

War KHOJALI

Eyewitness Account From the Following Day

by Thomas Goltz



Refugees from the Karabakh War, frantic to get away from the invading Armenian troops. In their haste, they had to leave almost all of their possessions behind.



Scores, hundreds, possibly even a thousand had been slaughtered in a turkey-shoot of civilians and their handful of defenders. Aside from counting every corpse, there was no way to tell how many had died. Most of the bodies remained inaccessible, in the no-man's land between the lines that had become a killing zone and a picnic for crows.

Journalist Thomas Goltz was the first to break the story of the Khojali massacre in the international press when his February 27, 1992 article appeared in the *Washington Post*. The day after the massacre, Goltz had visited the neighboring city of Aghdam (estimated population 60,000) and witnessed the Khojali survivors straggling in with tales of the horror that they had just passed through. It's a tragic memory that will never leave him, and a story that we think the world deserves to know.

The following chapter, entitled "Khojali", is from Goltz's book *"Azerbaijan Diary"* (M.E. Sharpe, 1998, Armonk, NY). It appears here in *Azerbaijan International* with the author's permission, in a slightly abridged form.

February 26th, 1992 seemed like a regular working day. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati was back in Baku to finally bestow diplomatic recognition on Azerbaijan, as well as to respond to the recent comments by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III about the growing threat of Iranian influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The wiry Iranian emissary insisted that it was not the Islamic Republic of Iran that posed a threat to the region, but rather the United States of America. In addition to being the country most responsible for the continued bloodshed throughout the world, it was America, he proposed, that was actively fomenting the conflict in Karabakh. By way of contrast, he noted that the Islamic Republic was interested in peace between nations and peoples. To that end, Dr. Velayati had brought a peace plan

for the increasingly bloody and senseless conflict in Karabakh—and one that both Armenia and Azerbaijan had agreed to sign. He himself was planning to visit Karabakh the next day.

That was news. I was getting ready to file a story with the Washington Post when Hijran, my wife, came rushing in. She had been on the telephone with the Popular Front and had heard some very distressing news. Sources in Aghdam were reporting a stream of Azeri refugees filling the streets of the city, fleeing a massive attack in Karabakh.

There had been many exaggerated reports about the conflict from both sides. I wondered if this was just another example, but I thought it best to start working the phone. Strangely, no one in the government answered. Perhaps they were all at the Gulistan Palace having dinner with the Iranian delegation. I waited a while, and then started trying to contact people at home. Around midnight, I got through to Vafa Guluzade [an advisor to President Mutalibov].

"Sorry for calling so late," I apologized. "But what about this rumor..."

"I can't talk about it," said Vafa, cutting me off and hanging up.

An ominous feeling filled my gut. Vafa was usually polite—to a fault. Perhaps he had been sleeping? I decided to call back again anyway, but the number stayed busy for the next half hour. Maybe he had left the phone off the hook, I thought. I made one last effort. Finally, the call got through.

"Vafa," I said, again apologizing. "What's going on?"

"Something terrible has happened," he groaned.

"What?"

"There's been a massacre," he said.

"Where?"

"In Karabakh, a town called Khojali," he said, and then he hung up the phone again.

Khojali?!

I had been there before. Twice, in fact. The first time was in September [1991], when a number of reporters and I had staked out the airport waiting for Russian President Boris Yeltsin to come through. The last time had been just a month before—in January 1992. By that time the only way to get to Khojali was by helicopter because the Armenians had severed the road link to Aghdam. I remembered that little adventure all too well.

Skeptical of the many reports coming from the Armenian side that the Azeris were massively armed and that their helicopters were "buzzing" Armenian villages, I had traveled to Aghdam with Journalist Hugh Pope, then of the [London] Independent to chat with refugees about their situation.

Refugees were easy to find in Aghdam. In fact, they were all over the place. The greatest concentration was at the local airfield for the simple reason that many of the refugees were tired of being refugees: they wanted

to go back home to Khojali. Pride had overpowered their common sense. One was a 35-year-old mother of four by the name of Zumrud Eyvazova. When I asked why she was returning, she said it was better "to die in Karabakh than beg in the streets of Aghdam."

