

**THE CONSEQUENCES OF FORCED DEPORTATIONS: AN ARCHIVAL
ANALYSIS OF THE AZERBAIJANI POPULATION'S DISPLACEMENT FROM
THE ARMENIAN SSR (1948–1955, 1988–1991)**

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Abstract

This study explores the psychological and socio-cultural consequences of the forced deportation of Azerbaijanis from Western Azerbaijan (the Armenian SSR) during two major waves of displacement: 1948–1955 and 1988–1991. Drawing on archival documents, state records, and memoirs, the article employs a historical-psychological framework to analyze the traumatic effects of mass uprooting.

The first wave (1948–1955), carried out under Joseph Stalin and framed as “resettlement,” dislocated entire families, disrupted communal structures, and produced long-term consequences such as identity fragmentation, cultural discontinuity, and enforced adaptation to unfamiliar settings (Aliyev, 1998; Aliyev, 2004). The second wave (1988–1991), coinciding with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was characterized by organized violence, intimidation, and ethnic cleansing, leading to acute collective trauma marked by fear, marginalization, and mass casualties (Atabaki, 2004).

Findings highlight the intergenerational transmission of trauma, erosion of collective memory, and weakening of psychological security among displaced Azerbaijanis. By integrating archival evidence with trauma studies, this article demonstrates how political decisions and ethnic hostilities become embedded in the psychosocial fabric of affected populations (Amrakhov, 2022; Najafov, 2025).

The study contributes to applied psychology, migration studies, and conflict research by illustrating the methodological significance of archival-document analysis for examining his-

torical trauma, forced migration, and the psychosocial consequences of ethnic violence (Najafov, 2025). Implications extend to post-conflict reconciliation and the reconstruction of displaced communities Amrahov, 2025.

1. Introduction

The deportation of Azerbaijanis from their historical homeland in Western Azerbaijan (today's Republic of Armenia) represents one of the most tragic episodes in the twentieth-century history of the South Caucasus (Bagirov, 2024). While forced resettlements and ethnic cleansing were recurrent features of Soviet totalitarianism, the Azerbaijani case stands apart due to its explicitly ethnic and political nature. These deportations were not simply demographic adjustments or agricultural resettlement initiatives; rather, they reflected a deliberate and systematic effort to reshape the region's ethno-political composition.

As the title of this study suggests, the article focuses on the organized expulsions of Azerbaijanis from Western Azerbaijan, executed by the Armenian SSR leadership with the approval of the Soviet central authorities (Aliyev, 2022). These deportations occurred in multiple stages—first between 1948 and 1953, and later during the terminal years of the Soviet Union (1988–1991)—when tens of thousands of Azerbaijanis were forcibly expelled under conditions of intimidation, violence, and exclusion (Cornell, 2001; Cornell, 2017).

The origins of these deportations can be traced to the post–World War II period, when Joseph Stalin revived Soviet territorial claims against Turkey. Although these claims were rejected by the United States and the United Kingdom, the political atmosphere fostered Armenian nationalist ambitions. Leaders of the Armenian SSR exploited the moment to pursue a policy of demographic engineering, targeting Azerbaijani communities that had historically lived in Yerevan, Zangezur, and other parts of Western Azerbaijan for centuries.

These policies were justified through overlapping Soviet strategies:

- **Geopolitical motives:** exerting pressure on Turkey by questioning the validity of the 1921 Moscow and Kars treaties and raising the Straits issue.

- **Demographic motives:** facilitating the resettlement of diaspora Armenians, who were promised land and housing upon their “repatriation” to Soviet Armenia.

- **Ideological motives:** employing nationalism as a controlled tool within Stalinist foreign policy.

Through an analysis of archival evidence, historical accounts, and survivor testimonies, this article reconstructs the context, mechanisms, and outcomes of these deportations. It em-

phasizes the interplay between Soviet geopolitical ambitions, Armenian nationalist objectives, and the profound suffering of the Azerbaijani civilian population (Dadashov, 2005). The broader aim is not only to document these tragic events but also to highlight their enduring humanitarian, psychological, and political consequences, which continue to shape Azerbaijani–Armenian relations to this day.

