

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Trabzon, 7 December 1994

Mr Peter Bird Martin, Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755
USA

Black Sea Coast -- Trabzon: football, *hamsi*

I set up shop last month in Trabzon, a port on Turkey's far north-eastern coast, to get a first-hand look at how Soviet disintegration has affected a Turkish town.

Trabzon (population about 250,000) is a 90-minute flight from Istanbul and a 3-hour drive (198 km) from the Georgian border. It is a long, skinny town squeezed along the coast by mountains which are strikingly green and usually covered in mist. It rains very often. Because of these conditions and the dramatic green I have heard this part of the coastline referred to as Turkey's Shangri-La and I like to repeat it. Tea and hazelnuts are grown on the slopes since the climate is more humid as a rule than one might expect. A few of the peaks are snow-capped now because 18 inches of snow fell last week, a freak fall such as has not happened in a decade. The sea is flat and grey as gun-metal with a sharp wind coming off it. As a result I am always cold but the truth is that after the hot summer in Istanbul I rather like it. I remember the end of Brave New World when the Controller gives the rebel Helmholtz a choice of exile in the Falklands or Samoa, and he chooses the Falklands because he thought the cooler weather would focus his mind. I believe he was right.

The preferred method of transport is dolmus which makes sense in a town with essentially a single, east-west axis. The three main streets run parallel for a while until the lowest one shears off towards the water and becomes a maze of market streets which is Trabzon's bazaar. There are clothes stores, jewellers, coppersmiths with raging anvils, cologne and perfume-sellers, sweetshops and, by the water, fish markets where the men stand at their stalls hollering that day's prices or else trundle back up through the bazaar pushing fish-barrows. Usually they are selling *hamsi*. *Hamsi* are a kind of silvery finger-sized fish eaten fried like a sprat or an anchovy but they are not salty. They are a source of regional pride and qualify as a local obsession. Residents are half serious when they attribute the unexpected successes of

Adam Smith Albion is an Institute Fellow writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance in the Black Sea and the former Soviet bloc.

Trabzonspor football team, which is turning out to be one of Turkey's strongest teams, to "hamsi doping."

Football is the other local obsession after *hamsi*. When Trabzonspor made it through the first round of the UEFA cup last month, a TL 30 billion (\$811,000) line item was added to the government's 1995 draft budget in aid from the Fund for the Promotion of Turkey to Trabzonspor FC. When Trabzonspor plays away, the coffeehouses offering a television set are jammed. Large crowds assemble outside the windows of television stores, and people stand stock-still on the streets trying to glimpse the screens of rooftop restaurants. When the match is home, the streets are emptied out. Dolmuses virtually disappear for two hours, and if I want to go home then I have to walk. There is almost no noise except for the distant sounds of cheering from the stadium. If Trabzonspor wins, the town resounds with pistol fire as the whole male population shoots real bullets into the air. Black Sea and Caucasus people traditionally own weapons even if they don't wear them day-to-day any more and there are three gunshops within five minutes' walk of Trabzon's centre.

Rose-tinted spectacles -- Old Trebizond

Before moving here, I thought it would be a good idea to look into some of the travel literature about Turkey to learn other people's impressions of Trabzon. What I read irritated me very much. It was full of the romance of the East, of the Silk Road, of old Trebizond, beautifully spun and embroidered. That style is fine but it is not sober and I was looking for a sober assessment too. I had to conclude that Pierre Loti and Lawrence of Arabia brainwashed too many travellers into seeing "the Orient" (which on this reading includes Turkey) in an exaggeratedly romantic way. The travelogues were written with a refinement so overdone and a style so attenuated that the critical faculties were left behind. It all seemed very artificial to me. I not want to spoil anyone's fun because poetry and rhapsody have their place. But I have to ask what sort of selective mentality is it after all that steps off the ship into Anatolia and begins seeing only tamarisk trees that wave in the spice-filled air? Why should the commonplace in the West become mystical and filled with power in the East -- an ignorant prejudice at home become a wise folk tradition abroad -- an ugly vendetta there become a noble quest for tribal honour here? Only cross into Asia and sensibilities become so elevated that it is like breathing pure oxygen.

