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A Conversation With Haydar Aliiev

by Thomas Goltz

It is a brittle, windy Sunday morning in Nahchivan and a crowd of several thousand men and perhaps five or ten women have gathered in Independence Square to listen to the leaders of the local chapter of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan. The subjects are many but with the exception of the praise lavished on Turkey for having sent emergency food aid they are the same themes as those of last week's rally: commitment to the democratic process, condemnation of the government of President Ayaz Mutalibov and an emphatic rejection of ever being a part of what was once known as the Soviet Union.

And from the second story of the government building flanking the square an elderly gentleman with tremors in his left hand and the slow blinking, green eyes of a crocodile turns away from the window and smiles because he knows that to all those in the square below he is the very symbol of independence and nationalism in the country.

His name is Haydar Aliiev and he is the President of the Autonomous Republic of Nahchivan--the remote enclave of some half a million Azeri Turks pinched between Iran, a sliver of Turkey and separated from the rest of Azerbaijan by an inimical Armenia. And from his isolated laager, Aliiev is pushing through a number of reforms that make Baku very nervous indeed: changing the Azeri script from C illic to Latin, opening borders to Turkey and Iran and even creating his own army. His most vocal supporters are now urging Aliiev to take the almost sacred title of 'Ataturk'.

But the 68 year-old Aliiev is a curious symbol for democratic ideals because in addition to his recent guise he has been many other things before: KGB general, Communist Party boss, Politburo member and First Deputy Premier of the USSR. As such, his detractors suggest that Aliiev is less interested in fathering a country than he is in exacting revenge on old enemies, and that the best thing he could do for his country would be to return to the obscurity of exile in distant Moscow and let the fledgling Azerbaijan Republic alone.

In order to get a close range reading of this extraordinary man I traveled to Nahchivan and had the pleasure of several meetings with Aliiev. The first interview was interrupted by the arrival of a large delegation from Iran; a second contact was made during a press conference for Turkish journalists accompanying the Red Crescent caravan: elements of the first two meetings are included but what follows is the transcript of our third meeting--a Sunday chat conducted in Anatolian and Azeri Turkish on November 10th, 1991.

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From The Tar Pit Of History: A Dinosaur Speaks

TCG: I have a number of questions--but could we start with a quick review of your career--where you came from, where you are and where you are going. How did a former leader of the communist party, a man from the politburo, become a symbol of the democratic movement?

ALIEV: I was born in Nahchivan and was raised here, finished high school here and then went to Baku. There I joined the state security committee--the KGB--and eventually achieved the rank of general. That is, I became the governor (1) of the Azerbaijan state security committee. In 1969, in July, I was elected the leader of the Azerbaijan Communist Party--that is, I became the leader of the Republic of Azerbaijan. For 14 years. Then, in 1982, Leonid Brezhnev passed away and Andropov (2) was chosen as the new head of the Communist Party and he invited me to Moscow. I didn't want to go but he was insistent in his invitation and as a result brought me to Moscow to serve on the Politburo because he wanted to have his own people there. He knew me well, and that's why he wanted me there. So I started work in Moscow in early 1983. I was selected as a member of the Politburo--you know the Politburo; at the time it was the highest body in the land, made up of ten people drawn from the communist parties.(3) At the same time I was given the position of first deputy Prime Minister of the Soviet Union. So I worked in Moscow, and it was a time of great change. One year later, Andropov passed away and Chernenko (4) was selected as General Secretary. A year later he passed away and in 1985, in March, we members of the Politburo chose Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary. I continued to work as the first deputy Prime Minister. Then at the end of 1987 I resigned--both as a member of the Politburo as well as first deputy to the Prime Minister. I continued to live in Moscow although I had no work or task to perform. Then in January 1990, the Soviet Army attacked Baku and I made my first political appearance at a meeting in Moscow where I protested the use of force in Azerbaijan and denounced Gorbachev as being responsible for the violence and bloodshed.(5) I also denounced the Azerbaijan leadership, specifically Vezirov (6) as being responsible for bringing the disaster upon Azerbaijan. Thus, I found myself once more involved in political activity.

1. Seder, the Azeri Turkish term for vali--governor or rehber--leader.

2. Yuri Andropov, consummate spy-master of the all-Union KGB.

3. Each of the 15 Union Republics that made up the USSR up to the Autumn of 1991 had its own party organization although it was the Russian CP that dominated the others.

4. Constantine Chernenko--the last of the old-men-of-the Kremlin.

5. The evening of January 19th-20th, 1990 is a seminal date for Azeri nationalism; some 200 people were killed when Red Army tanks rolled into Baku to stop 'Muslim fundamentalists' from killing Armenians.

6. Abdulrahman Vezirov, described by sources as being a thoroughly Russified Azeri who served in various diplomatic posts in India, Pakistan and Nepal before being effectively appointed by Gorbachev to Aliev's old post of General Secretary of the Azerbaijan Communist Party in May, 1989. After the January 19th-20th Ishqali, Vezirov was obliged to leave his post and is now back in Moscow, reportedly working with Gorbachev in some capacity. Curiously, nowhere in the transcript does Aliev mention his hand-picked successor, Kamuran Bagirov who led Azerbaijan between 1983 and 1986 and who is said to run a small concern somewhere in Sumgait.

TCG: A few questions about the past before we proceed...It was Andropov that brought you to Moscow.

ALIEV: Andropov.

TCG: ...There are those that say that glasnost and perestroika were the creations of Mikhail Gorbachev while there are others who say that the real beginning of the reform process was started by Andropov.

