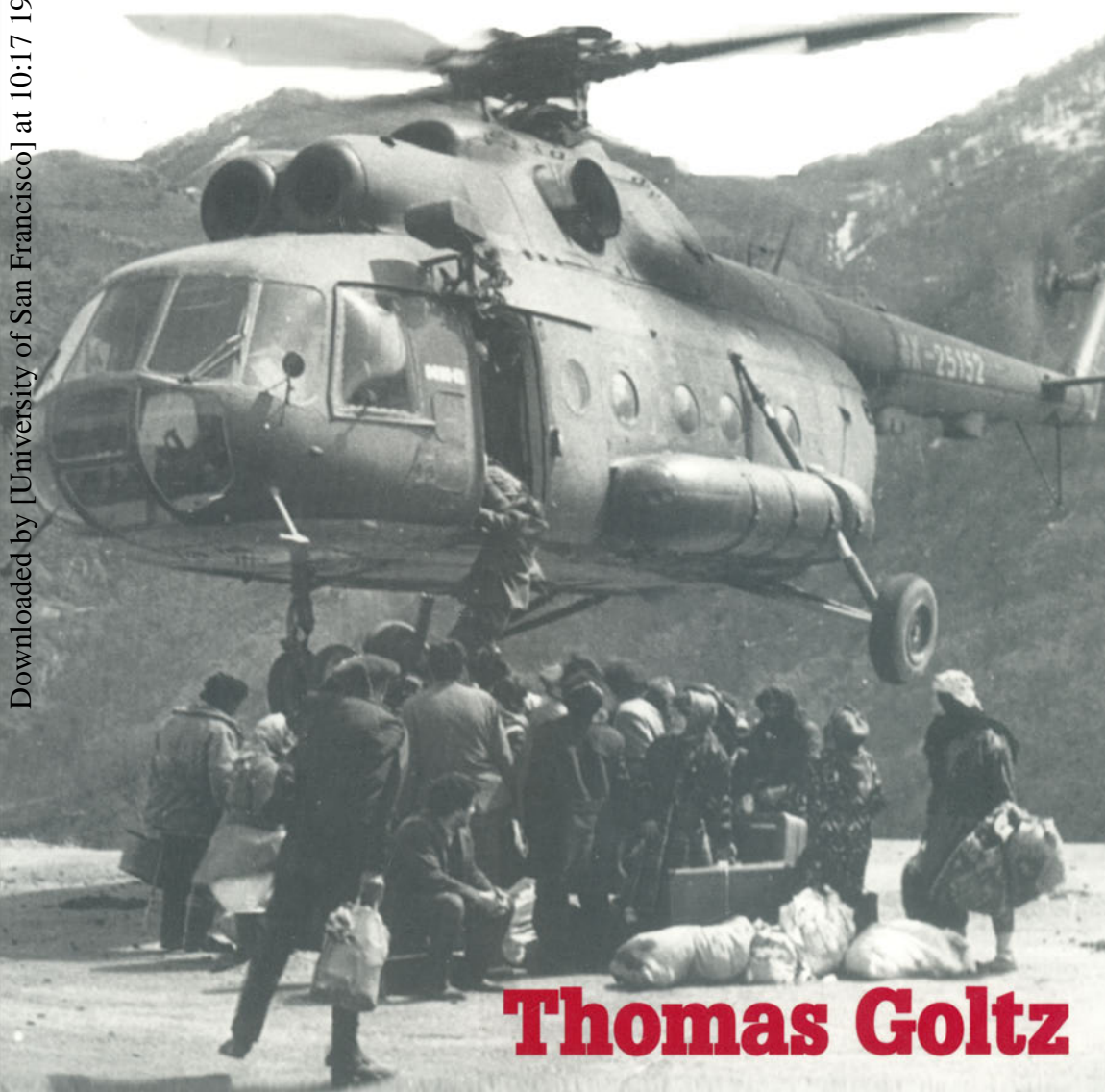


**A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an  
Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic**

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# **Azerbaijan Diary**

**A Rogue Reporter's Adventures  
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Post-Soviet Republic**

**Thomas Goltz**

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unadulterated truth, et cetera. It was starting to get old, but the deputy minister was obliging and promised to re-open the line.

Almost incidentally, I asked whether he had heard anything from Shusha. The man stared at me. The telephone and radio link had gone dead earlier in the day but the ministry had picked up some radio traffic from the area, he said. It was all in Armenian. Then he shuddered and broke down.

Fortress Shusha had fallen, and almost without a fight.

\* \* \*

Unlike the three-day silence at the fall of Xodjali, however, the fact that Shusha was gone was known throughout the country by nightfall. In addition to the 'official' accounts of the disaster, the rumor mill was churning out incredible stories. Fifth-columnists had doped the defenders before the fight and snipped detonation cables in minefields; most of the soldiers defending it were pulled out right before the Armenian militiamen began their long-expected assault; the defending armored vehicle's gas tanks had been tainted by water; there were still Armenians living secretly in the town, passing signals . . . All of this was reduced to an increasingly common phrase: like Xodjali before it, Shusha had been 'sold' for political gain.

The first public salvo was delivered by Acting President Yaqub ('Dollar') Mamedov, who called Defense Minister Rahim Gaziev a traitor. Not only had his army been unable to defend Shusha, Mamedov noted, but suspiciously like the Mutalibov government at the time of Xodjali, the Defense Ministry initially had denied that the city had fallen. This was not so, said Mamedov. With a heavy heart, he was obliged to relay the unspeakable truth: Shusha had been infested on Friday, the 7th of May. Casualties were high and the disaster complete. Beyond complete! 'Dollar' Mamedov did not want to point fingers, but the fact remained that Rahim Gaziev had been lying to him personally and lying to the nation collectively about the status of the town for three long days. Mamedov had repeatedly tried to contact the defense minister to get an expert assessment of the situation to distinguish between rumor and fact—but in vain. The last thing he heard was that Gaziev had gone to Moscow. . . .

This was an amazing suggestion. The defense minister, Rahim Gaziev, member of the Popular Front and the Lion of Shusha, accused of being a stooge of the Russians? It was so incredible that it almost seemed true. The program ran twice that night.

Gaziev replied the next night with his own televised announcement. He was not in Moscow, but with the men on the front who were fighting for the country—unlike other cowards in the Defense Ministry and in the presiden-