

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Peter,

It was a great pleasure to see you and your friends in June and to take a little time in Montana to work through the back-log of material that has accumulated over the past year.

After we last spoke, I flew to London to make some literary and academic contacts. I hope it was productive because it certainly was expensive: I thought I had been robbed the first day I was in town until I started adding up the price of cigarettes, beer and newspapers.

Well, I finally managed to escape with my shirt and flew to Istanbul and was greeted by August heat. Perhaps happily, most of my old friends were on vacation and so I was obliged to check into a cheap hotel in the Aksaray section of the city. Aksaray is near the Grand Bazaar and the various touristic sites Istanbul is famous for, but until recently was more like a warehouse slum pinched between chunks of history than a destination in and of itself.

But how things change!

Aksaray has, over the past three years, become a vibrant example of the real 'oriental' bazaar, and is packed from morning until late at night with thousands of the most unlikely merchants from the 'East'--namely, the citizens of the countries that once made up the East Bloc, and they are now merrily learning basic capitalism on the streets of the great mercantile city.

The Poles and Hungarians are the best entrenched, having been the first to discover in the late 1980s that Istanbul was a fine source of cheap textiles and other goods they could sell back home. By now, the Poles and Madjars are old timers and there is scarcely a shop in the area where the marque is not written in one of those languages. And by the look of the goods purveyed in the Polish/Madjar shops, those two groups have moved up-market: cheap textiles have been replaced by fashion leather goods and other, fancy products.

Others have taken the lower niches of the market.

They come from places further East--Ukraine, Russia and even Central Asia, not to mention the small legions of would-be merchants from Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan. They bring in cheese, cognac and junk jewelry and anything else they can sell (including, in the case of many women, themselves) in order to fill huge, one-way suitcases with less-than-perfect, T-shirts, slacks and tennis shoes to sell in turn back home.

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Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow researching the Turkic-speaking republics of the former USSR and related regions

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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.

At times, the nature of the market seemed pretty obvious to me--bring what isn't in Istanbul to sell and buy what you don't have back in Odessa--but it didn't work out exactly like that. While the market around the Beyazid Mosque contained everything from piles of party balloons and tons of Zenit cameras as well as cheap rubber rafts and tents and fishing poles, I discovered that the merchants were often Turks, selling (former) East Bloc stuff to (former) East Blocers and (former) East Blocers selling Made in Turkey stuff to Turks.

It was all very casual and fun, and it was clear that a lot of people were having a cross-cultural experience in the real, very limited sense of that concept that has nothing to do with dance festivals or poetry-reading events, but everything to do with exchanging money.

But itinerant merchants also have to sleep and eat, and another industry has grown up to address those needs.

There are hotels of every shape and size and whole streets devoted to cheap eateries.

Truly, it was a remarkable scene--and one that most people who live in Istanbul don't know anything about because they continue to avoid Aksaray because they remember the way it used to be--an uninteresting warehouse district outside the Grand Bazaar.

Me, I don't think I will ever stay any place else when in Istanbul. And as for entering the famous Grand Covered Bazaar--well, it looks like a museum compared to the real item happening on the street...

The experience was only marginally sullied by the fact that the city sanitation workers were on a wild-cat strike and piles of garbage were growing on every street corner.

It was, as they say, pungent.

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My fascination with Aksaray obliged me to spend a couple of days in the district--an unexpected delay to my planned delay in returning to Baku and beyond.

The planned delay was a journey to Bulgaria, about which I will write you in a separate epistle.

The essence is this: Hope springs eternal.

Three years ago, Bulgaria was the pariah of Eastern Europe because of its 'inhuman' campaign against the ethnic Turkish minority. (I only put the word 'inhuman' in quotations because however bad and nasty the Bulgarians were to the Turks at the time, adjectives like 'inhuman' have taken on new meaning--or maybe just reverted to their old accuracy--when put in the context of Yugoslavia and other fun countries where inhumanity is very, very real today.)

I wrote a great deal about the assimilation campaign of the 1980s, and as a result was Persona Non Grata in Bulgaria for most of that decade. But in the summer of 1989, at the height of the chaos of a mass exodus of the ethnic Turks to Turkey, I was able to get in twice--and just before the whole House of cards came tumbling down.