ALIEV: Exactly so. The beginning was under Andropov. Andropov wanted to enliven the democratic process by a number of different means. I was one of Andropov's men, one of his soldiers (7) and I participated in the preparation and realization of those democratic processes. Then Andropov became ill and couldn't work for the last four months and as a result the process was stalled. Then came Chernenko. He was sick even at the time of his election and he didn't want to go down the road laid out by Andropov. Gorbachev--and the rest of us, all of us, it wasn't Gorbachev alone--then attempted to revitalize Andropov's ideas. But it didn't happen all at once. Take a look at Gorbachev's delivery at the April, 23, 1985 Central Committee Plenum. There is no serious proposal in it at all about perestroika. Not even the word. It all was begun under Andropov, faded away a bit and then Gorbachev came to power but he really didn't understand developments all too well but the force of events slowly brought the changes back into play and Gorbachev and the rest of us started to put the process in motion. Now it is generally accepted that it was Gorbachev who was responsible for the changes but he didn't do it alone; we were all there. And the real founder of the reform process was Andropov.

TCG: When did your relationship with Gorbachev go sour and why?

ALIEV: About a year after Gorbachev was selected as General Secretary he started to violate the collegial principle of leadership. He started acting on his own and a number of mistakes resulted. But he didn't like disagreement and would try and roll over anyone who disagreed with him. Again, mistakes were made--among them the national question. You are a witness to what an extent the national question (8) has damaged the Soviet Union.

7. Silahdash--literally, 'weapon-mate'.

8. The irony here is that Aliiev still sounds like he is defending the old system although from all appearances he now embodies one of the most extreme nationalist positions in the (former) USSR--IE, departure from it. The 'national question' refers to the perplexing nature of the Russian-dominated multi-ethnic Soviet Union in which some 150 different nationalities have remained distinct groups while at the same time becoming 'Soviets' in the sense that the word 'American' applies to citizens of the United States: in principle the answer to 'what are you' should be 'Soviet,' then, say, Russian-Ukrainian-Jewish (a standard German-Irish mix, as it were). But there is theory and there is practice and the failure of the concept of 'Soviet' is nowhere more evident than the dramatic emergence of Russian nationalism (Yeltsin, flag, etc): up until 1990, there was no real and effective difference between Russian and Soviet nationalism. As for the other, smaller nationalities, great effort was devoted to preserving and even promoting differences between groups--some say with the specific, cynical aim of supporting a policy of divide and rule. Stalin was particularly adept at this and used such mix and

TCG: Torn it apart.

ALIEV: Yes. And on a number of occasions our views on the issue resulted in real fights. He didn't like what I had to say at all. Then he started to have me followed and started to show contempt for Azerbaijan. But I loved Azerbaijan and the people respected me--and Gorbachev didn't like that. It was the start of national tensions in the USSR--and you can see the results today. Gorbachev wouldn't and couldn't see it coming and as a result now he has no support.(9) So, it was impossible to agree with Gorbachev on a number of different issues and I felt I no longer had any role to play in the Politburo. You know the Politburo, its a group of ten or eleven or twelve people, solving all the problems at one sitting. But when Gorbachev started to try and do it all himself--look back five or six years. Of all the others on the Politburo or in Gorbachev's circle, not one has remained. Not one. And they were not all bad.(10) Others went, I went, because I felt it was just impossible to continue work with Gorbachev.

TCG: But if Gorbachev had not started to act on his own and had you remained in the Politburo and the national movements had not started to tear apart the Soviet Union then you would not be sitting here at the head of the Nahchivan/Azerbaijan nationalist movement. Previously, you wanted to hold together the union, but now...

ALIEV: I think a lot about that. And I come up with the same thought again and again: that I couldn't have stayed on the Politburo, that I should have left it before. Because my ideas had changed. Even had I stayed on the Politburo it would have been impossible to achieve any political objectives with Gorbachev. So I resigned. And now I am here, among the people and the democratic movement, working for the real independence of the Azeri Turkish people. And I had the same thought at that time. Only then within the context of the Politburo and the Kremlin I would have been unable to do anything. The conditions weren't suitable. Accordingly, I had to go, and I went. I went, and for awhile I stood by the side and watched and observed developments. And I was unable to return to Azerbaijan because the leaders of Azerbaijan were Gorbachev's slaves. You know slaves? (11)

TCG: Slaves.

ALIEV: Slaves. They were people that I had trained, people that I had brought up through the ranks. That's the character of our Soviet Communist Party and its apparatus. They were all slaves. They were all people that I trained, I know. So it was impossible for me to return

matching methods as forced migration as well as the creation of autonomous regions and districts within nominally sovereign states to focus local attention on one's neighbors and not on the activities of the Center. But with the relaxation of the hand of the Center, the centrifugal forces are quite literally rending the USSR into pieces.

9. Aliev joked the day before that Gorbachev should become a Muslim because his only base of support after the August 19th, 1991 putsch is in the docile Muslim republics of Central Asia.

10. Hepsi pis değıldi were Aliev's considered words.

11. KÖLÜ

to Azerbaijan. (12) And after I left the Karabakh business began. (13) The conditions that allowed for Karabakh to become a problem are tied to my departure. Had I remained in the Politburo, I would never have allowed for Karabakh to become an issue. After the Karabakh business began I tried to reach Gorbachev and some of the other members of the Politburo to talk to them about it but no-one wanted to talk to me.