Trabzon's past as Trebizond sorely tempts even those who are not predisposed to put on the rose-tinted glasses. Its name and associations seem to single it out for unremitting romantic treatment. It is certainly true that Trabzon has had a long and often exciting history which it would be a shame to ignore. I wish we could be sober, however, on one point that is relevant to the present. I note that writers love to repeat that the Laz and Circassian women of this region were famously beautiful. "Circassian" certainly does sound exotic, and Pechorin's Bela in Lermontov's A Hero of Our Time was Circassian. But the glorification of the periodic raids launched to capture Laz and Circassians for Topkapi harem is too much. I do draw the line at that and I don't know why everyone else gets a big kick out of what were mass rapes for the

pleasure of consecutive sultans. French painters seemed to think that the Rape of the Sabine Women was a pretty good idea too. I am not saying all this out of the blue and will return to it later.

Trabzon extends across two deep gorges that acted in the past as moats and has three sets of city walls which were built as the city expanded. It is fun to remember that Xenophon's march of the Ten Thousand from Persia ended when they glimpsed of the sea from the mountains over Trabzon. A millenium and a half later, the Comnenid dynasty were forced to flee Constantinople when the Fourth Crusade -- an army of nominally Latin, Christian allies -- sacked the Byzantine capital in 1204 at Venetian instigation. The Byzantine court moved here for fifty years and the Church of St Eugenius and the Aya Sofia Cathedral are well-preserved relics of that time. The kingdom they established actually outlasted Byzantium proper by eight years; Constantinople fell in 1453, but Trebizond held out against Mehmet II until 1461.

Trabzon became a cosmopolitan Ottoman port town with the usual non-muslim comprador population controlling trade. You can see this still in the relics of hans (kervansarays) where merchants could store their goods, and a still-functioning catholic church which once catered to Italian traders. The Greeks and Armenians were bloodily ejected, as elsewhere in the country, at the end of the 19th century and after the Atatürk-led War of Independence. The Greeks have left their traces in the shapes of windows, lintels, and tombstones around town. Also, when I listen carefully, I can make out that Turkish speakers with family roots here say 'u' for 'ü/i,' 'ch' for 'g,' and deviate in various other ways from the standard language. I have been speculating that these deviations are residual influence of Greek pronunciation but I would appreciate a linguist's judgement.

Trabzon and Vienna -- Leather jackets -- Russian lessons -- Risks and bribes

Everyone starts a study with a working hypothesis. My thought was that Trabzon's situation was unexpectedly similar to Vienna's. Both were cities with provincial mentalities situated at the far eastern end of the regions to which they belonged politically. With the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and the USSR's destruction in 1991, the barriers came down. Vienna and Trabzon found themselves facing new and unknown hinterlands which would open them up and make them more cosmopolitan. With some obvious qualifications, I still think there is merit to this idea. Georgia is no Czechoslovakia economically. It will not be on its feet for a decade. The eastern Black Sea is altogether a less hospitable environment at present for investment, tourism or cultural ties than East Central Europe. But it is all coming, slowly slowly, as the Turks say. Trabzon has changed significantly in 3-4 years.

First, though, an example of how Trabzon is still provincial. One of my first acts in Trabzon was to look for a map. The Tourist Bureau, which does see some activity during the summer, could offer only an abridged version showing the monuments. They at least regretted the lack of a real street map. Everyone else thought a map was a novel idea. No one encouraged me in my hunt for one on the grounds that there could be no need for a map, since everyone in

Trabzon knew all the streets anyway. I even heard this in the surveying department of the Town Hall. I began testing people with my own address and found this claim was demonstrably false. At one point a small crowd, recognizing by now the foreigner in town, had collected in a bookstore to advise me. They began shaking their heads and clicking their tongues, in other words a thumbs-down on the map issue. I am afraid I lost my temper. I said that it was ridiculous to keep telling me there was no city map of Trabzon. Since NATO maintained a military base above the town for years, smack on the Soviet border, the Soviet High Command in Moscow certainly had a detailed map of Trabzon even if its residents never cared to print one. In fact I eventually found a street map a few years' old in a bottom drawer at Hertz Car Rental. I never use it.

The opening of the border at Sarp inaugurated a flood of traders from Russia and Georgia, less from Armenia and Azerbaijan. At first they came by bus but nowadays there are daily ferries to Sochi and flights to Stavropol, Krasnodar, Rostov, Mineralnye Vody and Baku as well as the regular domestic services and occasional charters to Europe. As in Istanbul, traders began by setting up stalls to sell knick-knacks, antiques, or Soviet memorabilia by the docks. The stalls were brought together and covered and are now institutionalized as the Russian Bazaar selling cheap junk. Most traders then quickly switched from selling their pieces to the more lucrative business of bringing Turkish goods home, particularly leather jackets. Reportedly before 1991 there were three or four leather stores in Trabzon. Today there are so many I have not tried to count them. Leather jackets are now ubiquitous among the Turkish male population. As a result, superficially the town has an atmosphere of macho criminality such as one associates with Chechnya. Incidentally, I too have bowed to peer pressure and now conform to the fashion. There have also been local explosions of shops selling ladies' clothes and crystal goods such as chandeliers. Many stores have hired Georgians to help the customers in their native languages. The number one hears from officials is that 750,000 people came from the ex-USSR in 1993 to buy and sell but mainly buy.