Thus, my journey to Bulgaria was affected almost out of sense of obligation: if my mission in the 1980s was to kick the country in the shin for its social sins, then it was time to give them a pat on the back if what I was hearing about the 'New Bulgaria' was true.

Well, things were very very very different. So incredibly different, that I have to ask myself a question that will remain

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rhetorical only because I lack the information, imagination and intelligence to answer it for you.

To wit: if Bulgaria was a bad place three years ago, so bad that half a million of its citizens, an ethnic minority, made a 'biblical' exodus because they couldn't stand it anymore, what has the new, non-commie government of Bulgaria done that was so right that many of the ethnic refugees have actually returned?

To the West is Yugoslavia, one of the 'good' commie countries of three or five years ago, and I don't think I have to say much more about that one; to the North is Romania, where they murdered a dictator (and a lot of other people, too) to get rid of the past, only to retain the most egregious aspects of it; there is ethnic nastiness in Moldova, in Georgia, God Knows in Karabakh, as well as ~~the monotonous~~ cycle of violence in Turkey between Turks and Kurds, ~~Add the tensions~~ in Greece, Ukraine and Russia, all based on ethnic groups, and you have a real mess indeed.

Again: what did Bulgaria, the first place on the map of ethnic bigotry and self-obsession, do that was so right, and why, how?

Are there problems?--certainly!

Are the Turks and other ethnic groups insecure?--absolutely!

But something profound and beautiful and interesting has happened in that little, erstwhile pariah country that its citizens can be very proud about, and I will write to you about it at length later on.

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Anyway, after my short, limited, fascinating and thoroughly satisfying trip to Bulgaria, I returned to Istanbul for another hot, summer weekend, saw a couple of old pals who had returned from vacations, and then left for Baku.

Home, as it were, after a two month romp across three continents, multiple time-zones and far more emotional ones, and with the coinage of five different countries in my pockets.

The sixth currency would have to wait.

That was the newly minted/printed 'Manat' of Azerbaijan, which had allegedly become the legal tender in ~~the land~~ a couple of days before my arrival.

There were many things that had allegedly changed in the two months since my departure--the first two months of the nationalist Popular Front government that had promised so much, and to effect it so quickly.

Perhaps I should not have been surprised by the level of grumbling and the lack of apparent change upon my return.

There were more private shops, but all the goods being purveyed were exactly the same.

There were more departments of government, but all the faces seemed the same as those who had worked the bureaucracy in the bad old days of the commie/crocodiles.

Indeed, everything seemed remarkably similar to the way I had left it June, and even before that: the dolled-up gals with vermilion cheeks strutting down the streets, the young bucks, woofin' 'bout their prowess in cafes and bars, and even the condescending Turkish Fly-By-Night businessmen, thinking themselves kings because--well, because.

There was only one thing that was different, and it took me a couple of my cat's lives to find out.

In my absence (I hope not because of it, or maybe I do) this place started becoming a country.

And sadly the reason for this becoming was violence--war.

I know you are not going to like what follows.

I don't like it either, for some very personal reasons--like my health.

But after a week or so in Baku, talking with everyone I could, it became pretty clear to me that the war was almost a national secret--so secret, in fact, that absolute control over entry into the zone of conflict had been effected lest spies discover whatever it is they want to discover.

The government organized occasional press trips to safe zones, sometimes.

But no-one had been to where the real action was in the North since the day the campaign had begun. Oddly, it was on the day that I had left Azerbaijan in June.

When in the USA, under intense questioning by Armenian Americans at a hearing at Congress, I had been obliged to cough up the pathetic answer of 'I don't know' when grilled about the Azeri offensive, because I didn't.

Well, neither did anyone else. *There was only one person who could--me.*

It was time to pull in some tabs and use some expendable 'blat,' or 'clout,' and get into the off-limits zone.

*It was remarkably easy. I contacted contacts. That's what contacts are for.*

I said I wanted to go into the liberated zone of Nagorno Karabakh. *When they asked why I told them they owed me.*

Everybody I know was jealous or furious and asked why I was so favored.

