

TCG-36

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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4 West Wheelock Street
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February 1993

CAUCASUS NOTE BOOK: PART ONE

IN COLD AND GRIM ARMENIA, A SNOW JOB

by Thomas Goltz

The snow fields began on the far side of the border, as if Stalin had decided to demarcate the frontier exactly at that place where the rugged, forested beauty of his native Georgia stopped, leaving the cold, denuded plateau to the Armenians.

Now, in the winter of 1992/93, the situation on that cold, denuded plateau had become so desperate that no less a person than Yevlana Bonner could say that the country was 'dying.'

Extensive press reports seemed to confirm this, detailing how the country had been reduced to a frozen and hungry existence, with citizens obliged to cut down trees for fuel to keep warm and shoot packs of starving dogs lest the former pets attack their starving owners. 'Welcome to Hell' was a typical headline, as the media awakened the world to the threatened catastrophe: there was no food, no gas, no petroleum and no medicine; in addition to creating a black-out in cities and closing industrial plants, the lack of electricity had even forced radio stations to stop broadcasting and shut down newspapers. According to an oft-cited Red Cross statistic, between 30,000 and 50,000 Armenians would die over the winter due to diseases and deterioration associated with lack of food and heat. All of this was a direct result of a blockade imposed on Christian Armenia by its Shiite Muslim neighbor, Azerbaijan.

Recently, at a candle-lit press conference in the frigid Armenia capital of Yerevan, Junior Massachusetts Congressman Joseph Kennedy said that he had 'never seen such human suffering' as he had been shown by his Armenian hosts during his whirlwind, 24 hour tour of the city, and that 'the pungent odor of the ending of life' throughout the hospitals and orphanages filled with refugees from Baku would stay with him always. It was no fault of Armenia's that it was 'cut off from the rest of the world,' he said, adding that Azerbaijan's mentor, Turkey, must accept the responsibilities that go along with regional leadership, whether transshipping massive amounts of aid to Armenia suited Turkey's interests or not.

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Perhaps it is axiomatic that journalists and researchers will always find what they are looking for, but so different was my Armenian experience from that of Congressman Kennedy that I have to wonder if the cold and grim reality of Armenia has been cynically exaggerated in order to attract an out-pouring of sympathy and thus aid. Additionally, there is the larger question about how such aid is being used. Because at the same time that thousands were allegedly dying of starvation and cold in and around Yerevan due to the Azeri 'blockade,' Armenian arms in Mountainous (Nagorno) Karabakh were conducting a massive, successful offensive against the Azeris, taking back in two or three weeks virtually all territory lost to Azerbaijan over the past nine months. The ramifications of this stunning defeat for the government in Baku is profound, and will be dealt with in an extension of this letter.

But back to Armenia.

Given the extreme circumstances said to prevail in the country, I joined a small caravan of journalists to go and see for myself. We went in prepared for the worst. In addition to blankets and four extra 20 liter canisters of gasoline for our NIVA landrover, we made sure to pack along a weeks supply of bread and water for ourselves. Then we drove South from the Georgian capital Tbilisi through bandit country until we reached the Armenian frontier, where we had ate a few tough pieces of grilled meat in dirty tomato sauce, sure that it would be the last hot food we would have for the next week.

Then we crossed the border, and it was there that the snow fields, or maybe snow-job, began.

The first object of interest we came across, some ten miles in from the Armenia border post, was a large Muslim cemetery. The dates on the tombstones suggested that the last burials had taken place in 1987 and 1988, when the Azeris were evicted from Armenia. This was interesting, because most of the available literature on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict suggests that it all began in 1989 and 1990, when some 400,000 Armenians of Baku and other cities fled organized pogroms against them, an exodus that triggered the expulsion of some 200,000 Azeri and Kurds from Armenia. But the Azeris insistently claim that the first wave of refugees were Azeris and Kurds, expelled from Armenia in 1988, and that it was these people were responsible for the pogroms in Sumgait and Baku, when the destitute people came looking for surrogate victims and replacement homes. Now, a single cemetery does not overwhelming evidence make, but it was an interesting and important piece of the puzzle of who started what and when, and where.

Slogging about in the snow by the side of the road, men and boys were hacking down trees for fuel, and leaving long rows of stubs incapable of summer shade. It appeared that the reports about the decimation of Yerevan's botanical gardens and other parks at the hands of freezing people, desperate to heat their homes by any means, were probably true. Strangely, however, gasoline tankers were parked at street corners in every town: according to press reports, traffic had come to a standstill in Armenia because no gas was available. There was plenty, from what we saw.