2. The Impact of World War II on the Population of Western Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijani population of the Armenian SSR entered the post-war period already weakened by decades of repression, famine, and political persecution (Gasimov, 2008). During the 1930s and 1940s, mass arrests, forced collectivization, and wartime mobilization had taken a devastating toll on communities. Families were divided, traditional social structures were dismantled, and cultural practices eroded under Soviet totalitarian policies (Altstadt, 1992; Swietochowski, 1995). For the Azerbaijanis of Yerevan, Zangezur, Goycha, and other regions of Western Azerbaijan, an even greater catastrophe emerged in the immediate aftermath of World War II (Council of Ministers of the USSR- 1988).

The deterioration of Soviet–Turkish relations gave the Kremlin an opportunity to revive unresolved territorial disputes. Seeking to expand Soviet influence in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, Joseph Stalin encouraged Armenian and Georgian political elites to formulate historical “claims” against Turkey. Armenian nationalists, in particular, were emboldened to demand the “return” of so-called Western Armenia—a notion grounded not in international law, but in nationalist mythology (Walker, 1991; Asadov, 2025).

According to Sergo Beria (2000), the son of Lavrentiy Beria, Stalin and his inner circle harbored deep hostility toward Turkey and Turkic peoples (Hasanov, 2011). In his memoir *My Father Beria: Inside Stalin’s Kremlin*, he recalls that Stalin personally authorized anti-Turkish propaganda, commissioning historians and propagandists to produce reports that vilified Turkey and questioned its sovereignty over Kars, Ardahan, and parts of Trabzon. This strategy sought to build public legitimacy for Soviet expansionist ambitions (Huseynova, 2022).

To advance these territorial claims, the Soviet leadership considered annulling the 1921 Moscow and Kars treaties, which had defined the Soviet–Turkish border. Draft plans proposed transferring parts of northeastern Turkey to the Armenian and Georgian SSRs. Georgian demands centered on “Eastern Lazistan,” while the Armenian leadership focused on Kars and Ardahan. To lend these proposals scholarly legitimacy, Stalin directed the USSR Academy of Sciences and Armenian officials to prepare justificatory documents (Altstadt, 1992; Swietochowski, 1995).

In this context, Grigory Arutyunov, First Secretary of the Armenian Communist Party, invited the prominent Soviet historian Yevgeny Tarle to Yerevan to draft such reports. Meanwhile, in April 1945, Archbishop Gevorg Chorenkchyan (later Catholicos of All Armenians) submitted an 11-point petition directly to Stalin, calling for the “return” of so-called Western Armenian lands (Suny, 1993). Stalin reportedly assured Armenian representatives that, once

annexation was achieved, diaspora Armenians would be resettled in these territories (Kaufman, 2001).

These developments coincided with broader Soviet provocations. On March 19, 1945, Moscow unilaterally annulled the 1925 Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality with Turkey, signaling a more aggressive posture toward its southern neighbor (Walker, 1991). Although the Soviet Union ultimately failed to annex Turkish territory due to strong opposition from the United States and the United Kingdom, the repatriation promises made to diaspora Armenians created a policy dilemma for Moscow. The “solution” was found in the forced displacement of the indigenous Azerbaijani population from the Armenian SSR.

3. Geopolitical Context and the Decision-Making Process behind the Deportation

The Potsdam Conference of July 1945 marked a turning point. The United States and the United Kingdom firmly rejected Soviet demands regarding the Turkish Straits and the alteration of Turkish borders (Walker, 1991). For Turkey, this represented a moment of diplomatic survival. On November 1, 1945, President İsmet İnönü delivered a speech to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, rejecting Soviet accusations and affirming Ankara’s determination to resist territorial dismemberment. Intelligence reports gathered by Turkish, British, and American agencies revealed the scope of Soviet expansionist intentions, further consolidating Western resistance (Hasanli, 2011).