No-one else had been permitted into the area: *people asked why me.*

I told them that it was because they were idiots and didn't know which buttons to push.

I told my wife, who had been banging her head against the bureaucratic wall for a month, in vain, that she didn't know who to ask, or how.

I informed an American diplomat recently denied an attenuated tour that the reason was because I don't ask for four hour trips.

I told a Turkish general assigned to advise the President on military affairs that it was because the Azeris trusted me. The implication was that they didn't trust him.

To be honest, I am not sure why they allowed me inside the proscribed zone aside from force of personality and the convenient fact that I had somehow gone to bat for the Azeris in the USA and that this was known in the higher circles of government.

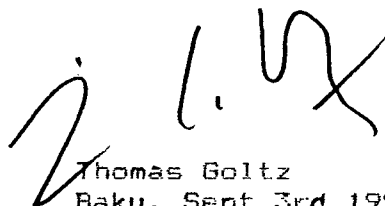
But they let me in and although I swore to you that I wouldn't get on any more helicopters in war zones anymore it seemed to me that I was obliged to go and witness whatever the hell was going on in northern Karabakh because no one else was allowed to do so.

History, and all that.

So I went, by car.

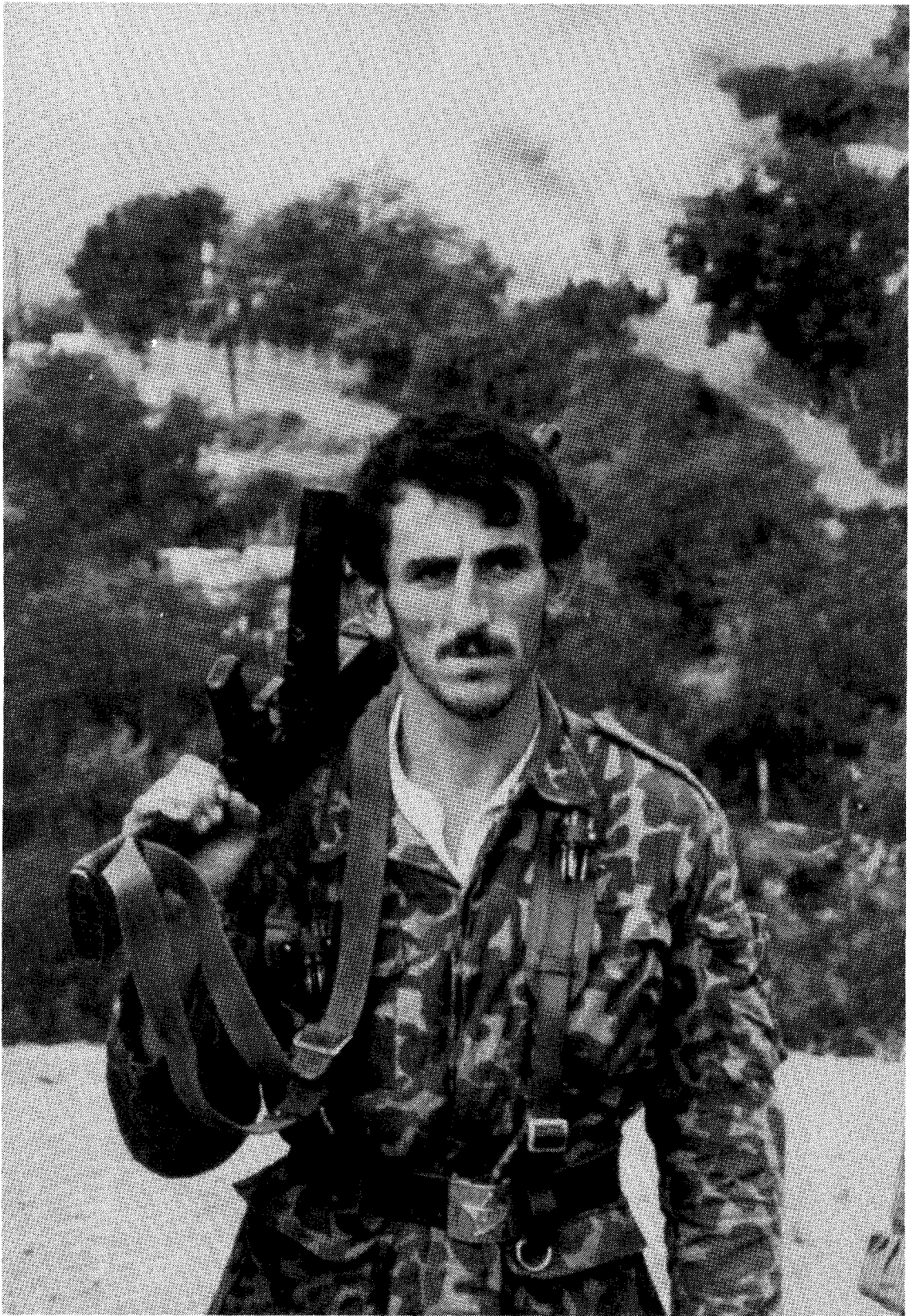
This is my war report.