But prices were high, and they kept rising the further one got away from the frontier. At the border, a 20 liter container (about 4 gallons) cost 5,000 roubles (about \$7); 50 kilometers inland, the same amount cost 5,500 roubles (\$8). In Yerevan, the prices ranged between 6,000 roubles for regular and 7,000 for high octane gas, or twice the price of fuel in Tbilisi and ten times that of Baku. If this was almost insanely expensive according to the old Soviet pricing system, the cost did not seem to have stopped traffic, and gasoline was everywhere available.

More importantly, the price of fuel was roughly on par with that in the rest of the industrialized world. One interpretation of this was that the Armenians were being dragged willy-nilly into an economy based on realistic prices--and not the state-subsidized consumer price index of, say, Azerbaijan, where the government would be toppled if the price of fuel or bread went very much above the current, low rate. Also, the sight of the high-priced gasoline lining the road was the first suggestion that the much-heralded 'catastrophe' in Armenia might have been a short term disaster, but in so many ways it was a medium and long term blessing: through default or design, Armenia was solving the price-structure problem that has bedeviled other former Soviet Republics. It was also galvanizing the people to the war effort in Karabakh: everyone in the country who used a motor was being touched by the war in some way.

Most people had already been touched by the great earthquake of December, 1988, especially in the city (now town) of Spitak, where some 20,000 were killed when the shabby, Soviet-style apartment buildings dating from the 1960s and 1970s came crashing down on the occupants. The total number of those killed in Armenia was around 35,000. Although this is far less than the 'hundreds of thousands' of victims initially reported, there is no question that the quake was a great disaster for the country. But one side-effect was the in-pouring of international aid, especially for the reconstruction of safe and adequate housing. All along the road and in the city there was evidence of a massive project to create what might be best termed as modern, structurally-sound apartment buildings, and with a touch of style. Due to the difficulties of building in winter coupled with electricity shortages, however, most of the construction works seemed to be in hibernation: scores of cranes stood idle and there was no visible activity on the sites. More than four years after the earthquake, residents continued to live in pre-fabricated emergency units.

According to most reports, Armenia was in such dire straits because of the Azerbaijani 'blockade.' But if it was true that Baku had interdicted energy supplies that crossed Azerbaijani territory to Armenia, the Azeris had not cut Armenia's links with the world, like the North attempted to do against the South in the American Civil War. The roads links between Armenia and Georgia were open: in addition to the fuel trucks everywhere to be seen, 66,000 metric tons of wheat aid had recently been transshipped from Georgia by an American company, representing enough flour for one loaf of bread a day for everyone in the country for two months. The road South to Iran was also open, over which aid and trade from the Islamic Republic was arriving.

But it was in Spitak that the claim that Turkey was actively participating in the Azeri 'blockade' against Armenia that the term started to ring very hollow. The market was filled with

chocolate bars, cigarettes and a plethora of other consumer goods, all stamped with 'Made in Turkey' on the wrappers. That the source of this providence was a direct trade and not some triangular deal made in Georgia or the Ukraine was confirmed some miles outside of town when we encountered a semi-trailer truck with Turkish license plates. A snow storm had blown-up, and the truck had stopped to solicit directions. Although not in a very good position to do so, we pulled over to assist him, and discovered that the man had just dropped his load of chocolates, cigarettes and Amareto in Yerevan and was now on his way to Istanbul to collect another load.

That Armenia had not been reduced to surviving on sugar-jolts from Turkish chocolates became even more apparent when we arrived in Yerevan. It was dark and cold and we had to feel our way up the darkened stairwell of the Hotel Armenia to our sixth floor rooms to hide our gasoline canisters and eat our bread. But once in the rooms, we were distracted by a deep whumping sound. Finally, I figured out what it was: a bass guitar or the bottom keys of a synthesizer, thumping out a rhythm in the hotel's restaurant, presumably feeding off electricity provided by a generator. Music, clearly, was a priority; stairwell lighting was not. We descended and inquired if food was available, but the manager informed us that the kitchen was closed; he could, however, recommend one of three others restaurants that were collectively known as 'the Mafia.' By the time we arrived, two had already closed for the night but the third opened its doors and we were soon ensconced in one of perhaps ten small, well appointed rooms, seated at a table sagging under the weight of plates and bottles. Service was provided by almost obsequious waiters, who would only smile when we asked how they managed to acquire caviar and sturgeon steak from Baku. There was also a pleasant duet of wandering minstrels, playing traditional Armenian and 'international' tunes on the guitar and violin.

It was, without exaggeration, the very best dining experience I have had in almost two years of living in the former Soviet Union. The price was about half what you would pay for the equivalent amount of food at the best restaurants in Baku, which can in no way compare with 'the Mafia' in service, decor and general hospitality.

