

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

tcg-10 Part III

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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 III

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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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

### Ararat and the Albans

I will spare the reader detailed descriptions of our casual hosts or our travels and let it suffice to say that the former ranged across the social and political spectrum while the latter ranged across the breadth and depth of Nahcivan. Our first two spontaneous guides were a pair of young family men, Asker and Mehmet, who worked in the local government administration (we were the first Turks they had ever met and they were determined to please); the second day was taken by Hassan, the fanatically pro-Turkish 15 year old son of a university professor of archaeological history and current opposition Member of Parliament Agha Seyidov (himself, incongruously, perhaps, a close pal of Nahcivan native-son and erstwhile Azeri strong-man and CP Central Committee member in the wanning days of Brezhnev, Haydar Aliiev: we tried to meet him but he was in Baku); the third day was spent with Hassan's uncle, Zahit, a big-wig in the municipal government and some sort of shop-keeper along with his drunken pal (and opposition MP) Abdullah, and the fourth and final day with Zakir, a former student of archeology (by coincidence under Hassan's father) who now ran one of the few private ("Cooperative") restaurants in Nahcivan and who pretended to be an expert in the proto-Azeri "Albans".

With Mehmet and Asker, we toured the town and checked out its scanty monuments, the most impressive of which was the 12th century turbe, or high, conical tomb and monument of one Mrs. Muamina Khatun.

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It was so covered with scaffolding that I did not bother to take a picture. After tea and anti-commie and pro-Turkish conversation we ate dinner with them at a private Kebab joint; their wives could not join us due to 'local custom'. With Hassan and a friendly cab driver, we visited the north-central sector of Nahcivan, dropping in on the 'Union-famous' mineral water factory at Badamli ("bottles are sold in Moscow pharmacies", we were assured) where we discovered the factory was closed because of a lack of Baku-supplied bottle caps. The Armenian blockade had teeth. From there we proceeded to the town of Shahbuz (site of an entrepreneurial tea-shop owner who brewed 32 different types of hand-picked herbal teas) and then to a series of villages beyond, one, Cholonli, was graced by a new mosque constructed two years ago and paid for by local subscription to the tune of 34,000 roubles (in addition to gorvey manpower and donated materials)--a hefty sum for local folks. A children's how-to-pray chart and a picture of Imam Khomeini graced the walls, the latter declaring, in a Cyrillic inscription, that "Ignorance is over, Islam has arrived".

With Zahit and his inebriated pal Abdullah, we traveled westward to the town of Karabaghar, the site of a 13th century, late-Seljuk-style mosque and medrese complex under what appeared to be perpetual restoration, and from thence via the dump-town of Shakhrrur to the Nahcivan-Turco-Armenian border triangle. Here, under the northern shadow of Mount Ararat, we viewed the road-work-in-progress of the Nahcivan-Igdir highway and ate one of the most delicious watermelons ever grown by God--a reminder that the fecund Araxes valley is a veritable hot-house for fruit and vegetables, and had thus been coveted by all who have passed this way. (On the Turkish side of the frontier at Igdir they grow oranges and other citrus fruit, all fed by the immediate run-off of Ararat!)

Our last excursion was with Zakir the archaeologist who led us to several obscure "Alban" sites in the east-central sector, including an impressive church at the town of Saltakh (Abrakunus in Russian) which was currently used as a granary and then a second church converted into a mosque at the village of Khanasa on the far side of "Snake Mountain"--the curiously perpendicular massif that dominates that fertile Nahcivan plain and that reminded me of nothing so much as Devil's Tower in Wyoming; a cleft in the summit was said to be the result of the bottom of Noah's scrapping submerged land here before landing atop Ararat, 200 kilometers to the West...

Along the way and when not in tow of our four primary guides, others led us to the famous waterfall inside Nahcivan town (a few warm drops of water emerging from a mossy rock-face), the local museum (nothing special save for the tantalizing and repeated references to the mysterious proto-Azeri "Alban culture" and the singular inability of the guide/guardians to explain anything about anything), a couple of pleasant outdoor tea shops (weak tea) and then a couple of all-boy bars: one was in a a sweaty, half-restored hamam, or Turkish bath, right across from our hotel and the other a video-cafe featuring excruciatingly bloody Kung-fu flicks and spiked "cocktails", both designed to please the commercial crowd from Iran.

Of all our meanderings, the most interesting part was our tentative and all-too-quick quest to find out about the "Albans". For they

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appear to be a recent, Azeri nationalist discovery suspiciously like the Turkish claim that the Hittites were, in fact, proto-Turks.

Sadly, I didn't have time to run down much more information on the group than that acquired in casual conversation and cross-examination, but the essence of the newly-discovered proto-Azeris would appear to be this: a Turkic people, possibly in the guise of Scythians, arrived in the southern Caucasus during the grey midst of time and founded a previously unknown state of fire-worshipping Zoroastrians who later embraced Christianity, distinguishing themselves from the neighboring Armenians by disdaining the ornamental use of the Swastika and Maltese-type cross on their sacral architecture although their churches resemble those of the Armenians and Georgians in nearly every other respect.

Indeed, this seems to be the greatest scholarly obstacle in pin-pointing their separate identity: although Alban inscriptions were kept in an Armenian-style script, Zakir and others insisted that the Albans were not, could not be Armenian. Either the inscriptions had not been translated properly, or, in case of the central church in Nahcivan (now been converted into a muscle-building and boxing gymnasium) they were spurious additions etched into stone long after the fact by the ever-mendacious Armenians in order to erase all memory of the Albans...

