

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

tcg-10 Part II

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Dear Peter,

In an effort to help you and others who might be taken aback at by the weight of this monster report I think it wise in this instance to include a sort of table of contents, to wit:

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Part II

As you must gather from some of the chapter headings, the report deals with the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan--a curious, ill-understood piece of real-estate that has, I have to admit right off the git-go, claimed a chunk of my heart.

With no further ado, then, I submit to you:

Impressions of Azerbaijan: (or travels in trans-Türkiye)

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### A Quick Walk Through History

The following information will of need be short and thus superficial, although I think it is essential for the understanding of the current dilemma in Azerbaijan. In effect, I mean to address the question of exactly what the country is, and why it is so.

First and foremost, there never really was an Azerbaijan state up until our present century: it was always a part of a greater, neighboring state or was divided into small, Muslim principalities, or emirates.

Indeed, omitting the nations in the area prior to the arrival of the Turks on the historical scene in the 9th century (and these are of keen interest and relevance in the on-going irredentist debate of our day) it can be said that Azeri Turkish history mirrors that of Seljuk/Ottoman Turkish history: early contact with the Muslim Arabs seeking slave-soldiers in Central Asia; palace coups by the slave-soldiers who then became masters of the Islamic house; conflict with and then victory over the Byzantine empire on the march-lines of eastern Anatolia and the creation of the Seljuk Turkish empire(s); their defeat at the hands of the Mongols and the division of the Seljuk empire into numerous, Muslim beyliks; the rise of one of their number as primus inter paris to fill the political void when the Mongols withdrew from the scene.

This rough litany of events is familiar to anyone who has read Turkish history, with the last stage mentioned referring quite obviously to the rise of the inchoate Ottoman state set up by the descendants of Osman first in Bursa and then Edirne and then finally, in 1454, in Istanbul.

The same litany also applies to the Turkic East, with one major difference: here, in the late 15th century, a similar survivor of the ravages of the Mongols and Timur was to set up his own, rival dynasty in the city of Tabriz in what is now northwestern Iran. Either by belief or political expediency or in order to forge a difference between himself and the other, mainly Turkic pretenders to hegemony in the Muslim world, he began importing Muslim clerics from the heterodox land of the Yemen to convert his Sunni, Muslim subjects to a long-despised (or at least disputed) variant of the faith: Shiism.

And in doing so, he created one of the great religious fault lines of the faith, running from the Caucasus down to Basra on the Gulf.

In the South, it divided the Arabs; in the middle, it divided the Persians from the Kurds, and in the North the march line between Sunni and Shiite clove a wedge between the Turks.

His name was Ismael, and he called himself by the title of the traditional kings of Iran--Shah.

I have to confess that I myself always thought--or was taught, or both--that Shah Ismael was a Fars, or Persian, but have recently been disabused of that notion: he was a Turk, or at least Turkic, although like most or all of the Muslim rulers of the day, he adopted Persian court customs and Persian as the language of history and literature to laud him and his deeds.

This has disguised much, for throughout his religious wars in the East (against the Persianized, Sunni Turkic leaders of such Central

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Asia states as Bukhara) and the West (against the Ottoman, Sunni Turkish leaders of Istanbul) the historians usually depict the conflict as much as an Iranian\Turkic culture conflict as a Sunni\Shiite dispute.

But with the belated revelation that Ismael was actually Turkic (however garbled his sense of this was at the time I will not comment on) the great Islamic civil wars of the late 15th and early 16th centuries take on an entirely different aspect:

They were Turkic civil wars, and ones that are not over yet.

In the event, Shah Ismael lost, at least in the West.

His Kizilbash troops, or "Red Heads" as the Shiites were known in distinction to the Yeshilbash, or "Green Heads" of the Sunnis, were defeated by the Ottoman Sultan Yavuz Selim ("The Grim") at the battle of Chalidran north of Lake Van in 1517. And after Selim's chain-linked canons had ripped through Ismael's cavalry, a veritable pogrom was begun against Turkic Shiites of the land: fortified by a fatwa, or pious proclamation issued by the grand Mufti of Istanbul that promised paradise for any Sunni who killed a Kizilbash, a witch-hunt ensued.