Still, the restaurant(s) were so queerly out of place that we felt obliged to inquire a little more closely into the source of all the providence. We were informed that the restaurants had replaced a national museum of some kind through the intervention of an anonymous American Armenia of considerable wealth and influence. One waiter maintained that this philanthropist had also donated several small, refrigerated aircraft to speed the importing of necessary supplies. At one point, someone in government had suggested a curtailment of services in keeping with the spirit of the current crisis, but this was scotched due to the protests of the number of diplomats, aid-workers and foreign journalists who had become dependent on the restaurants for relief from the suffering they reported to be all around them.

It was in the second restaurant where we bumped into the author of the story concerning the attacks of starving packs of

dogs on their former owners. When we pointed out that we had seen several proud pet owners walking their handsome animals on leashes, he cringed in shame and blamed the balloon story on his editors in Paris, claiming that he had not written the opening paragraphs that had been attributed to him. All of us having been abused in a similar manner by a distant desk editor at some time or other, we agreed to study his original copy and then pronounce his guilt or innocence on the charge of gross exaggeration. In fact, the reference to the dog packs was minimal and buried way down in his copy. Still, there was a lot of other, very dubious material, including references to such things as the total lack of water and electricity in the country and the statistic, attributed to the Red Cross, that up to 50,000 people would perish over the winter as a direct result of cold and hunger deriving from 'the blockade.' The director of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Yerevan had categorically denied that his organization had anything to do with the number; the actual source was one of the 'dog' correspondent's companions--a gentlemen associated from the local office of French Red Cross, named Jean Pierre Masiyan. When questioned about how he had come up with the statistic, Masiyan's response was that he was, by profession, a statistician and knew how to quantify such things.

One of our most curious encounters at the Mafia-restaurant was with a young Swiss national working for the ICRC proper, and tasked with running the liaison office in the Karabakh capital of Stepanakert. He was eager to get back, he said, because aside from the periodic shelling, Stepanakert was more pleasant than Yerevan in so many ways. There was constant electricity and running water, and prices were so cheap for certain goods that it was 'as if the locals had never heard about inflation in the rest of the former Soviet Union.' Sadly, we were unable to confirm this for ourselves because the snow storms had made traffic along the road East of Yerevan grind to a halt and helicopters had been grounded due to a lack of visibility.

The ICRC worker then invited us for a night-cap to his dacha on the outskirts of Yerevan to watch a video on the VCR; electricity was provided by generator. Similar engines seemed to be in use elsewhere, too--including in a couple of gambling saloons downtown, where a row of one-armed-bandits had been set up for the entertainment of all. An attendant at a luxury commission shop specializing in electronic goods like telephone answering machines and computers as well as imported cheeses and Cuban cigars remarked that business was surprisingly brisk; those who could afford electronic gadgets could also afford generators or manage to get more than the usual ration of electricity of a couple hours a day.

Hospitals, of course, were given a priority for electrical feed, and also had back-up generators--or at least the two hospitals we visited did. The staffs said that all other hospitals and clinics in Yerevan were equally supplied.

At Clinical Hospital #3, staffed by 81 doctors and capable of handling 290 patients (although there were 310 beds) the vice director, Mrs Isabella Papayan, said that the main problem was the supply of food and the acquisition of specialized cardiological medicines and antibiotics. Food was a problem because the hospital, as a state institution, could not purchase from the bazaar; it had to be supplied from state-run stores, which were mainly empty. As for the problem of medicines, Mrs

Papayan said that she 'waited every day for Turkey to break the blockade,' apparently unaware that a snack shop specializing in the usual assortment of chocolates, cigarettes and soft-drinks imported from Turkey had been set up in the out-patient lounge.

A similar state of affairs prevailed at another clinic we visited that was responsible for the health of the 20,000 employees of 24 factories in Yerevan's industrial zone, seven of which deal in chemicals. One of these was Narit Chemical, allegedly the largest producer of resins in the former USSR and a long-time target of the Armenian Green Movement due to the high level of pollution produced by Narit.

Ironically, the Green Movement gave rise to the Karabakh Committee, which in turn gave impetus to the current conflict with Azerbaijan over Karabakh that has resulted in the Azeri embargo, which in turn is held responsible for the alleged closure of Armenia's industrial factories, including Narit.

But the director of the industrial park's clinic, Dr Emil Nadjarian, said Narit and all of the 23 other factories in his patch were working, although staffed only by skeleton crews due to the shortage of electricity and raw materials. The second element was, in any case, a common problem for industries throughout the former Soviet Union due to the irrational network of inter-dependencies created by central planners in Moscow. But once again, like with high price of petroleum, the very fact of the crisis was giving rise to silver-lining solutions. An American diplomat who specializes in economic affairs even went so far as to say that Armenia's economic planners were getting out of the cul de sac of manufacturing heavy industrial products that no-one outside the former Soviet Union wanted, and were developing the sort of energy-efficient, high value-added goods that would integrate it into the world economy. None of the 'high-tech' plants suffered from a want of either electricity or materials. The dinosaur plants, like Narit, were not being kept alive for a better day; having no place on the map of the future, they were being allowed to wither and die, with the war providing the excuse.

