

both sides seldom distinguished between combatants and noncombatants. But until Khojalu, Armenian fighters had spared women and children, either releasing them or holding them hostage for prisoner exchanges. On this score, they had a better track record than their enemies. The attack at Khojalu, however, had gone some distance to even the score.

Monte crunched over the grass where women and girls lay scattered like broken dolls. "No discipline," he muttered. He knew the significance of the day's date: it was the run-up to the fourth anniversary of the anti-Armenian pogrom in the city of Sumgait. Khojalu had been a strategic goal, but it had also been an act of revenge. Monte knew that enemy fighters would retaliate in kind, and sure enough, when Azeri forces overran the Armenian village of Maragha the next month, they slashed and burned Armenian captives.

Convinced of the supremely high stakes in Mountainous Karabagh, Monte had accepted the ends-justifying-means calculations of all "political realists," East and West: the Arabo and the Aramo were bloodthirsty, yes, but they were also brave fighters, at a time when there was a desperate need for brave fighters. After Khojalu, though, what shocked Monte was that they were unwilling to set vengeance aside, even for the sake of Armenian hostages in Azeri hands. Eventually, Monte would convince his superiors in Stepanakert to expel the Arabo and Aramo Detachments from Martuni. But he never succeeded in convincing them to disband these brutal detachments or to expel them altogether from Mountainous Karabagh before they killed again.

Insubordination only increased after Khojalu. The same defiance that the Arabo and Aramo fighters had demonstrated at Karadaghlu was spreading like a virus among the native fighters in Martuni: reservists didn't bother to show up at the trenches; road repair crews dwindled, and tanker trucks full of diesel vanished into the black market. Even Monte's closest staff at the headquarters lied to him and ignored his orders. One sunny day in early March, four of his fighters, including a local nicknamed Tsav (or "Pain"), requisitioned a jeep on a lark and set out across no-man's land to scavenge booty abandoned on the battlefield. As they approached a knocked-out enemy tank, their jeep blew on a mine, injuring the treasure hunters and tearing off Tsav's lower leg.

When Monte heard the news, his jaw dropped in disbelief. This act of insubordination, so quick on the heels of Khojalu and Karadaghlu, was the last straw: either Monte would take steps to shore up his eroding authority, or the defiance would spread and he would be hounded out

of Martuni. And if that happened, his replacement, whoever it would be, would have an even harder time filling the trenches with fighters.

Tsav's bandages had not yet dried when Monte shouted him down and ordered the Patriotic Detachment—his own detachment and the last one within his jurisdiction—to leave Martuni.

Kechel was still recovering from his bullet wound when he learned that his former comrade had ordered him and his detachment out of Martuni. Monte, he concluded, was "going crazy" with his newfound authority, neglecting old friends and trusting treacherous locals. But if Monte wanted him out of Martuni, then so be it: he would serve elsewhere, under a stronger, less gullible leader.

Monte, for his part, was glad to be rid of one more headache. Later, he would find out just what sort of person he had embraced as a comrade-in-arms: back in November 1990, Kechel had kidnapped a young Azerbaijani Popular Front activist from a village across the border, stealing his car, a red Jhiguli, in the bargain. The young Azeri, Syed, spent a month chained to the wall of a cottage near Yerevan. On New Year's Eve 1991, Kechel and a couple of buddies, including a local police officer and their friend Ardag, dragged their captive to the top of Yeraplur, the burial hill near Yerevan. There they kicked Syed to his knees under a spreading tree next to the grave of a fellow fighter named Haroot. Then Kechel, a father of three children, began cutting Syed's throat with a dull knife. At first Syed screamed, but after a while the screaming gave way to moaning and gurgling. Finally, when Ardag could no longer listen, he pushed a knife into Syed's chest, putting an end to it. They drained Syed's blood on top of Haroot's grave and then left. Not long afterwards, a friend asked Kechel to be his daughter's godfather. As the priest's voice rose in hymn during the baptismal liturgy, Kechel heard Syed's moans echoing through the church. Swooning, he interrupted the ceremony. "Could God ever forgive a person who had killed a dog out of revenge?" he asked the priest. The priest lowered his miter. "That depends," he said, "Was it a four-legged dog or a two-legged dog?"

On March 24 or 25, Monte propped his rifle against a table at the headquarters and took a seat facing a delegation of town elders. In better days these elders had been the leaders of the local soviet, but when war had come to Martuni, younger men in camouflage had pushed them aside. Today, they had come to introduce themselves to the new Headquarters Chief, to find out what sort of man he was and what they