Sorry if it offends.

  
Thomas Goltz  
Baku, Sept 3rd 1992



Welcome to Arshakh! -- 'Karabakh' in Armenian



Gulyatak--a member of the Mahmud The Mule Brigade polices a burning town in the Karabakh mountains

IN NAGORNO KARABAKH AN AZERI ARMY MARCHES SOUTH

Outside Mexhana, Nagorno Karabakh:

The out-going artillery rounds from the wheat fields behind the reservoir thunder like deadly timpani while the in-coming mortar shells from behind the wooded ridge come whistling in like evil piccolos.

It is a cacophony of destruction, completed by cadenced, heavy machine gun fire burning through the trees and the occasional crack of single pistol shots.

"They know where we are," said Eldar Mahmedov, a six month veteran in the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh, "They are working a coordinate pattern. We'll have to take them out before they get us."

A high school teacher in better times, Eldar has a beard as long as his time in service and knows the difference between out-going and in-coming rounds.

But the string of new recruits from the Baku Automobile Police Inspectors Group who have just joined his company have not. They are huddled along the side of a truck loaded high with boxes of shells and self-propelled grenades--one of many portable ammunition dumps trundled up a badly-rutted road in preparation for the next assault on Mexhana, the last Armenia stronghold in the heights above the Sersenk reservoir in northern Karabakh.

The Azeris are determined to take the town because it controls the east-west roads crossing the southern lip of the reservoir.

The Armenians are determined to hang on because if Mexhana falls, the Azeris will have a toe-hold on the heights 30 kilometers North of the Stepanakert.

Fighting has raged around the town for a week, and casualties have been high.

But there is more happening here than just jockeying for position in a nasty little war between inimical ethnic groups claiming the same real-estate.

A scant year ago, the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh might best have been described as a guerrilla war being waged by private militia groups on both sides.

It has now become a conventional war, with both sides squaring off with the usual tools of the trade: motorized companies with APCs and tanks; field artillery batteries, including the notorious GRAD--a modern version of the 'Stalin Organ' multiple missile-launching systems of World War II--and even the beginnings of a tactical air force.

All the heavy equipment on both sides is an inheritance of the Red Army of the dissolved USSR to the successor states; while maintenance is often problematic, supply is apparently not: *in Russia,*

But the basic unit in the Azeri army remains the foot-soldier. Although there are a number of veterans from Afghanistan, most of the ranks are green, and their training commences on the front, inching forward beneath the thump of out-going canon rounds and the screaming whistle of in-coming mortar fire.

And with each inch of Karabakh that has been 'liberated' from the Armenia foe, there emerges not only a new self-confidence in the martial capabilities of the Azeri army, but a new, inchoate sense of Azerbaijani nationalism, born under fire and through the barrel of a gun.

*everything is for sale.*

For the Armenians—an ancient people with its share of history and tragedy to draw upon, and with the most homogeneous population in any of the former Soviet republics—the idea of nation-forming is not much of an issue. They already are.