The subject of electricity, however, was clearly of crucial political importance. President Levon Ter-Petrosyan had recently announced that despite the considerable risks of a Chernobyl-like disaster, the desperate situation in Armenia necessitated the reactivation of a nuclear power station in order to save the country's industry and provide Yerevan with light.

Located 37 kilometers outside of the capital, the 800 Megawatt Metsamor plant is an Soviet-built reactor of the same design as the infamous Chernobyl station. It once supplied 40 percent of Armenia's power needs, but was shut down in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster in 1988 and kept closed after the Leninakan earthquake later that same year. Experts agree that the marriage of those two factors alone make the idea of reactivating the Metsamor plant highly undesirable.

To take a closer look, we drove South and the West down a highway that was alternatively lined by shops selling the usual consumer products from Turkey and men hacking down trees to use as kindling. Eventually, we arrived at the tell-tale funnels, and walked into the High Security administrative building. It did not generate much confidence: not only were there cracks in the walls and ceiling, but the building's security doors were held together with twine.

We sought an interview with the director, but were denied it. A western diplomat in Yerevan who is closely monitoring the plant, though, said that we had not lost much in the way of concrete information: the director, not a scientist, had informed the diplomat that he regarded the reactor as 'safe' because he 'felt' that there would not be another earthquake anytime soon.

Others suggest that there may be more manipulation than madness in Ter Petrosyan's nuclear plans--not only is the threat of turning Metsamor back on line tantamount to blackmailing Turkey into supplying Armenia with power, but in addition to electricity, Yerevan would receive the 'bonus' of effectively destroying Turkey's relations with Azerbaijan. Indeed, although no electricity has been sent, Tokyo-Rose type broadcasts from Armenians to their Azeri foes in Karabakh are already saying that it is so, and with predictable effect: the Azeri soldiers on the front now openly accuse Turkey of aiding and abetting the enemy by supplying Armenia with electricity and bread.

Meanwhile, Armenia is supplying Turkey with blankets, medicines and meat.

This is a very strange development indeed, and almost unbelievable the first time one hears of it. But the facts are clear: for the first time in 70 years, and unique to all citizens of the former Soviet Union, Armenians are now able to travel across the Turkish frontier without visas. A special, weekly train from Leninakan to the eastern Turkish city of Kars is the usual means, carrying 400 tourists--and as much luggage as they can carry--on each trip. The result is that a lively 'Armenian' market has been set up in Kars as well as the smaller city of Igdir that specialize in 'privatized' humanitarian aid such as baby food and blankets, as well as livestock smuggled across the frontier: a sheep costs around \$15 in Armenia, but fetches around \$200 in Turkey.

The head of state security (former KGB) at the border town of Oktober'an on the Turkish frontier told us that his men had apprehended 350 head of cattle during the first week of a state of emergency that had been imposed to interdict the growing, illegal export trade of meat-on-the-hoof across the border.

Although there is not necessarily a direct correlation between the interdiction efforts on the frontier and the availability of meat in Yerevan, we noted that in addition to the meat one could eat at the 'mafia' restaurants, any number of side-walk grills had grown up on major avenues where delicious mutton and pork chops and even 'doner kebab' was available at the price of about a dollar per 'shish,' or steel cooking blade run through cubed flesh. Statistically, this was more than twice the average daily wage, but people were lining up to defy the mathematics of official salaries and apparent spending power and ask for seconds.

The citizens of Yerevan were also crowding into the city's several large markets, described as far richer and variegated than anything in Tbilisi. In addition to all the dairy products one could ask for and the usual selection of potatoes, cabbages, carrots and other winter, tuber vegetables, there were piles of the pida-like Armenia bread, locally-cured pastrami, Abkhazian tangerines and even winter grapes.

In a word, it was not a starving city.

The news about all the trees having been hacked down by desperate residents was also false, or at least a gross exaggeration. Trees on the outskirts of town had been cut down, where families lived in individual houses. But in Yerevan itself, the very structure of the city preserved the trees on the boulevards and in parks: without installing a wood-burning stove, replete with stovepipe shot out the fifth floor window, apartment dwellers had no use for chopping down trees or even buying wood from those who were doing so. A cursory look at stove-pipes protruding from apartment blocks suggested that maybe 10% of all apartments were so equipped, probably less.

Cooking hot food was another matter. Most ovens and stoves in Armenia were fed by a natural gas line from Turkmenia and Kazakhstan that passed through Azerbaijan--and the Azeris had interdicted it like they had the trains, roads and electrical lines that passed to Armenia across their territory. Another gas-line came through Georgia, but individuals presumed to be ethnic Azeris in Georgia were sabotaging it for solidarity's sake. The result was that one resorted to tubed gas, or went without hot food and drink.