With Soviet ambitions thwarted, the Armenian leadership redirected its strategy inward. The challenge of accommodating incoming Armenian repatriates—many of whom had already begun arriving from the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas—was resolved at the expense of the Azerbaijani population of the Armenian SSR (Amrahov, 2025). Stalin, seeking to satisfy Armenian allies and maintain control over nationalist mobilization, sanctioned the deportation of Azerbaijanis as part of a broader demographic engineering project (Altstadt, 1992; Swietochowski, 1995).

This policy was formalized on November 21, 1945, when the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR (Sovnarkom) adopted Decree No. 2947, *On Measures for the Repatriation of Armenians from Abroad to Soviet Armenia*. The decree authorized the Armenian SSR to organize the reception and settlement of incoming Armenians (Amrahov, 2025). A special commission was subsequently established in Yerevan to oversee the process (Hasanli, 2011).

The results were immediate. Between 1946 and 1947, approximately 86,300 Armenians were resettled in the Armenian SSR, out of an anticipated 130,000 (Suny, 1993). Many of these repatriates were given homes, land, and villages vacated by forcibly displaced Azerbaijanis. The deportation of Azerbaijani communities was therefore not an unintended by-product of Soviet migration policy but a calculated strategy designed to ensure Armenian demographic and political dominance within the republic (Altstadt, 1992).

4. The Deportation of Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR (Western Azerbaijan), 1948–1955

The deportation of Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR between 1948 and 1955 was neither accidental nor incidental. Rather, it was a carefully planned and centrally coordinated policy of forced demographic restructuring. On December 23, 1947, Joseph Stalin signed Decree No. 4083 of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, which explicitly mandated the “resettlement” of Azerbaijani collective farmers and other rural populations from the Armenian SSR to the Kura-Aras Lowland in the Azerbaijan SSR (Council of Ministers of the USSR, 1947).

5. Demographic Manipulation and Implementation Challenges of the Deportation Plan

Decree No. 4083 of the USSR Council of Ministers (December 23, 1947) mandated the forced relocation of 100,000 Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR to the Azerbaijan SSR between 1948 and 1950. Official documents repeatedly emphasized the “voluntary” nature of the resettlement; however, archival evidence indicates that the process was conducted under coercion (Council of Ministers of the USSR, 1947). Reports from the State Archive of Azerbaijan and eyewitness testimonies demonstrate that demographic data were systematically manipulated to obscure the scale of Azerbaijani displacement (Hasanli, 2011).

Soviet authorities presented the deportation as a pragmatic solution to accommodate Armenian repatriates, but inconsistencies in official records reveal that statistical figures were deliberately falsified to downplay the humanitarian cost (Altstadt, 1992; Swietochowski, 1995; Najafov, 2025).

6. The Final Phases of the Deportation: 1949–1953

The deportation campaign did not end abruptly but unfolded in successive stages. Archival records for 1949 indicate that only eight Azerbaijani households, consisting of 39 individuals, were resettled from Yerevan to Goychay, Yevlakh, Saatli, and Salyan districts (State Archive of Azerbaijan, 1950). In 1950, 24 Azerbaijani households were expelled from Yerevan’s Stalin, Kirov, Spandaryan, and Mikoyan districts.

The campaign expanded in 1951–1953, targeting rural Azerbaijani populations. Deportees were often transported under harsh conditions, with inadequate housing and agricultural support awaiting them in the Kura-Aras Lowland. Memoirs from survivors describe the experience as one of profound dislocation and trauma, exacerbated by widespread disease, economic hardship, and the loss of ancestral lands (Suny, 1993; Hasanli, 2011).

7. Total Deportation Statistics (1948–1953)

Although Stalin's decrees envisioned the deportation of 100,000 Azerbaijanis within three years, the targets were never met. Logistical difficulties, combined with resistance from Azerbaijani families, produced significantly lower outcomes. According to the January 12, 1954 decree of the USSR Council of Ministers, the actual number of deportees amounted to 52,956 individuals across 11,914 households (Council of Ministers of the USSR, 1954).

This discrepancy between planned and actual figures underscores both the human cost of the deportations and the limits of Soviet administrative capacity in implementing large-scale demographic engineering (Altstadt, 1992).