"Why can't the government open the road?" shouted Zumrud in my ear over the roar of the nearby chopper's engines, "Why are they making us fly in like ducks—easy targets to shoot at?"

I didn't have an answer.

Then someone lurched toward me from across the airfield. It was Arif Hajiyev, Commander of Airport Security at Khojali and the gentleman who had saved us from the Aghdam drunks during Yeltsin's visit three months earlier. He had been pretty chipper then, but despite the broad smile that he gave me, I could see that it was no longer fun and games. I asked him how the situation was in his hometown.

"Come on," said Hajiyev. "Let's go to Khojali—you'll see for yourself and you can write the truth—if you dare."

Behind him an MI-8 helicopter waited, its blades slowly turning. A mass of refugees were clawing their way aboard. The chopper was already dangerously overloaded with people and foodstuffs. There was even more luggage waiting on the tarmac, including a rusted 70mm cannon and various boxes of ammunition.

"I'm not going," said Pope, "I've got a wife and kids."

The blades began spinning faster, and I had to make a quick decision.

"See you later," I said, wondering if I ever would.

I climbed on board, one of more than 50 people on a craft designed for 24, in addition to the numerous munitions and provisions.

"This is insane," I remember telling myself. "There's still time to get off."

And then it was too late. With a lurch, we lifted off and my stomach rushed up to my ears. I could see Pope waving at me as he walked off the field. Somehow I wished I had stayed behind with him on "terra firma". The MI-8 wound its way up to a flight altitude of 3,500 feet—high enough to sail over the Asgaran Gap to Khojali and avoid Armenian ground fire. Two dozen helicopters had been hit during the past two months. In November [1991], one helicopter had crashed, resulting in the deaths of numerous top officials.

Another "bird" had been hit the week before. Even the machine we were flying in had picked up a round in the fuel tank just a week before. That's what the flight engineer told me. Luckily, the fuel supply had been low and the bullet had come in high. This was all so very reassuring to learn as we plugged on through the Asgaran Gap, bucking headwinds and sleet.

Through breaks in the cloud cover I could see trucks and cars on the roads below. They were Armenian machines, fueled by gas and diesel brought in via their own air-bridge from Armenia (or, perhaps,

X-O-C-A-L-I

How to Spell Khojali

Trying to spell Azeri words in English is often tricky, especially for those letters that have sounds that don't correspond to the English alphabet. The name "Khojali" is a typical case. In Azeri, this town is spelled *Хосалы*. Azeri "x" sounds like a hard "kh" as in the Scottish word "Loch Ness". Azeri "c" sounds like English "j", and the undotted "i" (*ы*) sounds somewhat like a short "i" in English.

When we spell Azeri names in the magazine through English, we usually write the Azeri "x" (kh), the "c" (j) and the undotted "i" (i, not y). However, on the Internet, we found that Khojali is being spelled in many different ways—at last count, more than 20.

Most Web sites write it as "Khojali" or "Khojaly", but we found a wide variety of other spellings, including: Hocali, Hodjali, Hodjaly, Hojali, Hojaly, Khocali, Khocaly, Khodjali, Khodjaly, Khojally, Xocali, Xodjali, Xodjaly, Xojali and Xojalli. But that's not all—through Armenian, it's also spelled Khodjalu, Khojalu, Xocalu and Xojalu. And don't forget Cyrillic and Armenian scripts.

Is there any wonder that so few people in the world know about the terrible tragedy that took place in this Azerbaijani town, when there are so many ways to spell it?

even purchased from Azeri war profiteers). Finally and I should add, "mercifully", after a journey that seemed to take hours but really only lasted maybe 20 minutes, we began our circular descent to the Khojali airfield. Any one who has ever been aboard such a flight can appreciate the relief I felt when the wheels touched ground.

"I'm alive!" I wanted to shout, but thought it most appropriate to stay cool and act like I did such things twice a day.

"How do you feel?" Arif Hajiyev asked me.

"Normalno," I lied in Russian, cool as cake.

Meanwhile, the chopper was mobbed by residents—some coming to greet loved ones who had returned, others trying to be the first aboard for the helicopter's return trip. Everyone had gathered to hear the most recent news about the rest of Azerbaijan—newspapers, gossip, rumors.