TCG: We can say that your professional life was in the KGB. I have heard people say that any number of problems in the USSR--Karabakh, Ferghana (14), Baku--are the result of provocations by the KGB. According to your experience is it possible that it is so?

ALIEV: Karabakh is the result of Armenian nationalism. But that is nothing new. (15) It has been around for a long time. It was necessary to restrain it. Gorbachev has not. On the contrary, he has assisted it in order to bring about the present situation. And he has even said so himself. (16) That just shows his lack of political foresight. He could not understand that the issue of Karabakh would have enormous ramifications for the entire Soviet Union. He couldn't understand. I was the leader of Azerbaijan for 14 years and as such was also the leader of Karabakh for 14 years. I was often in Karabakh and had good relations with the local Armenians. Had Gorbachev asked at that time about Karabakh, I would have explained the realities of the situation to him. But he didn't ask because he wanted to give Karabakh to the Armenia. To no avail. Let me tell you the truth about the matter. The Armenian lobby in America has prevented the real information from being known by the world--the Armenian nationalists here and in the world have prevented this. But one has to evaluate what the results of all this will be. One has to think about it all very carefully. Gorbachev has not. He became very close to the Armenians before and accordingly went into this adventure--do you use that word?

TCG: Adventure. (17)

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12. The contradictions do not necessarily detract from the truth of this statement: Aliiev's men become Gorbachev's slaves. But was Vezirov an Aliiev creation? Some forcefully disagree with this. Cf footnote 6.
13. The Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh, the mainly Armenian enclave within the borders of Azerbaijan. Created by Caucasus Bureau in the 1920s, the area is a classic example of the 'national question' policy referred to in footnote 8. The Armenians of Karabakh announced their intention to secede from Azerbaijan in 1988, thus precipitating the ethnic conflict that led to the expulsion of some 250,000 Azeris from Armenia, the anti-Armenian riots in Baku, the January 19th crack-down, the expulsion of 400,000 Armenians from Azerbaijan and the virtual state of civil war in Karabakh by the summer of 1991.
14. The Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan that saw similar, bloody ethnic fighting in the summer of 1989 between the majority Uzbeks and the tiny 'Meschitian' Turkish minority--IE, Turks from the Ahiska region of Georgia who were deported en masse to Central Asia by Stalin in 1944. The Turks were eventually evacuated to Russia and Azerbaijan.
15. At the press conference the day before, Aliiev stated that Armenians are taking revenge for the massacres in Anatolia that began on April 24th 1915--a sentiment shared by many Azeris who see themselves as being made to pay for Ottoman Turkey's alleged crimes.
16. Sadly, I have been unable to locate this important reference.
17. Aliiev uses the Russian Aventura; I use 'majira' (sic)

ALIEV: Yes, adventure. He went into the adventure unable to understand what the results might be. He didn't understand. I worked together with Gorbachev for a long time. But a few months after he became General Secretary he changed greatly: He knew everything, was wiser, more clever, more far-sighted than everyone around him. The result was that many things just got out of hand. Like Karabakh. Coming to the matter of January 20th, there is no doubt about the hand of Moscow, Erivan (18) and Armenian nationalists. And the KGB--both the Moscow KGB and the Azerbaijan KGB. They were all involved in the attacks on the Armenians in Baku on January 12th, 13th and 14th and then again on January 20th when Azerbaijan was attacked. It was all in accordance with the plan prepared by Moscow with the complicity of the Azeri leadership--Vezirov, Mutalibov. (19) They were in on it, too.

TCG: Mutalibov says that Vezirov was responsible and he knew nothing.

ALIEV: Total nonsense. Look, if it were only Vezirov's responsibility and that Mutalibov knew nothing about it he would have mounted an investigation. But up until today, nothing has been done to apprehend the criminals responsible for the events of January 1990. Mutalibov wants it kept secret because his hand is right in there along with all the rest. Kafarova, Elmira (20) had her hand in it too, so did state security committee chief Huseinov (21); ok, they just got rid of him but replaced him with another Huseinov (22) who was also involved--all of them, they were all participants. And, accordingly, they don't want to open up the subject for investigation. It was a great disaster, a tragedy--the first time in 70 years that such a thing happened to the

Azeri people. (23) And as a result, on January 21st at a meeting in Moscow I spoke with reporters, one from the Washington Post...David...

18. Yerevan, the Armenian capital

19. Former Communist Party boss Ayaz Mutalibov, now president of Azerbaijan, who succeeded Vezirov in 1990.

20. Elmira Kafarova, the parliamentary speaker who, during the early, extraordinary session of parliament in October 1991 attempted to delete Article 112 from the Constitution of Azerbaijan that guarantees the President of the Parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Nahchivan--in this case, Aliiev--from acting as the assistant president of the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan in Baku. CF footnote 39. A crowd outside the parliament got wind of this and began protesting; Kafarova then remarked that the crowd was made up of 'drunks and drug addicts.' Her speech was being broadcast live and a riot quickly ensued and two deputies from the disbanded CP were beaten when they inadvertently strayed out of the parliament building to be met by the insulted mob. Elmira was forced to resign her position but was later reinstated by the old guard.

21. Wagif Husseinov, who was forced to resign as Azeri KGB chief on September 12th 1991 in the aftermath of an investigation mounted to determine who was behind a thug attack on the headquarters of the Popular Front in Baku in the run up to the presidential elections which the Front was boycotting. Some say PF chairman Abulfaz Elchibey has not been the same since.