In essence, the Azeri scholarly argument over the Albans can be summed up as this: we, the Azeris, belong right here, where we are, because we were here long before that wandering clan of thieves and liars, the darlings of the West, the Armenians, arrived to steal our native heritage.

Who knows? Maybe it is true.

But it appeared to me to be one of the more obtuse and disingenuous efforts aimed at rewriting (and iradicating) history to please one's self--a scholarly technique I am plenty familiar with thanks to my long years in Turkey.

Still, it served to underline in bold the irrational hatred and distrust held by most Azeris against the Armenians (and, no doubt, vice-versa).

The next stop along the way would put this bold underlining into highlighted italics.

#### Gendji and the Cruise Mobile

Aided by our parliamentary contact we had no problems acquiring tickets aboard Aeroflot back to Baku, and for the sinful price of 46 Roubles (\$1.50) each. The cab fair from the airport to Kazim's abode in Mashtaga cost as much as one of the flights.

We were greeted by the Kazim Bey household as friends returned from the dead. Everyone was sure the train would have been fired on, and when they hadn't heard a word for two, then three then four days?--well, one simply had to assume the worst. They had spent days waiting by the phone...

The telephones didn't work, we explained, and anyway, you don't have one..

Of course! Why didn't we think of that?

But we had new surprises in store for our hosts.

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While in Nahcivan, we had learned that we had inadvertently entered Azerbaijan during the Shiite passion month (lunar) of Muharram, and that we were fast approaching the pinnacle of suffering and atonement--the Ashura, or 10th of the month: the day that the Imam Hussein, son of Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and Blessing Be Upon Him!) was murderously cut down along with his 77 followers on the field of Karbala by the wicked Umayyad general (and later Caliph) Yezid in the mid 7th century, an occasion remembered and relived by Shiites the world over in displays of passion ranging from incessant weeping to whacking one's head open with an axe.

We had initially planned to depart for Tashkent on the fourth or fifth of the lunar month, but the prospect of witnessing the Ashura in Azerbaijan was too tempting to pass up and so we informed our hosts that we were delaying our departure by a week. And, rather than burden them with our presence for the duration of our extra stay, we thought we might just slip off up north for a day or two, and then return to Baku for the 10th.

"Road trip!" Nazila Hanim fairly squealed.

"Whadya mean, woman?" her husband, Kazim the Merchant muttered.

"Well, you were planning on buying those five tons of cheese in Sheki, weren't you?" replied Nazila, taking control, "We'll just come along and go visit the tomb of Imam Zade outside Genci (Gendji) and visit with the Jones..."

If this wasn't exactly the content of the conversation, it was the tone: for within minutes of our announcement of our vague plans to go North, Nazila announced that very firm plans were in hand: Kazim's business trip would be doubled with ours or cancelled (it was) and that we would travel as a unit to the second largest city in Azerbaijan, Genci, outside of which was the tomb of one of Imam Hussein's son--a center of pilgrimage throughout the year and now, with the approach of the Ashura, a major destination for the pious from near and far.

Accordingly, and joined by Kahraman as a fifth person in the car, we set off at 0500 the next morning in one of Kazim's four vehicles--an egg-shell blue, 1989 Volga sedan without a scratch on it.

I called it the cruise-mobile.

"Wee!" cried Nazila Hanim from the back seat as we set off through the oil-platform forest, "I haven't been out of Baku in a decade!"

"Hmmpf," replied Kazim Bey and pushed the pedal to the floor.

I wish a Volga had more guts and that we could've gotten through the land of desolation quicker, for the first two hours of our seven hour cruise were tedious and depressing. Following the oil-region we entered into an equally austere and depressing landscape of low; rolling and denuded hills and plains devoid of human or animal life.

And then we started having car problems; specifically, flats.

Our first happened about 100 kilometers out of Baku. Happily, a local Kolkoz (collective farm) also happened to run a tire repair shop on the road, and we were soon moving again. But I had taken the opportunity to check out the other tires, and they were all bald. It seemed so unlike Kazim Bek to try and save money on rubber, and I brought the matter up.

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"Why do you think the other Volga is sitting on blocks?" he asked rhetorically, "It is easier to get a car here than new tires."

The second blow-out happened on a rocky mountain road leading to Karabagh, when it was discovered the first repair (now the spare) was shoddy and leaked; a third flat only threatened to happen on our seven hour night trip back to Baku, although the prospect of having such seemed more than likely: we were rolling down pot-holed roads on four baldies with two useless spares in the trunk, one with a smile across the white-wall and the other wearing wide, double tongues where the rubber had peeled loose. And aside from the one Kolkoz tire repair shop, I had not noticed another for the duration of the 500 mile trip.

Nor were there many of the other familiar sights and blights of the open road. There were no billboards, no traffic signs, no services stations--nothing, save for an extraordinary number of electrical and communication poles lining the highway and the rather surreal sight of 50-odd parachutist troopers gliding through the sky on a practice commando operation.

Now, we hardly expected to find Taco Bell or the Golden Arches inviting us to take a break, but the signal dearth of any sort of enterprise was truly astounding. I guess I have subsequently grown used to the lack any visual reminders of commerce, to the point where a highway with no billboards seems wholly normal, so I think it best to note the first impressions now before I have grown totally culture blind.

Then, hungry and thirsty and needing a break, we finally espied a two story shack with a couple of tables and chairs in front of it and pulled over for a look-see. It was indeed an "inn" of sorts, but there was no food and so we were obliged to supply our own picnic from the trunk. The Gasthaus personnel were good enough to provide glasses for our own thermos tea. Sated, kind of, we jumped back in the cruise mobile to down-shift our way through a series of mountain cut-backs before cresting a slope overlooking the fecund Aghsu Valley and descending into the flats toward Genci.