This had two effects:

1) Those behind the lines began to conceal their Shiite faith on fear of death, and this concealment eventually gave rise to the severely distorted Shiitism that I will call "Anatolian" Alevism (in distinction to the more familiar Alawites of the Levant), and

2) Those Turkic peoples to the East of the new frontier came under the influence of the Persian language\Shiite clergy cultural sphere more than ever before.

The result has been a deep psychosis, a hearts and minds passion play that is still being played out today.

In essence the question is: are we Turks or Shiites, or both?

This national schizophrenia was handily exploited by a third factor in the region--the nascent power of Czarist Russia. Petrograd was able to take full advantage of the fact that Azerbaijan had become the march-line between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shiite Safavids, playing one side off against the other while making great incursions into the Caucasus. The Russians were only temporarily stopped by the Ottomans in 1724, when the new Turkmen ruler of geographic Iran was also ousted from the region. But the Ottomans would not or could not take control themselves, and the Caucasus then split into a number of semi-independent (and rival) principalities, lasting from around 1750 until 1810, when Russian troops once again started pushing the frontier south. Using the local Christian minorities such as the Georgians and Armenians as a means to enter local disputes, Petrograd ineluctably swallowed up the independent principalities of the Caucasus, the last being the Iranian border province of Nahcivan, ceded to Russia in the 1828 Treaty of Turkenchi.

The rest, as they say, is history:

Azerbaijan was divided into "north" and "south". The former, now belonging to Russia, contained most of the arable land and mineral resources; the later, now belonging to Iran, contained most of the rugged, mountainous real-estate and people. In contemporary terms, the population ratio between Soviet and Iran Azerbaijan is something like five million to twenty million souls.

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And thereby lies the irony: when one thinks of Azerbaijan today one thinks of Soviet Azerbaijan.

Despite 150 and more years of Russian (Czarist or Soviet) domination and assimilation and a far smaller Azeri population to begin with, a consciousness of 'Azeriness' has been maintained, while in the much larger and populous southern portion of the 'country' in geographic Iran, ethnic consciousness appears to have been largely subsumed by the majority Persian culture--be it that of Shah Ismael, Nadir Shah, Reza Palavi or even the Ayatullah Khomeini.

Strange then, that in these days of waning Soviet/Russian influence and relevance in the affairs of (northern) Azerbaijan, that rather than asking whether they should be progressive or conservative or even western or eastern, the citizens of Soviet Azerbaijan appear to be asking themselves the age old question that predates any events as young as 70 or even 150 years ago.

That question, again, is: "are we Shiites or are we Turks?"

In the good old days of Stalinist rule, this question of hearts and minds was probably not asked too often. But within the contradictory context of glasnost it is being asked incessantly.

One answer comes in the guise of men in business suits looking for a deal and talking about economic ties and trade.

They are from Turkey, and will sell to the highest bidder.

The other answer comes in the guise of men wearing gowns and turbans and the stern looks of religious fanatics who encourage young men to whip themselves with chains during the Shiite month of passion and demand that women return to the veil.

They are from Iran, and are determined to stay.

#### A Tour of Baku Town

Having given a sketch of primary characters in our tow (or towing us) as well as some of the historical and social issues at play, I think it might be well to enter into a description of our exploration of Baku and environs.

I think it incorrect to try and give a detailed account of the city, because we have barely scratched the surface and I have more questions now than I can answer about its basic history, architectural composition, personalities and such like. It is a fascinating place that warrants far more time and discovery than I was able to afford.

Still, it would be unfair not to make a couple of casual remarks and observations.

The first is that orientation in Baku is strange.

The core city is situated on a wide bay on the southern face of the Apsheron peninsula that hooks out into the Caspian Sea, but the feel of it is that one is looking East, making an approach from the land-side very confusing--even vexing when one is intent on shooting film, for the expected shadows are not in the right places. Indeed: to this day, I am not sure whether the airport is North or South or due West, or how our suburb home in Mashtaga fits into being South of the city. There were few road signs and the general blight of the sprawling oil-field forests on all sides of Baku further added to the problem of landmark orientation.

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Once within the ring of the newer, uglier Soviet-style high-rise apartment buildings on the fringes of town, Baku reveals itself to be a charming if somewhat down-at-the heel turn of the century city that might be labeled truly beautiful if given a scrub and a paint-job.