But<sup>for</sup> the Azerbaijanis, the concept of nationhood has always been weak. Historically, Azerbaijan has been more a place inhabited by an assortment of ethnic groups than a self-conscious, unitary state, and localism—often promoted by Moscow during the years that Azerbaijan was a Soviet republic—has always been a problem.

Now, however, on the front and behind it, the answer to the question 'where are you from' is no longer a town or city or ethnic tag like 'Tat,' 'Jew,' 'Lezgi' or 'Turk', but simply and proudly 'Azerbaijani.'

"We should send the Armenians a vote of thanks," said a Defense Ministry official by the name of Mustafa, "If it hadn't been for this war, as a nation, we would have remained asleep."

This new sense of nationhood began as a deep sense of shame following the series of humiliating disasters and defeats suffered by Azerbaijan in Karabakh last Spring, when local Armenia fighters—with the tacit and then open support of Yerevan—purged the area of all Azeris as part of a bid to secede from Azerbaijan and set up an independent state—albeit one that would quickly become part of Armenia itself.

Ironically, the very success of Armenia arms in Karabakh directly resulted in the victory of the nationalist Popular Front candidate, Abulfaz Elchibey, in presidential elections in June. The rapid, if chaotic, creation of the conventional army soon followed—and it is now that Azeri military machine that is slowly purging Karabakh of Armenians.

Although no hard numbers are available about losses on the Armenia side—in June, the Armenia Assembly of America made the claim that 20,000 Armenia and 'Russian' civilians had been forced to flee, and that 1,000 had been killed—there is no question that the summer war has been an unmitigated disaster for the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh.

The offensive from the North began in mid-June, and its success surprised even the Azeris themselves, accustomed as they were to only abject defeat after defeat. The army, pushing relentlessly south, managed to 'liberate' almost a third of Karabakh, and destruction and death are everywhere to be seen: the roads of the region are strewn with the twisted remains of tanks, jeeps, APCs and trucks as well as veritable hills of discarded ammunition boxes. Civilian areas have also been hit hard in the see-saw fighting.

The city of Mardakert, the second largest Armenia town in Nagorno Karabakh and a center for wine making, is now a pile of rubble. After the burned houses and smashed vehicles, the eye is drawn to the more intimate detritus of destroyed private lives: pots and pans, suitcases leaking sullied clothes, crushed baby strollers and even family portraits, still in shattered frames.

But in addition to burning the town during battle and then leaving it open to looting of what valuables were left behind for Azeri refugees from other zones of combat, the Azeris have now renamed Mardakert, as if they might erase the memory of the Armenia inhabitants with the stroke of a pen.

It is most likely that they will succeed.

The new town to be built out of the ruins of the old is Agdere, as announced by sign on the outskirts, and something like 50,000 families have already applied to the government for the right to move to the region and claim it as home.