The way this impacted on us was that morning coffee was exceedingly difficult to brew, unless we waited in the hotel room between ten o'clock in the morning and noon, when the electricity came on and we could boil water in an electrical pot. The alternative was to hit the streets and find a commission shop or cigarette stand heated by a wood-burning stove and brew our coffee there, or to seek out a coffee shop that was still operating with the help of generators or a butane burner.

It was in one of these shops that we met the first of a series of refugees from Baku--an attractive woman by the name of Lena. Her shop was 'open' in the sense that it was not 'closed', although the basement salon was so dark and bleak that it was difficult to tell where the tables ended and where the chairs began. Accordingly, my translator and I perched ourselves in the office where Lena and several of her friends were sitting, and spoke about the cutting down of trees, the lack of gas and the other trials Armenia was undergoing. It was a familiar conversation.

'Its horrible, horrible,' said Lena, 'And it is all due to the blockade.'

'What do you expect?' asked a man named Gaik, filling a glass with home-made schnapps to stay warm, 'We are at war.'

This was not the first time that my interlocutors privately accepted what their government so adamantly refused to concede, namely, that Armenia was at war with Azerbaijan and would remain so until some 'logical conclusion' to the conflict was reached. In the meanwhile, they did not expect the enemy to conduct normal trade with them.

But Lena's response was a little different; it was the first time I heard anyone come out against the war itself.

'Karabakh!' she spat angrily, 'Karabakh! It is all a pact of lies! They lived like kings there, but then they decided to make a war with the Azeris and drag us into it, too.'

This was a curious attitude, and so I warily pursued it.

How, I asked, did she figure that the Karabakh Armenians lived like kings?

'Because we went there on vacations!'

From here?

'No!' she said, looking at me like I was an idiot, 'From Baku!'

Really, I said, when did you leave?

'1990, with everyone else.'

You must be very happy to have gotten out, I suggested.

'Happy? Here?' Lena almost wailed. 'We had everything there! It was an international place--Armenians, Azeris, Jews, Russians, everyone! And now look at us! I'd go back in a minute if I had the chance! Maybe you won't believe this, but I speak better Azeri than Armenian.'

I decided to roll the dice and changed languages.

Nijaysiz, I asked her in Azeri, 'how are you?'

Yahshi, she replied not a little dumbfounded, 'fine.'

And then, to the amazement of the three or four other characters sitting around the office, we launched into a long conversation about Baku--about how and why and when she had made the decision to leave and ending up with her promising to introduce me to two friends of hers the next day who would tell me more: an Armenian woman married to an Azeri man, one of several mixed couples she knew about who had decided to live a discrete life in Yerevan as opposed to Baku.

This was dynamite, because however ridiculous the ultra-nationalists Armenian claim that 'all' Armenians have left Azerbaijan, the Azeris make the same, familiar demonizing claim about how the Armenians expelled 'all' the Azeris from Armenia.

Here, at last, was some evidence to the contrary.

But when we returned at the appointed time the next day, Lena had changed her mind as well as her mood--or had it changed for her.

'We're closed,' she said, opening the door a crack before shutting it again without further explanation.

If such casual encounters were productive, official and semi-official interviews and meetings were a mixed bag.

The first of these was to the coolly efficient Dashnaksutiun news service, run by a young gentleman by the name of Tigranes. The news agency was a natural draw for foreign correspondents because it provided a battery of computers and satellite fax transmission for quick relay of information to the world. It goes without saying that there was plenty of electricity. I do not even want to start to compare the Dashnak operation with its equivalent in Azerbaijan, except for one, small anecdote: the last time I had anything to do with a local, Azeri news agency, they charged me \$40 for a ten minute news story telex which they sent three days late.

The Dashnak offices were packed with maps of Armenian states at different point of history: that of the classical 'Greater' Armenia of Tigranes the Great (about whose grandson Julius Caesar said Vidi Vini Vici), medieval Armenia (with chunks of real-estate in the Caucasus as well as the Crusader-state of Lesser Armenia in Cilicia) and even a poster describing the new Armenian state of the Karabakh Republic, replete with flag. The banner was designed to look like it had been ripped in two by a chain saw: the two thirds on the left was Armenia while the other third on the right symbolized the detached state of Karabakh. To my recollection, there was not a single map of (former) Soviet

Armenia or even today's Republic within its (Soviet) frontiers. The Dashnaks made no bones about where their political hearts were.

