

The Azerbaijani Tinderbox

The crisis in the Caucasus is not only the ugliest of the conflicts in the Soviet Union, it is also the most intractable. Fred Halliday

between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The crisis that has erupted in the southern Soviet republic of Azerbaijan has, for the third time this century, placed this oil-producing region at the centre of international conflict. It is mistaken to see the triangular battle of Azeris, Armenians and Russians as simply a product of traditional enmities; many of the causes of this latest crisis are recent ones - economic decline, events in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, the contradictory impact of perestroika. But, contemporary as many of its causes are, this clash has reactivated older conflicts, internal and international, that have been dormant in recent years.

The whole of Azerbaijan, a Turkish-speaking region, had, until the early 19th century, been part of Iran: then, following a tsarist defeat of the Persian forces, Azerbaijan was partitioned, with the northern half, including Baku, going to Russia, and the southern half, with its capital at Tabriz, remaining in Iran. There are really three cities in Baku - a medieval Turkish town, the extravagant villas and public buildings of the oil boom of the late 19th century, and the anonymous mass buildings of Soviet urban areas. During the first world war, local Azerbaijani nationalists, with the help of Turkey, declared independence from Russia; but revolutionary forces, mainly Armenian and Russian, supported the Bolshevik revolution, and rival Turkish and British armies occupied Baku. When Soviet forces re-established control of Baku in 1920, they chose its opera house as the site for a gathering of Asian revolutionaries to promote revolution throughout the Islamic and colonial worlds; trying to harness Islamic radicalism, the Bolshevik leader Zinoviev called for *jihād* against British colonialism. It was while returning from that congress at Baku that the American writer John Reed died of cholera.

Nothing much came of the appeals from the Baku congress; Islamic radicalism and communism soon came to be rivals,

not allies, and communist parties were unable to develop in the Islamic countries. In Soviet Azerbaijan itself, Islamic institutions were suppressed; in one of the main squares of Baku there is a statue of a woman tearing off her veil. During the second world war, however, a new opportunity presented itself; when the USSR occupied Iran, together with Britain, in 1941, the Soviet authorities set up autonomous regional authorities in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. With a growing communist movement in Iran, it was hoped that a pro-Soviet Iranian Azerbaijan could act as the catalyst for a wider Iranian revolution. But with the second world war over, the Soviet presence in Iranian Azerbaijan provoked a clash with the USA and Britain: it was in Azerbaijan, not Berlin or Trieste, that the cold war began. In March 1946 Harry Truman, then the sole possessor of nuclear weapons, told the Russians to get out of Azerbaijan. They left, and in the following December the Shah's forces occupied Tabriz and destroyed the autonomous republic.

This most recent crisis has erupted in the site of the first world war conflicts, 'northern' or Soviet Azerbaijan. Three factors in particular have precipitated it. The first is the continuation and development of rivalry between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. This became acute in the 1890s and involved massacres by both sides during the first world war. The causes of Azerbaijani hostility to Armenians have many similarities to those of anti-semitism in Russia and central Europe: economic rivalry, religious bigotry, resentment at what is thought to be greater political and cultural influence, fear of territorial loss.

These animosities have been present throughout Soviet rule but have been especially reactivated in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, an 'autonomous region' of around 200,000 people within Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh has a largely Armenian population and is near Armenia proper: but it was not historically part of Armenian territory and in recent years the Azerbaijanis have encouraged Azeri settlement there and sought to exert greater control of it. The Armenians, for their part, have sought to alter the region's status so that it becomes part of the Armenian republic. Here

Armenian resentment of Azeri domination, and Azeri fear of Armenian 'expansionism', have come together.

This nationalist conflict has, however, taken place in the context of perestroika: since 1988, it has become possible within the USSR to express political views previously suppressed and the republics have been encouraged to take a more independent economic and political role. But in the same process the authority of the central government has been weakened, and the local communist parties have become less the instruments of control from Moscow and more the vehicles for local nationalist expression. At the same time, the nationalists in different republics have been watching each other to see how far they can go. The local soviet in Nagorno-Karabakh was the first such body anywhere in the USSR to vote, two years ago, for a change in its territorial status, when it stated that it wanted to be part of Armenia. The Azeris in the Nakhichevan region who recently tore down frontier posts with Iran said they had been influenced by seeing tv pictures of the Berlin Wall coming down. This demonstration effect stimulates nationalist movement; but it also leads Moscow to be very reluctant to make concessions, since to concede at one point may unleash explosions elsewhere.

The implications of the crisis are still unfolding. It is clear that in the Caucasus itself the majority of the blame rests with the Azeri nationalists who have provoked the killings: the Azeris claim that the Soviet and international press are dominated by anti-Muslim elements and are too favourable to the Armenians, but the fact is that it has been the Azeris who have inflamed passions. It is the opposite of Bulgaria where a Christian nationalist fanaticism, exploited by elements in the communist party, has victimised the Turkish Muslim minority.

With the majority of the Armenians in Azerbaijan either dead or refugees, the danger of pogroms is now reduced; but the long-run enmity between the two republics remains, as does the unresolved question of the two exposed enclaves - Nagorno-Karabakh, which is being threatened by Azeris, and Nakhichevan, which faces attack by Armenians.

Even if sectarian killing in

the Caucasus can be stopped, there remain major difficulties. Gorbachev is likely to face major unrest in central cities of the Soviet Union in the near future, including anti-semitic riots in Moscow itself. The firm hand in the Caucasus may help him to face this challenge, but it was indecision and confused signals in Moscow that allowed the crisis to reach this point. There is also a major economic cost: both the Azerbaijani and Armenian economies have been hit by fighting and strikes, and the stoppages in Azerbaijan, which produces much of the drilling and processing equipment used in the oil industry, will hit Soviet energy production and exports. Since oil and gas account for 80% of Soviet export earnings, this could be very serious indeed.

Relations with Iran and Turkey are also affected. Neither Tehran nor Ankara want to become too closely involved, and neither favours Azerbaijani secession from the USSR. But they have to show some support for what they see, respectively, as struggling Muslims and Turks. The Azerbaijanis in Iran, despite the episode of the Soviet-backed republic in the 1940s, are far more integrated into the Iranian state and economy than those in the USSR: many of the Iranian merchants and mullahs are Azerbaijanis, as are leading figures in the Tehran government, including spiritual leader Ali Khamenei.

Iran also has major strategic interests in keeping favourable relations with Moscow, notably *vis-a-vis* its two other main neighbours, Iraq and Afghanistan. But the Iranian authorities cannot prevent men and weapons going across the frontier, and are committed to rhetorical support for 'Islamic' forces inside the USSR. They, like Gorbachev, exaggerate how far the Azerbaijani nationalists are Islamic in orientation, but they are caught in a dynamic that has escaped control by either Moscow or Tehran.

As in Eastern Europe, so in the Caucasus, the most far-easterly region of Europe, it is not just the settlements of the second world war, but those of the first world war, which new nationalist upsurges, enabled by perestroika, have placed in question. The programme of the Baku congress has boomeranged on Bolshevik and Islamic revolutionary regimes alike. •