As a result some money has come to Trabzon, and just in time. Turkey did well out of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980's, supplying goods to both sides. Trabzon was especially well-suited to profit from the trade with Iran. Five years ago a typical Transport and Trading company, Transhoron, had 60 staff, owned 30 trucks, rented 250, and dispatched 50-60 trucks/day towards Tehran carrying tractor parts, tyres, tools, eggs and frozen chickens. Today it is a sad office with five people and no trucks. The end of that war, the boycott on Iraq after the Gulf War, and the rising insecurity to trucking along Turkey's eastern roads due to Mrs Ciller's escalation of the war with the PKK (the Kurdish guerilla movement) meant hard times ahead for Trabzon. Then the ex-Soviets began coming.

They seem to have brought remarkably little crime with them. I expected a reprise of the Czech-German border when impoverished Czechs would descend on Nuremburg and shoplift everything in sight but Turks report surprisingly cordial business relations with the newcomers. That said, according to the Georgian consulate there are about one hundred Georgians in Turkish prisons between Sarp and Samson, mostly for passport forgery or

vandalism. Georgians and Russians also come across the border looking to work illegally as housecleaners or woodchoppers or loaders. Their numbers swell as the weather gets cold to escape the food and electricity shortages at home. They buy a month's visa on the border for \$30 and simply lose their passports to avoid the cost of renewing them so their consuls are kept busy issuing them 3-day passports to send them home.

All in all, Trabzon has become a more cosmopolitan place. There is a Turkish theatre company presenting plays by the Georgian playwright Lali Nikoladze. There are many more restaurants than there were and I am told some will even stay open during Ramazan, which was previously unheard of, because the foreigners have to eat. Owners have rehauled and modernized their shops in line with the foreigners' tastes, especially the clothes stores catering to ex-Soviet women who favour Western lines. The demand for Russian lessons at the Tomer language school has multiplied manyfold, and not only by businessmen who only want to learn to count and use rudimentary economic vocabulary but by others too who are motivated by curiosity, although whether that curiosity survives a brush with the Russian case system is of course a separate question.

The Russian/Georgian trade is acknowledged to be risky. The trading companies down at the port seeking those markets are conservative in the risks they are willing to take. There is demand for such things as spirits, cigarettes, fish, wheatflour, batteries and, with Christmas coming, eggs, but entering those markets is always a gamble. Georgia in particular is talked about as the Wild West, with no business or banking infrastructure or legislation worth talking about. Turkish companies will not look at a letter of credit and work only by bank transfer or cash. If the Turks sell, say to Georgians, they sell CNF -- cost and freight. In other words, the price they quote to the Georgian buyer includes the cost of the goods and the cost of transport and nothing else. The Georgians are responsible for the rest, eg. insurance. The Turks will not touch insurance. There is in fact no insurance company in Trabzon for trade with the ex-USSR. If the Turks buy, they buy CIF -- cost, insurance and freight: in other words, insurance is included and the Georgian sellers take all the risk again. DDP -- deliver duty paid -- is a dream. At a DDP price Turkish goods would arrive in Georgia with everything paid and ready to go: cost of goods, freight, insurance, customs taxes, VAT, and bribes. No Turk would begin to think about DDP business with the ex-USSR although it might be a normal transaction between Western companies.

The shopowners in town are also aware that the Russian/Georgian trade is fragile. Although their customers deal in dollars, their numbers fell off for a month this summer after the plunge of the rouble shook the Russian economy. There is also a rumour circulating among them that I keep hearing in the bazaar about an absurd tax due from Moscow in the New Year. On top of the new tax regime of two months ago, the rumour claims that profits will be penalized up to 100%. True or false, it scares people off. Furthermore, all are agreed that the abuses by Georgian border officials are getting worse. Corruption is expected: the distinction is between reasonable and unreasonable corruption. After two years of reasonable bribes to pass goods

through customs, since spring the bribes have begun to be extortionate, occasionally equal to 40% of one's stock.