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To be perfectly honest, Genci wasn't a very impressive place. Dominated by a huge aluminium plant whose pollutants had killed most plant life in the vicinity, the place felt of too many five year plans and production quotas. It also felt like a garrison town, which it was: the streets were full of knots of young men in khaki uniforms, whiling away their time before being called on to put out the next outbreak of Azeri-Armenian violence or to march into near-by Georgia from the South, if events in that break-away republic got out of hand.

Architecturally speaking, Genci was a bore. Aside from a late 19th century, red-brick mosque downtown attended mainly by older Azeri men and a same-period (same architect?), red-brick orthodox Russian church attended mainly by elderly Russian ladies, the most interesting structure in town was a three storey private dwelling made of or at least embellished by hundreds of ordinary bottles set in cement, lending the residence a sort of ginger-bread effect. Elsewhere, the sight of so many Coca Cola bottles used in this manner would invite

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the assumption that the owner was a total hick--kind of like placing a bed of plastic flowers in front of your house because you couldn't afford the initial expense to plant real ones. But within the context of the Soviet Union, the use of the bottles in this manner was an extraordinary extravagance because in most of the USSR you cannot get the local equivalent of a soft-drink or even soda water without first delivered the same-sized bottle back to the store. People steal and sell empty bottles. And here, the owner was quite literally flaunting his wealth by announcing that he chose to use his empty bottles as part of the facade of his house! In the old days, this sort of bourgeoisie indulgence might have called for a Gulag...

Even the object of our visit, the tomb of Imam Zade, was a disappointment. The turbe complex was about 10 kilometers out of town in a mixed pre- and post-Revolution cemetery, but even that lacked the sort of jungle of inscribed tombs one comes to expect from a Muslim graveyard of significance. Most of the deceased were honored by nearly kitschy headstones with their survivor's idea of their favorite portrait lithographed (I believe that is the technique) into the stone, underneath which stood the date of birth and death and then the individual's particulars, written in Cyrillic. The most imaginative of these graves gave visual expression to the cause of death--car accidents, a plane crash, etc., but even these peculiarities I found tame with some of the other theme-graves I have seen.

And we had arrived two days early: the thin trail of pilgrims to the site, we were told, would swell to 40 or 50,000 on the 10th of Muharram, or Ashura, but at the time of our visit there were only a couple of folks circumambulating the tomb and pinning coins to a "wishing stone" in back of the complex.

After our tour of Imam Zade we returned to our digs of the night: the newly acquired suburban abode of Kazim Bey's old pal Rashit Bey, who just happened to be the equivalent of the chief of police for Genci and environs (and the landlord of young Kahraman when the lad was doing his military service).

I think it fairest to maintain my first impressions of Rashit: suddenly, the door to the garden was thrown open by an underling and in strode a broad man with quick eyes and a steady hand who saw strangers in his house but instantly determined that friends, too, were here. Still wary, he approached me.

"Hello," he said, still not extending his hand but keeping it on his revolver.

"Sir," I began, "We thank you for your hospitality."

"It has not yet begun."

"If this is the extent, we are overwhelmed."

"You are welcome."

"It out-does anything done for guests in Turkey."

"Turkey?!"

It is not too difficult to determine what happened next.

The Turks had arrived, and out-rolled the welcome mat. Now accepted as his guests, there was only one thing to do:

Eat unto gluttony and drink into oblivion.

It all started casually enough with the usual preparation of the barbecue and diverse salads, but Rashit had brought with him a double,

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special treat: his totally alcoholic brother (who I had initially and erroneously assumed to be Kazim's contact and our host) and a seemingly bottomless quantity of extremely potent mulberry spirits--a 180 proof brew that had the taste and elevating experience of the infamous Chinese whiskey, Mau-Tay.

Bottoms-up vodka drinking was kids' stuff compared to this, and after two of the devils, I forswore anymore.

But not our host and his brother. And with each shot of the lighter-fluid liquid, the more loquacious Rashit Bey became.

"Here we are, here! My home! Breaking bread! We say that anyone who breaks bread and eats and drinks together must forever be friends! Forever! Hoop! Me, you, Kazim, Kahraman--he's my son! Stayed with us for two years! Family, all!"

I won't even bother to try and render his brother's moanings into speech; the sad man, perhaps 35 years old, was obese in all the wrong areas from eating all fat and no lean and drinking like the proverbial fish. I gave him another five years before the first heart attack, if a second car wreck DWI didn't bag him first.

And as his brother sank into oblivion, Rashit took control of the mulberry bottle and lectured long and liquid over a variety of subjects: eternal friendship as the meaning of life, his commitment to the integrity of the communist system by stopping criminals and profiteers from abusing the fruits of 70 years work (sitting in a house with a garden and a fine car outside and in the presence of the master black-marketeer Kazim Bey, this was a little hard to take, but I was a guest and let it pass) and his deep and profound and abiding love of all things Turkish.

Then finally, with one last long gulp off the mulberry truth-juice, Rashit turned to the subject he really wanted to talk about:

The Armenians.

"Why didn't you do anything?" he demanded out of the blue.

"What do you mean, do nothing--when, where, why?"

"You know perfectly well what I am talking about."

"I am clueless."

"My boys! My men! Four of them, shot like dogs by the bastards! And with weapons supplied during their God-deserved earthquake! We know..."

"But I don't."

"You'll see tomorrow...we'll show you! They'll never be back, ever...and I managed to get this sauce out of their cellars. Hoop! One more for the memory of my men..."