Perhaps the easiest description of the city's architectural style would be to declare it Czarist and late-Czarist, for Baku has been in Russian hands since the first quarter of the last century when the Russian armies moved south through the Caucasus, taking over the Muslim principalities there one after another. (There were, I believe, 15 mainly Turkish speaking but mainly Iranian-influenced Shiite emirates in the region which now make up the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia, all of which fell like so many dominoes between 1810 and 1828 as the Russians expanded southward against Ottoman Turkey and Persia). Still, I am not familiar enough with the look and feel of other Czarist Russian towns to make a leap of faith and categorically say it is so, and am thus tempted to describe the style of most of Baku's architecture as "Levantine", as many buildings resemble the nicer structures found in such eastern Mediterranean cities as Alexandria in Egypt, Izmir on the Aegean coast or, most pre-eminently, Istiklal Caddesi in the Beyoglu/Pera section of Istanbul. This would fit the historical record in any case, for these entrepots all attracted a similar mixed, mercantile class of Italians, Armenians and Greeks who remained largely indifferent to who held political control so long as they could make trade. Naturally enough, the itinerant architects of the age followed the new wealth where it went and I would not be surprised to see such familiar names as C.E. Street, Sir Charles Barry or even the ubiquitous Fossati brothers appear as the designers (or inspirers) of many of the nicer structures in town.

Architectonically, the down-town buildings seem to be broken down into three categories--deep historic, monumental and residential.

The most striking structure in the first category, consisting of remnants of the citadel and high Islamic structures such as mosques, caravansaries and hamams, is the so-called Girl's Tower (Kiz Kulesi)--a cylindrical guard tower connected to the city's citadel. A thin wedge of fortified wall extends out into what used to be the shallows of the port, making the battlement to appear curiously tear-shaped. A shorter version of Istanbul's Galata Tower, a stairwell loops upward through a series of ventilated floors to the roof which provides a fine view of the old town.

In back of the tower is the main fort, with most of the defense walls still intact or now restored. These encompass the old town, a series of pastel colored houses interspersed with several mosques (or ruins thereof) including the pleasant divan complex housing the tomb of the 15th century Emir of Baku, Shirvanshah. It is now an inscription museum and includes many grave stones which boast a peculiar mixture of (base) animal and (pious) Quranic design. Other museums of interest in the quarter are the Khali, or Rug Museum, with an exquisite collection of rugs and kilims from the Caucasus region; collectors might stop in and browse in one of the several carpet shops set up in the area, or visit the carpet-weaving cooperative under the direction of the Kafkashia (Caucasus) Muslims Administration, located in the main square of the old town. Also within the confines of the

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old walls are several caravansaries, now converted into tourist-class kebab restaurants as well as several art galleries and book stores.

Flush up against the older walls are those structures belonging to the second category--either government or monumental buildings dating to the turn of the century. These are arguably the most handsome buildings in town, representing an epoch when architects had an eye for detail, design and even humor. One building abutting the Maiden's Tower is nearly wild with wry wit and fun, with gargoyles anointing the gables and vaguely "oriental"-style friezes mounted along all balconies and windows. All such decoration, I should add, is very subtle--to the point where one would only notice it by its absence.

This sense of style has even touched the more modern buildings in the down-town region, many of which display curious bas-reliefs of individuals who once lived or worked within the walls of a given building or events of significance that occurred nearby--such as the aforementioned (and now desecrated) monument and park devoted to the memory of the 18 Baku Commissars shot by nationalists during the hurly-burly surrounding the 1920 Soviet Putsch.

Sadly, some other structures seemed doomed to decay or conversion to purposes other than their builders intended: the several Armenian churches in town are now boarded up and partially desecrated, the unhappy result of the continued tension between citizens of Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet Armenia over the disputed region of Karabagh.

Now is not the time to go into a analysis<sup>of</sup> the matter, save for noting that from the Azeri side a truly irrational hatred and fear of all things Armenian has taken root. This psychosis has even gone so far as to affect the local (and necessarily monumental) Lenin Museum. Although the details of Lenin's life remain etched in stone, the displays devoted to the destruction of independent Azerbaijan and the glorious creation of the Azerbaijan Soviet in 1920 have now been altered: the portraits of all ethnic Armenian participants in the revolution (and there were quite a few) have now been removed from the walls, the pins supporting the picture frames still in place and giving mute testimony to the success of Stalin to divide and rule more than 30 years after his death.

