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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Peter,

They say it has been a good month for Boris Yeltsin but it has certainly been a good month for me.

Shortly after my last epistle of late August, we (not Boris and I, but myself and wife Hicran) traveled up to Moscow for a fascinating week of touristic and political sight seeing.

I won't bore you with a detailed rendering of my first impressions about the city save for the following summary: Moscow was a happy, world-class capital touched (if not filled) by far more 'western' commercialism and culture than at least ignorant I had been led to believe. In addition to the beauties of St Basil's and the Kremlin, the over-rated mystery of Gorky Park and the famous mile-long line around Macdonalds, I discovered fax lines and courier services and foreign beer and restaurants and even a number of new dollar (or credit card) based shops where you could buy everything from VCR sets to M&M chocolates.

The weather was brisk but bright and the streets filled with all manner of folks: Baptist preachers looking like reborn Jim Bakers spouted their nonsense next to bearded Orthodox priests in icon-bedecked soap-box stands near the Lenin mausoleum; Deputies from across the union rushed about, greeted by insistant crowds who demanded to know the minutes of each and every meetings; Tour-groups diverted from the planned itinerary along the Moscow River to stand in front of the barricade museum outside Boris' Russian White House to have their pictures took. Free-trade thrived in the flea-markets on the fringes of town and street artists indulged themselves in recreating their impressions of the heady days just past: my favorite was a large oil canvas depicting a Shakespeare in tennis shoes, standing in front of a blazing tank.

Everyone, it seemed, was having a very good post-putsch party--with the exception of the American diplomats. These poor servants of the state were obliged to work out of make-shift offices in the basement and garages of the hedious new compound called an embassy while American contractors rebuild and de-bug the office space. The reason for the first was that the old offices were burnt down in a fire earlier this year, compelling the dips to make an early move to the new, much-maligned embassy compound which, in addition to be filled with KGB-planted spy-devices was clearly designed to limit all contact with the local enviroment to the barest minimum. Even those diplomats who lived outside the compound are obliged, by law, to avoid one-on-one encounters with Soviet nationals for fear of being 'compromised'. Remarkable. One has to wonder just how much under-the-skin contact is possible if junior and senior officers have to double-date everywhere they go.

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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.

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But the purpose of the trip to Moscow was more than mere post-putsch tourism.

It was to gain even a fleeting glimpse of The Center around which all the USSR has revolved for 70 years and to try and assess what sort of pull it still exerts toward the peripheral republics. It was also a trip designed to partially reactivate myself as a journalist, and to set up functional channels through which to file.

There are various reasons for having decided upon this course. A general sense of informational duty is one; development of 'career' is another. Perhaps the most important, though, was the growing sense that without an immediate outlet for recording events or getting next to movers & shakers I was losing a certain desirable focus. My 'bad coup' in Uzbekistan is a case in point: There, presenting myself as a professor, I had no right to barge in to Communist Party headquarters or grill other VIPs about the significance of what was (or was not) going on. Even if I had, without a Moscow communications link, getting information out of Tashkent would have been an exercise in futility.

Now, with channels opened, I have the means to leap into action if the situation demands it. Even if 'pure' research into things Turkic and Central Asian suffers marginally due the periodic compulsion to file I feel the end result will be quantitatively and qualitatively better for my having participated immediately in significant events rather than simply sitting back and evaluating all from hearsay.

The first test-case would seem to bear this out.

For, after setting up lines of communication in Moscow, I found myself Baku, Azerbaijan, witnessing the dismantlement of the Communist Party, attending any number of press conference and interviews and riding rough-shod through Nagorno Karabakh--all of which were opened up to me by dint of being a journalist and not a researcher.

It is also wholly possibly that the local political environment played as big a role as my altered attitude: for Azerbaijan is a fascinating and changing society, a place of issues and questions and voices and answers. The place is alive and I regret to say that Uzbekistan compares very badly with it.

Perhaps the proof that Azerbaijan is such a rich vein might be assumed from the number of pages in this most recent ICWA report, where I feel obliged, once again, to add a table of contents to make some sense out of the whole.

I will entitle this month's monster report "Back in Baku".

It is a fine place to be.

Back in Baku

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Back in Baku/Part One

Friday Evening on Freedom Square

The unemployed and retired arrive early and take the bleacher seats while those with regular jobs don't arrive until after five thirty or even six and are obliged to stand.

But by the time the loud-speakers start to blare the peculiarly Wagnerian anthem announcing the commencement of the rally, Freedom Square is packed with between 10,000 and 20,000 dedicated souls. All silently raise their arms with hands balled into fists or with two fingers raised in the Churchillian victory sign and then break into applause with the final symphonic bars.

The assembled are young and old, rich and poor and are drawn from across the spectrum of society. Grey-bearded men of religion stand next to women sporting make-up and jeans; young men with unshaved cheeks nudge shoulder with porky matrons in high heels. Mothers carry babies in their arms lest the kids be crushed in the crowd.

For tonight is Friday Night, the time and place that for months has been devoted to anti-government truth-talk rallies (demonstration is too strong a word) and the people are used to coming here, rain or shine, to listen to their leaders berate the government and announce new demands.

It is a scene made familiar to world television by similar, set-evening anti-government meetings in the late 1980s in such places as the (erstwhile) East German city of Leipzig, Prague in Czechoslovakia and Sofia, Bulgaria, when young democracy was raising its proud head and old-guard regimes crumpled like so many dominoes.

But the venue here is the former Lenin Square, now renamed Azadlik Meydani-- the large processional avenue between the Caspian Sea and the "Stalin Cupcake"--style Government House in downtown Baku, capital of the newly self-proclaimed independent Republic of Azerbaijan.

And if the crowd of eager listeners is a few years behind those that forced the former communist regimes of eastern Europe to collapse under their own weight it is still light years ahead of all the other Turkic-speaking republics that make up the southern tier of the (former?) USSR, and perhaps--aside from the core group of folks who defended Boris Yeltsin's White House during the 60 hours of the August 19th putsch--ahead of Mother Russia itself.

This does not jive with the popularly held view of Azerbaijan, usually described in western press reports in such loaded terms as 'conservative' or 'fundamentalist Muslim.'

But here, unnoticed and unaided by the outside world, a remarkable process of change has been in motion for years. The prime movers in the process is a broad-based coalition of new political parties and interest groups called the Halk Cephesi, or Popular Front, and it finds its inspiration in the memory of the short-lived Republic of Azerbaijan of 1918-20. As such, it is a movement with history and heroes, sorely lacking in most of the other Muslim (and many non-Muslim) Republics of the former USSR.

And if the movement is fed by the anger and alienation so familiar across the crumbling Union, it has found itself representing the high-ground of Azeri national interest. Quite naturally, it expresses its many demands in those terms; as naturally, the government worries.

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The now-former communist government of President Ayaz Mutalibov has thus been put in a very uncomfortable position of either openly disavowing nationalism and thus losing what may be left of its tattered credibility or slowly and grudgingly implementing Popular Front demands while trying to claim that the initiative was its own: If on Friday the Front demands the dissolution, and not mere renaming, of the Communist Party, on Sunday it is so; the next week, the Front threatens to recruit 10,000 volunteers if the government does not start forming a national defense force of 50,000; on Monday, a defense council is created and given the old KGB building for office space.

But with every perceived capitulation to an ultimatum brought forth in the weekly al fresco meetings, the government of President Mutalibov becomes weaker. And perceiving greater weakness, the Popular Front ups the ante. Now it is the refusal to recognize any decision taken by the (old) communist dominated Supreme Soviet, or parliament--including the unilateral declaration of independence of August 30th as well as the ratification of the long-sought, new union treaty which would keep Azerbaijan within the (old) Soviet Union. The Front has set out its own conditions of independence and has asked other states not to recognize Azerbaijan until they are fulfilled. These include the dissolution of the current parliament and holding new and free elections monitored by international observers, the establishment of an independent army and the right to private property within the context of a free market economy. And it is to this terms that the people subscribe.

A shadow government of the streets has emerged, and it is a breath-taking and exciting thing to see in a society so long thought to be dead and mute.

And on Friday nights in Baku, it does not whisper, but shouts.

Tonight's series of speakers represent an impressive array of anti-government voices:

First comes Isa Gamferov, a molish-looking man who is a rather subdued, and maybe even dull monitor. He recounts the events of the week and reiterates standing Popular Front demands: that no outside nations should recognize Azerbaijan until a new and democratically elected parliament is constituted; that Azerbaijan must take control over its own petroleum resources; that bribery should cease; that a special meeting is to be held four days hence, that car plate number I 995573 has its blinkers on and is blocking the exit road.

He then introduces the next speaker, Kurban Mehmedov, a political activist released two days before from an unspeakable prison cell where he had been held for 14 months while awaiting his trial on charges of desecrating the flag, anti-Soviet agitation, illegal weapons possession and stealing Popular Front funds--charges that collectively amount to 15 years in prison, if he is found guilty. A fiery orator, his essential demand is for a total amnesty as well as an inspection of prison conditions throughout the land.

"Open the cells! Open the cells!" chants the crowd in unison.