22. Il Huseinov; no relation to Wagif.

23. The resonance of the statement is curious, suggesting that all was well in Azerbaijan throughout the long years of CP domination; Aliiev conveniently forgets the liquidation of the remnants of the 1918-20 democratic movement during the 1920s, the mini-pogroms mounted by

TCG: Remnick

ALIEV: Remnick, David....I told him, and then another reporter from the New York Times, and others, I told them at the time that an exposure was mandatory. Who were the criminals? In the most beautiful part of Baku, the Martyrs Park (24)--who killed them? Who slaughtered them? Who are the criminals responsible? It is almost two years now...You asked me yesterday how my relations were with Mutalibov. (25) My response is always the same: there must be an investigation. But Mutalibov refuses and as a result our relations cannot be said to be cordial. I say it again and again: it must be made public. And if Mutalibov says he was ignorant then let him open an investigation--he has all the possibilities to do so, but doesn't. On the one hand he says that Vezirov was responsible but on the other hand he defends him. They have an arrangement. All of the people around Mutalibov are Vezirov's relatives. Mutalibov is continuing Vezirov's policies.

TCG: Still, we might say that if there had not been a January 20th in Baku, then the essential Azeri nationalism of today would not have come into being and Haydar Aliiev would not have come out of retirement to participate in it.

ALIEV: After my resignation, I wanted to return to Azerbaijan but Vezirov would not allow it. He was very close to Gorbachev...Vezirov was a worm, truly he was low and without spine. (26) I know him well. He worked under me for a long time. I was the one who brought him up. I was the one who sent him to India as a Consul General. (27) They are all people who went through my hands. So, I saw that it was impossible for me to return to Azerbaijan and that I was obliged to stay in Moscow. And I stood back and watched. The situation in Azerbaijan was tense. Karabakh had become a serious problem. But I didn't retire completely. Several times I tried to get in contact with Gorbachev, Ligachev (28) and the other members of the Politburo but none of them wanted to talk with me or listen to my views. Then after January 20th, I wanted to go to Baku but they wouldn't let me. Mutalibov didn't want it; well, he didn't exactly say 'don't come,' but it was perfectly clear through other signs and signals from the Politburo that I was not welcome and would not be allowed. I was followed. My telephone was tapped. The KGB generally tried to make life miserable for me. Then in May, at the end of May, I decided to go back despite the fact that I had nothing in Baku--after 14 years as Azerbaijan's leader, I didn't

Stalin against intellectuals and 'Pan-Turanists' in the 1930s and 1940s and even the scores of people Aliiev must have put in jail while the head of the Azerbaijan KGB or Communist Party during the 1960s and 70s--including Popular Front leader Abulfaz Elchibey. Cf footnote 37. 24. Formerly Kirov Park, named after Stalin's comrade and erstwhile governor of Azerbaijan (and conqueror of Central Asia) Marshall Sergei Kirov (Kostrikov). His statue was toppled in the aftermath of the January riots and the park rededicated to the memory of those who fell on January 19th-20th, 1990.

25. At the press conference for Turkish journalists in Nahchivan accompanying the Turkish aid caravan.

26. Shasiyetsiz, alchak adam, said Aliiev--them is strong words.

27. Again, there are those who beg to differ and say that Vezirov was obliged to flee Azerbaijan to escape from Aliiev.

28. Igor, erstwhile Secretary (not General) of the Central Committee.

even have a house of my own! (29) But I had a sibling (30) and I called and said that I was coming. Of course the phone call was tapped and I was inundated by calls from the KGB, even one from the head of the Azeri KGB in Baku telling me not to come lest I contribute to the general worsening of the situation in the aftermath of the events of January 20th. I said no, I'm going. You can't forbid me forever. So I bought a ticket and called my sibling and the word spread that I was coming and certain people started to organize a sort of reception committee. One of them was an old friend of mine, a publisher by the name of Ejdar Hambabayev. He called me and expressed his happiness and said that all sorts of writers and other figures of the opposition were going to meet me at the airport. I told him no, don't come to the airport--I am coming as an ordinary person and not as someone special. Then there were more calls and contacts telling me not to come but I didn't pay them any mind. It had been eight years since I had been back in Baku, and I was determined to go. (31) Then, the evening of the day I had spoken with Hambabayev, at nine o'clock, somebody shot and killed him. Terror. It was pretty clear that they were trying to frighten me: if I went to Baku, they would kill me, too. Before that Hambabayev had gone to Istanbul and called me in Moscow and made an interview for the Hazar newspaper (32) and of course the KGB listened to everything I had to say then. But I was still determined. And they were determined to prevent or delay me. But I bought another ticket for the 6th of June and of course they knew about it. This time Mutalibov called me on the telephone and almost begged me not to come to Baku, saying that the situation was very tense and that my arrival would only make it worse. I demanded to know why I shouldn't come--I am Azeri, I lived in Baku--why not? He requested that I not do so and I replied that I would return and then he asked me to wait and that he would come to Moscow to talk. So I waited and he came to Moscow but didn't call. So after a month, in July, I bought another ticket and came. I stayed in Baku a few days and then went on to Nahchivan.

TCG: In the month of waiting was there more of the same business?

ALIEV: Yes, yes yes--telephone tapping, following me; both in Moscow as well as here.

TCG: So you came to Nahchivan...

ALIEV: Yes, and here there was a fine reception--80,000 people in the square. (33) It was a regular holiday. And I made a speech and in it I called for the real independence of Azerbaijan, the exposing of the criminals involved in the January 20th events and spoke against the

29. Sources in Baku point out that while this may be true of Aliev himself, it is not necessarily true of his family which managed to insinuate itself into great wealth during his years as CP boss.