No phones were working in Khojali. In fact, nothing worked there. No electricity. No heating oil. No running water. The only link with the outside world was the

helicopter that was under constant threat with each run. The isolation of the place became all too apparent as night fell. I joined Hajiyev and some of his men in the makeshift mess hall of the tiny garrison, and while we were dining by the light of flickering candlelight on Soviet army Spam with raw onions and stale bread, he gave me what might be called a front-line briefing.

The situation was bad and getting worse, a depressed Hajiyev told me. The Armenians had taken all the outlying villages, one by one, over the previous three months. Only two towns remained in Azeri hands: Khojali and Shusha, and the road between them had already been cut. While I knew the situation had been deteriorating, I had no idea it was so bad.

"It's because you believe what they say in Baku," Arif jeered. "We're being sold out. Utterly sold out!"

"Baku could open the road to Aghdam in a day if the government wanted to," he said. He now believed the government actually wanted the Karabakh business to simmer on in order to distract public attention while the elite continued to plunder the country.

"If you write that and attribute it to me, I'll deny it," he said. "But it's true."

The 60-odd men under his command lacked both the weapons and training to defend the perimeter. The only Azeri soldiers worth their salt were four veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan who had volunteered to try to bring some discipline into the ranks.

The rest were green horns. If the Armenians shot off a single round, they answered with a barrage of fire, wasting half of their precious ammunition. And thus we passed the night. Around 2 a.m., I was awakened by a distant burst of fire coming from the direction of a neighboring Armenian town called Laraguk, about 500 yards away from a part of Khojali called, ironically enough, "Helsinki Houses."

The Armenian sniper fire was returned with at least 100 rounds from the Azeri side, including bursts of cannon fire from an old BTR, newly acquired from some Russian deserter. It was the only mechanized weaponry that I saw in the hands of the Azeris. The firefight continued sporadically until dawn, making it impossible to sleep.

No one knew when the Armenians would make their final push to take the town, but everyone knew that one night they would. Khojali controlled the Stepanakert [Khankandi] airport and was clearly a major objective for the Armenians. They had to take it. I remember thinking to myself: "I would, if I were them." With that thought came another that made me very uneasy: "What would the residents do when the Armenians did attack?"

In the morning, people were just standing around—literally. There was not a single teashop or restaurant in which to idle away the time. Men stood in small knots along the mud and graveled streets, waiting. The only person I saw actually doing something was a rather fat girl who worked as a sales clerk in the one fabric shop where there was nothing to sell. I spotted her waddling in to work at nine that morning. She was so intense about what she was doing that I decided to follow her into the shop. But the next time I saw her was when I was viewing a video. She was lying dead on the ground amidst a pile of other corpses—but that would come later. The rest of the townspeople just hung around, waiting for the ax to fall. I just prayed that it wouldn't happen while I was there.

We wiled away the morning, hanging around the airport. A photographer from an Azeri news agency happened to be around, so the military boys put on a good show, rolling out of their bunkers and running behind the old BTR, guns blazing.

"Let's do it again, but this time, let me take pictures from the front," the cameraman had suggested.

I felt sick and refused to have anything to do with such theatrics.

"These guys are going to die," I told myself. "And I don't want to die with them just because they're stupid enough to be shooting at shadows that fire back."

Arif Hajiyev seemed to agree. We sat together in silence, watching his men pose for the camera, running hither and yon, full of bravado.

"Let's try that one again!" crowed the photographer.

I felt sick and refused to take a single photo or write a single note.

Finally, around noon, I heard the telltale whine of the chopper approaching from over the gap. Thank God! I let out a sigh of relief while trying to look indifferent. Then I made my way toward the airfield, just in time to see the overloaded bird disgorge its cargo of food, weapons and returning refugees. One kid got off with a canary in a cage, or maybe he was getting on. There were so many people at the airport, trying to get on and off that lone bird. I was merely one of them.