Rashit, it appeared, in addition to his duties enforcing 25 districts in Genci, was also responsible for Chaykent, a lovely town of perhaps 1,000 homes in the Azeri highlands on the way to Gokgol, "sky lake," one of several crater/earthquake lakes favored by the Genci week-end crowd which was found just above a series of Young Pioneer summer camps set up in the mountains for commie kids to romp about in the semi-wilds like so many boy-scouts.

Chaykent also happened to be one of three, exclusively Armenian settlements outside the explosive Karabagh district and the last to remain in Azerbaijan following the deportation of all Azeris from Armenia in 1989 and the resultant expulsion of Armenians living in



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Azerbaijan in 1990. But up until April, 1991, a few dozens Armenian families (or at least their men-folk) had managed to hold on to their homes in Chaykent, forming the last Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan (save for Karabagh) and less than an hour from Genci's city limits.

It had been Rashit's job to get them out.

And in the course of doing his duty, four of his men had died.

And their memory obsessed him.

The full story of the battle for Chaykent was never told us, for Rashit remained singularly drunk the entire time we were in the area and in his few moments of semi-coherence he tried to lead the conversation back to happier topics--like the eternal friendship born of breaking bread and the fact that we were brothers because we had broken bread the night before and that I had to take him up on his offer of a two week drunk and fishing trip in the mountains.

I think one week-end with Rashit was enough.

Still, I believe I should be glad for having the chance to hang out with a major in the militiaman who was so thickly in cahoots with the economic bad guys (my esteem for Kazim Bey undiminished by this critique) and so thoroughly committed to driving the devilish Armenians away, forever.

No, I don't regret a moment: Rashit was a rasty, nasty, corrupt and hypocritical lying son of a bitch, but presented another real, if rough, portrait of Soviet Azerbaijan, and one that no voyeur would think of denying himself.

But it was a little hard to take at times, especially when the subject turned to religion, or specifically to the self-flagellation performed by Shiite penitents--a trick now being taught the youth of Azerbaijan by imported Iranian clerics.

Rashit thought this was an excellent idea, and pouring himself another shot of mulberry fire, proceeded to tell me why:

"It teaches them to fear God," Rashit slurred, "Me? I cannot beat my son, and he is a louse, a louse! No school, nothing--lazy! Decided to eat and drink away the little wealth I have managed to put aside. Let the mullahs teach him fear and repentance! Let them come all the way from Teheran..."

Rashit also confessed that religion had recently touched his heart: he would, we swore, refrain from drink for the first three days following the Ashura out of respect for the martyr Hussein.

Land of contradictions!

There were even more to come.

#### Azeri Refugees and Armenian Homes

I woke hard the following morning, my head throbbing after a mere two snorts of the mulberry misery (and a few more of standard vodka, I have to admit).

But Rashit Bey was already long gone for his day's duties in Chaykent, and we learned that we were due to collect him there on our way to a mountain picnic on the shores of the recently re-opened Gokgol crater lake, and so we proceeded hither.

The climb away from the city in the plains was, as they say, picturesque.

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Soon, we had left the flats and wheat fields behind and were motoring up a series of wooded cut-backs toward Chaykent and the Young Pioneer Camps above. Local ladies, quick to realize what a visiting families and the tourist crowd needed, had set up stone-hearth bread ovens at regular intervals, flogging their delicious, home-made pide-style loaves to all passersby. Other picnic-style accoutrements were also readily at hand for those who had left home without the proper makings: luscious tomatoes, piles of cucumbers, hunks of raw meat ready for spitting, and then, inevitably, liters and liters of Stoli's lesser cousin, Russkaya Vodka...

It might have been the Shiite holy month of atonement, but the vast majority of Azeri Muslims intended to enjoy this summer weekend like they did every weekday night: dead drunk.

Finally, after passing a series of six or seven Young Pioneer Camps we approached the upper reaches of Chaykent, a garden town straggling along a babbling river cutting several hundred meters below us.

Steep alpine-style roof tops punched through the canopy of grape arbors; a hundred or two or three or five hundred balconies looked unabashedly out at the sun; raspberry bushes as tall as a man stood ready to be picked; apple trees swayed under the weight of their bows, and a babbling brook one was tempted to drink from ran through all.

What is it about the eastern Christians? Whether Armenian, Greek or Nestorian, the buggers always manage to find the most pleasant, beautiful up-land valleys to plant their villages, towns and even cities, while the Muslims occupy the dreary flats below.

And yet, or perhaps because of the beauty of the place, I was filled with an overwhelming sense of sadness as I got out of the car to stroll down-hill through the ruins of the town--for only upon closer inspection did the signs of a battle reveal themselves.

Something awful and tragic had occurred here, and recently.

Admittedly, I don't have all the facts, but I have enough to make me uncomfortable:

The Azeris in Baku, Nahcivan and Genci all maintained that they were the unsuspecting victims of an Armenian revenge that was really directed against Ottoman Turkey for the alleged genocide of 1915; that one fine day the Armenian leadership in its wisdom demanded that Karabagh be ceded from Azerbaijan and included in Armenian, thus creating yet another bizarre territorial anomaly in the already anomalous USSR...And when the Azeris declined the Armenians responded by expelling all the 200,000 Azeris in their midst. Not unreasonably, this resulted in a deep-felt Schadenfreude among the refugees when Armenia was struck by the great Leninikan earthquake in December 1989, just days after the last of the Azeris left.

God's Wrath! Hell's Bells!

But Hell's Bells also appeared to be God-send to the Armenians, for it provided them with a means of importing vast amounts of weapons from abroad, and all delivered under the guise of aid during the earthquake relief effort. Those same weapons were now being infiltrated into Karabagh (and Chaykent) in order to drive even more Azeris from their homes...

Such was the Azeri Grand Conspiracy theory.