8. Continued Repression under Khrushchev and Brezhnev (1953–1987)

Stalin's death in 1953 initially raised hopes for reform; however, systematic repression of Azerbaijanis in the Armenian SSR continued under Nikita Khrushchev and later Leonid Brezhnev. Between 1956 and 1967, the Armenian Communist Party repeatedly petitioned Moscow for the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia (Swietochowski, 1995). During this period, Azerbaijani cultural institutions in Yerevan were closed, newspapers were banned, and Azerbaijani-language schools were systematically reduced. By the 1960s, Azerbaijani students faced significant restrictions in access to higher education in Armenia (Altstadt, 1992; Walker, 1991).

This gradual cultural suppression foreshadowed the renewed wave of ethnic cleansing that emerged during the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

9. Heydar Aliyev's 1997 Decree: Official Recognition and Reconciliation Efforts

On December 18, 1997, President Heydar Aliyev issued a landmark decree officially recognizing the forced deportations of Azerbaijanis from Armenia as an act of genocide. The decree established a state commission tasked with historical investigation, legal assessment, and raising international awareness of the deportations (Aliyev, 1997).

Aliyev's initiative represented both a symbolic and practical step toward reconciliation and acknowledgment of historical injustices. It provided the basis for further academic research and international advocacy concerning the plight of deported Azerbaijani communities (Aliyev, 1998).

10. The 1988–1991 Deportation of Azerbaijanis

The final phase of Azerbaijani deportations occurred during the late Soviet period, amidst Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost reforms. Instead of fostering democratic openness, these reforms created an environment conducive to nationalist mobilization. Armenian

elites, with tacit support from elements of the Soviet security apparatus, seized the opportunity to press for the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent Azerbaijani districts such as Lachin and Gubadli (De Waal, 2003).

The events were catalyzed by the Sumgait pogrom of February 1988, which Armenian propaganda exploited to portray Azerbaijanis as aggressors on the international stage. Archival evidence and Azerbaijani sources suggest that Soviet security services allowed the violence to escalate deliberately, intervening only after the situation had spiraled out of control (Altstadt, 1992; Hasanli, 2011).

On February 29, 1988, the Soviet Politburo convened under Gorbachev's leadership to address escalating unrest in the Caucasus. Gorbachev described Armenians as "disciplined and non-anti-Soviet," while portraying Azerbaijanis as prone to disorder (Gorbachev, 1996). At the same time, he acknowledged Armenian demonstrators' open calls for the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. Anti-Azerbaijani and anti-Turkish slogans circulated freely during demonstrations, with leaflets urging Armenians to "arm yourselves and destroy the Turks" (Swietochowski, 1995).

Gorbachev also repeated unverified claims of "genocide graves" in Nakhchivan and alleged that of 90 Armenian cultural monuments in the region, only one had survived. In his memoir *Life and Reforms*, he later admitted that these claims were conveyed directly by Armenian intellectuals Zori Balayan and Silva Kaputikyan in a meeting organized by his aide Gevorg Shamkhazaryan (Gorbachev, 1996). By accepting these partisan narratives without verification, the Soviet leadership effectively legitimized Armenian nationalist propaganda.

The anti-Azerbaijani campaign was further facilitated by the removal of Heydar Aliyev from Soviet leadership. On October 21, 1987, under pressure from Armenian lobbyists in the Kremlin, Gorbachev forced Aliyev to resign as a member of the Politburo and as USSR Deputy Prime Minister. His departure silenced a critical Azerbaijani voice in Moscow, leaving Azerbaijan politically vulnerable at the height of the crisis (Hasanli, 2011).

10. The Deportation of Azerbaijanis, 1988–1991

Between 23 November and 7 December 1988, under the direct supervision of Soviet authorities, approximately 187,000 Azerbaijanis were expelled from 264 villages and seven towns, including the capital Yerevan. Entire communities were uprooted, with 31,000 homes and 165 collective farms seized or destroyed. These expulsions were accompanied by systematic looting and the deliberate destruction of Azerbaijani cultural heritage (De Waal, 2003; Hasanli, 2011).

