

## **Azeri Veterans Recall Military Fiasco**

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The most terrible episode of the Nagorny Karabakh war recalled, 10 years on.

The bloodiest military operation of all the recent wars in the Caucasus occurred ten years ago this month, when thousands of young soldiers died in the mountains west of Nagorny Karabakh. But the Kelbajar operation was also little reported on at the time and is little remembered.

Even today, all information on the terrible loss of life is classified information in Azerbaijan. Unofficial sources say the February 1994 battles took the lives of about 4,000 Azerbaijanis and 2,000 Armenians - or nearly one third of all the victims that perished in the 1991-4 conflict.

Teyar Mukhtarov, aged 30, was born in Kelbajar province, a mountainous area sandwiched between Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh. Nowadays, he lives in a warehouse, still a refugee. Ten years ago, he took part in the ill-fated operation to recapture his home region and remains haunted by the memories of it. Many of his comrades did not die from bullets or shells, he stresses, but from the bitter cold in the mountains.

Mukhtarov took part in a slow and painful retreat over the mountains. "We finally left Kelbajar completely on March 6-7," he said. "I still can't forget the frozen bodies of my comrades that we had to leave behind in the mountains without being able to bury them."

Kelbajar was initially captured by Armenian forces during the Karabakh war in April of 1993, the year that saw Azerbaijan lose one region after another.

By October that year, former Soviet-era leader Heidar Aliiev had returned to power in a country overwhelmed by disasters. Not long after his election, Aliiev decided to become the "saviour of the nation" in every sense and to win back the lost territories.

To do this, he quickly and controversially recruited an army of young people, many of whom were simply press-ganged into action on the streets of Azerbaijani cities.

On December 15, 1993, the Azerbaijani army launched a large-scale attack against the Armenians along the whole front. In early January, on the northern sector of the front Azerbaijani forces crossed the Murovdag mountain range over the Omar Pass and entered the Kelbajar district. It was a risky plan, not supported by all the military commanders.

Teyar Mukhtarov was one of the new raw recruits. "I was 20 years old then and a first-year student at the Construction Institute," he said. "Like many of my peers, I got caught during a 'round-up' and sent to the front." On New Year's Eve, Mukhtarov's regiment launched an attack over the mountains and struck deep into Kelbajar district.

However, by the end of January, the Armenians had regrouped and began a counter-attack. The Azerbaijanis were far from their supply lines across the mountains. Then the weather took a turn for the worse. Thousands of Azerbaijanis were trapped and mowed down by Grad multiple-missile launchers.

Sergeant Vagif Abbasov, who was just 19 at the time, recalled, "On February 12, really heavy snow began to fall. The next day we were ordered to retreat to northern positions on the slopes of the Murovdag mountains. On February 18-20, the enemy encircled two of our brigades. We tried to get through to them, but we couldn't because of the heavy snow. Many soldiers were killed by the fire from Grads and buried under the avalanches."

"Every day someone got killed in our company," said Mukhtarov. "I was heavily wounded in the leg in action on February 27 near the village of Bagirli. Already then rumours were circulating among our soldiers that we had been abandoned and they wouldn't supply us with food and ammunition any more."

Leila Yunus, who was Azerbaijan's deputy defence minister in 1992-3, blames the commanders for making a bad situation even worse.

"Instead of suspending the operation due to worsening weather conditions, Nadjmeddin Sadygov, head of the general staff, gave the order to attack the enemy's mountain positions," he said. "It was the stupidest decision a military officer could ever take. When the Armenians found out, they simply began to shoot at the snow masses on the tops of the mountains and created avalanches. Even well-trained mountaineers never climb the peaks in weather like that. As a result we lost over 4,000 soldiers and many of them are still considered missing."

Even ten years on, the issue of Kelbajar and the culpability of former president Aliiev is highly sensitive. Ramiz Melikov, head of the press office in Azerbaijan's defence ministry, declined to give any precise information on the episode. He refused to reveal the number of the dead, saying it was a military secret.

Eldar Namazov, who then headed the secretariat in President Aliiev's administration, blamed former prime minister Suret Husseinov - long since disgraced and in prison - for the fiasco.

"The operation was thoroughly planned, and it started very successfully for us," Namazov said. "But later on, some serious mistakes were made, especially regarding provision for the forward units, and as a result we lost a lot of soldiers. You have to bear in mind, the army was then effectively under command of Prime Minister Suret Husseinov, and there were serious disagreements among political leaders of the country. Many orders were given without prior coordination with the Commander-in-Chief. And the result was tragic."

Azad Isazade, who worked as press office for the defence ministry in the Karabakh war, disagreed with this verdict.

"Such a large-scale operation could have been carried out only on the orders of Commander-in-Chief Aliiev," he said. "I would compare the winter campaign of 1993-1994 to the Soviet technique of cotton harvesting. Just as they used to recruit anyone just to fulfil the 'plan', now, too, many completely unprepared young lads were physically dragged out of city buses, rounded up in the streets of Baku and thrown into battle. They had no idea how to handle a gun."

Another veteran Zaur Mamedov from Baku recalled, "The incompetence of the commanders, their squabbles and gossip all had a bad and demoralising effect on us, soldiers. We were very poorly equipped with arms and ammunition and you could forget about repairing anything. They sent us a lot of useless young guys, who were caught by the police on metro trains and sent off to certain death in Karabakh. I remember one new kid who tried to load 5.45 mm bullets into a 7.62 mm submachine gun. He was killed in the very first battle by a sniper's bullet because of his own mistake."

Azad Isazade also blames the Russians for the disaster. "We captured several officers who were Armenians but were serving in the Russian Seventh Army," he said. "They were transporting Russian military

equipment into Kelbajar.”

The scale of losses during the Kelbajar operation helped pave the way for the cease-fire agreement in May 1994. But, unlike other less bloody episodes of the conflict, it is little remembered. Even the veterans do not meet up, said Teyar Mukhtarov, to talk about it. “Only the victors have meetings like that,” he said.

Idrak Abbasov and Jasur Mamedov are reporters for the newspapers Impuls and Yeni Istiglal respectively.

**Location:** Caucasus  
Stavropol  
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