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But did the erstwhile residents of Chaykent really represent a sort of Armenian fifth column, poised and ready to take over the eastern approaches to Karabagh? Were they really supplied by helicopter from Armenia itself in order to hold out against the legitimate authorities of the land--the Azeri police? Were they really terrorist bandits, or merely half-lettered saps sucked up in the stupid nationalistic game played by their own, ethnic leadership?

Where does it start, where does it end?

When does a man or woman or boy or girl finally say No, I won't go, I won't simply abandon my life and house and that of my father and mother and forefathers because someone else has said it must be so, and when does a man issue the other response and say No, I won't kill them simply because they are not us; they, too, have their rights...

The site of the lovely, well-kept and deserted town raised too many questions without enough information to give any concrete answers, but left me with one overwhelming, if incredibly obvious and even trite feeling: that even at this late date of 1991, irrational nationalism is the major and most dangerous factor in much of the world, and that one can anticipate bloody pogroms in the near future, all pitting them against us.

And it doesn't take a crystal ball to be able to anticipate the next round: it seems perfectly logical that the most extreme Armenians will be exactly those disposed individuals from places like Chaykent--and not the politicians back in Erivan who started the nonsense in the first place.

Sound like a two-sided Palestine?

And what the refugee Azeris who had moved into Chaykent?

As I moved around town I stopped and chatted and determined that they were a pretty pathetic group: Dave and Joe and Jane and Nancy, really--just-plain folks who had been swept up in events beyond their understanding and control, driven from their houses and forced over mountain passes at gun point in the middle of winter--the familiar litany of rape and pillage and desperation and horror associated with refugees everywhere, save for one point:

In the eyes of the world they were Shiite Turkish fundamentalist terrorist bad-guys who somehow deserved it.

Me, I just saw a bunch of poor ducks trying to find refugee in a decoy patch, wondering where the fire was coming from.

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Following our tour of the town we proceeded to drive up mountain via a salmon spawning hatchery (Caspian salmon? I had not heard of it before, but they swore it was true) into a national forest with multiple but ineffective traffic barriers to Gokgol ('Sky Lake'). A rock above the lake was evidently a favorite Kodak point, given the line of folks in back of us waiting to smile at the lens and take a collection number for the prints.

From Gokgol, we proceeded higher in the mountains along an all-too-public stream; a barbeque seemed to be burning behind every tree.

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But Rashit had a special place in mind and demanded we carry on despite our growing hunger and the wanning day: we still had a seven hour drive back to Baku to complete that night. Then we got our second flat and were obliged to abandon the car in favor of a quickly requisitioned police landrover and continued the climb in tandem with Rashit's Niva four-wheeler over a ridiculously rutted road allegedly leading to a natural mineral spring beyond the timber line. But after a half an hour of misery I pulled guest-weight and stopped the caravan, demanding that the BBQ commence immediately and exactly where we had stopped.

There isn't much more to be say: the revolt met with the approval of everyone but our host, so Rashit directed his driver and his son to continue up the goat-path and collect several gallons of the prized water (they did so, returning in an hour with a fluid that tasted like bottled mineral water left out overnight) while his brother put together the bonfire for the BBQ, using his breath as a fire starter. Rashit and I, meanwhile, set up a paper and twig target for a little pre-lunch pistol practice; sadly and embarrassing for Rashit, it was discovered that he had left the ammo clip in the cop car, leaving the great police major effectively unarmed...

Finally, lunch was served. Again the cheers and toasts and promises of eternal and undying friendship upon having broken bread; again the surfeit of ill-seasoned, scorch-cooked flesh; again the slide of our hosts into the sort of bar-room banter that is only amusing if you are as pickled as your interlocutors are; again, the familiar question: what the hell am I doing here, listening to this crap?

The answer, though, was only a stroll back down the boulder-clogged road away, which provided the necessary distance for reflection:

We were in Soviet Azerbaijan, being entertained by a drunken, killer cop with radical Shiite tendencies (or at least apologies) and within spitting distance of Karabagh and Armenia.

Tell me:

What more could a boy ask for?

One thing:

To participate, or at least closely observe, the culmination of 70 years of repressed Shiite passion as represented in the first, Glasnost-approved celebration of Imam Hussein's martyrdom on the 10th of Muharram in the Azerbaijan capital of Baku.

It was an event, I think, well worth waiting for.

#### Among the Mullahs on Muharram

The reader has read my succinct explanations of the origins of Shiism in other chapters. Still, for those of light memory or for those who have, amazingly, proceeded so far through this missive without a clue about what a Shiite is, let me provide the following general information:

The Shiiah are the emotional descendants of those early Muslims who felt that Ali, the first follower, son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, should have been given the nod to lead the Muslim community after the Prophet's death in 632 by dint of his, Ali's, family connections.

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In the event, three other close associates of the Prophet--but not direct family members--were allowed to assume the Khalifa (or Caliphate) first, and Ali had to wait in line before becoming the fourth and last of the so-called Pious Caliphs. Because upon his murder in a mosque, the question of succession was reopened again, but with dire results: the majority of the Muslims went along with succession of the strong-man of Damascus, Muawiya, while a dedicated minority embraced the cause of Ali's son Hussein, grandson of the Prophet. The former was then slaughtered by the latter on the field of Karbala while on his way to set up a rival capital at Kufa in today's southern Iraq.