30. Kardash--a neuter noun (as all are) in Turkish. Sadly, I did not ask whether the sibling was male or female; I suspect the former.

31. Aliev here confesses that even while in the good graces of the Politburo, he did not bother or have time to visit his old bailiwick.

32. A Turkish and Latin-based Azeri language newspaper of Azeri exiles in Istanbul which is virtually unknown in Turkey.

33. Still called Lenin Square then but after the August putsch Lenin's statue was pitched down and the square renamed Azaltlik Meydani, or Freedom Square. Not far away, in a park overlooking the Aras River, locals have erected a new statue--a bust of native-son Haydar Aliev.

Communist Party and its policies. I said it all. Then I stayed in Nahchivan and the people elected me as a member of both the Nahchivan Parliament as well as to the parliament of Azerbaijan in Baku. (34)

TCG: So did you attend any sessions of parliament in Baku?

ALIEV: Yes, the session starting at the beginning of February, 1991. The people received me very well but not the partocrats--Mutalibov and his people. They knew what I had to say; so did Gorbachev. And then the telephones began again--members of the Politburo, Krichkov, the head of the KGB (35)--and they requested that I move back to Moscow and stay there. I said no. I said that even though I don't even have a house here--I stay with my sister in a tiny, little flat; it can be cold--that I wasn't going back to Moscow. And the people received me very well but the partocrats inside the Supreme Soviet, well, they were a little nervous and a number of them tried to prevent me from delivering an address in front of the deputies. But I managed to make a speech about various issues including Karabakh. In response, Mutalibov had a number of his people attack me but it didn't matter to me or to the people--I received thousands of telegrams from around the country congratulating me and supporting my politics.

TCG: I think I have asked this before in a different form, but again: how do you feel about it all? Your whole life, you worked in the KGB--secret work, removed from the people; now, you have become a man of the people. What do you feel? Do you understand what I am trying to ask? A sort of emotional question.

ALIEV: I don't understand.

TCG: Your professional life--it was in the KGB or in the Politburo.

ALIEV: Yes...

TCG: Removed from the people.

ALIEV: Yes...

TCG: Then, suddenly, 80,000 people show up to welcome you home. Suddenly, thousands of telegrams arrive. What I mean is your support doesn't come from the institutions you worked for but from the street.

ALIEV: You know, at the time that I was the leader of Azerbaijan, without a doubt I pursued the policies of the communist party because I was the general secretary of that party and because I was a communist. And I was a real communist. A believing communist. One who believed in the idea of communism. And yet, there was a real democratization of the process of government during my tenure. This is known throughout the entire Soviet Union. My speeches and appearances throughout the land and my general relationship with the people was

34. The Autonomous Republic of Nahchivan has its own parliament consisting of 110 seats; Nahchivan deputies (not necessarily the same people) also take their seats in the national parliament in Baku. Curiously, perhaps, that institution still goes by the name of the Ali Sovyet, or Supreme Soviet, whereas the parliament in Nahchivan has renamed itself a mejlis--the Turkish equivalent of 'parliament'.
35. Nikolai, one of the prime movers in the putsch of August 19th.

different than in other Republics. As a result, I had a very close connection to the people. I visited everywhere in Azerbaijan--cities, towns, districts, factories, collective and state farms. Once a week on Sundays I would go to a different bazaar in my own car, telling the guards that I was going to work. Then I would get out and plunge in and talk to the people. What I want to say is that when I was the leader of Azerbaijan I was very close to the people. Very close. I wasn't just somebody sitting back in his office directing things; I was out there with the people, working for the people. The same thing happened when I was in Moscow. I wasn't the first leader so I couldn't just up and go when and where I wanted but I would go to this or that province of Russia, say, Habarovski--a long way from the capital. I would go and a couple thousand of people would gather and we would talk. I was close to the people even then and as result my rapport with the people now is very good. Even when I was working in the KGB, doing secret work--clearly, I wasn't going to meetings or making public appearances--I had a network of relationships that kept me in contact with the people. Writers, artists, professors. My closeness with the people is not new.

TCG: I would like to ask an uncomfortable question concerning Abulfaz Elchibey.(36) In 1974 or 1975, he was arrested for anti-Soviet activities and spent 18 months in a labor camp. You were the head of Azerbaijan at the time. Who was responsible for his incarceration?

ALIEV: Listen. I have never met Abulfaz, or even seen him. I was the leader of the Azerbaijan Communist Party; it was the KGB who was responsible for his arrest and imprisonment. I don't know everybody in the KGB; I was the leader of the party at the time. And Abulfaz himself knows that I had no part in the matter.(37)

TCG: A different subject. Last month I was at the Supreme Soviet session where the government attempted to push through a bill that would have prevented you from assuming the deputy chairmanship.

ALIEV: Article 112. As you know, according to the constitution, the president of the Parliament of Autonomous Republic of Nahchivan is automatically the assistant of the president of the parliament (38) of the Republic of Azerbaijan. That is written in the constitution. Since 1938, every president of Nahchivan has assumed this post. Before me, the local communist party secretary served in this function for four months--illegally. There was no election for the man; he was simply appointed by Mutalibov to act as president of Nahchivan and thus as the assistant president of the parliament in Baku. But when I was elected as president of the Parliament of Nahchivan, the Supreme Soviet in Baku attempted to drop that article--Article 112--from the constitution and in such a way that no one in parliament knew what they were up to.(39) But they didn't succeed. Both the members of

36. The spiritual leader of the Halk Cephesi, or Popular Front.

37. "He thinks thou does protest too much." It is disingenuous and a little sad that Aliiev disclaims all knowledge and responsibility for sending Azerbaijan's premier dissident off to a labor camp. I have not had the opportunity to ask Abulfaz about this but in other discussions it was pretty clear that Abulfaz is anything but an Aliiev fan.