The Lenin Museum is the center-piece of the main promenade providing several miles of pleasant, shaded walk-way where kids play snooker and grey beards dabble at dominoes or simply sip at their tea at one of the many board-walk cafes. One of these establishments, built in a fairy-tale castle-like style with a moat, allegedly houses the chess club where Gary Kasparov got his start but it was not open when I was there, and I was obliged to pit my brains against several devotees at the many playing stands lining the quay. Shah-mat ("The King Is Dead") remains a very popular sport in Baku, a game played by one and all. Perhaps in deference to this national obsession, the parliament building at the end of the board-walk resembles nothing so much as a chess-piece castle, defending the chess-piece bishop statue of Lenin. His pose looks almost as if he were preaching the beauties of his foundering religion southward to the land of the mullahs in Iran at the far end of the Caspian Sea...

If Lenin is still ubiquitous, restaurants are a little more difficult to find.

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Excepting the massive, soulless dinners associated with the big hotels in town, the main tourist-class eatery in town is the aforementioned Caravansaray just in back of the Kiz Kulesi.

Sadly, and despite a plethora of literature on the delights of Azeri cuisine, it seems pretty well limited to different types of Kebab, or skewered meat and made with little of the care or spicing usually associated with this basic, Turkic dish. We did enjoy a tasty Aghbalik, or sturgeon steak at the roof top restaurant of the Hotel Moscow, though: its texture and taste was remarkably similar to lobster.

The best bet was aboard the good schooner Karol, managed by the Communist party youth league and anchored at the far western end of the quay. We took our hosts here on the last evening in town for a table full of caviar, smoked Aghbalik, various kebabs, sundry meze's (Russian--zakosta) and a true surfeit of other culinary delights. For libations, we enjoyed our fill of the light, white Azeri champanski (avoid the sweet red stuff), loads of vodka and even some fairly tasty East German beer. This last was presumably kept in cellars after the disappearance of that erstwhile Soviet ally from the map and it is sad that the stock will not be replenished because Soviet beer is actually pretty bad.

The price for the evening for eleven people, including dancing and tipping the band for allowing me to play and sing a blues number with them, ran to about \$40.

### Oil Field Forests

If the interior of Baku town is elegant and charming, the exterior is not.

The "other" Baku, in fact, is an unadvertised oil-town disaster, a vast area of black septic swamps linked by rusted pipes hung at chest level. Tens of thousands of old pumping rigs blight the horizon right outside the city limits, and often encroach well within them. For locals, the sight and smell of the fields is the most dramatic symbol of their colonization by the Soviets, which in this instance means 'The Russians'.

Oil was 'discovered' in Baku in the mid-19th century, although its presence in the area had long been known by fire-worshippers who came to the region to pray to the twin gods of fire and light. One of the local 'shrines' we visited was the Ateshgah, or "Flame Place" located perhaps half of an hour north from city center in the village of Surakhay. The road there was necessarily lined on both sides by the rusty drill rigs pumping away like a flock of pecking birds on every available parcel of land. Here, an eternal flame fed by underground gas has been burning, well, eternally, and attracting fire-worshipping sorts from as far away as India for centuries. A rather bad museum guide led us around the caravansaray-like structure erected around the holy flames, narrating the obvious about the shoddy model displays of emaciated Zoroastrian fakirs awaiting death. Naturally enough, I wanted to make a connection between the Zoroastrians here and the bastard off-shoot of the Yezidis in Northern Iraq but our guide was not used to being asked questions and so we dismissed her and wandered

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around the place by ourselves, noting Swastika emblems in the inscriptions over the chamber doors but being unable to acquire any additional information about who made them and when. (Another, less-well known eternal flame is located an additional half hour north of town on some nameless bi-road to Genci, and was far more impressive than the "tourist-class" Ateshgah: here, an un-quenchable wall of flame fed by natural gas shot up from the primordial depths out of a naked hill-side. A kebab restaurant had been set up just outside the scorch zone.)

