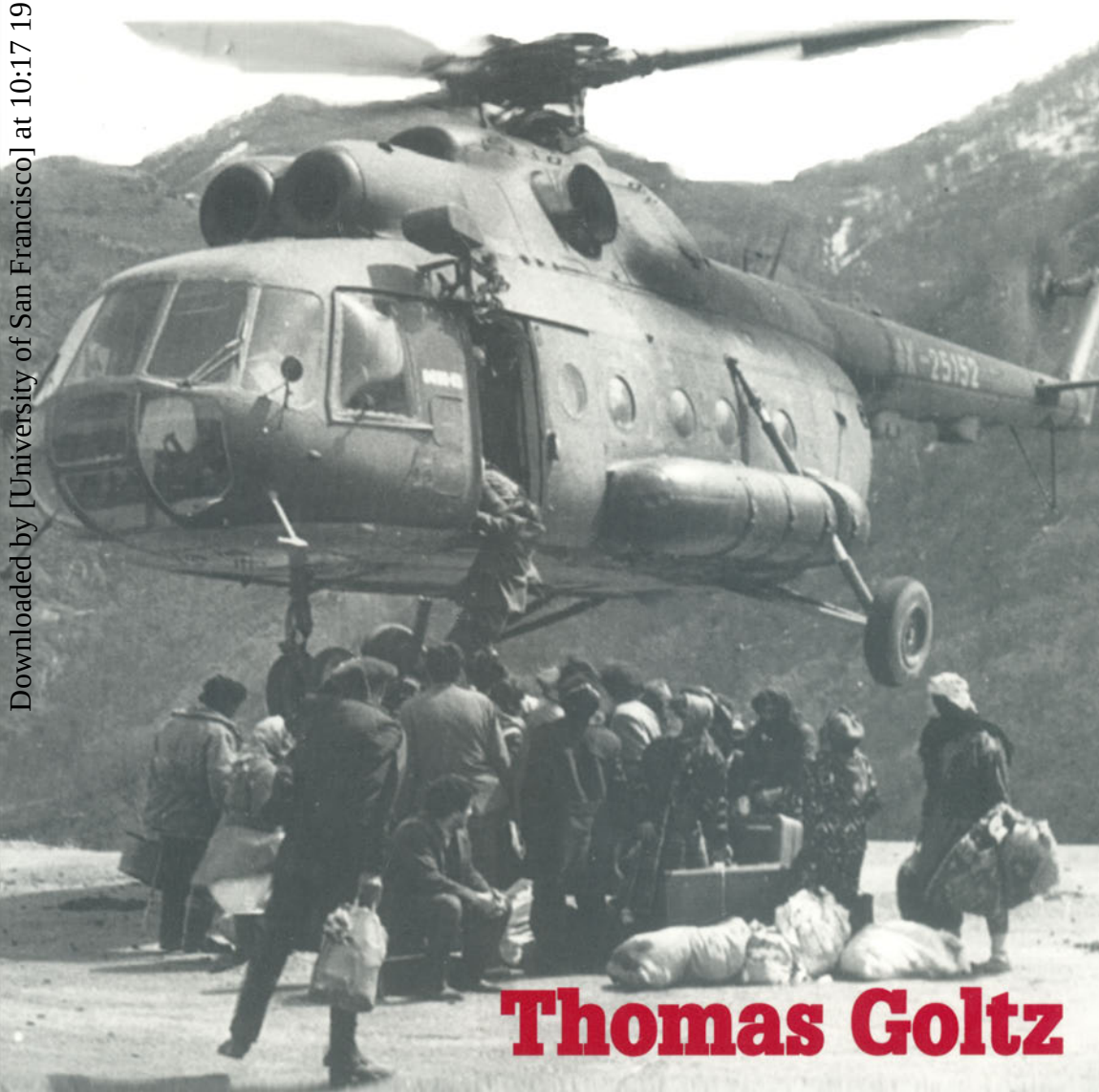
A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic

Azerbaijan Diary



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what was happening in Agdam. He said he didn't know anything. We stopped again, in a town called Barda, and took a moment to inquire about events and rumors. Clueless looks greeted us.

We were starting to think that the whole thing was a colossal bum steer when we arrived in Agdam and drove into the middle of town, looking for a bite to eat. It was there that we ran into the refugees.

There were ten, then twenty, then hundreds of screaming, wailing residents of Xodjali. Many recognized me because of my previous visits to the town. They clutched at my clothes, babbling out the names of their dead relatives and friends, and dragged me to the morgue attached to the main mosque in town to show me the bodies of their relatives.

At first we found it hard to believe what the survivors were saying: the Armenians had surrounded Xodjali and delivered an ultimatum—get out or die. Then came a babble of details of the last days, many concerning Commander Alef Khadjiev.

Sensing doom, Alef had begged the government to bring in choppers to save at least some of the noncombatants, but Baku had done nothing. Then, on the night of February 25th, Armenian *fedayeen* hit the town from three sides. The fourth had been left open, creating a funnel through which refugees might flee. Alef gave the order to evacuate: the fighting men would run interference along the hillside of the Gorgor River valley, while the women and children and graybeards escaped below. Groping their way through the night under fire, by the morning of February 26th, the refugees made it to the outskirts of a village called Naxjivanli, on the cusp of Karabakh. They crossed a road and began working their way downhill toward the forward lines and the city of Agdam, only some six miles away via the Azeri outpost at Shelli. It was there, in the hillocks and within sight of safety, that something horrible awaited them: a gauntlet of lead and fire.