Now is not the time to go into a detailed history of the Dashnaks. People write polemical books on the subject. But an essential profile would probably be helpful. Founded in 1890, when 'Armenia' as such did not exist, the Dashnaks alternatively cooperated with and rebelled against both the Sultan and Czar, depending on which approach would secure greater gains for the ultimate goal of achieving an independent state out of lands nominally belonging to the Ottoman and Russian empires. It was the Dashnaks, in the main, who led the Armenian partisan separatist resistance in the Ottoman East during World War One, and they were also instrumental in setting up the short-lived Armenian Republic of 1918-20. Not surprisingly, they were made very non grata once the Bolsheviks took over: the Dashnaks represented bourgeois Armenian nationalism and were, by definition, opposed to Soviet-style internationalism. Accordingly, the Dashnaks became the most visible and resonant anti-communist opposition group in the Armenian diaspora for the next 70 years. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Dashnaks were able to return to Armenia. Once there, the rich mixture of national feeling (much of which focused on Karabakh) and financial support from the diaspora has insured that the Dashnaks have more influence in Armenia than ever before.

According to unofficial polls, if snap parliamentary elections were held today, the Dashnaks would capture some 25% of the vote and thus take 40% of the seats in the legislature; the Liberal Democrats--the other 'traditional' political party in Armenia, set up in 1889--would collect something along the same lines. It was not quite clear how California-born, former Foreign Minister Rafi Hovanisyan's new political party fit into all this, although it is said that he is very close to the Dashnaks as many diaspora Armenians are.

President Levon Ter-Petrosyan's Armenian National Movement, meanwhile, would get less than 5% of the vote in putative elections. Some say that the ANM would collect as low as 1%, although most qualify this low rating by adding that Ter-Petrosyan's personal popularity still hovers at around 25%. Still, it was clear that the Dashnaks regard Ter-Petrosyan as little more than an opportunist in the Armenia political arena, and a man with little or no political future.

Others go much further, accusing Ter-Petrosyan of the catch-all crime of being a KGB agent; his father, critics point out, was 'very high' (some say secretary) of the Syrian Communist Party (others say Lebanese). The main criticism focuses on Ter-Petrosyan's apparent shift in politics: after using an absolutist position on the Karabakh issue to gain power, he is now wavering on recognition and/or annexation. One typically Soviet-cynical theory for this suggests that Ter-Petrosyan actually wants the war in Karabakh to continue in order to bleed the Dashnaks dry; it is they who control the front. Connected with this notion is that his inner circle is intimately involved with the hydra-headed Armenian mafia, and guilty of massive profiteering from such things as the price of gasoline.

One of Ter-Petrosyan's shrillest critics is Parour Harikian, the leader of the Union of National Self Determination (and former garrison commander of the key town of Goris that overlooks

the so-called 'Lachin Corridor' to Karabakh). Harikian claims that the presidential elections that brought Ter-Petrosyan to power were rigged and that Ter-Petrosyan is now using the police and security apparatus to sustain his autocratic rule in classic, old communist fashion. In a recent act of protest, Harikian organized a demonstration that was reportedly attended by over 100,000 people. The mob almost got out of hand, and was only dissuaded from attacking the presidential building by the intervention of Harikian and his cohorts from the UNSD.

We met briefly at a much smaller demonstration in Opera Square on the day that Congressman Joseph Kennedy was in town, presumably staged to let the visiting Congressman know that not everyone thought Ter-Petrosyan had the right to speak for the country. Although not large--there were only about 1,000 people gathered in the square, and snow was falling--the crowd was intensely interested in what Harikian had to say. In addition to reiterating his position on Karabakh--he supported the Right of Self Determination, followed by recognition of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh as a separate state--his speech consisted of maligning Ter-Petrosyan and accusing him of diverse crimes against democracy. Armenia, said Harikian, needed 'the rule of law instead of the rule of personalities'--by which he meant replacing the autocratic presidency with a new post-Soviet parliament. Most observers, however, suggest that Harikian's aim is probably as simple as replacing Ter-Petrosyan with himself.

But if Harikian was not happy with Ter-Petrosyan, not everybody was happy with him. After the demonstration we ran into some disgruntled religious fundamentalists, Armenian Apostolic style, who were parading around with a white cloth banner emblazoned with a red cross. The banner, they said, was made from the vestments Jesus wore and had descended to them 'from heaven' so that they might raise it over the Christian tanks in Karabakh. Harikian had declined the token, and the furious men now lumped him into the same category of the condemned as that godless, Levantine KGB agent and Moscow toad, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, predicting that after the latter was lynched for his sins against God and the Nation, it would be time to do the same for the former.

The President, meanwhile, remained aloof and inaccessible; they say he has given exactly two press conferences since his election as President in 1990. Our efforts to secure an interview were in vain.