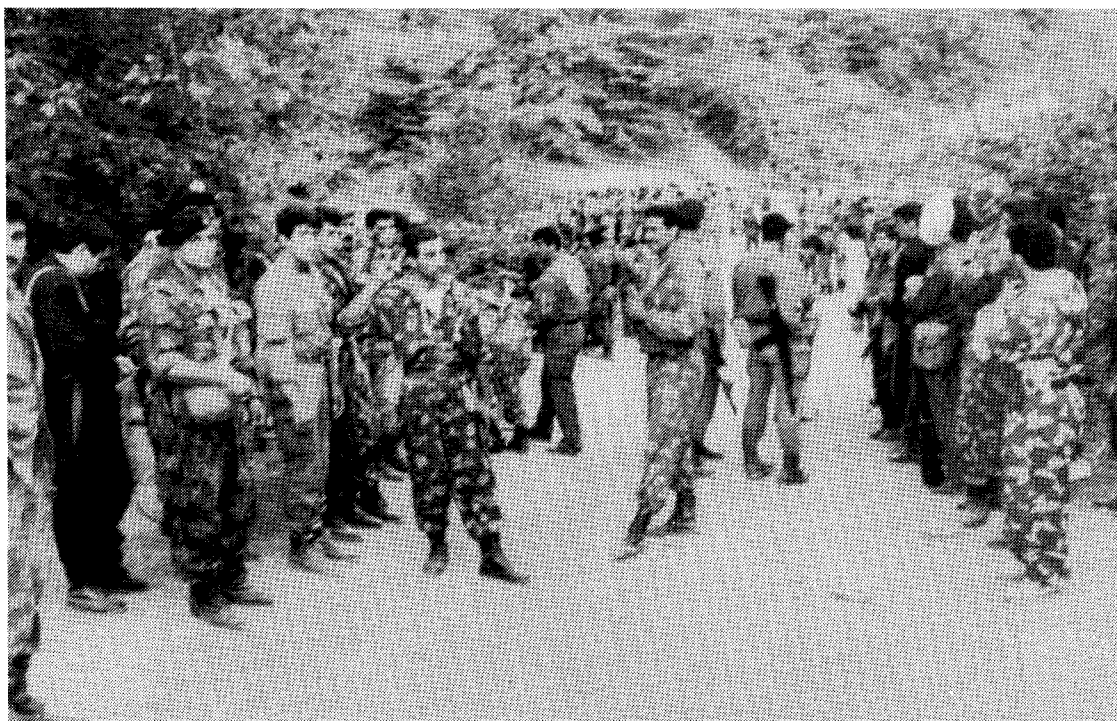


Greenhorn troops line up in Terter; after a week or two of training, they are ready for the Front

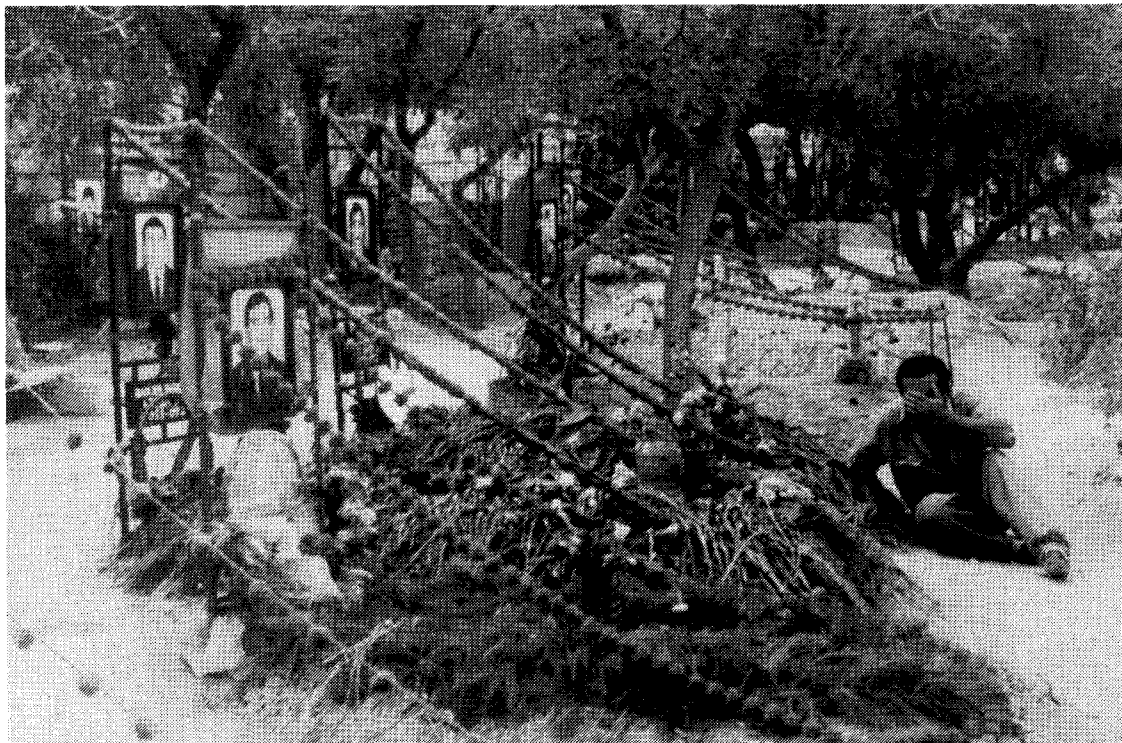


Above, President Abulfaz Elchibey (c) at Terter briefing by de facto commander in chief Col. Nurettin Sadikov (l) and Minister of the Interior and leader of the Bozkurt brigade, Iskender Hamidov (r)