38. Cf footnote 34; no capitalization because it is the Ali Sovyet.

39. This is perfectly true. I was there at the time and I didn't know what was happening until it was over and the sparks started to fly.

parliament from Nahchivan as well as those of the democratic block and even a number of old communists saw what the government was trying to do and stopped it. Because it was a scandal--changing an article of the constitution on purely personal grounds. The reason was very clear--to keep me from taking up the position of assistant to the president in the parliament. They know that I have a lot of support in Azerbaijan. But they tried. And parliament debated the issue for two days until it was voted to restore it on October 8th.

TCG: So why don't you go and take up the post?

ALIEV: Let the Supreme Soviet announce it. 'According to the constitution, Haydar Aliiev, the President of the Autonomous Republic of Nahchivan, is the assistant to the president of the parliament of Azerbaijan.' But they have not made such an announcement and so long as they do not announce it I won't go.

TCG: Why?

ALIEV: Principle. It was a filthy business they tried to pull off, and I have received thousands of telegrams in support. Really, the idea of changing the constitution for personal reasons and simply to keep me away. Unconscionable.

TCG: It is said that the members of Parliament are the richest law-makers in the world. The so-called Azeri mafia, in a word. Yourself?

ALIEV: (Laughs) Just take a look at the house I live in. And in Baku, I don't have any property, nothing. Because truly, I tried to live the communist ideal. I have no house, I have no car--nothing.(40) My children live in Moscow; they have a small house. But I have nothing.

TCG: Do you still believe?

ALIEV: No, no--but I have no means of making money! I have no business and I have no trade and I never took any bribes. It is the ones who took the bribes who now rule in Baku. They have everything. I am a victim, a victim of communism.(41)

TCG: About your relations with the Popular Front (42).

ALIEV: I have no relations with the Popular Front. I am a totally free. After I left the communist party I never joined another party, and I won't. When I left the party, I notified the people in Moscow of

The movement to change the article came from the aforementioned Elmira Kafarova who literally tried to slip it by with a show of hands; happily, someone in the opposition (I don't know who but think it was Isa Gamberov) had a copy of the constitution in hand and looked up what had just been voted on and demanded an explanation. Even old-line communists who had just voted in bloc swung around when they realized what they had done. CF footnote 20.

40. CF footnote 29 about wealth.

41. 'Kommunizm kurbani' were Aliiev's exact words.

42. The Halk Cephesi, or Popular Front, is the opposition movement in Azerbaijan, chaired by Abulfaz Elchibey. The Front is not a political party but an umbrella organization including everyone from the nascent Islamic Party of Azerbaijan to the Turanic National Democracy Party.

my reasons for doing so, but in Baku Mutalibov said he was going to form a commission of inquiry and then to fine me! (43) I laughed, because apparently they didn't know that the biggest fine one could serve to a party member was dismissal from the party! I was already out. How could they fine me after that? So, I left the communist party and have not joined another. As far as the leadership of the Popular Front is concerned, I really don't have what you could call a close rapport. But even before my return from Moscow people asked me what I thought about the Front and my reply was always the same: I will defend it. It is a people's movement, it is an independence movement and because I support the movement for true independence, I will defend it. Even here, I have no specific relationship with the Popular Front although I appointed two of its local leaders as my assistants. And I appointed Bijan Bey (44) the Prime Minister. He is also a member of the Popular Front. But I am not an enemy of the communists; some of the old communists have committed no crime...But those who wish to suffocate or strangle the people's movement, those I will have no truck with. Take Mutalibov. I have nothing personal against him, but he is two-faced, a liar. One day he declares himself to be democratic, the next... (45) And he has filled the parliament with his partocrats. 85% communist and many of them really filthy people indeed. I know them. There is no question in my mind where I stand in relation to them.

TCG: Do you have any interest in running for higher office?

ALIEV: Believe me, I don't even want this job. They forced me to take it. From morning until night, 40,000 people stood in Independence Square and chanted 'Aliev, Aliev, Aliev.' The deputies pleaded but I refused because I didn't and don't want any new position. But I saw that the partocrats wanted to strangle the popular movement. And I didn't want the partocrats to come back into power here. The movement didn't have the numbers in parliament to install their own man as president. And they understood this too. (46) Whoever they would propose as president from their number would be rejected by the partocrat majority. But they tried, and they nominated Kafar Bey and called on me to support him. And I did so, making four presentations in his favor. But the partocrat members of parliament didn't want him. Then the partocrats said they wanted me to be president. I declined. Then the Popular Front asked me to be president, and I still refused, telling them that I didn't want any new position or power but only wanted to be active politically as a member of parliament. But they wouldn't take no for an answer. And then the people started to come from all the districts and small towns for a big meeting here, chanting for hours and hours 'Aliev, Aliev, Aliev'. So I went out on the balcony and they continued to shout 'Haydar Haydar.' Inside, both the partocrats and the democrats were demanding I take the job. Once

43. The irony is that it was Mutalibov who demanded the liquidation, and not mere renaming, of the Azerbaijan CP on September 13th, 1991

44. Bijan Farzaliev, a sort of political, brunette Gene Wilder.

45. Aliev remarked to me the day before at the press conference that the most basic example for Mutalibov's bankrupt policies was his abrupt turn around on the subject of independence--promoting the idea of the new union treaty in March 1991 and then declaring Azerbaijan free in September of the same year.