"They just shot and shot and shot," wailed a woman named Raisha Aslanova. She said her husband and a son-in-law were killed in front of her and that her daughter was missing.

Scores, hundreds, possibly a thousand were slaughtered in a turkey shoot of civilians and their handful of defenders. Aside from counting every body, there was no way to tell how many were dead—and most of the bodies remained out of reach, in the no-man's-land between the lines that had become a killing zone and a picnic site for crows.

One thousand dead in one night? It seemed impossible. But when we began cross-referencing, the wild claims about the extent of the killing began to look all too true. The local religious leader in Agdam, Imam Sadik Sadikov, broke down in tears as he tallied the names of the registered dead on an abacus. There were 477 that day, a number that did not include those

missing and presumed dead, nor those victims whose entire families had been wiped out and thus had no one to register them as dead before God. The number 477 represented only the number of confirmed dead by survivors who had made it to Agdam and were physically able to fulfill, however imperfectly, the Muslim practice of burying the dead within 24 hours.

Elif Kaban of Reuters was stunned into giddiness. My wife Hicran was paralyzed. Photographer Oleg Litvin fell into a catatonic state and would only shoot pictures when I threw him at the subject: corpses, graves, and wailing women who were gouging their cheeks with their nails. Yes, it required stomach, but it was time to work, to report: a massacre had occurred, and the world had to know.

We scoured the town, making repeated stops at the hospital, morgue, and growing graveyards, out to the ends of the defensive perimeter for horrible spot-interviews with straggling survivors as they stumbled in, and then back to the hospital to check on new wounded and then back to the morgue to watch truckloads of bodies being brought in for identification and ritual washing before burial. I looked for familiar faces, and thought I saw some people I knew: one corpse was identified as that of a young veterinarian who had been shot through the eye point-blank. I tried to remember if I had known or been introduced to such a man in Xodjali, but could not be sure. Other bodies, stiffened by rigor mortis, seemed to speak of execution: arms were thrown up, as if in permanent surrender. A number of heads lacked hair, as if the corpses had been scalped. It was not a pretty sight.

Toward late afternoon, someone mentioned that a military helicopter on loan from the Russian garrison at Ganje would be making a flight over the killing fields, and so we traveled out to the airport. There was no flight, but there I found old friends.

"*Tomas*," a man in military uniform gasped, and grabbed me in an embrace, and wept. "*Nash Nachal'nik*. . . ."

I recognized him as one of Alef Khadjiev's boys, tall, skinny man named Asif who had been in the KGB before volunteering for duty in Karabakh. He was speaking in Russian, babbling—but only one word got through the tears: the commander. . . .

A few other survivors from the Xodjali garrison stumbled over and seized me. Of the forty-odd men under Alef Khadjiev's command, only ten were left alive. Dirty, exhausted, and exuding what can only be described as survivor's guilt, they pieced together the awful night and next day—and the death of their commander, Alef Khadjiev. He was killed by a bullet to the brain while defending the women and children. Most of the women and children died anyway.

While the word 'militia' may once have had a romantic resonance for Americans who associated the word with Paul Revere and the Minutemen, in post-Soviet Azerbaijan (and elsewhere) the concept had decidedly different connotations. In essence, 'militia' meant private army, usually made up of men divided by partisanship, regionalism, and often murderous jealousy.

In Azerbaijan there were different types of militias under the general rubric. The Lachin, Fizuli, and Gubatli 'brigades,' for example, often seemed to be composed more of extended families than soldiers. One former Popular Front man by the name of Aliekber Humbatov established what was known as the 'Talish Brigade' after its headquarters in the southeastern Caspian city of Lenkoran, more than 300 miles away from anything resembling 'the front.'

The best-known militia was a group then known alternatively as the 'Ganje Brigade' or the 'Surats,' after their financier, a shy and retiring young director of the state wool combine, Surat Husseinov. There was even a 'university' brigade associated with Etibar Mamedov of the National Independence Party, said to be made up of hotheads from the history department of Baku State. To tell the truth, I never saw a trace of them on or near the front, although Etibar's party headquarters always seemed to have an abundance of armed guards.

The militia that I was most familiar with, however, was based outside of Agdam, and led by a former sculptor named '*Katir* Mamed,' or Mamed the Mule. I had first heard of him through Imam Sadik Sadikov, the administrator of the Agdam Mosque and Morgue complex, when I traveled out to Agdam to check out a story concerning an Armenian hostage named Lev Vaganovich Ovakov-Leonov (Leoniyan), an octogenarian set-designer with 'national artist' status in (Soviet) Azerbaijan. Leonov had been picked up in Baku by unknown individuals and dragged off to Agdam to be exchanged for the elderly father of a well-known Azeri judge. I thought I might ask my old friend Imam Sadikov if he had heard anything about the incident. I found him washing a batch of Azeri corpses that had just arrived as part of some sort of exchange.

"So what about the hostages?" I asked the Imam.

"Better ask Yaqub Mamedov," Imam Sadikov said, pulling off the surgeon's mask he wore to cut down the stench and to stop from gagging.

"Yaqub Mamedov?" I naively asked. "The acting president?"

The Imam cackled the cackle of someone who had seen too much.

"Oh, no," the cleric answered. "*Katir* Mamed—the Mule."

"Who's that?" I asked.

"You'll find him out in the old graveyard."

"Digging graves?"