Below, Azeri artillery gunners take coordinates from hill-side spotters north of Sersenk reservoir



Above, a Bozkurt group assembling for the attack on Mexhana; note the gentlemen in the foreground with the Grey Wolf salute. The same group was hit by 'friendly fire' that night, possibly by the tank below, preparing for night action beneath the Grey Wolf group. Two other tanks stationed at the post were out of action due to incidental mechanical problems, the most important of which being that there was no mechanic



Above, the new police unit at the Agdere (Mardakert) HQ;  
Below, the growing Martyrs' Cemetery at Baku



A residential building in down-town Agdere/Mardakert

In the nearby fields, combines are harvesting grain and making bails of hay out of wheat planted by the Armenians, while tanker-trucks are portaging out quantities of the region's famous wine and cognac, now destined for the internal market. Profits go to the Azerbaijan war fund that provides salaries to the soldiers and stipends to wounded veterans and war widows.

Officially, the position of the government of Azerbaijan on Karabakh remains that peace-loving Armenians who comply with the laws of Azerbaijan are welcome to stay within the unitary state of Azerbaijan.

"We are willing to grant cultural autonomy to those Armenians who lived in Karabakh before the troubles began," said Azerbaijan President Abulfaz Elchibey at recent meeting in the front-line town of Terter, when he was questioned by a citizen what the government meant by entering into peace negotiations with Armenia, "If they want to open a cinema that plays movies in Armenia, that's fine; but they must recognize that Karabakh is an inalienable part of Azerbaijan."

In reality, though, it is doubtful many Armenians would be made to feel very much at home even if their houses have been left standing--and few have been left standing.

"Too much blood has been shed," said an Azeri volunteer from the town who was driven out of his home by his Armenia neighbors last March, "It is impossible for us to live together again."

There are still no hard and firm statistic about the total civilian and military casualties over the course of the Karabakh conflict, but they are surely the highest of all the ethnic and territorial conflicts that have erupted in what was the USSR. A conservative estimate would put the death toll at around 4,000 over four years, most of whom were killed in 1992.

That is a number only eclipsed in annals of late 20th century inter-ethnic gore by the sudden paroxysm of bloodshed in Yugoslavia this year.

There are many parallels and similarities between the two conflicts for those who want to find them, but there would also appear to be one major difference: the war in Nagorno Karabakh began as a guerrilla conflict but has become a conventional war--albeit one more reminiscent of the mountain fighting in Italy circa 1944 or maybe Korea than the Nintendo/computer bomb battles of the 'war' against Saddam Hussein.

Previously, Azeri casualties were mainly civilians and police.

Today, however, they are almost exclusively soldiers or police seconded into the fighting ranks.

Fatalities, of course, are a fact of war.

But many of the Azeri soldiers killed have died of wounds that only become mortal because there was nothing even vaguely resembling a M.A.S.H unit anywhere near the front, and certainly no helicopter teams devoted to extracting the wounded.

There are also persistent rumors that many of the dead and wounded are victims of "friendly fire"--an all-too likely possibility, given the disorganization of the army at this stage and the general chaos along the front.

"It is difficult to form a regular army at the same moment you are engaged in combat, but that is what we are doing because we have no choice," said Colonel Nurettin Sadikov, the man who now controls all fighting forces in the North from his headquarters at the former farming town of Terter on the northeast edge of Karabakh, "The enemy has a cadre of trained officers that we lack. Intelligence suggests that many of their commanders are Russians."

The suggestion that Armenia is employing Russian mercenaries in the field is widely believed in the Azeri ranks, and may be true--although there is no absolute evidence to support the charge at this point. Given the large pool of un- and under-employed Russian veterans from Afghanistan, whose reception home is frequently compared to that of American veterans of Viet Nam, however, it would hardly come as a surprise to discover free-booters among the Armenia ranks, fighting for love of the cause, pure adventure or just money. *Eye witnesses also claim there are Russians in the Armenia ranks.*

On the Azeri side, there are a smattering of 'volunteers' from other neighboring states--Georgian Muslims, Circassians from Daghestan and Chechen-Ingush, the odd Tajik and Uzbek and, reportedly, a number of Azeri Turks from Turkey. But the only Russian encountered by this correspondent during an extended tour of the front was an officer who was born and raised in Baku.