People are also annoyed at the "cross" system on the border. Officials have a register of Georgian companies with cross markings beside their names. Goods under the names of those companies have no taxes levied on them but no one knows how to earn a cross. I heard a rumour that you can get a cross if you donate money to certain shady charities which may connect with government coffers or may go into the pockets of some mafia or other. I heard another suggestion that a cross rewards those who supported the government in Tbilisi against the Abkhazian separatists. No one knows for sure.

Finally -- bad from the point of view of Turkish shopkeepers -- their customers have become more savvy about going to the sources to avoid middlemen. They have smelled out the leather and cloth factories in Istanbul and Izmir and buy wholesale. After three very good years, business is falling off in Trabzon. No one is wildly optimistic any more that the customers will simply come to them in 1995.

The truth seems to be that Trabzon has always had its ups and downs. This is the picture I piece together from people's memories, a sort of oral economic history of Trabzon. It is virtually bereft of industry. Its agriculture is seasonal: hazelnut gathering comes in mid-summer followed by the tea-picking in August. When the Turkish Republic assumed its now-familiar rectangular shape, Trabzon was left in the top right corner with no very stable or alluring markets nearby, although the Middle East has been good on and off and the ex-USSR is good now. Consequently the people improvise. The local population has a tradition of spreading out throughout Turkey or indeed Europe looking for work. It is captured in a saying that everyone knows: "Hangi tasi kaldirirsan, altindan Laz çikar" -- "Whatever stone you lift, a Laz [native of the east Black Sea coast] comes out from under it."

Natashas

I cannot claim that I am writing for family reading but even if I were it would be hard to tell the truth about Trabzon without mentioning the prostitutes. The town is notorious for its now steady population of a couple hundred Russian and Georgian/Circassian women who live three to four to a room in mostly unheated pension rooms on the waterfront. The women are mostly Caucasians, although I have met one from Rostov and one from far-off Tashkent. They stand out because they are generally fair and blonde or at least have learnt to capitalize on the fact that the Turkish men are strongly attracted to blondes.

They are known collectively as "Natashas" and Turkish men from Izmir to Kars know and wink about the Black Sea coast's "Natasha phenomenon." The Natashas started coming in 1991 when the borders opened and the USSR's economy collapsed, instantly throwing Trabzon's men into a tizzy from which they have not emerged. Men are still very aware of them after three years and like to discuss how beautiful some of the "Russians" are. I have

heard Trabzon unkindly called the Bangkok of the Black Sea. This is an exaggeration because no one comes on sex holidays to Trabzon. But Natashas are a key ingredient of this town and are responsible for a number of significant social repercussions. The Western romantics I read who came to Trabzon recently but were visiting Trebizond in their minds might choose to ignore them. That is fine but it is a sort of fantasy verging on blindness. The town's romance is pretty tempered by the whoring unless you really want to twist your sights around and begin talking up the girls' Circassian features and almond eyes.

The police have an informal zoning arrangement to ensure that the social proprieties are minimally observed. The massed ranks of Trabzon's 1-2 star hotels start 200 metres from the central park's statue of Atatürk and stretch along a windy cobbled road that goes down to the sea. They all have ground-floor lobbies that look like waiting-rooms and first-floor restaurants that look like buffets at train-stations. The women wait there shoulder-to-shoulder on benches in fur coats or leather jackets watching television, or at three or four "cafeterias" hidden in the backstreets. The advantage to the cafeterias is that they encourage the timid and simulate excitement by playing Western pop music while you drink beer. There are also no pimps in the cafeterias. The women sit with you at the booths or tables and know enough Turkish to discuss the weather and your appearance for form's sake. But once you have met and agreed you are expected as part of the price to take them somewhere to eat before finding a hotel room, because no Turk would think of bringing a woman home. The women alone cost about \$100 when average monthly salary is \$250 but do not lack customers. Before the the snow came many were walking the pavements but now it is too cold.

Natashas become a topic of national discussion when the Islamic-oriented Refah ("Welfare") Party won Trabzon's town hall in the March municipal elections. Refah attracts votes for many reasons -- by claiming to be close to the people and promising to fix infrastructure, for example. But specially in Trabzon they promised to rid the town of *fuhus*, a word which means prostitution but at the same time connotes indecency in general and as such makes Refah's link to a moral revival movement explicit. (They have broken this campaign promise, obviously. Why no move has been made against the Nastashas is a mystery. According to the Russian consul Atatürk's Turkey, like the USSR, denied the existence of prostitution, leaving the police with no formal weapons to deal with the problem, although Russian women are occasionally picked up, their heads shaved, and sent home without much rhyme or reason.)