With the 19th century discovery that petroleum was a lighter, more explosive substitute for coal, Baku took on new meaning and the exploitation began in earnest and Baku soon became synonymous with the very concept of Black Gold in the first half of this century. Its importance was underlined by the Nazi determination to take the fields whole and undamaged during World War II, to the point that not one air-strike was made on the city during the long Caucasian campaign lest the valuable fluids be destroyed.

Nowadays, that notion is associated with Saudi Arabia and the Middle East (and perhaps Texas and Siberia), and relatively speaking, Baku's importance in the world of oil has waned. But all the Middle East fields were discovered in the 1940s or later, and if Baku is no longer seen as one of the primary sources of petroleum for the world, it still remains the main source of "sweet" aviation-grade fuel for the entire Soviet Aeroflot fleet.

And still the fields produce--although one has to wonder for how much longer. For the veritable and thirsty forest of oil rigs all around the city, even if antiquated, are pumping like mad, day and night. (I can't resist quoting from the typically 'masses'-oriented Ateshgah brochure: "The heat they give (sic) has been placed at the service of the people, and today gas services peoples' economic and everyday needs".)

"It is another symbol of Soviet exploitation of our wealth," said our guide Shamir Bey, as we waited in a line of 50 cars to buy some gas, "No-one has any idea of the environmental impact of leakage into the water table or even industrial diseases in the work-site or in the community. Sometimes I think they intend to pump us dry and then grant us our freedom."

The one possibly positive development in regard to the subject of petroleum is that Moscow has allowed the Azerbaijan Petroleum organization to form a joint venture with a Turkish firm to exploit several older fields with newer equipment and methods. On paper, in any case, profits will be shared 50/50, but whether the Azeri shares will go to Azeri coffers or just be sent off to Moscow is unclear.

The very fact, though, that *it* was the Turks--or rather, a Turkish firm--that managed to secure the first foreign deal in Azerbaijan is significant, for the Republic of Turkey seems to be seen as Azerbaijan's life-line to the outside world, a fact to be underlined most dramatically during the next leg of our journey to the enclave territory of Nahcivan.

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### Night Train to Nahcivan

"Annex us."

Those words were the leit motif of our four days in Nahcivan, the strange Azeri enclave pinched between Armenia and Iran and connected to the outside world by a thin, 18 kilometer long frontier with Turkey.

I cannot comment on the sense of isolation from the rest of Azerbaijan prior to the Karabagh crisis between Baku and Erivan starting in 1988 with the resulting expulsions of Azeris from Armenia and Armenians from Azerbaijan (and the continued guerrilla war today). But in the summer of 1991 Nahcivan seemed almost totally cut-off from the rest of the country, and thus, the world: the trunk roads North, East and West had all have been severed because they pass through Armenian territory, making access difficult and dangerous in the extreme. Aeroflot, it is true, continues to fly between Nahcivan airport and Baku, but the planes are small and over-booked and it is virtually impossible for a foreigner to get the internal visas required before one can purchase a ticket.

We were thus reduced to taking the only means in--the gruelling, sixteen hour train ride that runs along the Araxes River on the Iranian frontier under the guard of Soviet soldiers riding shot-gun on the wagons as the locomotive grinds its way through the Armenian corridor dividing Nahcivan from Azerbaijan.

Our hosts did not want us to go.

"You'll be killed," they told us with assurance.

It took some talking, but finally we managed to convince Shamir Bey that we had to go, and booked ourselves a berth aboard the late night train to Nahcivan--a two class sleeper that one would only find in the more remote parts of Third World.

Carrying a bottle of vodka, some mineral water and a picnic lunch provided by Nazila Hanim, we boarded our second class wagon (the one first class carriage from Moscow was sold out, although in the morning we did settle in there: it was not much better than second) and secured our bunks--the carriage was divided into ten open compartments with six bunks each and a table in the middle. All were full. Another double row of bunks tacked to the aisle added to the claustrophobia.

And if the carriage was dirty and decrepit, it was also stifling hot and smelly. The only ventilation was provided by shattered windows; those, like ours, that actually had the glass in place could not be opened. At first the sight of the broken panes of glass gave us pause: Armenia bullets? But after settling in to sweat through the long delay before the whistle blew it became pretty clear that the windows had most likely been smashed by passengers needing a little fresh air. I was sore tempted to do the same in the common toilet at the end of the hall, which was filthy beyond description. This would become my private problem with my continued case of Saddam's Revenge from Iraq (I had dropped 20 pounds during the month of June) but I will spare the reader any more familiarity with my health and its relation to the train's latrine situation.