Next comes a rather didactic opposition deputy named Sadi Rustem Kanli who criticizes the weak mutterings of the government on the opposition demand for immediate recognition of private property rights

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and several other legal issues. His point is the contradiction between the government's declaration of independence on the one hand and the abject, continued subservience to the pan-Soviet state-planning authority on the other.

"Our Independence only exists on paper," his distorted voice echoes through the square, "it is impossible to claim political independence while the keys to our economy remain in Moscow."

Respectable applause greets his withdrawal from the pedestal.

The next series of speakers is typical of the cross section: poet and scholar Halil Riza Uluturk, also recently released from a one year prison term in Moscow for expressing pan-Turanic tendencies in too loud a voice. He is still calling for the union of all 250 million Turks in the world and the immediate adoption of the Latin-Turkish script. He is succeeded by a fundamentalist preacher whose rambling sermon necessarily ends with the Fatiha, or Muslim expression of faith; all in attendance obligingly lift their palms heaven-wards and recite the creed. An ethnic Russian then mounts the dias and declares that he and his family and friends want to change their identity papers and become Azeris. Isa, the monitor, then reads a few announcements and messages sent to the meeting from across the land; one is a letter from a Talish man requesting that this and other ethnic designations promoted by Moscow to divide and rule minorities be dropped.

Then, almost sensing the need to stoke up the crowd again, Isa introduces the next invited speaker---special guest Yilmaz Polat, the Baku correspondent of the right-wing religious newspaper Zaman in Istanbul. Polat was unlucky (or career-wise, perhaps fortunate) enough to have been attacked by an irate mob of Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh during Boris Yeltsin's visit there the week before: overnight, he became the best known press personality in Azerbaijan and is thus relishing his Warholean five minutes of fame.

"Yilmaz Yilmaz Yilmaz!" chants the crowd.

"We made them ministers and leaders of state during Ottoman times, and then they stabbed us in the back when we were weak!" he wails, the 'they' being clearly the Armenians of history and today. "We want to live in peace, but they don't! They want Karabakh but they will never succeed! Karabakh is Turkish, Turkish Turkish!"

The crowd thunders its approval, and the dull-voiced monitor is obliged to qualify Polat's pan-Turkic howling with more sober words.

"There are good Armenians and bad ones, just as in every society," he cautions the assembled with what is clearly an unpopular argument. "And we, as the Popular Front, want to work with any and all progressive member of any society."

He then announces that an Uzbek opposition figure has been unable to make it to the rally, possibly due to Uzbek government interference but has a couple of other foreign guest at hand---a pair of opposition personalities from Daghistan in the Russian Federation. Their essential message, made in Russian tinged with Turkish, is that Azerbaijan has always been a symbol for the Caucasus peoples' struggle for freedom, and that they are delighted to be in Baku. Then Isa is back behind the microphone again to introduce another fiery orator who is clearly a crowd favorite.

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"Can we have a meeting without Iskender?" Isa asks rhetorically.

"Never! the crowd shouts in response.

"Azadlik!" bellows Iskender Hamidov into the microphone, and the crowd thunders its freedom-cry echo back at him.

"AZADLIK!"

"By God, the deputies who are sitting at home because they don't want to work and make new laws have asked for gun permits so they can defend themselves," says Iskender in a twangy, vowel-distorting delivery, "and at the same time they say that we don't have the money to raise our own army. I say send those guns and those deputies to Karabakh! And if not, give the gun to me and I will be the first to volunteer!"

"AZADLIK!"

"By God, I am going to come to the Supreme Soviet with a broom in my hand and sweep the bums out--who will be the first to take the broom?"

"Sweep them into the trash can!" bellows a finely dressed matron from below.

"Sweep them into the ash heap of history!" responds Iskender.

"AZADLIK! AZADLIK! AZADLIK!"

Flags wave and fists are held high and it would seem the moment to end the rally, but the Popular Front has not yet learned how to modulate its moments properly, and another series of **uninspiring**, long-winded characters are trotted out to hammer on familiar themes.

Still the crowd of 20,000 remains loyal, waiting for something they must have before they depart. As the hour leans toward eight o'clock, Isa the monitor approaches the microphone again and says two words.

"Abulfaz Elchibey," he says and then moves away from the dias as a tall, slight man with a grey beard and almost the unblinking stare of the fanatic moves up to the microphone to have his say. The crowd is suddenly silent and expectant, ready to hang on every word.

"I just have a few remarks to make before you all go home," says Abulfaz **Elchibey** quietly, "First of all, remember to come to the Supreme Soviet on Monday to demand an early session of parliament so that we can then demand an early dissolution of the same. We cannot afford to waste time in this important matter."

A murmur goes through the crowd and a short, public discussion ensues between the assembled masses and the podium of whether they should meet at four o'clock or five, with the decision taken that it should be five.

"The next thing I wanted to talk about is that we must stick together because there will be those who attempt to divide us--there always will be," the speaker continues, "We are Shiah and we are Sunni but we are all from one root."

He then explains an historical detail concerning the formation of the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence, how the founder of one of the major Sunni schools and the founder of the main Shiite school were actually school-mates and students of the Sixth Imam. It is way over the heads of nearly everyone in the square--especially in light of the fact that basic knowledge of Islamic history has been reserved for the select few in the universities--but Abulfaz throws it out

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lightly and in such a way as to be totally reassuring: we are one and need not, cannot, will not be divided.

"But the main reason I want to talk to you tonight is about the communique signed by Ayaz Mutalibov and Leon Petrosiyan with Yeltsin and Nazarbaiyev," Abulfaz continues, slowly changing the tone and volume of his voice as he introduces the subject on the lips (and indeed, in the hearts) of everyone present:

Nagorno Karabakh, or more specifically, the ten point peace accord sponsored by the presidents of the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan aimed at bringing peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

"There are serious diplomatic errors in the text which all of the government newspapers and state television have neglected to tell you about," he says, "For example, the title of the communique neglects to mention just what the initiative is all about and the preamble only refers to Karabakh without bothering to suggest that it is within the sovereign state of Azerbaijan. Later it says that the law will apply, but it does not specify whose law--martial law? Azeri law? Armenian law? Soviet Law? This are all serious, diplomatic defects in the text which are unacceptable for the people of Azerbaijan."

The crowd is warming to the presentation as Abulfaz picks apart the document point by point, even down to the fact that the sponsors of the peace plan have thought to append their own names first, before those of the interested parties--namely, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia--and that the first witnesses to the signing happen to be high-ranking Russian military men and not those of the respective Azeri and Armenia delegations, the inclusion of whose signatures appears as a mere after thought.

"And the main point is this," Abulfaz is straining at the top of his voice, "That the Center now has a new name, and that is Russia, and Russia has as little right to interfere in our affairs as the Center had under Gorbachev or Stalin! Have they brought peace? Has the fighting ceased or even abated? No! The sole means of securing and protecting the territory of Azerbaijan is the immediate formation of our own army and if the government maintains its refusal to create such a defensive force within one week we will create our own!"

The crowd goes wild.

A new demand, with a deadline, has been issued.

An independent army for an independent Azerbaijan.

"That is enough," says Elchibey quietly into the microphone, "Remember to come on Monday to the Supreme Soviet. Goodnight."

And while the Wagnerian overture crackles over the PA system again, 20,000 people raise their fists in silence, and then, in groups of five and ten and twenty, they quietly disperse and go home.

Another Friday night on Freedom Square has come to an end, but the people are already anticipating the next.

A taboo has been broken, and if the re-born communist leaders of Central Asia are sleeping soundly tonight, Ayaz Mutalibov is not one of their number.

He has a country to deal with and it is by no means clear whether he or anyone of his ilk can stay in the saddle when the people say no.

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Friday Night Rally in Baku; Abulfiez Elchibey (with beard); first instance I know of where placards were helpfully written in English for non-Cyrillic readers

Abulfaz Elchibey and the Popular Front

Abulfaz Elchibey is less the leader of the Popular Front than he is a muallim, or teacher, and it is doubtful that he would run for office even if free and fair elections were held tomorrow.

Rather, in a Pavlov Havellesque way, he seems to embody the political aspirations and personal suffering of his nation and has thus become the point man and political weather vane.

A native of the enclave province of Nahchivan, Abulfaz was trained as an orientalist and is fluent in both Arabic and Farsi in addition to Russian and Azeri Turkish. He used his language ability to find work as a Russian-Arabic translator at the Soviet High Dam project on the Nile before returning to Baku to lecture on Islam and Sufism at the university. Sufi references pepper both his public and private speech, leaving some with the erroneous impression that Islam is the motivating force in his life. Rather, it is Turkism that defines Elchibey: it is a portrait of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and not the Ayatollah Khomeini that hangs over his bed at home.

Indeed, his attachment to Ataturk as an inspiration for Turkic culture and independence led first to his dismissal and then trial and imprisonment in 1974 on charges of anti-Soviet agitation and the catch-all crime of Pan-Turkism. The evidence was his insistence that Azeri Turkish be used as at least an equal medium of instruction to Russian in the university and high school system. A tall, scholarly and slight man, he was sentenced to forced labor in a quarry where for 18 months his daily task was to load some 900 building blocks weighing between 30 and 35 kilograms each on to trucks.

