

Moscow's Bitter Harvest

Massive civil strife over the boundaries between two Union Republics. Armed clashes between rival national movements. Pogroms against Armenians in Sumgait and other Azerbaijani towns. Refugees streaming in both directions. Civil war averted only by the intervention of the Soviet army. Why?

Experts have pointed to the clash between Armenian and pan-Turkic nationalism (the Azeris consider themselves Turks) in the years before the region was absorbed into the USSR in 1920. This struggle straddles the frontier of the Soviet Union, in time and in space. Thus the territory of Karabakh was transferred from Armenia to Azerbaijan in 1921 as part of a Soviet effort to court Ataturk's Turkey.

But why, after almost 60 years of Soviet power, should these old quarrels retain such explosive potential? The answer implicit in much Soviet and Western commentary is that national hatred is a natural and eternal attribute of the human psyche, which an anti-nationalist political structure can only temporarily force underground.

This is to replace the flux of real history by timeless myth. And to insult all the ordinary people who remain sane and decent, such as the Azeri families who hid their Armenian neighbours from the pogrom-makers at risk to their own lives. No, the roots of this tragedy, as of others, must be sought not in ancient history or in human nature, but in the social conditions of the immediate past. That is, the *Soviet* past.

Closer study reveals that the Soviet political structure, at least in the post-Stalin period, has been far from free of local nationalist tendencies. The discontinuity between the placid surface of life before Gorbachev and the present turbulence is much less

sharp than appears at first glance.

From where, for example, do the Armenian and Azeri national movements take their ideas and claims? Dissident influences, no doubt, have played some role. However, their nationalist ideologies have on the whole been preserved and elaborated by scholars and writers working within official institutions, under the patronage of Republican leaderships.

Thus territorial claims now advanced by the movements are justified by reference to the work of historians and archeologists at Republican institutes, who have 'proven' with the aid of ancient documents and remains that certain sections of contemporary Azerbaijan belong to 'historical Armenia' (or vice versa). Some such claims, above all the Armenian claim to Upper Karabakh, are also consistent with the current nationalist composition of the population, but others, in particular the Armenian claim to the Nakhichevan enclave, are not.

In general, the image of the USSR as a strictly unified polity, effectively controlled from the Kremlin, has long been a fiction. Especially under Brezhnev, the party bureaucracy took on a 'feudal' form: regional chiefs and their mafias, though continuing to pay obeisance to Moscow, acquired a relatively free hand within their domains. Most appointments to important posts were determined locally.

Feudalisation of the power structure was far advanced at the level of the Union Republics, where considerable power resided. This was so particularly along the southern periphery, in Transcaucasia, Kazakhstan and central Asia. Here the power of the Republican mafias was closely bound up with the privileges assigned to the titular nationality (eg, Kazakhs in Kazakhstan). Non-titular nationalities, such as the Armenians in Azerbaijan and the Azeris in Armenia, suffered discrimination and cultural repression. Russians, protected



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by their privileged position at the Union level, were admittedly an exception.

The initial effect of the process of democratisation under Gorbachev was to enhance the autonomy of the Republican elites, making it much more visible. These elites have been able to exploit the real grievances of fellow-nationals in other Republics for the purposes of inter-Republican rivalry. With remarkable speed, the mass national movements arising from below and the Republican elites above entered into intensive interaction. Officials both fell under the influence of the mass movements and learned how to manipulate them.

The ugliest instance of this interaction was the pogroms in Azerbaijan. Eye-witness accounts of the pogrom in Sumgait, published in *Detente* (No 13, 1988), make clear that it was not a spontaneous outburst but a planned action. The killers were armed with primitive weapons (hatchets, knives etc.) specially manufactured in workshops, used lists of addresses of Armenian families, and were given free rein by the local police, who even released those arrested and handed over by the army. The confused reactions of city party officials suggest that they were not the direct organisers of the pogrom, as some of the

victims suspected; but whatever nationalist network did organise it evidently received much assistance from official bodies.

In the wake of the disturbances, Moscow is reasserting control over the southern Republics - control that will be much more effective than in the past. Republican radio stations will stop directing their propaganda at one another and return to the more standard practice of denouncing non-Soviet targets. And many of the local inhabitants will find central rule relatively benign, though less 'democratic' from the point of view of the Republican elites.

All the same, this 'solution' has disappointing implications for Soviet society. The only institution upon which Moscow was able to rely to bring events under control was the army, which alone is run on completely centralised lines. This circumstance sets definite limits on demilitarisation. The idea of replacing the large standing army by a much smaller professional army combined with territorial militias, publicly advocated by Colonel Savinkin, must now look impractical and even dangerous for the foreseeable future. The honeymoon period of *perestroika*, when - at least to its enthusiasts - anything seemed possible, is well and truly over. •
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