It seemed more were trying to get on than off. I desperately wanted on myself. I didn't care that the chopper was carrying twice or three times its weight limit, nor that part of the weight was a corpse—one of Hajiyev's boys picked off by a sniper the night before. I wondered if we had shared that Soviet-style Spam dinner together by candlelight the night before, but thought it too impolite to pull back the death sheet to stare. The engines gunned and whined, and we lifted with a lurch—but this time I was not afraid of the flight. I just wanted out. We climbed and climbed, circling high in the sky and blowing over the Asgaran Gap at 3,500 feet with tail winds. Maybe we took some ground fire; I don't know. But I did know one thing: I would never go back to Khojali again.

There was no need for vows. The last helicopter into Khojali—that town that had already been surrounded by Armenians—flew on February 13th.

The last food, except for locally grown potatoes, ran out on the 21st. The clock was rapidly ticking toward doom. It struck on the night of February 26th—the date that Armenians commemorate the attack on Armenians at Sumgayit in 1988.

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We left Baku by car at seven in the morning and drove as quickly as we could across the monotonous flats of central Azerbaijan. Brown cotton fields stretched along the horizon. As we roared by, hunters standing along the roadside held up ducks that they had just bagged. We stopped for gas in a town named Tartar and asked the local mayor what was happening in Aghdam. He said he didn't know anything. We stopped again in another town called Barda and again 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 Aghdam and drove into the middle of town, looking for a bite to eat. It was there that we ran into the refugees. There were 10, then 20, then hundreds of screaming, wailing residents—all from Khojali. Many of them recognized me because of my previous visits to their town. They clutched at my clothes, babbling out the names of their dead relatives and friends, all the while dragging me to the morgue attached to the main mosque in town to show me their deceased loved ones.

At first we found it hard to believe what the survivors were saying. The Armenians had surrounded Khojali and delivered an ultimatum: "Get out or die." Then came a babble of details about the final days, many concerning Commander Arif Hajiyev.

Sensing doom, Arif had begged the government to bring in choppers to save at least a few of the civilians, but Baku had done nothing. Then, on the night of February 25th, Armenian "fedayeen" hit the town from three

sides. The fourth side had been left open, creating a funnel through which refugees could escape. Arif gave the order to evacuate: the soldiers would run interference along the hillside of the Gorgor River Valley, while the women, children and “aghsaggals” [gray-bearded ones—wise elders of the village] escaped. Groping their way through the night under fire, the refugees had arrived at the outskirts of a village called Nakhjivanli, on the cusp of Karabakh, by the morning of February 26th. They crossed the road there and began working their way downhill toward the forward Azeri lines and the city Aghdam, now only some six miles away via the Azeri outpost at Shelli.

It was there in the foothills of the mountains even within sight of safety, that the greatest horror awaited them—a gauntlet of lead and fire.

“They just kept shooting and shooting and shooting,” sobbed a woman named Raisa Aslanova. She said her husband and son-in-law were killed right in front of her eyes. Her daughter was still missing.

Scores, hundreds, possibly even a thousand had been slaughtered in a turkey-shoot of civilians and their handful of defenders. Aside from counting every corpse, there was no way to tell how many had died. Most of the bodies remained inaccessible, in the no-man’s land between the lines that had become a killing zone and a picnic for crows.

One thousand slaughtered in a single 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 Aghdam, Imam Sadigh Sadighov, broke down in tears as he tallied the names of the registered dead on an abacus. There were 477 that day, but the number 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. The number 477 represented only the number of confirmed dead by the survivors who had managed to reach Aghdam 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, Hijran, was numb. Photographer Oleg Litvin fell into a catatonic state and would only shoot pictures when I pushed him in front of the subject: corpses, graves, and the wailing women who were gouging their cheeks with their nails. The job required stomach. Now was the time to work—to document and report: a massacre had occurred, and the world had to know about it.

We scoured the town, stopping repeatedly at the hospital, the morgue and the ever-growing graveyards. We moved out to the edges of the defensive perimeter to meet the straggling survivors stumbling in. Then we would rush back to the hospital to check on those recently admitted who had been wounded. Then back



Top: Karabakh’s mountainous terrain proved difficult for Azerbaijani troops, shown here in their Soviet tanks. Bottom: Caskets, piled up, used to bury the victims of Khojali. Aghdam, February 1992.

to the morgue to witness truckloads of bodies being brought in for identification and ritual washing before burial.