Upon his release from the local gulag Elchibey was unable to return to teaching due to his dangerous views but managed to find a position as a calligrapher in the back room of one of the Academies of Science—a perfect place to keep a known activist from talking to anyone. Typically for the Soviet system, perhaps, he continues to work there, though now with five assistants.

But he did not keep quiet and remained a lonely dissident figure in a distant republic—virtually the only voice of criticism in Azerbaijan until the rise of Mikhael Gorbachev and the concepts of glasnost and perestroika.

"Abulfaz was there from the beginning," said Isa Gamberov, the spokesman and number two man in the Popular Front, "Now there are many voices of opposition, but there is only one Abulfaz."

Indeed, despite the curious omission of his name in many recent scholarly studies on the dissident movements in the USSR, Abulfaz is locally regarded as the very backbone of the loose coalition of intellectuals and workers that sprung up in the mid 1980s and eventually coalesced into the Halk Cephesi, or Popular Front of Azerbaijan. Based on the notion of working within the system for social and economic reform and categorically opposed to all forms of violence in the political struggle, the organization was instrumental in mounting a number of strikes and acts of civil disobedience before finally receiving its charter in July, 1989, at which time Abulfaz was elected as its first chairman.

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Just what he is the acknowledged leader of is a bit ill defined.

"We are not a political party but rather a movement," Elchibey told me during our first meeting in his office in the rather beat-up school that served as the Front's headquarters until mid-September. "There are five parties that have asked to be recognized as belonging to the Front, and perhaps as many other interest groups that might well emerge as separate political parties in the future. The point is this: the Popular Front will exist until there is real democracy in Azerbaijan. After that mission is accomplished it is wholly likely that the Popular Front will 'dissolve.'"

And 'real democracy' in Azerbaijan is no impossible dream.

"Democracy is a child of Europe, and is now rolling over the world like a wave," he said, "It is wholly natural that the first countries in the Soviet Union to be effected were those in the Baltics--those closest to democratic Europe. But Azerbaijan is a special case. We had an independent state for two years starting in 1918--the first secular republic in the Muslim world. That state became the model for Turkey and it remains our model today. Some would like to compare the situation here with that pertaining in Central Asia but it is ridiculous, although those states will eventually be effected by the democratic wave as well. And no-one can project the outcome of popular dissent there: there is no democratic tradition to refer to."

Heir to a local democratic tradition or not, the Popular Front might have remained a sort of think-tank on the fringes of Azeri society but for events linked to the Armenian enclave of Karabakh.

Theories vary over exactly when the recent, spiral of troubles began, but by November, 1988, Moscow had issued a decree announcing that a special commission would administer the area--thus effectively stripping the territory from Azerbaijan control.

The ensuing struggle for the territory became a four-ring circus between Armenian nationalists, the Azerbaijan government of Abdulrahman Vezirov, the central Soviet government in Moscow and the Popular Front, culminating in the riots of January 1990, with Abulfaz Elchibey broadcasting from his hideout as Soviet tanks rolled through the streets of Baku.

The Baku massacres, in which perhaps 200 people were killed--many allegedly by experimental weapons like bullets that cork-screw along bones--was a seminal event in current Azeri history and marks the emergence of the Front as the only organization willing to act in the national interest. Although officially recognized as a legal organization several months before, in the aftermath of the January violence the ruling communist party--now headed by Ayaz Mütalibov following the dismissal of Vezirov on grounds of inaction and incompetence--was obliged to deal directly with the Front lest its last vestiges of legitimacy be swept away.

Mütalibov might twist and turn, mounting elections and referendums and declaring independence on paper, but the Front has consistently refused to play ball--often to its own victimization.

The most recent show-down came in the aftermath of the aborted coup in Moscow, when in quick succession, Mütalibov declared independence and then went forward with direct presidential elections in which he was the only candidate.

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On the first count, the Front dismissed the declaration of independence as total nonsense, pointing out that a similar, almost 'unanimous' majority in the communist-dominated Supreme Soviet had voted for continued association with the rest of the USSR scant months before and that lacking such basic attributes of statehood as control over its own resources and territory (IE-- Azeri banks, currency and army) and with no plans to create such, the declaration of "independence" was an insult to the nation and a gross slight on the memory of the heroic founders of the short-lived republic of 1918.

The second issue, the presidential elections, was equally contentious. The Front had been calling on the public to boycott the polls for months on the grounds that they were to be conducted in an atmosphere of martial law. Then, on August 23rd, a number of thugs attacked on the Front Headquarters, smashing windows, kicking in doors and breaking heads when they got in the way--including that of Elchibey, who was hospitalized for a week. Clearly, someone was sending the Front a message that the boycott was viewed with something other than favor or even indifference by the powers that be.

In the event, there was an alleged 70% voter turn-out with a concomitant 98% approval of sole-candidate Mutalibov--ridiculous figures if one makes a random sample of people on the street.

But the results were hardly in before president-elect Mutalibov announced his intention to resign from the Communist Party and recommended that the Party dissolve itself. It promptly did so on September 8th in a stormy session described by presidential advisor Wafa Goulizade (an school chum of the young Abulfaz) as the "death agony of a handful of partocrats."

Goulizade also described the attack on the Front HQ as an 'inhuman crime' in which the government had no roll but whose perpetrators it was determined to find and prosecute. Despite testimony from Elchibey and others which included the names and even home telephone numbers of several of the attackers, nothing has been done to date.

But possibly as an act of contrition--or maybe just out of a weird sense of cynical humor--the old, now 'non-communist' Mutalibov government donated the now-vacant premises of the Baku Communist Party to the Popular Front (and other small organizations like the Miskhitean Turks Solidarity Society) and this where our second interview was held.

The difference in venue between my first and second private meeting with Elchibey underlines the subtle tension between the government and its nemesis and suggests efforts by the government to somehow co-opt the Popular Front even at this late stage of the game.

Certainly, Elchibey seemed nearly ill at ease in the new surroundings.

Gone was the intense professor-cum-calligrapher at the old Front HQ: there, we had been able to discuss everything from the Front's positions on language reform and the status of private property to creating a "common Caucasus house" federation with Armenia and Georgia; here, we dwelt on such subjects as Karabakh and the Front's insistence on the creation of a national defense force separate from that of the Soviet troops in the country.

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To be sure, the change in tone may have been dictated more by the force of events than a mere change of address. Discussion had been going on between the opposition and the presidential office for sometime about the national defense force, with the former demanding a proper defense force with armor and artillery and the latter seeking to create a 'national guard' without heavy weapons. Karabakh, meanwhile, was a perennial subject, but had become a very hot item following the Yeltsin/Nazerbaiyev mission that had come and gone so quickly--and right between our two meetings.

Still, there was a difference between Elchibey in the school house and Elchibey in the former commie office block, and I think it would be a disservice not to note it.

The main subject of the second meeting, as suggested, concerned the Front threat to form its own 10,000-strong core-group if the government didn't act quickly in the creation of a 50,000 man force to put paid to Armenian claims to Karabakh and defend the territory and honor of Azerbaijan. The idea of a national guard was unacceptable to the Front which thought that such a force would either only be good for parades or could be used as an exclusive, presidential tool against discontent.

"A national guard would turn into a sort of elite presidential militia willing to fire on Armenian bandits on Monday and anti-government demonstrators in Baku on Tuesday," Elchibey said. "The army must be a serious, non-political force under the control of an independent ministry of defense and tasked with the defense of the national borders."

The government, he noted, had indeed created a defense ministry on paper and had donated the old KGB building to serve as its institutional address but there was still no action in recruiting a force. (Unknown to Elchibey and yours truly at the time, the government was even then busily trying to recruit five opposition members of parliament associated with the Front to serve on a "National Defense Council". Perhaps not remarkably, they succeeded in recruiting a popular Front speaker, Ibaret Mehmedov, and in so doing succeeded in exposing at least one fault line in the coalition.)

The Front's threat to recruit a core army group seems unrealistic in at least one particular: the 10,000 men would remain at the ready, but unarmed, until equipped by the government. When I asked Elchibey about how he believed that Mutalibov give weapons to 10,000 irate men when the point of their demanding them was his refusal to arm anyone in the first place, he could only shrug and say that time would tell. And when I asked whether he wasn't concerned about the specter of the "Lebanonization" of Azerbaijan, with every political and ethnic group maintaining its own militia, his answer was not exactly satisfactory:

"It is an army of Azerbaijan," he said, and left it at that.