In practical terms what this did was to split the early Muslims into two distinct groups--Sunnites (adherents of the 'democratic' principle of consensus within the community) and Shiites (the partisans of the 'royal' family of Muhammad). Throughout the centuries, though, there has been plenty of overlapping of 'royal family' and the Sunnites--to the point where today even such leaders of the Arab world as Iraq's Saddam Hussein (al-Tikriti), Jordan's King Hussein and Morocco's King Hassan all claim direct descent from the Prophet, yet remain mainstream 'Sunni' politicians. The irony is that the Shi'ah, at least today, tend to be found among non-Arab Muslims, like the Iranians, Pakistanis and, apropos this epic, the (Azeri) Turks.

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Kazim Bey and I had just finished a second bottle of vodka and were watching a near-naked Turkish flick on the video when his two sons burst into the room.

"Dad," said Kazim Bey's 14 year-old son named Turan, but whose folks called him Turgut in honor of the Turkish President, Mister Ozal, "You should have seen me! Whack Whack! I managed to get the chains to hit my pelvis! Mom," continued junior, "how about a massage?"

Kazim Bey looked on with pride at his first born son, and smiled.

"Grandad used to take a sword and crack his skull until it drew blood on Ashura," he warmly related to Turan/Turgut while pouring me another shot, "Then he'd strap a loaf of bread to the cut and go to bed, waking up the next morning with no headache or nothin'."

"Daddy," said Turan/Turgut, "I want to go to Iran when I grow up and become a mullah."

"Great," said Kazim, stroking the boy's head.

"Me too," said 12 year-old Rasha, Kazim's second son.

"One is enough," cautioned Kazim.

"Aww, dad..." moaned Rasha.

"I-get-to-go-to-Iran, I-get-to-go-to-Iran," chanted Turan/Turgut in a sing-song, merri-go-round voice.

Young Rasha was only mollified when I invited him to feed the paper into my computer's printer.

The two lads, I learned, had just returned from their nightly catechism--lessons held in a local mosque-cum-factory-cum-mosque

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designed to inculcate them with the faith of their forefathers, Shiite Islam, and taught by a recently imported divine from Tabriz.

"Everyone is sending their kids," Kazim explained a little defensively when I asked him about the Persia language lessons and Quran memorization classes his two lads attended every night of the week from nine until eleven, "we've been without religion so long we've forgotten what it is all about."

He seemed pretty comfortable with this attitude during our initial stay at his house, but by the third day of Muharram, even Kazim was slightly taken aback by a new turn in events: the kids were not returning until 1:00 AM, and with welts on their backs. Nazila Hanim didn't like it one bit, either; young Turan/Turgut was increasingly talking about going to Iran to study, and had even suggested that she put on more appropriate clothing in his delicate presence than the sleeveless dresses she was accustomed to: his teacher had said that women should be covered, head to foot.

Its time to take a look-see at just what the heck is going on here, I said to myself, and made arrangements to 'tour' the local religious establishments of Mashtaga.

None were particularly beautiful or awe-inspiring; most were early 20th century constructions which had been closed down or even destroyed by Stalin, but which had now taken on a second life under Gorby's Glasnost.

"See that minaret?" asked Kazim's brother Farid, a house painter by profession, "I chipped in 100 Roubles when the imam passed the hat to rebuild it last year. It was torn down in the 1930s, but now its back up, thank God!"

We had been touring the neighborhood and looking for a "typical" mosque for me to poke my head in to and finally selected the Mashtaga Jammi, or the town's Friday mosque. It was after nine o'clock at night, and the sixth day of Muharram, and word had started to pass around that the mosque was the place to be after dark.

At nine there had been perhaps 200 devotees; by ten they were twice that, and by eleven they numbered over 1000. They were young and old and in between, many with the sort of moustaches and beards usually associated with pious Islamic practice, but many others looking exactly like cab drivers and waiters and house painters. Still others looked like merchants like Kazim, mid-level bureaucrats like Shamir and students like Kahraman. Many wore the black shirts and pants of Shiite mourning during the month of atonement; those who did not wore black arm bands distributed by the mosque for temporary use. All had found their way to the mosque of this week-day evening for the equivalent of vespers--only in this context, the chanting was accompanied by the slow, rhythmic cadence of men beating their breasts with their fists.

Karbala o! Karbala, Karbala o! Karbala...

As the string of new devotees entered the mosque to perform their ablutions and prayers, a pair of gentlemen from the mosque administration chanted the passion of Imam Hussein: how he had begun his mission in innocence; how he had gathered his followers, how he had set off across the cruel desert; how he was met there by the even crueller Yezid...

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Karbala o! Karbala, Karbala o! Karbala!

The men tapping their thighs were now slapping their knees, and the volume in the room was rising.

Karbala Oh! Karbala! Karbala Oh! Karbala!

Again, another grey-beard took over the microphone to add another sing-song element to the unfolding saga: how Yezid had come riding on his horse, and demanded submission; how Hussein had declined, saying that submission was to God alone; how the faithless Yezid had threatened and how the faithful Hussein had replied: there is no Right but that of God!

The gathered tapped their thighs, knowing the words by rote:

Karbala! Oh! Karbala! Karbala! Oh! Karbala!

Then, there, at the entrance to the mosque, a door opened and from among the amorphous mass of believers there emerged two individuals who were clearly not taxi drivers, merchants, teachers or mid-level bureaucrats: standing like the principle and his assistant in front of a bunch of cowed school children were two men in turbans and robes who had come to bless Mashtaga with their presence this fine Muharram.

Mullahs from Iran.

One was a fairly fresh-faced youth, whose beard was full and dark and not yet stained by traces of grey and with a little too much fatty-cheek above the hair-line to be taken too seriously.

He was the disciple, it was clear, the personal aid for the other cleric--a lean, long-nosed man with glasses and a salt and pepper beard whose fundamentalist physiognomy was as familiar as an FBI Most Wanted poster. I swear I had seen somewhere before--a press clip, CNN, or something, but couldn't put a name to his face.