In search of the proto-Azeri "Albans"--the suspiciously Armenian-looking church (and now grain-depot) at Saltakh in Nahcivan (T. Goltz)



The "(Soviet) Union-wide famous" mineral water bottling plant at Badamli, Nahcivan, temporarily closed due to a lack of bottle caps thanks to the Armenian blockade (T. Goltz)

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As suggested above but now explicitly stated, train travel in the Soviet Union is only good for one thing: it is the sole means of transportation in the Union where IDs and visas (both for locals and for foreigners) are not checked. It thus represents, for those who can stomach it, a rolling hotel to anywhere the tracks run and as such I know it will not be my last ride aboard the Soviet rails. It was certainly a sobering first experience of the system, however.

To make things easier for ourselves, and to take advantage of the emotional pro-Turkey welcome we had received thus far in Baku, we decided that I was a Turk and that my name was Tahir, thus making my fluent Turkish a little more explainable. I have subsequently amended this story to account for my general appearance and occasional grammatical mistake: my father is now a Turkish expatriate to the USA (sorry, dad), and my mother American. When we related this to our pals in Baku, they found it all very jolly and wise and then insisted I take on a different name closer to my own.

Timur, as in Tamerlane, was born.

It was, I believe, an astute deception, for no sooner had word spread that a couple of Turks were aboard the train, than a veritable line-up of curious folks began forming in the corridor outside our compartment and then started playing musical bunks within it to the point where it became difficult to tell who our actual roommates for the night journey were. I think, though, that the other bunks belonged to an ethnic Kurdish (?) teacher from some extremely dangerous area between Karabagh and the corridor that separates Nahcivan from Azerbaijan; a young Azeri dentist from Moscow; an engineer from somewhere in Nahcivan (with a very loud mouth and full of opinions) and then a couple of "merchants"--IE, black marketeers--making the run down to the border with Iran to see what sort of baubles the Iranians might have for sale.

All were obsessed with Turkey, but with a Turkey of perhaps a decade ago. Did we know this artist? Had we seen that film? Was it true that Sibel Can (a singer-cum-movie star) had contracted 'spit' (AIDs)? Would Turgut Ozal come back to save Azerbaijan?

Of keenest interest to all was what Ibrahim Tatlisises (Abraham Sweetvoice, the Frank Sinatra/Billy Joel of Turkey), was up to. The Kurdish teacher discretely asked whether it was true that Ibo was, in fact, an ethnic Kurd, and upon my confirmation of this point he went mute with delight, only coming out of his silent coma to berate the loud-mouthed engineer about his somewhat contradictory praise, in the same voice, of Iraq and Saddam Hussein and Iran and Khomeini. The conversation next drifted, somehow, into a defense of Russian as the unifying language of not only the Soviet Union, but also of Azerbaijan--a pointed reminder that the inchoate Azeri nationalism of the streets with its strident Turkic/Shiite qualities does not necessarily sit well with the aspirations of the country's small Sunni Muslim (and mainly Kurdish) minority, not to speak of the non-Muslim settlers like Russians and Ukrainians.

Finally, as the others drifted off to their bunks and sleep, one of the merchants settled down on my bed and began to wistfully describe the beauties of communism in days gone by. Then, he said, a worker was able to get along on 300 Roubles a month. Food was cheap and

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plentiful; medical attention virtually for free; housing was a problem, true, but had not been an insurmountable one: for those with the patience to wait, the state provided. In a place like Turkey, though, the market dominated everything, forcing prices far beyond the reach of the average man. What was the basic wage there, and what could you buy for it? Hearing the numbers, he almost triumphantly noted that the old system of the Union was patently superior to that currently pertaining in Turkey.

I cannot say it was moving, only that it was interesting to find, at last, someone who defended the system of government and commerce discredited by nearly everyone else in the Union.

Then I asked what the man did for a living.

"I am a merchant," he sheepishly replied.

I laughed out loud.