Far more talkative were officials of the Armenian Ministry of Defence, although one has to wonder what their words are worth: despite the overwhelming evidence that thousands of Armenian Armenians are on the front lines in Karabakh--including even Defense Minister Vazgin Manukyan himself--the ministry still adamantly denies that it has any troops or tanks in the theater and that Armenia is merely a 'keenly interested' observer in the fate of the Karabakh Defense Forces. ('I travel a lot,' Manukyan sheepishly told a pal from the AFP who stumbled into the Minister on an apparent inspection tour of the front).

"The Karabakh Defense Forces are made up of 95% Karabakhians (sic), with maybe 5% coming from Armenian volunteers with family connections in Karabakh," Defense Ministry spokesman Aram Dooliyan coolly told us at a briefing. "The Armenian Ministry of Defense has no control over any of them."

Dooliyan allowed that there might be some foreign soldiers in the theater; Armenia itself had solicited 'specialists' from other republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States to help it build up the Armenian army, so it logically followed that the Karabakhians might have a similar policy of recruiting foreign soldiers. The Azeris, in any case, were doing the same: two pilots, one a Ukrainian and the other a Russian, had been captured alive after their planes had been shot down over Karabakh. A total of nine Azeri aircraft had been brought down in the first six weeks of 1993; the fate and thus identity of the other pilots was not known: they had either been killed in the air or subsequent crash or had parachuted to safety on the Azeri side of the lines.

(A French journalist who spends most of his time on the front described how he had seen two planes, one piloted by the Russian captive, shot down after they had been lured into a zone protected by heat-seeking 'Eagle' anti-aircraft rockets: knowing the Azeris were picking up their radio signals, the commander stormed and raged in fake anger because Stepanakert, despite his repeated pleas, had not sent him the Eagles. Hearing this, the Azeris then sent in their planes on what was to have been a cake-walk mission only to be blown out of the sky.)

No, Dooliyan stressed again and again, there were no Armenian soldiers involved in the fighting. Nor was the Defense Ministry involved in the supply of weapons or petroleum or any other military supplies to Karabakh, such as Kevlar body armor, night-vision equipment or state-of-the-art communications gear--all of which has been vital to the David versus Goliath success of the Armenians against the numerically superior Azeris. Karabakh was, or was almost, an independent state, and any and all military equipment there was either purchased by Karabakhians on the international market or donated by Armenians from the diaspora. The AMD's task was solely to protect the Republic of Armenia from cross-border incursions from Azerbaijan, and there had been many. Azerbaijan, Dooliyan charged, was currently occupying the Armenian territory of Kransnaselsk (unlike Karabakh, this is a true Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan). Dooliyan disallowed any comparison with Armenia's 'presence' in several Azerbaijani territorial enclaves in Armenia: the residents of these enclaves had simply 'left' in 1988 and 1989, along with the local Azeri minority of Armenia proper. Armenia, Dooliyan stressed, had no territorial ambitions--not in the area around the Lachin corridor (he laughed at the idea of the 'Lachin Kurdish Republic' declared last Autumn by the Zoroastrian Yezidis, a group who usually deny that they are Kurds at all) or further north in the Azeri Kurdish region of Kelbajar, situated between northern Karabakh and Lake Sevan in Armenia proper. Armenia was satisfied that the Kelbajar had been effectively neutralized militarily after the recent, spectacular gains by the Karabakh forces in the northern theater; the Azeri forces there could no longer make any more aggressive moves against Armenia because they were now pre-occupied with survival.

"We continue to hope for a cease-fire and a peaceful solution (to the Karabakh conflict)," Dooliyan said, "but there is no sign from the Azerbaijani side that they want this. It is clear that Azerbaijan regards Karabakh as its territory."

Not surprisingly, Dooliyan completely rejected the idea of a territorial exchange with Azerbaijan--the classic form of which

would be for Azerbaijan to legally cede part or all of Mountainous Karabakh, plus a corridor, to Armenia in exchange for part or all of the Zangezur, which would thus connect the Azeri territory of Nakhjivan with 'mainland' Azerbaijan.

"This is impossible," said Dooliyan, "It would be the worst possible solution for us because we would lose our border with Iran. It would also be the best solution for Azerbaijan because it would connect the Azeris with Turkey. The only realistic, compromise solution to the conflict is for Azerbaijan to accept the independence of Mountainous Karabakh. This is the only way to lead to good relations between all three states."

We left the meeting less optimistic about the future than when we had entered, and not really much better informed about the past.

There were other meetings, interviews and observations, but none of any great import and certainly none that changed the general picture: Yerevan was cold and grim, but the reason the country found itself in that uncomfortable state of affairs was because it was pursuing a war with a neighboring state that sat atop its traditional transport lines and energy arteries. It was not exactly reasonable to expect Azerbaijan to conduct 'business as usual' with Armenia so long as guns were firing. But time and again, when I pressed my interlocutors, all would finally admit that the war was worth while. As for the pending national catastrophe due to the 'blockade' that was really an 'embargo,' most also shyly admitted that beyond the very real, self-imposed misery that people endured, the idea of suffering made for great propaganda abroad.

