of January 19-20 was so out of proportion to the resistance offered by Azerbaijanis as to constitute an exercise in collective punishment. The punishment inflicted on Baku by Soviet soldiers may have been intended as a warning to nationalists, not only in Azerbaijan, but in the other Republics of the Soviet Union."

The Soviet attack against innocent civilians in Azerbaijan followed massacres in other Soviet republics, including Kazakhstan in 1986 and Georgia in 1989 and was tragically replicated one year later in Lithuania, although the brutality of the "Black January" tragedy was the biggest exercise in collective punishment by reactionary forces of the Communist Party.

In 2007, The Honourable Peter Mackay, then Foreign Minister of Canada sent a letter to the Federation of Azerbaijani Societies of Canada on the occasion of the commemoration of January 20 tragedy. He said historical notes on the January 20 show that armless civilians were massacred by security forces of the former Soviet Union. "These events are one of the black pages of Azerbaijani history. The victims of the January 20 event, who demonstrated heroism for the independence of the country, should not be forgotten," he said.

The terrible event remembered by this commemoration was an atrocity--but it also gave birth to a hope that led eventually to independence and freedom the following year. Twenty two years later, there is no sign of the Black January commemoration declining in significance. Millions of Azerbaijanis and friends of Azerbaijan visit Martyrs' Alley in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku on January 20th to pay tribute to the memory of their compatriots who laid their lives for the country's independence. They lay flowers on the graves of the victims and the nation's commitment to independence, democracy, and freedom is renewed.