I searched for familiar faces and thought I saw some but could not be sure. One corpse was identified as a young veterinarian who had been shot through the eyes at point-blank range. I tried to remember if I had ever met him, but could never be sure. Other bodies, stiffened by rigor mortis, seemed to speak of execution: with their arms 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 day.

Toward late afternoon, someone mentioned that a military helicopter on loan from the Russian garrison at Ganja would be making a flight over the killing fields, and so we traveled out to the airport. No flight materialized, but I did find old friends.

"Thomas," a man in military uniform gasped, and grabbed me in an embrace, and began weeping, "Nash Nachalnik..." [Our Commander...]

I recognized him as one of Arif Hajiyev's boys, a pimply-faced boy from Baku who had described himself as a banker before he had volunteered for duty in Karabakh. He was speaking in Russian, babbling, but I managed to understand one word above his sobs: the commander...

A few other survivors from the Khojali garrison stumbled over to me. Of the men under Arif Hajiyev's command, only 10 had survived. Dirty, exhausted and overcome with what can only be described as survivor's guilt, they pieced together what had happened during that awful night and the following day. Their commander—Arif Hajiyev—had been killed by a bullet to his brain while defending the women and children. And about the women and children—most of them had died, too.

Towards evening, we returned to the government guesthouse in the middle of town searching for a telephone. There we met an exhausted Tamerlan Garayev. A native of Aghdam, the Deputy Speaker of Parliament was one of the few government officials of any sort that I found there. Tamerlan was interrogating two Turkmen deserters from the Stepanakert-based 366th Motorized Infantry Brigade of the Russian Interior Ministry forces that had descended on Khojali the week before. The last missing link of the tragedy suddenly fit into place: not only had the doomed town been assaulted by the Armenians, but the Russians had been undeniably involved as well.

"Talk, talk!" Tamerlan demanded, as the two men stared at us.

"We ran away because the Armenian and Russian officers were beating us because we were Muslims," one of the men, named Agha Mohammad Mutif, explained. "We just wanted to return home to Turkmenistan."

"Then what happened?" Tamerlan wanted to know.

"Then they attacked the town," the other explained. "We recognized vehicles from our unit."

The two had tried to flee along with everyone else in town and were helping a group of women and children escape through the mountains when they were discovered by the Armenians and the 366th.

"They opened fire and at least twelve men in our group were killed," Mutif recounted. "After that, we just ran and ran."

Could such a thing have really happened: a Russian-backed assault by Armenians on an Azeri town, which resulted in up to 1,000 dead?

This was news. But as we started to file our stories, we became aware of something very strange. No one seemed interested in the story. Apparently, the idea that the roles of the good guys had been reversed was too much: Armenians slaughtering Azeris?

"You're suggesting that more people died in this single attack in Karabakh than the total number that we have reported killed over the past four years?" observed BBC's Moscow correspondent when I tipped him on the bloodbath.

"That's impossible," he replied.

"Take a look at Reuters!"

"There's nothing on the wire."

Indeed, there wasn't. Although Elif Kaban had been churning out copy on her portable Telex, nothing was appearing on the wires. Either someone was spiking her copy, or was rolling it into a larger, anodyne regional report of "conflicting allegations".

To be fair, the government and press in Baku didn't exactly assist our efforts to get the story out. While we had been off in Aghdam trying to break the news, the presidential spokesman was claiming that Khojali's feisty defenders had beaten back an Armenian attack and that the Azeris had suffered only two casualties. They were pitching it as just an ordinary night in Mountainous Karabakh. We knew differently, but it was the three of us against the Azerbaijani State propaganda machine.

Finally, I managed to get a call through to the Moscow Bureau of the Washington Post and told them that I wanted to file a story. The staffers said they were too busy to take a dictation. When I insisted, they reluctantly patched me through to the Foreign Desk in Washington. I used the number of 477 people to indicate how many had died. After all, that was the figure that had been so carefully determined by Imam Sadighov. Though the figure turned out to be low, the editors "dragged me over the coals." Where had I gotten such a figure, since Baku was reporting that only two people had died? Had I seen all the bodies? They cautioned balance. Besides, the Armenian press was reporting that there had been a "massive Azeri offensive."