The received wisdom on the election is that Trabzon women and wives formed the backbone of Refah supporters. Refah appealed to their jealousy and fears that their husbands were being disloyal to them. There is probably a lot of truth to this but it is not the whole story. My on-going coffeehouse straw-poll suggests that wives' fears of infidelity are well-founded. But infidelity is in the eye of the beholder. Lots of men appear not to regard sleeping with a Natasha as cheating. Or else, if it is cheating, they do not see why they should be blamed. Here in provincial Turkey, the usual hypocrisy rooted in sexual double-standards applies. Everyone is borrowing from everyone else or occasionally cashing in their wives' jewellery to pay for Natashas but guilty consciences are hard to find, although the psychiatrist at the

university clinic says he has been approached by a few. What I am driving at is that I think plenty of Trabzon's men, who keep the Natashas in business, voted for Refah too shoulder to shoulder with their wives. They did not perceive that their wives were voting "against" them. In fact men boast that their wives vote the way they tell them to. If this is so then male and female votes were cast for Refah for different reasons but the men at least saw no contradiction in their doing so.

On balance I would say that the influx of two hundred prostitutes who are, by Turkish standards, liberated women has been a good thing for Trabzon. It is a close call, though. A lot of bad has come of it, notably broken marriages (in the re-telling, the wives are blamed for being unreasonable but this might be bravado). Disease is a danger. I was sitting in a cafeteria with a fisherman boy of 19 who was waiting for his favourite to arrive and I asked him if he used a condom. He said he didn't. I asked him if he was concerned about AIDS. He said he wasn't. I asked him why not. "Because I eat *hamsi*," he said, without a hint of irony. "*Hamsi* protects you against AIDS."

On the upside, I have had a number of Turkish women tell me that Turkish men, notoriously chauvinistic, have started acting a little better towards them since the Natashas came. In a perverse way, Natashas give a lesson in inter-sexual respect by being noticeable, in control, out for themselves and unaccompanied after dark. None of these are qualities one would associate with the typical role of a Turkish woman. I have heard reports that it is easier for a woman to walk along the Russian Bazaar past the mechanics and garage-workers without being jeered and wolf-whistled. The psychiatrist thinks that if Natashas liberate the repressed libido which the Turkish division of the sexes creates, at least that libido will be rechannelled away from passive aggression towards women in general. *Insallah*.

However, in a straight popularity contest between football, *hamsi* and Natashas, in Trabzon football still wins. On the night that Trabzonspor was playing Lazio at home, I walked into a pastry-shop and was surprised to see two Russian prostitutes sitting in the corner. I recognized one of them because I had helped her earlier that week translate something in a grocery.

"Hello," I said. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. There's a football match tonight," she said.

"There's nothing to do when there's a football match?"

"No. We're waiting here until it's over."

"Or at least until the interval," her friend said.

Received in Hanover 1/3/95.

We regret that, during the preparation of ASA's first newsletter for printing, two lines of text were accidentally omitted from the first page. The fourth paragraph should read:

"Perhaps, for the moment, I would do best by invoking Herodotus, who appropriately knew this part of the world well. Until I am more

ASA-3

grounded and certain of myself here, I can only commend his practice of being open about reporting what he heard and saw even when he was couldn't say for sure what was true. He mixed hearsay with eyewitness accounts; never avoided a picturesque moment or a good anecdote; and pioneered the lost art (crushed by one of this century's evil -isms, academic credentialism) of being informative, and imaginative, at the same time."

We apologize for any misunderstanding this may have caused (ICWA).

ASA-3

Adjaristan.

Turkey's Caucasus population 10m

North Caucasiona Cultural Association

Russian attack on Chechnya

one set up for business with Iran -- "Valley" (?) group in London is Iranian-owned

To set up in the zone you apply to the H (treasury); operating company handles hiring offices, warehouse space.

Purchases outside are taxes at .5% which goes to a Free Zone Fund to advertise Turkish free zones. We pay no income taxes.

Free Zone in Poti idea: Law, Regulations, Contract for Creation of Poti Free Zone (to be signed between operating company and Georgian gov, eg Economic Ministry), operating agreement... Adv: duty-free depots. Good rail connections. But US company/ Western needed for face.