The violence was catastrophic. Official Azerbaijani data indicate that 242 Azerbaijanis were killed, 1,154 wounded, and thousands subjected to torture and humiliation during the deportations. Alongside Azerbaijanis, more than 15,000 Kurds and several thousand ethnic Rus-

sians were also forcibly displaced, underscoring the broad ethnic cleansing objectives of the campaign (Altstadt, 1992).

In a striking act of hypocrisy, on 6 December 1988 the Soviet government issued a decree condemning “forced relocation.” By that time, however, nearly the entire Azerbaijani population of Armenia had already been deported, rendering the decree symbolic and insincere (Council of Ministers of the USSR, 1988).

The 1989 Soviet census reported only 84,860 Azerbaijanis living in Armenia (Gorbachev, 1996). In contrast, Azerbaijani state records from late 1988 documented more than 230,000 deportees within a matter of weeks (State Statistics Committee of Azerbaijan, 1990). This glaring discrepancy highlights the deliberate falsification of demographic data by Soviet authorities to conceal the scope of ethnic cleansing. As with the earlier deportations of 1948–1953, statistical manipulation served as a political tool to delegitimize Azerbaijani grievances and obscure the humanitarian crisis (Swietochowski, 1995).

11. Conclusion

The deportations of 1948–1955 and 1988–1991 were not isolated episodes but interconnected phases of a long-term policy of demographic engineering in Armenia, sanctioned by both Soviet central authorities and Armenian nationalist elites. Together, these expulsions resulted in the near-total elimination of Azerbaijanis from their ancestral homelands in Western Azerbaijan (Walker, 1991; Suny, 1993).

The cumulative consequences were devastating.

- **Loss of life and cultural heritage:** Thousands perished due to displacement, harsh living conditions, and targeted violence, while Azerbaijani schools, theatres, and institutions were dismantled.

- **Psychological trauma and identity erosion:** Communities fractured, collective memory was suppressed, and centuries of Azerbaijani cultural presence were erased from Armenia.

- **Geopolitical consequences:** The deportations deepened mistrust between Azerbaijan and Armenia, fueling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and shaping the post-Soviet geopolitics of the South Caucasus.

These realities underscore the profound significance of President Heydar Aliyev’s 1997 decree, which legally and politically recognized the deportations as an act of genocide. By establishing a state commission and situating the deportations within the framework of interna-

tional law, Aliyev set a precedent for historical justice and national remembrance (Aliyev, 1997).

This recognition has only grown in importance in contemporary contexts. On 24 December 2022, President Ilham Aliyev reaffirmed the centrality of this issue in a speech to the Western Azerbaijan Community, stressing its relevance for Azerbaijan's identity and strategic future (Aliyev, 2022). By embedding the deportations within domestic and international discourse, Azerbaijani leadership ensured that these tragedies remain not only a matter of historical record but also a driver of modern policy and diplomacy.

Ultimately, the deportations of Azerbaijanis from Armenia between 1948–1955 and 1988–1991 represent a continuum of ethnic cleansing, conducted under different political circumstances but unified by the goal of erasing Azerbaijani presence in Western Azerbaijan. Their recognition and remembrance are essential for regional reconciliation, international awareness, and the safeguarding of collective memory for future generations.

Findings

- Archival analysis demonstrates that forced deportations produced enduring psychological effects, including trauma, identity loss, and intergenerational displacement stress.
- Both deportation waves reveal systemic disregard for human rights and psychological well-being.
- Collective memory was reshaped through violence, leading to the erosion of cultural continuity.
- Archival-document analysis provides a valid tool for reconstructing the psychosocial experiences of displaced populations.

Actuality of the Research

This study is highly relevant to applied psychology, conflict studies, and migration research, as it illuminates the enduring impact of forced migration on identity, resilience, and intergenerational trauma. In the context of ongoing post-conflict reconciliation processes, the research highlights the importance of integrating historical-psychological perspectives into peacebuilding and policymaking.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in strict adherence to ethical guidelines for historical-psychological inquiry. All archival sources were used responsibly, and sensitive accounts of violence and trauma were presented with respect for victims and their descendants. The authors sought to avoid political bias, emphasizing objectivity in the interpretation of historical evidence.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. There are no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the results reported in this article.

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