(There are others, even now, who are saying the same--notably the quasi-renegade leader of the enclave province of Nahchcivan, former Brehznev Central Committee alternative member Haydar Aliev. Known among the pan-Turanic crowd as 'the first Turk in the Politburo' he was booted from the inner council by Gorbachev and then relieved of his duties as Communist Party boss in Azerbaijan by the Vezirov-

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Mutalibov team. His tumble hit rock bottom when he arrived as a pensioner in his native Nahchivan--literally a last-station stop on the Soviet railway system pinched between a sliver of Turkey, a slice of Iran and a large unfriendly slab of Armenia. Napoleon's island exile could not have been more remote from the centers of national or even local power, but now, the 70-ish old Aliiev is making a comeback only Richard Nixon could dream of: Caesar-like (to mix metaphors a third time) he thrice rejected the presidency of the Nahchivan parliament when that body declared itself unilaterally independent from everybody in the USSR after the August 19th coup, but on the fourth call he finally bowed to fate and history and accepted. Immediately, he launched a Latin-based language reform which, if the rest of Azerbaijan doesn't catch up, will culturally sever the enclave from the country. In the meanwhile, Aliiev has reportedly started a public subscription fund to create an army to defend the territory of Nahchivan. (Weapons from where? Iran?) Some say Aliiev's legion will become a part of the proposed Azeri defense force; others think the old fox might go his own way or even--get ready for this--create the right circumstances for Nahchivan's annexation by Turkey in accordance with the 1920 Kars Agreement between Moscow and Ankara. Some poetic types are already demanding that he change his name to Haydar Alisoy Ataturk--IE, the Father of the Turks of Nahchivan. When I asked Elchibey about this, he could only roll his eyes and admit that neither he nor anyone else in Baku knew what the hell was going on in the Aliievistan...)

Another contentious issue is the emotional matter of relations with Iran, or more specifically, the large ethnic Azeri region in the northwest of the Islamic Republic.

"Union between south and north Azerbaijan cannot be effected immediately but will ^{be} determined by the flow of history," said Elchibey during the course of our first interview, "Iran is just as much a heterogeneous empire as Russia and is thus doomed to fall apart if democratic reforms and voluntary confederation does not occur. Religion cannot hold a state together for long. Nationalism spelled the end of the Christian empire-states of the West and it will now spell the end of the Muslim states of the East. And when it does, it will be impossible to foresee how many states will emerge from the rubble."

But for cultural and historical reasons, Iran is of particular interest to Elchibey as well as most other Azeris:

In various guises at various times, Tehran (or Tabriz) was the dominant city in Azeri affairs, the font of the Seljuk/Iranian/Shiite symbiotic culture that distinguished Azeri Turks from their Seljuk/Ottoman/Sunni cousins in Anatolia. It was only as recent as the 19th century that the territory now known as Azerbaijan was divided between Czarist Russia and Iran, with the majority of the population and land ending up in the southern, Iranian sector. Those Azeris were, and are, subjected to a subtle campaign of Persification akin to the more well-known Turkification of the Kurds of Turkey and the uniquely repugnant forced assimilation campaign of the ethnic Turks of Bulgaria in the mid-1980s.

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In recent years, the opening up of a 45 kilometer wide strip of passport-free border area to facilitate visits between Azeri families split by the frontier has resulted in an increasing number of southern Azeri visitors appearing in northern Azerbaijan--including many religious types presumably hoping to fill the philosophic void left by the demise of Marxist-Leninism with their own fundamentalist ideology.

One interesting aspect of this is the insistence that (northern) Azerbaijan not return to the Latin-based alphabetic script it pioneered in the early 1920s, several years before the Republic of Turkey converted its script from the Arabic. The demand that Azerbaijan do so has been part of the Popular Front platform for some time, although the organization seems to accept the government approach that the transition be subtle and gradual: start with advertisements, the names of newspapers, and then the schools.

But Tehran has made its unhappiness at even this incremental attitude toward language change known plain and clear.

"I remember once when a Mullah from Tehran told me that our accepting the Latin alphabet was tantamount to accepting Christianity and that we had to return to the alphabet of Islam, Arabic, or at least stick to Cyrillic," Elchibey recalled, "I pointed out that Arabic is the step-child of Aramaeic and Hebrew and goes all the way back to Phoenician and can in no wise be described as an inherently 'holy' or 'Islamic' alphabet. Cyrillic was a 'Christian' alphabet before Latin in any case. It just serves to underline how boned-headed the clerics can be, and therein lies the danger."

But Islam, despite 70 years of doctrinal communist efforts to extirpate it, remains an essential part of Azeri psychology, and an essential part of the make-up of Abulfaz Elchibey--especially the great Sufi poets and thinkers of the past and how they inform the mission of the Popular Front and its relationship to the Azeri people.

"In mystic literature, there is the image of the nightingale and the rose," he related poetically during our first meeting, "the flower is the sustenance, the means of creating the desirable result. In Sufism, there is the murid, or disciple and the murshid, or spiritual master who assists the murid in his path toward the knowledge of Truth. I see our role as the Popular Front in that light: not to lead, but to assist the people along the path to become mature, political beings. A well-read, thinking and critical body-politic is the main defense against fanaticism and dictatorship."

Other Voices

Happily, perhaps, Elchibey is not a one man show.

The Front not only includes total rejectionists and election boycottists but also an array of personalities willing to work within the existing system at far closer range than the spiritual leader of the Popular Front--and even those who are willing to serve as minority members of the reformed (or defunct) communist dominated parliament.

One of these men is Timurlang Garayev (Karayev), Vice chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan and chairman of the Popular Front parliamentary group.

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A youngish, dapper lawyer given to tailored suits and flashy ties, his style and bearing set him apart from most Front leaders and might even define him as being the first politician animal (and not "politician") of modern, quasi-democratic Azerbaijan.

"The reason I chose to work with such people as Mutalibov is that without compromise the situation in Azerbaijan would end in confrontation," he explained in a meeting in his office at the Supreme Soviet (the building has not yet been renamed 'parliament') "and with violence and bloodshed, we will never have our freedom."

As such Garayev represents the middle ground between the old and the new: a man with connections, he will not allow the government to railroad the opposition into the position of being neo-Bolsheviks, determined to exact revenge against the old elite for having pilfered the state coffers.

"We are faced with the choice of having a totalitarian elite and a democratic elite," he said, "I prefer the latter. Legalize the theft of the past, then tax it. England raped India for centuries, and the leaders of the concerns that did so later became lords and mayors. The same occurred in America with the early industrialists and oil barons. Our own partocrats are no worse and maybe even better. Let them stay here and re-invest their ill-gotten gains. The rich will be with ye always, legally or illegally. We need to make once-off amnesty for grand larceny. I regard this as a realistic assessment of reality."

Garayev is one of many who feel that Azerbaijan could become "a Switzerland of the Caucasus" if peace, stability and independence were restored to the land. This means, in effect, total economic and political independence and the resolution of the nagging question of the disputed enclave of Nagorno Karabakh.

"I have a radical solution," he told me, "It revolves around citizenship. All legal rights of property ownership and enterprise should be made exclusive to Azerbaijan nationals, irrespective of ethnic origin--Lezgin, Kurd, Russian, Jewish, Armenian, Ahiska or Azeri Turks. Let all who want to subscribe to our laws do what they will here; those who violate the laws will be fined or deported. Given the mineral wealth of Azerbaijan, I am sure that most Armenians would chose to remain here. You either subscribe to the law or leave."

Garayev was one of several Popular Front-associated MPs to become involved in the so-called Boris Yeltsin/Nursultan Nazarbaiyev Ten Point Plan to bring peace to the largely ethnic Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh and to pull Azerbaijan and Armenia back from the brink of war, and would appear to be a supporter of the essential process rather than a categoric detractor like Elchibey.

"The issues at stake in Nagorno Karabakh are extremely complex and difficult, but there is no question that peace is preferable to the current state of affairs," he said. "There will be events sponsored by those determined to undermine the process, either by militants who are out of control or by the remnants of the Moscow center who desire to promote chaos for their own ends. This is the sad reality."

Still, Garayev remains "100% optimistic" that the recent peace accords will work out--if not, then that the world will recognize that it is Armenia--or at least rogue Armenian militants--who are responsible and not a mob of 'blood thirsty Azeris'.

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"Yeltsin and Nazarbaiev have formed a commission that is responsible for determining who violates the peace," said Garayev, "if honest, it will soon be clear who is the aggressor."

Garayev distances Karabakh from local politics, saying that he is only interested in the future of Azerbaijan and not who wins political points from the matter. Karabakh is a national issue. To underline this, he related how Front deputies literally came to the rescue of Mutalibov in down-town Stepanakert when the president, who had disregarded their insistence that he not go to the troubled town, found himself surrounded by an irate Armenian mob.

"I think the experience got to him. Now he understands that it is, in effect, the Popular Front that is defending even him. This may well lead to a dramatic change of attitude toward many of our demands."

Unlike Elchibey, who finds the diplomatic language of the Yeltsin/Nazarbaiev communique offensive to the dignity of Azerbaijan, Garayev feels that the very fact that there is a piece of paper requiring observers to inquire into guilt and innocence will exonerate Azerbaijan. In distinction to Elchibey's charge that Yeltsin has usurped the center, personified by Gorbachev and that Moscow is still up to its old imperial tricks, Garayev feels that the very fact that the Boris/Nursultan show arrived at all underlines the fact that the old center is further away than ever in local affairs.

"It is of critical importance that Gorbachev was not involved in the discussions. We didn't ask for help; we only let someone from outside come and listen and judge. So long as Yeltsin remains an honest broker, no harm can come from this."