And as sure as I recognized him, others did too. The pious mood and the flagellations of the penitents immediately intensified, with devotees now abandoning their knees and thighs in favor of a direct beating of their breasts:

KARBALA OH! KARBALA! KARBALA OH! KARBALA!

The anonymous mullah contented himself with drinking tea and tapping his knee, contentedly watching the flock as they slowly worked themselves into a frenzy of passion.

KARBALA OH! KARBALA! KARBALA OH! KARBALA!

It was becoming a little uncomfortable for me, and so I asked Kazim's brother to take me off to another mosque--this time the mesjid where Turan/Turgut and Rashan went to Quranic night school.

Here, the atmosphere was less charged if hardly subdued: a portrait of the good Imam Khomeini hung on one wall, and black-board with Farsi/Arabic characters scrawled on it on another. A third wall was actually a series of windows overlooking an alley, and the fourth, against which I sat, was naked save for a make-shift minbar, or pulpit, and an odd-angle construction representing the qibla, or direction toward Mecca. Sadly, the building--a former factory--was not aligned so as to create a natural indicator of the Kabaa along one of the walls but was off-kilter by some 15 or 20 degrees; happily, the local savants had made due and created their own pious weather-vain, as it were, out of several bricks and a bunch of tape on the floor.

The 100-odd kids, however, seemed oblivious to such niceties as qibla and minbar. They were swaying in a double line and facing each

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other, ranging in age from around 12 to perhaps 16 and beating themselves across the breast with their hands. At the head of the line stood a mousey-looking youth of maybe 20 years of age, dressed in black and sporting a straggly beard, correcting faulty breast-beating techniques and generally urging the young penitents on to greater feats of passion. In his hand he held a well-thumbed prayer book containing the lyrics being chanted by the group--once more, the dirge devoted to the martyr Hussein.

Karbala o! Karbala! Karbala o! Karbala!

Just then, a couple of older boys standing at the fringes of the main group completed their prepatory prayers, wiped their faces with one hand (Sunnites use both) and bowed to kiss the plastic blotters that were placed between their foreheads and their prayer rugs.

Amen, they muttered in unison.

Then one of their number went over to a corner and picked up a large bag; it appeared to be rather heavy by the way he carried it. Back in the group, he opened the sack and pulled out a tangle of chains. On closer inspection, I realized they were whips, with multiple metal slashes attached to each wooden handle.

Qooo! whistled the young man's companions, and started fondling the instruments of torture; several of the kids from the dual line broke ranks and ran over for a look-see.

The mullahs from Iran had just played Santa Claus and had been thoughtful enough to bring up their favorite toys for free distribution to their Soviet Azeri kinsmen.

The only thing missing was a wrack.

The passion play now started in earnest with the leaders now flogging their own backs with the iron whips while the less devote found themselves obliged to beat their breasts with much greater blows in poor imitation of their betters.

Karbala, o! Karbala! Karbala, o! Karbala!

I left the mesjid when I saw Kazim's kid Turan/Turgut reach for one of the whips and inquire how to use it. His instructor was a bearded young man with the unblinking gleam of fanaticism in his eye and conveniently slashed shoulder-holes in his tunic (to better feel the lash of metal on naked flesh).

There are moments when even a professional voyeur has to back out, and I thought this was my cue to go.

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But the next day was the Ashura proper and I was committed to the event--or at least to capture it on film. The venue was to be another crowded cemetery just north of Mashtaga at a place called Nadiran. Here, unlike Imam Zade, there were several mosque and tomb complexes in and around the general area, but with the crush of people clawing their way in and out of the alleyways leading to the main, tomb complex, it was impossible and untimely to make an attempt at lesser visitations and we headed straight for the main tomb. There, it was even more difficult trying to get it straight just why the place was so special: in the crush of the pious to participate in the mass self-flagellation or vicariously experience it from approximate presence,





The 10th of Muharram, or Ashura, in the Baku suburb of Nadiran--a focal point for celebrating of the death of the emotional founder of Shiism, Hussein ibn Ali, Iranian-style in Soviet Azerbaijan (T. Goltz)

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few were interested or able to answer any of my historical or reflective queries.

Why are you here?

Hussein!

Why do you beat yourself?

To remember Hussein!

To whom do you feel closer, Turkey or Iran?

Iran!

What do you think the future of Azerbaijan should be?

An Islamic Republic!

And the younger my interlocutors were, the more devoutly determined they became.

It was sobering and sad.

Iran, it was so crystal clear, was way ahead of all others in the new Great Game of the southern Caucasus--that of winning the hearts and minds of the Azeri Turks.

The final message was the exhortation printed on a wall above a portrait of the mullah I had seen in the Mashtaga mosque:

Halka lisan Latin yok!

The translation would make Muhammad Emin Rasulzade turn in his grave:

No Latin characters for the language of the people!

Better the Cyrillic of the godless commies than the Latin of Turkey and the Satanic West.

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Departing the Nadiran complex, I discarded my skull cap and Hicran her shawl (Thank God I had some sort of disguise; most folks initially assumed I was Russian, and probably KGB, wandering around and snapping pictures with my fancy new Pentax. Emotions ran high until the good Kahraman stepped in to explain away my presence with a line running something like "He's a cousin from Turkey working on a book on contemporary Islam in Azerbaijan") and we proceeded to the next stop on the local, Shiite equivalent of the Stations of the Cross: namely, the imprimatur of Hussein's father, the Prophet's cousin, son-in-law and first follower, Ali, himself, there on shores of the Caspian Sea, and within spitting distance of Kamra Hanim's naphthalene spa and sanatorium. The sacred place was called "Elinin Ayakhizi," or "the Imprint of Ali's Foot."