"Why wasn't that in my report?" The editors wanted to know.

I was about to defend my position that I had not written such because it simply had not happened when suddenly the first of many Kristal missiles started raining down on Aghdam and landing only about a mile away from the Government Guest House that I was calling from. Other missiles followed, and when one crashed into the building next door and blew out all the windows in our building, we thought it best to get down to the basement before we were blown to smithereens.

An hour later, crawling out from under the mattresses, we came up for air and decided we had better get out of Aghdam as fast as possible. About 60,000 other people had the same idea, and we suddenly found ourselves in the middle of a mass exodus of trucks, cars, horses and people on bicycles, all rushing to flee east in the direction of Baku.

I broke the news about the Khojali massacre with a world-exclusive story on February 27th. It made an inside page of the Washington Post. London's Sunday Times took the story more seriously—maybe because they were Europe—and gave it front-page coverage. By then, the international hack-pack had started parachuting in to count bodies and confirm that something awful had really happened. The first Western reporter who managed to arrive in the killing fields and perform the grisly task of counting the dead was Anatol Lieven of the London Times. His companion was the late Rory Peck of Frontline News—another cool professional and dear friend. [Less than two years later, Rory would be shot to death in front of Ostankino TV in Moscow on October 3, 1993, when Boris Yeltsin decided to restore democracy in Russia through the barrels of guns.]

Others performed less well. One reporter from Agence France-Press, best left nameless, arrived in Aghdam the night we left and found the city

“quiet,” apparently confusing the silence that followed the missile-induced exodus of 60,000 people with an aura of peace and tranquility.

The government of Azerbaijan, meanwhile, made a complete about-face on the issue. The same people who had remained inaccessible during the early days of the crisis were suddenly asking me to provide telephone numbers of foreign correspondents in Moscow whom they could invite down—at government expense—to report on the massacre.

That didn't set well with me. I almost hauled off and assaulted the Presidential Press Secretary, accusing him of lying. He, in turn, started a rumor that I was an Armenian spy sent to Khojaly to ferret out “military secrets” during my January visit to the doomed town. Consequence: I was temporarily detained, causing me to slide into a very black mood. When I was released, I went downtown and found myself sitting at a shop with a bunch of black marketeers, who were vaguely waiting for me to exchange my dollars for rubles. Then the whole situation hit me and hit me hard.

The evening streets were still filled with light-hearted shoppers, apparently oblivious or, perhaps, indifferent to the fate of the citizens of Khojaly. The men seemed to be all look-alikes in leather jackets, and the women had far too much rouge on their cheeks. They were all smiling and laughing and parading around. I have to confess: I hated every one of them. Maybe they didn't know what I had done. Maybe they did know but didn't care, lest it drive them insane. It wasn't clear, nor was my brain.

I canceled the dollar deal, walked out of the shop and wandered the streets. I think it was raining, but I can't remember for sure. I meandered the streets, unable to stop anywhere or see or talk to anyone for hours and hours.

“Ha ha,” someone cackled, as he leaned toward his sweetheart and switched on the motor of his car.

“Ho ho,” another chortled, as he lurched out of a “Komisyon” shop, a bottle of Finnish vodka under arm.

I wanted to slash their tires, smash their noses, burn their houses. I wanted to do something—something violent. Instead, I ended up wandering the streets in a daze. Finally, I arrived home and sat down and poured myself a long drink. Hijran asked me where I'd been.

“Khojaly,” I answered in a voice that I didn't recognize. I had been in that dump of a town with ghosts and no food to speak of, no water to wash with. And all the people from there that I had known were dead, dead, dead. I broke down and cried and cried and cried...vowing that I would remember Commander Arif and all the others, whose names I had never known, but whose faces would be etched forever in my memory. ■



Top: Burying victims of the Khojaly massacre. Bottom: A blood-stained casket; according to Azerbaijani custom, the body is taken out of the casket before being buried. Photos: Azertaj.