But Garayev, like Elchibey, also encourages the idea of the creation of an Azeri national defense unit to take the place of the Soviet interior ministry corps currently patrolling Karabakh.

"The Soviet army is necessary while the Armenians disarm but after that it should be withdrawn to a neutral strip along the border for a period of time, but never divided into Azeri and Armenia sectors. That might result in eventual clashes between troops favoring one cause or the other. After the establishment of our own national force, the Russian troops should be withdrawn, forever."

Garayev and Elchibey both foresee the possibility of inviting United Nations troops in to patrol the border area--if and when both Armenian and Azerbaijan are accepted by the UN as sovereign states.

"The first condition of inviting outside observers or peace keepers from the United Nations is that your country be recognized as independent," he said. "I think we should start the process now."

Still, political independence is intimately related to economic independence and Garayev categorically declares that the only means of effecting that is through the individual and not the state.

"In order to be called a democratic state there must be a democratic economy--that is, one based on the principles of private property," he said. "Personal freedom means independence from the state. That means private enterprise. The main reason for ethnic strife is poverty and as such the conflict is less the cause of Azeris or Armenians as it is the Soviet system which imposed poverty on all of us. If you live well, you do not fight with your neighbor."

And yet that is exactly what the neighbors are doing.

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Back in Baku/Part Three

Peace Prospects in Karabakh

There is a quiet war going on between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Far removed from the eyes of the world--trained, as they are, on the remarkable events in Moscow and the sad litany of death and destruction in Yugoslavia--the Azeri-Armenian conflicts simmer on, occasionally boiling over into open war.

The irrational is on the loose and no-one knows how to reign it in.

In Nahchivan, the abducting and killing of two shepherds led to a crowd stopping a train loaded with more than 100 Armenians, who were then held hostage for several days; just why the Armenians were traversing Nahchivan is a question that has not been adequately answered--nor how so many would submit to capture without a fight.

On the northern front, some 4,000 people have left their villages in the face of Armenian armor and artillery fire some hundreds of kilometers inside Azerbaijan and are now taking refuge in the district seat of Garanboy.

But it is in Nagorno-Karabakh that the real action is happening, with neighbors torching each other's homes and unknown militia men launching Azalan missiles down on cities and towns.

Indeed, the bitter irony is that the only peace the area has seen in four years came with the coup in Moscow. Local Azeri police and Soviet military commanders in the area told me that for 60 sweet hours, not one shot was fired and not one person killed. Immediately upon the restoration of Mikhael Gorbachev, though, the fire-works began anew. Nor did it stop during or after the Yeltsin/Nazarbaidyev visit; it was simply neglected by the press-pack traveling on the Russian President's plane.

The root of the current conflict is mixture of disputed history, demographics, geographic reality, micro and macro Soviet politics and finally and perhaps most importantly, what can only be described as a deep and abiding, atavistic hatred between two communities separated by language and religion.

As for history, Armenians say that Nagorno Karabakh, or the six 'mountainous' rayons of the Azerbaijan province of Greater Karabakh is an ancient Armenian heartland essential to the (at least emotional) state of modern Armenia. The claim of the Armenian nature of the sub-province was backed up by the Caucasian Bureau, or Kafburo, decision to make Nagorno Karabakh^{an} "autonomous region" within the newly-founded Soviet of Azerbaijan in the early 1920s. The same commission also saw fit to strip the Zangazur region from Azerbaijan and cede it to Armenia, thus driving a corridor between the now truncated state of Azerbaijan and the province of Nahchivan.

Azeri Turks, meanwhile, say that there were no Armenians in Karabakh until 150 years ago. As evidence for this, Azeris refer to a monument erected by the first Armenian settlers commemorating their arrival in the area; the monument has now allegedly been destroyed by Armenians to erase the Azeri claim. As for the Kafburo decision to separate the administration of Karabakh from Baku, contemporary Azeri thought regards this as a perfidious plot to divide the country; as evidence it is pointed out that only one Azeri sat on the commission

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so-called "Lenin of the Caucasus." In revenge the Azeris have now erased Shoumian and other Armenians from all museums in the land.

There is the temptation to compare the historical and diplomatic arguments of the Azeri-Armenian dispute over Karabakh with the more familiar moral roller-coaster of the Israel/Palestine conflict, with the Armenians in the role of the Zionists and the Azeris playing the Palestinians or vice versa, depending on who you talk to and when. In sum, the question concerns the right of conquest: whether and when any national group of people should be delivered, by mandate, treaty or force of arms, any territory or portion thereof that they once claimed to inhabit decades or generations or centuries ago--even if it has been inhabited by another nation for all of living memory.

(The reader will forgive me one of my North Dakota-boy comparisons: invaders from the East seize control of large tracks of land and drive the original inhabitants out, who then form their own country in a rump state. But the grandchildren of the losers start filtering back and eventually form dense enclaves within the new country. Now they want to join those enclaves to the motherland--annexing south LA or El Paso to Mexico, if you please...)

Demographically, perhaps 80 to 85 percent of the total Nagorno Karabakh population of 200,000 is Armenian, whereas the percentage is dramatically reversed if one looks at the population of the Azerbaijan province of Greater Karabakh as a whole: the nearby Azeri city of Agdam alone has twice as many Azeri nationals as all the Armenians of Karabakh put together. When do you start creating ethnic islands and when do you stop?

Geographic reality, though, is the largest impediment for associating Nagorno Karabakh with Armenia.

The entire Karabakh region is well within the boundaries of Azerbaijan and even if Baku were moved or forced to cede it to Armenia, the territorial disputes would not end there: a Danzig-like corridor would have to be carved through other bits of terrain undisputedly belonging to Azerbaijan that happen to lie between Karabakh and geographic Armenia in order to give access to the region. There is, short of Armenia's launching an all out war against Azerbaijan and dictating the peace, absolutely no hope for this whatsoever: even now, the Popular Front is mounting a campaign to restore the territorial integrity of the short-lived Republic of 1918-20. What this specifically means is reclaiming the Zangazur corridor.

(Impossible to contemplate, this may be the answer to the conflict: give Azerbaijan Zangazur for Karabakh, plus corridor.)

On the macro-level, too, the powers that be--and this means Boris Yeltsin and the reborn Russian Federation--have no interest in having any of the borders in the (former) Soviet Union be brought into question. Rather like the famous article in the charter of the Organization of Africa States that forbids the adjustment of frontiers because most are so totally inane, the heirs of Joseph Stalin's policy of mixing and matching populations and creating ethnic identities where none had previously existed are not the least bit interested in having test-case Nagorno Karabakh point in the direction of ethnic dissolution--the result of which would be an endless cycle of irredentism throughout the (former) USSR.

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And the fact that Yeltsin's traveling companion on his mission to Karabakh was Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev was no coincidence: in addition to fulfilling his dual role as a liberal (ex) communist and token 'Muslim' to appease Azeri fears of being tricked by 'Christian' Russia, Nazarbayev's presence served to underline the reality that neither he nor Boris want any similar border disputes between their own countries: Kazakhstan itself is less than 50% Kazak, and in the 'settler territories' along the long Russian frontier, the population is almost exclusively Russian. No less a personage than Alexander Solzhenitsin has publically called for its annexation.

Finally, there is the psychological aspect of the current impasse.

Most research into the current troubles starts in 1987, when one of Mikhail Gorbachev's chief advisors (who just happened to be Armenian) publicly suggested that the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region come under the purview of a special commission and thus, administratively, be detached from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan due to the alleged cupidity and corruption and general administrative ineptitude of the communist party bosses in Baku. But (and to reach for another far-fetched theoretical example) the cupidity and corruption of, say, local Francophone officials in Quebec has not driven the local Anglophones to seek annexation by Ontario. If they don't like it, they can leave.

In Karabakh, a separation of local government from national government was indeed effected in late 1988--to the great joy of the Armenian majority in the region and to the unmitigated chagrin of the minority Azeris. Confrontations ensued and led to the death of two Azeri youths. In revenge, an Azeri mob went on the rampage in the (mainland) Azeri city of Sumgait, killing many Armenians and forcing others to flee. On January 12th, 1989, 12,000 Azeris (among them many mixed marriages) were effectively thrown out of the Nagorno Karabakh capital of Stepanakert by the local Russian military commander although, curiously, the special commission running the affairs of the enclave was dissolved later that year and the administration of the sub-province returned to Azerbaijan.

The effect of this was electric.

Armenians, either feeling their oats or terrified for their lives or maybe both, then declared their intent to join Nagorno Karabakh to mainland Armenia. Azerbaijan, necessarily, then answered with equal intent to hold on to the break-away territory.

Lines drawn, events soon escalated out of control: Armenia violently expelled every last one of the 200,000 ethnic Azeris resident in Armenia and Azeri refugee mobs then mounted a tit-for-tat pogrom against Armenians in Azerbaijan. Thanks to the personality of Gary Kasparov, the world focused on events in Baku in January 1990 when refugee mobs (or, some say, maybe a little too conveniently, KGB agent provocateurs) attacked Armenian homes and neighborhoods to lay claim to alternative housing. The Red Army was called in to impose law and order and when the dust settled it was revealed that some 200 Azeris had become martyrs to the cause of freedom: modern Azeri nationalism had joined modern Armenian nationalism as being an ideology based in fear and loathing of the other community--an attitude that has now effectively frozen into stone.