The scene was decidedly sober compared to the morning's activities in the cemetery or the evening spent touring Mashtaga's mosques. Here, hundreds of folks waited patiently in line for the opportunity to enter the small, cement block cubicle containing the size 11 or 12 boot print of Ali embedded in stone, wedding their lips to the indenture and quietly shedding their tears for the unhappy fate of the prophetic family. Those with less patience would merely circumambulate the structure and kiss its exterior walls; those with the greatest devotion would do both the outside and the inside and then pay for a quick dash of holy water sprayed on the pious by a local attendant. (Ladies had the additional pleasure of visiting an adjacent mesjid

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where food was distributed to the poor. Within its confines was a picture of Khomeini, covered by gauze as a sort of reverse veil lest the good Imam behold the womenfolk within, as well as a photographic representation of some character known as the "boneless man", described by Hicran as being a withered guy who, despite his miraculous lack of bone fibre, had identifiable hands and was able to sit in a chair to his picture took.)

None of this, I hasten to say, seems any more strange or bizarre than the plethora of weeping rocks, holy shadows and photo-optic rags associated with popular Christian belief; beyond my own 'orientalist' curiosity, I found it primarily significant that all of the specifically Shiite-style visitations mentioned above was occurring within the Soviet Union, where such displays of religious passion have been banned for decades.

By mid-afternoon, the Ashura was petering out and we took advantage of the occasion to have lunch with Kamra Hanım and tour her sanatorium (it was the first we had seen of our host since our arrival) and then proceeded to the final stage of the flagellation festival--an after-hours tour of the main Baku mosques to see just what sort of devotion was expressed in the center of the Azerbaijan SSR.

Accordingly, Shamir Bey (who had replaced Kahraman as my escort for the evening and in whose one bedroom flat we were to stay for the night) and I headed back through traffic to the long-aforementioned area around the citadel, dropping in on a large, 19th century Ottoman-style mosque (across from which, maybe significantly, was planted an ornamental WWII vintage tank with its barrel facing the minaret). All manner of folks were streaming in and out of the entrance and the center-stage attraction: a line of young men, whipping themselves with the Teheran-supplied chains while chanting the passion of Hussein:

Karbala, whack! Karbala! Karbala, whack! Karbala!

Again, several of the more devote flagellants had donned quasi-muscle shirt vestments in order to better display their scraped and scarred backs. Despite the bad light in the mosque's courtyard, I raised my trusty camera to snap a pic.

The response was nearly instantaneous:

A brace of Azeri cops were suddenly at my side, asking me whether I had permission to record this holiest and most pious of events. Shamir, like Kahraman before him, deftly dealt with the situation by announcing to the security folks that I was a Turk from Turkey researching Azeri Islam...

Have you spoken with the Sheikh, the required, and in confessing that we had not, we were ushered into his presence.

"Sir," I began respectfully to the sweating, plump, bearded and be-robed man, "I am a scholar from Turkey, and--"

They were the last words, save for the occasion pious epithet in Arabic, that I managed to get in for the next half-hour.

I won't bother to repeat, even if I could, the sermon that I received. In essence it evolved around the death of Hussein at Karbala on this very day 12 centuries ago and the devious plot at the bottom of all attempts to divide Sunni from Shiite.

As his voice raised higher and higher, the knot of casual passersby grew to a dozen and then a score and then more, with the good Sheikh

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raising the level of his voice with every new arrival until toward the end he was shouting point blank in my face.

"God curse those who divide us," cried the sheikh, a look of rage stretching and distorting his features, "in the end, we are all Muslims, praise be to the one God!"

"Amen," whispered Shamir and I, "Amen."

Shamir, especially, was feeling uncomfortable and, as there seemed little to be learned from continued interviews with the sheikh or his masochistic murids and so we decided that it was time to go.

As the last stop on the Ashura trail we next went over to Baku's main, Friday mosque and seat of the Administration for Kafkashian Muslims where Shamir said he had a pal. But upon our arrival the crowds had already dispersed, the clean-up crews were sweeping the ditrius of the pious away and save for a single peripatetic divine reading palms and dispensing with blessings to a small knot of regular looking folks willing to pay for simony, the place was dead.

Shamir's friend, meanwhile, had already left to escort some Iranian guests back down to the border.

Ashura '91 was at an end.

#### Full circle

The next day we left our adopted family in Mashtaga and checked into the fo'castle of the good ship Turkestan. There, with the privacy afforded the captain of a dry-docked ship, I began assessing our adventures.

I have attempted to give a blow by blow account, including both the incidental as well as the deep and profound. You be the judge; myself, I cannot remember many more bang-for-the-buck experiences.

True confession: although I started these notes in Baku, I am completing them in our shabby apartment in Tashkent.

Yes.

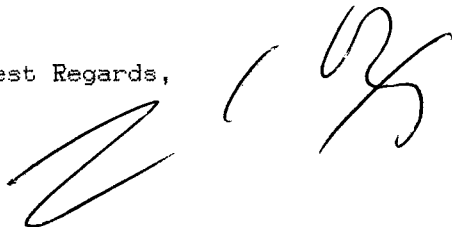
We have finally arrived in Uzbekistan, but I have to say that the initial impression is--well--disappointing, especially after our reception in Azerbaijan. Aside from a few dramatic exceptions, "Turkishness" does not appear to carry much weight here, and maybe we are spoiled.

More to the point, my sponsors at the university increasingly appear to be trying to gouge me (and thus ICWA) while delivering nothing in return.

A full, initial report will follow shortly.

'nuf said for now.

Best Regards,



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