46. 40 members of the 110 member Nahchivan Parliament are from the Popular Front; with the exception of a few independents the rest are former communists.

again I refused and said that Kafar Bey should be the president but the partocrats wouldn't have him. Then they elected me and asked that I sit down in the chair of the president. I still said no, and went home, telling them that I would not take the job. Then they came to my house to plead some more. That night I couldn't sleep and in the morning I made the decision: if I didn't take the position, things would quickly come to an impasse, get dangerous. So I accepted. But now you ask if I have other ambitions. No. Mutalibov is afraid of me because he thinks that I want to become the leader of all of Azerbaijan again. I was the leader of Azerbaijan for 14 years. I was the first Muslim, Turk to take such a high position in Moscow. (47) I have seen it all before and I don't need to see it again.

TCG: A different subject. The Armenians.

ALIEV: Tet-Petrosyan (48) was the first to call to congratulate me on my election as president. The point was that it pleased Petrosyan that democratic forces were in power in Nahchivan whereas there still was no democracy in Azerbaijan itself. The communists were still in control in Baku, whereas the communists had been disbanded in Armenia. There followed a series of calls, some by me, some by him, with the result that we managed to solve a number of problems--border problems, terrorists killing two shepherds; the train hostages in Ordubad--(49)

TCG: I heard about that. Were they arrested on your orders?

ALIEV: I didn't arrest any 100 Armenians. The Popular Front did. Then Tet-Petrosyan asked me to get them released. So I called the Popular Front and they listened to me and I managed to get 40 of them released immediately--the women and children. Then he asked that 14 others still being held hostage by our side be released and I managed to get 14 Azeri hostages taken by the Armenians near Gerenboy released in exchange. (50) Then we agreed in a general sense that we should solve the border problems through conversation.

47. It might seem churlish for me to mention this, but Aliev neglects to mention not only Nuritdin Muhitdinov who was the first "Central Asian" (Muslim Turk) brought into the Politburo (1958) but also Dinmuhammed Kunayev, the General Secretary of the Kazakistan CP who ascended to full Central Committee (Politburo) membership in 1971. Perhaps Aliev's categories of what is "Muslim" and "Turkish" are different from others.

48. Armenia President Leon Tet-Petrosyan.

49. A truly obscure series of events that have not been sufficiently explained by anyone. The essential story goes something like this: In early September, two shepherds and their flocks were abducted by unknown Armenians on the Nahchivan/Zangezor corridor area; locals demanded that the hostages be released and seized a passenger train filled with Armenians as it was passing through Ordubad, the last town in eastern Nahchivan before one enters Zangezor. This is remarkable for two reasons: that a train-full of Armenians had the courage to pass through Nahchivan and that the Armenians apparently put up no fight when their vehicle was stormed. How did the Azeris know the train was loaded with Armenians? Well, it was a regular milk-run through a war zone...

50. Gerenboy is the region just North of Nagorno Karabakh and was an area of Armenian settlement until their eviction in 1990. Now (Autumn 1991) armed Armenian militants are making gains against the Azeri

TCG: Do you talk everyday?

ALIEV: We talk when we need to.

TCG: Would you describe your relations with him?

ALIEV: Normal, not particularly good, but normal. (51)

TCG: Are there still occurrences?

ALIEV: Those two shepherds, they were the last. But after that, we have captured a few people who have tried to infiltrate from Armenia on missions. A couple of days before the opening of the Sederek bridge (52) we arrested an Armenian from Erivan and a couple of Russians. The Armenian confessed that he had been sent from Erivan to study and then sabotage the bridge. Then in Ordubad we arrested a Russian private and lieutenant with a bag full of explosives and timers. And they, too, confessed that they had been sent from Erivan by bandits (53) there to create havoc and disorder. Those ones we are not going to send back. They were spies, and we will prosecute them according to the law.

TCG: In Baku, a decision has been taken to create a national defense force, headquartered in your old KGB building. But there are reports that you forming your own here through public subscription.

ALIEV: Yes, we are. We created a national defense fund and the people (54) are contributing to it for the defense of Nahchivan.

TCG: What size will the force have?

ALIEV: It is not clear. The force is for the border with Armenia. We have no fear of anything untoward coming from Turkey or Iran. They will never attack us. Our fear is from Armenia, and that is where we will place our force. Right now, there is the Soviet army--and they

militiamen--and in an area some 200 miles from Armenia proper. Hostage taking is a favorite ploy of both sides in the on-going conflict.

51. Normala in the Russian sense of the word--acceptable.

52. The first direct link to Turkey in 70 years. CF footnote 61.

53. An interesting and important distinction often lost on locals and foreigners alike: Aliev is in effect exculpating the Armenian leadership of pre-meditated aggression against Azerbaijan, but blaming them of being unable to control their own people.