But truly, what I believe lies at the root of it all is the nearly psychotic Armenian hatred of all things Turkish due to the alleged 'genocide' of 1915 (I prefer to call the events of those days massacres carried out in the heat of civil war).

Unable to exact useful revenge on the heirs of Enver Pasha's Ottoman Empire in Anatolia, the descendants of the Armenian survivors (many of whom fled to Karabakh from eastern Turkey) have apparently decided to focus their hatred on the Azeri Turks. To risk another far-fetched comparison, it is rather like Amerindians holding Canadians responsible for the Wounded Knee massacre because the Canadians, as white North Americans, are numerically smaller than their southern cousins and far less belligerent when called to defend themselves.

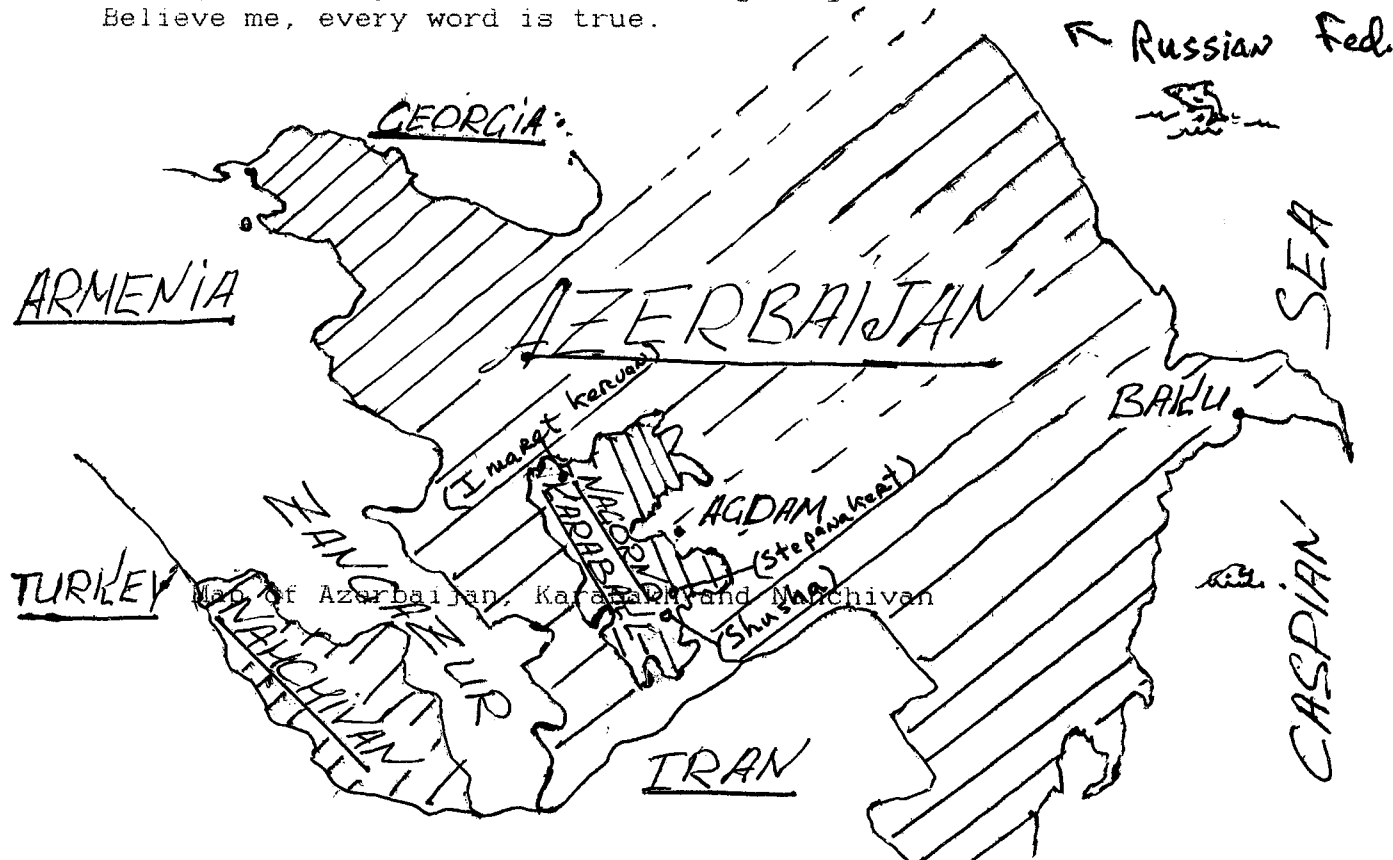
For their part, the Azeris have assumed the familiar Turkish posture of being demonized victims of a Christian plot to keep the world from knowing the Azeri side of the story. So shrill has this sense of being unjustly maligned and manipulated become, in fact, that the grand conspiracy theories even include the accusation that Turkey, of all places, is supplying the Armenian side not only with food and clothing but even military hardware in an effort to woo the West.

This, in sum, is the state of affairs that awaited Lone Ranger Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin and his Tonto-like companion, Kazakistan President Nursultan Nazarbayev as they flew together toward Karabakh in mid-September, trying to make peace and harmony out of a fragmented mess. An unofficial translation of the resulting agreement follows, with comments.

But I, too, just happened to be in the neighborhood, having arrived by military helicopter a few days before to get the lay of the sad and ethnically fractured land.

Allow me, then, to slip away from Big Picture analysis and into the mode of cowboy adventurer to tell my story as a sort of background to the Boris visit, a travel tale I blushinglly entitle: Riding Shotgun in with Sergii Nikolayavich Shukrin through Nagorno Karabakh.

Believe me, every word is true.



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Back in Baku/ Part Four

Riding Shotgun with Sergii Nikolayavich Shukrin

Captain Sergii Nikolayavich Shukrin, 42, independent candidate for the Russian parliament on a platform of privatizing the tobacco industry, poked his assault rifle in my ribs and pointed in the direction of a roadside memorial bedecked with flowers.

The slab bore an impression of the face and a name but we were driving too fast to further identify the man and did not want to stop lest we become more recent victims of the fighting that has claimed the lives of 27 Soviet soldiers this year.

"Look," shouted Sergii over the roar and whine of our BTR, an eight-wheeled, all-terrain, riot-control vehicle with a 7 millimeter gun mounted in a dwarf turret, "That's where another of our boys bought it."

The 22 year veteran of the MVD, or army of the Ministry of the Interior, shook his head and scanned the tree line along the road for snipers. After a relatively quiet career as a professional soldier, the last three years had brought him to nearly all of the ethnic hot-spots that have flared up in the wake of Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost and Perestroika: the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan in 1989; the Baku riots of 1990, and now, in 1991, the intercommunal violence in Nagorno Karabakh between Armenians and Azeri Turks.

Commander Sergii and his vehicle are stationed in Shusha, population 27,000, a medieval Turkish fortress town built in the highlands above the main Armenian city in the province, Stepanakert. Although most of the defensive walls have now crumbled Shusha has once more returned to its garrison state and represents the last Azeri Turkish stronghold within the 170,000-strong Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh.

But there are other, smaller settlements of Azeri Turks scattered throughout the province, and it is these small and unarmed groups that are constantly coming under attack by Armenians intent on driving all Azeri Turks away. It is these outlying settlements that are commander Sergii's brief.

By fluke of circumstance, I was able to hitch a ride atop the BTR as Sergii's MVD men accompanied a team of Azerbaijan interior ministry inspectors to a village called Imaret Kervan located in the northwest corner of Karabakh that had been hit by Armenian bandits the night before. A radio report on the raid indicated that four houses had been torched, four people wounded and one person killed. As such, it was neither as dramatic or destructive as the rocket attack on the town of Hodjali earlier this month when 64 Azalan-type rockets had rained down on the population from surrounding hills, but it was another event and had to be inspected and recorded---yet another detail in the increasingly long and sad litany of death and destruction between the twocommunities of Karabakh.

"Step on it, Andrei," Sergii shouted over the roar of the BTR engine to the driver as we cleared the last of the check-points separating Shusha from Stepanakert and started down the main, north-south highway, deserted but for the occasional truck or fellow BTR on daylight patrol.

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We had just entered the war zone, and one that pitted the Soviet soldiers against invisible Armenian bandits: every sullen village that we drove through was a threat; every bend in the road promised action.

That this was no joke was driven home when, after leaving the main highway for a mountainous dirt-track cutting West to the village attacked the night before, we ran into two large holes in the road with traces of cable running toward a near-by bluff: home-made mines. A pool of caked blood stained the dusty road next to the largest pit; another Soviet soldier killed two nights before.