Here was a man, much like our host and friend Kazim Bey in Baku, who was taking gross advantage of the breakdown of the old system by buying up state goods and then on-selling them for immense (or relatively immense) profits, the difference coming out of the pockets of the working class that he so solidly defended.

The poor hypocrite slunk off to his bunk, and we lay down on ours, feet dangling over the edge and into the aisle, certain that we would be woken whenever someone brushed by. I counted a dozen people before I went insensate to the intrusion, and finally slept.

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We woke early in the morning and flushed out our mouths with the only available liquid--the half bottle of vodka left from the night before. It was warm and strong and not the sort of way you usually want to start the day but others, equally ill-prepared for the journey, were doing the same and so we just joined in. The experience took on an added piquancy due to the fact that we were, quite literally, on the border with Iran: the train tracks were pinched between the bank of the Araxes River and a series of jagged, denuded hills and peaks on either side of the frontier.

Our side of the border was wired, mined and patrolled whereas the Iranian side appeared to be devoid of much border security, leading me to a ironic reflection: I remembered previous travels in eastern Turkey and the (typically American?) thrill I felt when visiting a place like Ani, smack-dab on the Turco-Soviet zero-point: right there; on the other side, was them, the land of the commie enemy, the real and actual territory of the USSR!...How funny now to be traveling inside those frontiers and peering across a river at the new ogre of the age--Mullahistan, Iran...What will be the next place to elicit such naive fear and loathing--Japan?

After about an hour of chugging along and passing an ancient-looking and evocative graveyard set against a steep hill, the Araxes Valley widened out to the point where a town could be built and we pulled into the station of Zulfa (Russian: Djulifa). Here, our Soviet Army guard, dressed in khaki uniforms and out-back slouch hats, got down from the train. The ordeal was over and everyone was so relieved to not have been fired on by the Armenians and to be safely beyond the

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corridor and in territorial Nahcivan that the platform was soon swarming with folks looking for drinking water, greasy biscuits, fatty sausage and, inevitably, more bottles of vodka. I joined a line of folks at a water fountain and managed to splash some lovely cold and clean water on my face before the whistle blew for all to reboard for the final leg of the trip to the city of Nahcivan.

### Turkish Delight

### in Nahcivan, Azerbaijan,

The reverry started the moment we debarked and ordered a tea at the station and took off in full ecstatic flight after we had checked in to the only hotel in town and descended to the restaurant while waiting for the floor-woman to change our sheets. (The reader will tire of learning once again about local squalor, so I will let it be assumed from now on that if I do not describe an establishment as being "surprisingly clean", or some such, it will fall into the more familiar category of unimaginable filth).

"Anything to eat around here? I asked.

The waiter listlessly muttered something to me in Russian.

"Look," I said in crisp, clean Turkish, "I don't speak a word of Russian and if you had ears to hear you would understand I am speaking your language."

The man stared at me, his jaw dropping open.

"You're from Turkey?" he finally stammered and all heads in the restaurant turned.

"Yes, from Ankara."

"Had I only known! Please! sit down! Chef, the very best!"

A low murmur soon passed around the restaurant and then turned into a roar.

Turks!

Here, in our restaurant, in Nahcivan!

Turks!

Turkey? You are from Turkey? Good God! You are from Turkey!

People moaned.

People cried.

People called their friends and relatives and begged them to come see for themselves.

The police arrived, but not to keep order--they, too just wanted to shake hands.

For the next four days, no meal could be paid for, no taxi fare accepted and we were genuinely surprised when we were actually allowed to pay for our hotel ourselves--albeit at the local rate of 50 Roubles (\$1.75) a night.

Fake Turk that I was, I found the reception interesting. But for my wife Hicran, so used to the difficulties faced by a Turkish traveler in Europe due to the phobia about Gastarbeiters and the standard, silly queries about the truth of the "Midnight Express" in the United States, it was almost overwhelming to be so loved, sight-unseen.

"I've never seen anything like it," she kept on muttering as someone else would run up and kiss her hand.

We sought in vain for a comparison, and ended up likening our appearance in the midst of the enclave of Nahcivan to the reception of

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West Germans in, say, East Berlin right after the construction of the Wall. It doesn't quite fit but I can't think of what else to run with.