54. And others, too--and maybe unbeknownst to themselves. When I went to a restaurant that was out of food I managed to buy a few ounces of the 126 tons of the Turkish Red Crescent food-aid that had just reached Nahchivan. (CF footnote 61) It was a little disconcerting to discover that a good portion of the aid was actually German army battle rations that had been given to the Turkish Red Crescent to distribute to refugee Kurds from Northern Iraq. The amounts were really not that large and there is plenty of Made in Turkey goods that could have been shipped over instead--which was the alleged point of the exercise. Poor Turks, shooting themselves in the foot again. But the authorities in Nahchivan didn't particularly care: they were flogging the aid on the market, the proceeds going to the new defense fund. I didn't discover this until after my Aliev interview and was thus unable to ask him to comment on it.

are not up to the task of defending us. They have told us that it is not their task. Thus, we were obliged to create our own defense force.

TCG: Will the force eventually become part of the Azerbaijan defense forces, or remain exclusive to Nahchivan?

ALIEV: We'll see if Azerbaijan manages to do something concrete. (55) There's only talk now--a defense ministry but no army.... (chuckles)

TCG: There are a few other examples of your doing things on your own down here, like the language reform. Is there no danger that this will act like a wedge between Nahchivan and the rest of Azerbaijan?

ALIEV: It is not a language reform but a character reform. All the Turks of Azerbaijan want their language written in Latin characters and not in Cyrillic like now. But it is nothing new. I myself finished high-school at the time that we still used the Latin letters. (56) Then they changed it to Cyrillic. We want to change because we believe that the Latin characters are better suited. And we want to have the same characters throughout Azerbaijan because it is not reasonable for there to be one alphabet in Nahchivan and another in Baku. We are a part (57) of Azerbaijan. But if Azerbaijan delays on the matter, we will go ahead and then they can follow. It is not the first time. For example, we reinstituted the new national flag (58) on November 17th, 1990. Baku was rather upset with us but then they followed suit and adopted the flag in February 1991. And there are other examples of our doing things down here first. We banned the November 7th and 8th holidays 15 days before the parliament in Baku did. So about the alphabet, if Baku delays we will proceed and then they can tag along.

TCG: Thank you for your time. (59)

55. The Popular Front demanded the creation of 50,000 man army while the government of Ayaz Mütalibov wanted to create a sort of national guard of around 10,000 men. The Azeri parliament has now passed a resolution to create the army but the government continues to drag its feet--possibly because it fears a people's army might turn someday.

56. Azerbaijan actually preceded the famous decision by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to change written Turkish from the Arabic/Ottoman script to a Latin-based alphabet by several years. Baku adopted the new script in 1924 while Turkey only changed over in 1928. A Cyrillic-based script was imposed on Azeri Turkish and the Central Asia Turkic languages in the 1940s. Azeri linguists are fond of pointing out that the current alphabet is already moving in the direction of Latin, having embraced the letters 'h' and 'j' instead of their Cyrillic-based equivalents used in the Turkic languages of Central Asia.

57. Hisse--the word sounds like stocks and bonds in the Turkish ear.

58. Actually, the flag of the Azerbaijan Republic of 1918-20.

59. The interview did not exactly end here: the old fox turned tables on yours truly and started plugging me for details about how much rent I pay, how many children I have and how much I make a month in addition to my views on the political scene in Baku and the recent (October) elections in Turkey but I will spare the reader the details.

Additional Questions From Press Conference of November 9th 1991

TCG: What about your relations with Iran and Turkey as exemplified by the new Sederek bridge to Turkey? Isn't there the danger of Nahchivan slowly becoming alienated from the rest of the country by dint of its economic and cultural ties binding it elsewhere? (60)

ALIEV: We call it the 'bridge of hope' (61) but it is not just for us-- it is for all of Azerbaijan. Nahchivan is a part of Azerbaijan and will remain so. And the bridge is not just for Azerbaijan but for the other Turkish and Muslim republics of Central Asia as well. (62)

TCG: And the rumors that Nahchivan wants to be annexed by Turkey?

ALIEV: You are referring to the Kars Agreement. (63) No, we are a part of Azerbaijan and not a part of Turkey. We are one people but we each have our own country.

* * * * *

60. This and the next two questions were posed during the Red Crescent press conference the day before my taped interview. I include them here for the sake of completeness and because I would have asked them if didn't already have the answers.

61. Umit Köprüsü--now a pontoon bridge across the Aras River linking Nahchivan to the thin strip of Turkey running between Mount Ararat to the South and Armenia to the North. Work proceeds on the main structure, due to open in early 1992. But already the concept of the bridge has taken on a life of its own and most people don't refer to it as the Bridge of Hope but as the Hasret Köprüsü, or 'Bridge of Yearning' in the Arabic sense of the world hajara (Hijra calendar, etc--IE, the pious yearning of the Prophet for the Holy City of Mecca) The sense is identical if one substitutes religion for nationalism and the concept of Türkiye for Mecca. Indeed, the welcome afforded the seven Red Crescent trucks that came across on November 9th was truly astounding: Prime Minister Bijan Farzaliev was crying when he kissed the individual drivers and their assistants and suggested that an exchange of brides commence immediately to tie Nahchivan/Azerbaijan even closer to the Motherland.

62. The significance of this off-handed remark cannot be exaggerated, as it foresees a new geopolitical axis--the connecting link between the largest, most powerful, westernized and democratic Turkish state--Turkey--and the various less-developed '-stans' of Central Asia. The Sederek Bridge will become, in time, the Suez Canal of 'Turkistan'.

63. The 1920 Kars Agreement signed between the Turkish nationalists (there was no Turkey then), the nascent Soviet Union government of V.L. Lenin and the (communist) leadership of the newly-formed Armenian SSR. Among other things the agreement gave Turkey the right of intervention in Nahchivan if the territory was ever threatened by another state--IE, Armenia.