The dead soldier had been with the 5430th unit of the Krasnaiarsk regiment, stationed outside the Azeri village of Umutlu, which ironically means "Hope" in Turkish. There, 200 troops milled around their compound, idling away the hours by lifting weights, smoking and jawing about their own respective homelands--Russia, the Ukraine, Kazakistan or elsewhere; there were no troops there from any of the Baltic Republics.

The passivity of the soldiers in the face of having just lost one of their own was curious--the more so given the fact the unit had become somewhat notorious after eight of its members had been ambushed by Armenian women and children in the nearby Armenian town of Izak: after the non-combatants had surrounded the troops, the men-folk had come in to disarm them and take them hostage. The eight soldiers were eventually released, less their equipment, and then sent home to Krasnaiarsk in the Russian Federation. The circumstances of their captivity left many with the impression that they had purposefully lost or even sold their weapons to the Armenians who were now training the weapons on Azeri Turks and Soviet soldiers alike.

"The Soviet troops evince a remarkable ability to lose weapons in Armenia," presidential advisor Wafa Goulizade had told me the week before, "armored vehicles, flame throwers and rocket launchers and even artillery pieces. It is funny that they don't lose the same equipment here."

Finally, after four hours on the road and passing through Izak with weapons locked and loaded, we reached our destination--the Azeri village of Imaret Kervan, a tobacco growing settlement of some 1200 souls. A crowd of local men had gathered outside the 150-man garrison of MVD troops, who seemed singularly disinterested in pursuing the perpetrators of the raid the night before. Still, the commander of the garrison instructed Sergii how to get to the site of the attack and our BTR, now crowded with local men, lurched down a rain-rutted road beneath the swaying branches of walnut trees until we reached the furthestmost fringe of the Imaret Kervan.

Here, separated by a shallow brook from the contiguous Armenian village of Chapar, population 900, were half a dozen brick and stone houses. Four were still smoldering; one was still on fire.

"It was Heno, Heno Asyriyan!" wailed Mahmud Mirzaev, 54, pointing across the brook to the closest Armenian house and describing how a gang of eight had attacked at around five o'clock the previous evening and how the family had managed to escape via a window and hide in the orchard as they watched their neighbor torch their house. The Assyrian household, Mirzaev related, had once been the first place they would look if a chicken had gone stray.

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So much for the convenient claim by Azeris in Baku (and even Armenians in Yerevan) that the dirty work is being carried out by volunteers from afar: in Imaret Kervan, it was formerly friendly neighbors who were in deadly combat.

The identity of Heno and the personal nature of the conflict appeared to be confirmed by the next neighbor, a school teacher by the name of Valida Kafarova, who had returned to her house to collect bedding and a few personal effects. The four room structure had miraculously not caught on fire during the attack, although the interior walls had been raked by automatic and pistol fire and there were burn marks on the wooden stairs where the attackers had apparently placed some burning embers.

"It was Heno and Limberk and Vladik and Agop," said Kafarova, naming four of the eight attackers. She knew them all from school.

After the inspectors snapped pictures of the building and picked up spent bullet casings, we moved on to the last two houses torched the night before. One had become the crematorium of a 96 year old blind woman by the name of Zeynep Alieva. Her dog, still chained to a post outside the front door, lay cringing and whimpering beneath a defoliated bush, its hair singed crisp.

When asked why his team of soldiers did not drive over to Chapar and question Heno Assyrian, Sergii Nikoalyavich smiled weakly.

"That is the job of the police, and they don't dare; as for us, we have no orders."

Our task complete and with evening falling, we turned back. But concern for freshly-laid mines along the road we had come led to the decision to take an eight-hour, mind-numbing detour along twisting mountain roads through the sliver of Azerbaijan dividing Karabakh from Armenia. First I tried to conjugate Russian verbs but the roar of the engine inside the BTR prevented such mental gymnastics; then I studied the interior design of the BTR for efficiency and found it poor: whenever I turned my head, I would painfully knock it against the ammunition boxes or other military hardware strapped to the rough metal walls. I began to feel like a Russian soldier bumping over the roads of the Wakan corridor in Afghanistan, waiting for the Mujahadeen to pull the plug. Finally, I resigned myself to mindlessly staring at the toothpaste and Samantha Fox decals with which Andrei the driver had decorated his cab and recalling adolescent sex to stay awake, lest in dozing, I smash my head again on a turret structure and draw blood again.

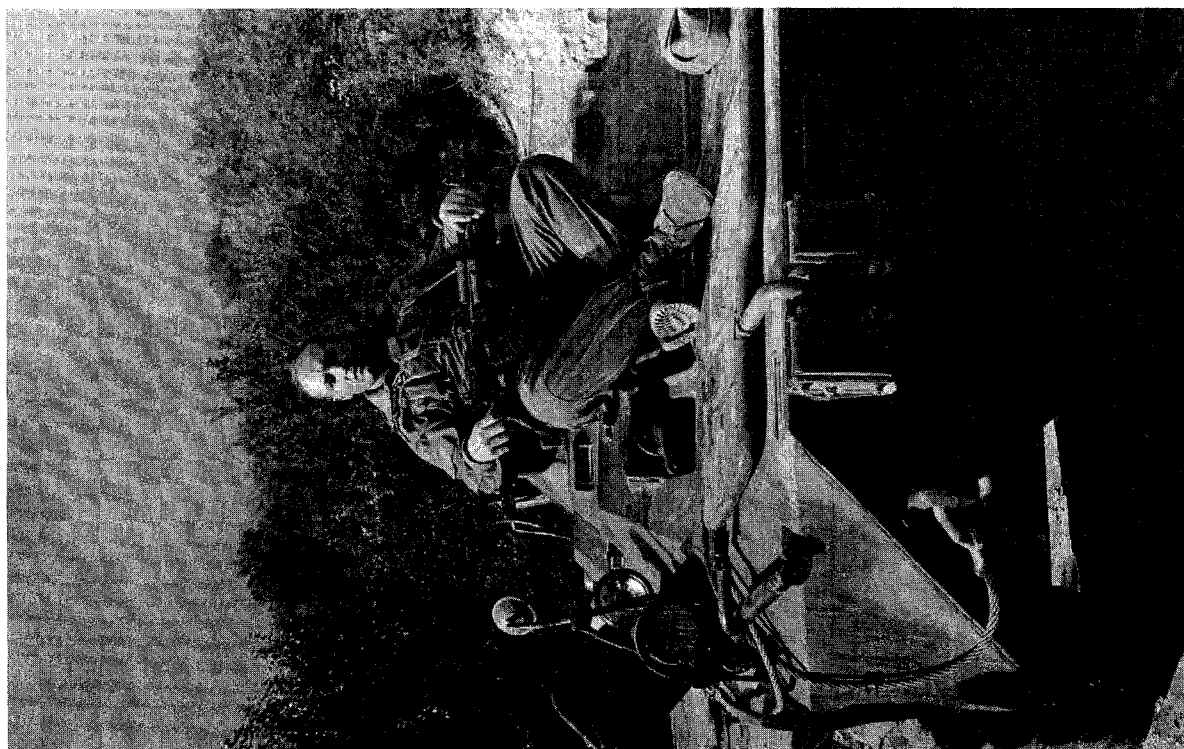
We did not arrive back in Fortress Shusha until four o'clock in the morning, and then only to learn that there had been a new bombing attack on Imaret Kervan after we had left. The BTR inspection team would have to return in the morning to take new notes.

"I did not serve in Afghanistan," said Sergii wearily, "but I cannot imagine that it could be worse than this. There, we were foreigners, but here is the 'rodina', the homeland, and we are allowing it to be torn apart."

Sergii's commanding officer Major Igor Shevchenko concurred and added his own radical solution to the problem.

"The only way out of this mess is for Russia to temporarily annex Karabakh," he said, "Otherwise, this will just go on and on."

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Keeping the non-Peace in Nagorno Karabakh--Commander Sergii Nikolayevich atop his BTR; then the crowded scene aboard the BTR after we arrived in Imaret Kervan

Teg-12

Peace Prospects (or the Boris/Nursultan Road Show)

Well, Commander Sergii and crew went off on their next mission while we went off on ours--staking out the Hodjali airport outside Stepanakert in anticipation of the Big Man's arrival.

I would like to bore you with the details, but won't: in essence, Boris didn't show--or at least not until the next day. Quite literally, after watching the security detail evaporate at Hodjali and finding a free flight back to Baku aboard a VIP Aeroflot jet conveniently hanging around the two-bit runway, we arrived back in the Azeri capital just in time to see the big, black Zils arrive at the airport and load their special guest aboard a plane bound for the city of Gendji, from where the peace maker would make his grand entrance into Stepanakert the next day. I swear I saw Boris wave at me as the plane taxied out to the run way, and I waved back.

I was not sad.

First of all, I had learned that Boris was traveling with a veritable press pack to record his grandstanding efforts; there would be nothing unique about his visit, professionally speaking: photo ops, pressers and more grandstanding.