For Nahcivan was a Turkish island in an Armenian sea, or at least so perceived by all who lived there. The Armenian blockade of the place--still porous due to the rail and airline connections maintained by the central government--meant that basics such as gasoline and industrial parts often had a hard time getting through. This was, in a slightly different context, another sad indicia of the state of the Soviet economy for it illustrated fairly clearly that the previous supply of goods had come via private trucks and cars via the now-closed roads across the Armenian corridor. Now, however, supply was truly in the exclusive hands of the state as represented by the railroad, and everything from bottle caps to matches were virtually impossible to find.

The very isolation of Nahcivan from the rest of Azerbaijan--and thus, the Soviet Union--had of need forced it to look elsewhere for both spiritual and material succor.

The spiritual side was supplied, perhaps unknowingly, by the Turks. Even the telephone system fortified this--it being easier to reach Ankara by phone than Baku. Pictures of the Turkish President Turgut Ozal were everywhere; shops were named "Izmir," "Ankara" and "Istanbul". People talked openly and hopefully of the day that Turkey might annex Nahcivan--an obscure provision of the 1920 Kars Agreement between Moscow and Ankara (but well known and recited often to us by everyone in Nahcivan) allowed for Turkey to intervene in Nahcivan if the enclave was threatened by a third state--namely, Armenia.

Fueling the fire of hope and salvation was a new road and rail link project to link Nahcivan to the Turkish sub-province of Igdir on the North slope of Mount Ararat, at the point where a thin, 18 kilometer splinter of Turkey touches Nahcivan. The Azeris, for their part, were furiously working away on the road and bridge over the Araxes, determined to open the new border gate by the end of the year. Not much was said about the fact that the beloved Turks hadn't even started the construction of their part of the project.

Meanwhile, though, the Nahcivanians were obliged to depend on their other outlet to the world--Iran.

Remarkably, I thought, the frontier had essentially been thrown wide-open to anyone who claimed he was an ethnic Azeri merchant, and Nahcivan town was fairly overrun with nickle-dime salesmen sporting the familiar five-day beards of Islamic Revolutionary guard class, all come up for a week-end to flog bubble gum, matches, pens, plastic shoes, bogus brand-name cigarettes and other amazingly cheap kitsch (most of it apparently manufactured in Pakistan). In addition to a couple of boozy nights on Nahcivan town, the Iranian Azeri merchants would then snap up what their Soviet Azeri cousins had to offer in the way of shoddy Soviet manufactured goods before disappearing back across the frontier to hawk their newly purchased Zenith cameras, children's tricycles and ventilated accordions there. (A fan of the Argentine Tango master, Astor Pirazola, I priced one the accordions and was quoted a cool thousand roubles--about \$33 at the current black market exchange rate. As I walked away, the price dropped to 800 Roubles, and I nearly bought it. Later, I discovered the store price

on the device is around 300 roubles. One assumes a similar mark up in price for the other goods available in the market.) It almost goes without saying that we were pestered to sell the very shirts on our backs as we wandered through the market, but declined.

Our hotel--not surprisingly named the Hotel Tabriz--happened to face the venue of the bazaar in the main square and was thus the natural kip for the itinerant bazaar merchants. We became quite friendly with two religious types who rented the room adjacent to ours and I even got them to admit to membership in the Revolutionary Guards and to detail some of their adventures as the vanguard of that fizzling revolution. It was just a little pathetic: here were the descendants of the Silk Road merchants, as famous for their commercial skills as for the wealth and luxury of the goods that moved through their hands, reduced to hawking Karachi-made imitation chicklet bubble gum bits while haggling over the purchase price of hopelessly out-moded German optics. Still, it was trade, and another indicia of the vitality of the spirit of mercantilism in both the Soviet Union and Islamic Iran. Small and tawdry as it might seem at first glance, these guys were doing business, rediscovering the relative value of various goods, and finally making money.

The presence of the 'cousins', too, was a poignant reminder that any study of Azerbaijan, of need, would be incomplete without an investigation into the much larger (and far more assimilated) Azeri population in <sup>the</sup> southern sector belonging to Iran. Confining oneself to Soviet Azerbaijan would be rather like pretending to research the subject of 'The Kurds' while limiting oneself to those found in Iraqi Kurdistan and totally ignoring their vastly more numerous (and assimilated) brethren in Turkey.