

Tales from Death Row

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As the last Karabakh PoWs are released from captivity in Azerbaijan, tales of their ordeal in a Baku jail are sending shockwaves through Armenian society

Officially, the notorious Block Five of Baku's Bailov Prison has surrendered its last secrets. It was here that Armenian prisoners-of-war captured during the Nagorny Karabakh conflict sat on death row - and here that dozens apparently vanished without trace.

But even now, after the last inmates have been handed back to the Yerevan authorities, many Armenians believe that hundreds more remain in captivity. And, while the interior ministry in Baku refuses to hand over prison archives, the true story of Block Five may never fully be known.

Throughout the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan never recognised the rebel army as a legitimate military force. Armenians captured during the fighting were charged with murder, sabotage and terrorism, then sentenced in accordance with the law. Public opinion often had a marked influence on the verdicts.

In March 1992, for example, a group of Armenian fighters from the Shushin region were found guilty of ambushing an Azerbaijani army vehicle and sentenced to death. The court case sparked a wave of public outrage after it was discovered that one of their victims was the young journalist, Salatyn Askerova.

"We didn't know there was a woman in the military car," one of the men said later from his cell in Block Five. "We just wanted to settle scores with the soldiers who kept getting drunk and firing at our village."

After the sentence was passed, these men simply disappeared. The authorities claimed they were still alive and would be exchanged for Azerbaijani prisoners-of-war but they were denied access to Red Cross workers, human rights activists or journalists. Their whereabouts remain a mystery.

Former prisoners have, however, been able to throw some light on the fate of Yuri Dzhangiryan, a leader of Armenia's notorious Krunk underground society, who was brought back to Block Five after a failed prisoner exchange in the Agdam region.

In June 1992, according to cellmates, Dzhangiryan, nicknamed "The Marshal", was dragged out of his prison cell and severely beaten by prison guards. The beating ruptured his liver and the Karabakh "freedom fighter" died on the following day.

Repatriated Armenians have reported dozens of similar cases with prisoners dying from illness and malnutrition as well as harsh treatment.

Executions were carried out with similar brutality. In February 1993, two brothers fought desperately with guards sent to take them to the execution yard. They clung fiercely to their beds and resisted any attempt to drag them into the corridor. Eventually, the warders shot them through the bars of their cell window and the narrow hatch in the door.

It was not until the end of 1993 that foreign observers from the International Committee of the Red Cross were first allowed to visit death row prisoners. However, on this occasion, the Armenian inmates were

taken from their crowded cells to Block Six, the children's wing, where conditions were comparatively luxurious and each prisoner had his own bed.

Two months later, following the sensational escape of several death row prisoners from the Bailov Prison, the Armenians were sent back to Block Five where between five and seven men were crammed into cells designed for two.

Often their cellmates were Azerbaijani convicts who subjected the Armenians to daily beatings and humiliation. A notorious example was Asim Shemakhinsky whose brother had been executed during the Soviet era and was now awaiting a similar fate. One prisoner reportedly hanged himself as a result of Shemakhinsky's brutality whilst another, a Russian, died from the constant physical abuse.

One Karabakh fighter, Vasily Lugovy, was the victim of constant hazing until he persuaded the authorities to move him to a different cell where two Armenians had recently died. Lugovy's death sentence was later commuted to 15 years' imprisonment.

Another former inmate of Block Five remembers, "I wasn't afraid of death, it had been hanging over me for too long. But five or six years are enough to make you hate everyone, sometimes without exception. It was a hell of struggle to stay human there, in that continually humiliating atmosphere where sometimes you were insulted verbally, sometimes with sticks and boots."

But, amid the despair, there were tales of hope and self-sacrifice. Several Armenians recall receiving food packages from an Azerbaijani they knew only as Firuddin. The packages were accompanied by a note which said that, although they had come to Bailov by different paths, their "brand of suffering was the same". Firuddin died in 1995 and his face was reportedly disfigured by prison wardens attempting to tear out his gold teeth.

Following the Red Cross visits, the Armenians began to receive food parcels from abroad - luxuries which they shared with their fellow inmates. A doctor also made regular visits - although the prisoners were shocked to discover he was a cousin of the murdered journalist Askerova. This fact, apparently, did not affect his dedication to duty.

The first Armenians were released from Bailov in May 1996, charged with appeals from other inmates to tell the world of the suffering in Block Five. However, convinced they were under surveillance by the secret services, the former convicts waited another four years before breaking their silence.

Even now, the Azerbaijani interior ministry is refusing to hand over the Bailov Prison archives and the prisoners' stories remain the only testimonies to the fate of their missing comrades.

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