For the moment, anyway, I was swimming in local detail that may one day find its way to the page: the population of Hodjali, 6,000, half of whom are refugees from Stepanakert and among whom are some 20 mixed-marriage families, collecting among the half-constructed and half-destroyed buildings in town and determined to make an airport sit-in after the rumor and rushed through town that Boris had arrived, but was not coming to their dorp as planned...The unease with which I first approached the airport: were those men Azeri or Armenian, and which language do I use? Are we in their country or theirs?...The wild and reckless Turcophobe Azeri commander of airport security who took us off to view a few of the 120 artillery pieces seized in the summer of 1990, suggesting they were gifts from the Republic of Turkey to Yerevan, along with all the other Made in Turkey diapers, vegetable cans and school note books known to be sold in Stepanakert...Dinner that night in Agdam with the same louts, now totally loaded, and blistering for a chance to prove their manhood in the face of what so clearly was a consuming terror of what the future held...

Well, I took assiduous notes on it all but will spare you because I was only doing it to pass time while waiting for Boris and he didn't show until after I was gone.

But I think I have a somewhat better sense of Azeri reservations about Karabakh than the Russian Federation leader--and certainly the hack-pack following him around his whirl-wind Tour For Truth because I was on the ground both before and after his two hour trip, and have watched the sad, silent aftermath of continued bloodshed spreading, as of this writing, even beyond Karabakh into mainland Azerbaijan.

Thus I think it wise to take a look at the famous document and herewith present an unofficial translation of the Ten Point Communique aimed at bringing peace to the troubled area. I will also be presumptive enough to add my own comments in footnote form.

tcg-12 Joint Communiqué on the results of the mediation mission of Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin and Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev (1) the main results of the discussion are as follows:

1) Both sides consider the following as necessary conditions for the resolution of the conflict (2): a ceasefire and cessation until January 1 1992 of all unconstitutional acts of Azerbaijan and Armenia on the Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh (3); recognition of all legal bodies of authority; the withdrawal of all armed forces aside from the MVD (Ministerstvo Vnutrennih Del, or Ministry of Internal Affairs) troops of the USSR and USSR Defense Ministry Troops.

After January 1st, 1992, the presence of all armed formations and their actions will be considered illegal and will be stopped by USSR Interior (MVD) troops and members of the armed formations will be put on trial according to the law. (4)

A working group of observers will be charged with developing the mechanisms of the ceasefire and the neutralization of all armed formations which they consider to be illegal (5) and create security guarantees for all civilians living in the area of conflict.

2) In order to fulfill the coordination of the normalization of the situation in the area of conflict, a temporary working group of observers is to be formed from plenipotentiary representatives of the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan. The working group will start its mission on October 1st, 1991.

3) Azerbaijan and Armenia are to secure the gradual return of the deported population (6). Both sides guarantee the security of the returnees on a permanent basis. Talks on this issue are to commence on October 1st, 1991 (7).

4) Both sides involved in the conflict will immediately begin the release of hostages. (8) This process must be ended in a two week period. After this period all those opposing the release of hostages will be put on trial. Plenipotentiary representatives (9) of the mediating sides will supervise the fulfillment of this.

5) In conjunction with the Union (Moscow) authorities, both sides (Azerbaijan and Armenia) are to re-establish the normal functions of rail, air and other systems of transport and communication. (10)

6) During discussions, both sides agreed to give objective information about the events in the conflict zone and it was decided to set up a special group consisting of Russian and Kazak representatives to prepare official news reports on eventuating conflicts in the area. (11)

7) The highest bodies of state authority in Azerbaijan and Armenia are to set up plenipotentiary delegations that will immediately start the process of bilateral talks on a permanent basis. (12)

8) The sides believe the preparation and conclusion of bilateral treaties between the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation and Armenia and Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and Armenia will promote the course of the negotiations (13).

9) The working group is charged to prepare their proposals on further steps on conflict resolution within one month.

10) The working group of observers is to periodically inform the leadership of the four republics on the status of the above mentioned measures imposed by the communiqué.

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Addendum: The clauses of this communique cannot be considered as constituting the right of the mediators to interfere in the internal affairs of the sovereign states.

Signed on September 23 (in the south Russian city of Jeleznovodsk):

Boris Yeltsin, President of the Russian Federation
 Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan Soviet
 Ayaz Mutalibov, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan
 Leon Tet-Pterrosiyan, President of the Republic of Armenia

Well, there it is!

Boris and Nursultan came, saw and made the impossible peace!

Or did they?

As Marx or his followers used to say, there is a difference between theory and practice: for despite all the fine words in the communique there are some very serious questions to be asked, such as:

1) The mediation effort is not identified as to place or concern; IE, Boris and Nursultan might have been in Alaska or Madagascar

2) Russian and Kasakistan or Azerbaijan and Armenian? Does 'Both Sides' refer to the mediators or the belligerents?

3) Where is the ARNK? What is unconstitutional according to whom?

4) Related to #3: whose law? Soviet? Martial? Armenian? Azeri?

5) The Kazaks and Russians will judge?.

6) Circa 400,000 Armenians left Azerbaijan and 200,000 Armenians departed Azerbaijan between 1988-91 under the bitterest of circumstances and with each passing day romantic idea of returning to the homeland increases while the practicality of doing so dies. Politically, of course, the re-patriation article is obligatory; the reality, though, would increasingly seem to resemble the Palestinian ideal of returning to ancestral homes in Haifa and Tel Aviv.

7) Due to editing problems, I have slipped beyond deadline and find myself reworking this on October 4th, 1991, and there has not been a whisper of movement in this direction.

8) Whose common criminal is whose political detainee? Exactly two days before the signing of the agreement, there were four ethnic Armenians being held in the jail in the Azeri Turkish town of Shusha in the heights above Stepanakert. Three were common criminals charged with dope peddling, theft and 'hooliganism' and had been arrested and tried by ethnic Armenian police and judges (yes) and thereafter sent to the local jail in the Azeri Turkish district seat. The fourth is facing charges of arson and murder in connection with the torching of a number of houses which happened to contain people when they went up in a blaze: he has not yet been convicted and thus should presumed innocent until proven guilty. But all of the four have now been declared 'political hostages' by Armenia. To effect their release elements of the Stepanakert resistance seized an Azeri television reporter literally from under the noses of Boris's beefy guards during the Yeltsin/Nazarabeyev visit. Happily, other Armenians managed to free the Azeri TV hack from custody without a quid-pro-quo.

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9) To paraphrase Nazi Luftwafen boss Hermann Goering, 'when I hear the word plenopetiniary, I reach for my gun'. I have always hated that word---maybe because I've never been able to figure out what it means.

10) Re-tripled Aeroflot flights are the only means into the enclave province of Nahchivan as of this writing. Train and road transport remain severed. Nahchivan looks more and more an independent state.

11) Yeltsin went out of his way to say that this did not mean censorship but impartiality.

12) At this writing, it is two weeks exactly since the signitures dried on the communique paper and not one word of any---let alone meaningful---Azeri-Armenian talk has been heard.

13) Russia and Kazakistan are the two largest and most intimately intwined republics of the erstwhile USSR and as such represent the very core of any future union. Why even mention the significance of bilateral connections, except to remind the lesser parties (Armenian/Azeri) concerned that they are not as sovereign as they might like to be?

The essence of my arguement is this: even amateurs like myself, admittedly clued by concerned parties, have serious questions about the apparent vagueness about several significant points in the communique. It may seem nit-picky, but as any lawyer will tell you, 'precision is the essence of the law' and the Yeltsin document appears to be singularly imprecise and thus may well lead to significant differences of interpretation.

The up-side of the document, if there is one, is that the Russian/Kazak peace team managed to bring together leaders of bitterly feuding communities at all: damning the diplomatic nicities which have thus far spiked any realistic peace efforts in such areas as the Middle East (which Palestinian might belong to what West Bank delegation and whether the proposed talks are regional or international or not) Big Boris may, in fact, have cut through the Gordion knot of Azeri-Armenian conflict by his bold diplomatic move.

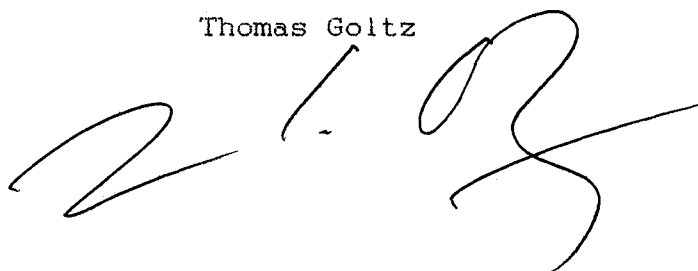
The betting, sadly, is that his grand-standing was still-born precisely because of the high-handed style that the accords were effected and because of the personalities involved: I cannot speak for the level of support enjoyed by Mr Ter-Petrosiyan in Armenia, but as may have divined from the previous exegisis of current Azeri political reality, President Mutalibov cannot claim to speak (or sign) for anyone---especially the Popular Front. Indeed, one has to wonder about the political fate of those who even appeared with him during the course of the negotiations (such as Timurlang Garayev).

It ain't over 'til its over, but maybe it hasn't even started yet.

Well, enough for now---there certainly is plenty more. An oil survey I conducted, an interview with the Sheikh of Islam, but I will leave those subject for another day.

Best regards from Baku,

Thomas Goltz



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