Ironically, Colonel Sadikov himself is often mistaken for being a Russian because he can barely speak Azeri.

A career officer in the Soviet Army, he had spent virtually his entire life outside Azerbaijan, but returned last Spring when the military situation looked particularly bleak in order to see what he could do for his country. As such, he is perhaps the most prominent example of how the new nationalism has touched Azeris scattered throughout what was the Soviet Union--a curious mirror--imagining of the support long enjoyed by Armenia by Armenians in the diaspora.

Another returnee is the new police chief of Agdere (Mardakert), Wagif Guleiyev, who served in the police force of Leningrad/St Petersburg for 17 years, but also decided to quit his job and heed the new call of country around the same time as Sadikov.

"This our country," said Guleiyev, standing in a shattered room of the Agdere/Mardakert police station, hit by an Armenia rocket in late July after yet another cease-fire brokered by the CSCE/Minsk Group broke down and the Armenians almost rolled back the Azeri gains, "we have paid for it in blood, and we have no intention of leaving."

Another cease fire, in fact, had just been negotiated in the Kazakhstan capital of Alma Ata--but no one in Baku, Yerevan or the front has any belief that it will hold or even be recognized. As the old rugby saw puts it so plainly, both sides are clearly ready to get their retaliations in first.

And the reasons are clear: Baku maintains that cease-fire agreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan only pertain to the long border between the two states, and that Karabakh is an internal affair. Yerevan maintains that such cease-fire agreements must also apply to Karabakh, and that any shot fired there is tantamount to a shot fired at Armenia.

And the shooting continues in Karabakh.

At the firing lines outside of Mexhana, for example, a battalion led by a local commander known as Mahmud the Mule, himself a sculptor--turned-private-militia-commander from the town of Agdam, who had finally allowed his troops to be folded into the regular command structure, is working a quasi-coordinated pincer movement from the East while Sadikov's forces attack from the North. A third battalion stationed in Kelbadjar to the West is said to be mopping up resistance around the towns of Kochagot and Drambon in preparation for a combined push on the town of Childiran.

The Azeris say they have left the road south open to allow Armenians civilians to flee; there are unconfirmed reports

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reaching the Terter HQ that the Armenians have started to fight among themselves: would-be refugees versus warriors.

Another mortar round comes whistling in while Eldar the school teacher and a group of commandos disappear beneath the canopy of the forest to find and silence it before the invisible gunners manage to hit the nearby ammunition dump and blow his group to smithereens.

In the distance, the monotonous thump of the field artillery continues as the Azeri positions try to do the same to the enemy. You can see the plums of smoke and dust rise on the far hillside several seconds before you hear the explosion. Closer, from somewhere deep within the beautiful canopy of trees, a tank is firing at something close: boom-wham!

There is scarcely any delay between out-going and in-coming explosion.

It is impossible to tell whose it is.

The distant artillery continues at intervals.

The mortars whistle and whine.

A late model MIG jet screams overhead on a mission.

And then, with an alacrity that is difficult to adequately describe, the various sounds of death and destruction begin to merge and rise into the satanic roar of heavy machine gun fire crashing through the trees that is answered or maybe augmented by the sputtering of scores of Kaleshnikovs firing on full automatic.

Two armies, men--teachers, athletes, grease monkeys, farmers--are closing to kill each other.

I have a new maxim: being dead because you were brave only means you are dead.

The situation is too dangerous for the unarmed observer, me, to remain.

As I return back down the shell-battered and mine gouged road toward Mardakert, trucks packed with fresh troops are trundling up. I wave and the soldiers hold their hands up in the 'Grey Wolf' salute, with index and little finger extended--the sign of the shock troops of the army, the 'Bozkurt' battalion.

'Azerbaijan!' they cheer.

Mexhana fell the next day.

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