Amazingly, this line of thinking was actually being promoted by certain American officials involved in the aid business. Discrete sources in the U.S. embassy in Yerevan reconstructed a three-way conversation in which a U.S.A.I.D. staffer tried to convince an Armenian government functionary of the 'need to get in contact with the diaspora community' and make the current state of the country 'look as bad as possible' in order to get more aid.

One direct result of this staged suffering due to the Azeri 'blockade' was the decision by the United States Congress to put Azerbaijan beyond the Pale of the Freedom Support Act. The FSA was designed to support pluralistic democracy in the former Soviet republics, but the section 907 rider to the bill states:

"United States assistance under this or any other Act (other than assistance under Title V of this Act) may not be provided to the Government of Azerbaijan until the President determines and so reports to the Congress that the Government of Azerbaijan is taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh."

The rider may well go down in the annals of legislation as the most effective piece of lobbying ever performed in influence-ridden Washington DC. Leaving aside the question of why Karabakh is referred to as a state-like entity, one might ask about the definition of what constitutes a 'blockade' and 'offensive use of force.' One might also ask why the perfectly good English word

'Mountainous' is not used to modify the noun 'Karabakh' instead of the Russian adjective 'Nagorno.' Perhaps one should be glad that at least the misnomer 'enclave' was not used in the wording.

This fuzziness and the effort to make it so was exemplified by Congressman Joseph Kennedy's visit on the last day of our trip to Yerevan. It goes without saying that his hosts, the Armenian Assembly of America, did not take him to the Mafia Restaurant, Hospital Clinic #3 or, in the way of meeting refugees from Baku, to Lena's coffee shop. And the last thing they wanted to promote, I am sure, was the idea that whatever deprivations Armenia was experiencing were the result of its territorial ambitions on a neighboring state--IE, that the Azeri blockade/embargo against Armenia was directly connected to Yerevan's participation and promotion of the war in Karabakh.

I thought it inappropriate to ask Congressman Kennedy about all this during the course of the candle-light cocktail party/press conference held at the Armenian Assembly's freezing rooms in the Ministry of Agriculture, but I did ask him if he intended to take a trip to Baku any time soon to take a look 'at the other side.'

No, he said, there was a lot of work on the Hill. The Yerevan trip was pretty exceptional; perhaps it had something to do with his constituents in Watertown, Mass.

Then I asked him a personal question.

"Is Douglas Kennedy your brother or your cousin?"

"Dougie is my brother," answered the Congressman with the sort of shit-eating grin that older brothers reserve for their maybe wayward, younger siblings, "Why do you ask?"

"He spent some time at my house in Baku," said I. "Give him my regards." (Actually what I wanted to say was: 'tell him he owes me a \$25 ink-jet,' but it would have been too confusing and unseemly to explain why, so I kept it short and friendly.)

"Sure," said Kennedy, "He told some pretty wild stories about that trip."

Then the cold cocktail party broke up, and Kennedy and his accompanying entourage of 56 foreign journalists went out to the airport while we went back over to the Mafia restaurant for a last taste of sturgeon steak, kebabs, caviar and the rest of the whole nine yards. They would have with their memories of Yerevan, and we would have ours.

Inevitably, we were joined by the usual crowd: whining diplomats, A.I.D workers and Red Cross relief personnel. Among our table companions was also Mr Statistics, Jean Pierre Masiyan of the French Red Cross, and his constant companion, the correspondent who we had wrongly accused of writing about starving people being attacked by starving dogs. So we ate and drank and ate and drank some more, and then we went back to the sixth floor of Hotel Armenia and drank cognac by candle-light in our cold but clean rooms, trying to assess our experience and to put our impressions into some context. It was time to go.

We set off the next morning, heading North across the snow-bound landscape toward Spitak, but then jagged West to Leninakan (now renamed Giumri) to take a look at the city that is the symbol of the 1988 Earthquake. It will probably not come as a surprise that quite a bit of it is still there. It was the

Soviet-style apartment buildings that had come tumbling down; the simple, pleasant single-storey stone structures owned by individuals on the edge of town (along with the turn-of-the-century public buildings downtown) had mostly survived unscathed.

"Everyone knew that you shouldn't build higher than two stories, but the government did anyway," said Vitalis Davtiyan, 43, a construction engineer. His father owned a Turkey-supplied commission shop in which we had stopped to brew some coffee and talk with quake survivors, and that conversation had led us to his house for a look-see.

After fortifying ourselves with hospitality and cognac, we proceeded downtown. Despite the repairs effected on the city's surviving buildings, Giumri was a pretty depressing place. The roads in and out of town were now lined by long rows of tree stumps; if the much-advertised decimation of Yerevan's parks and boulevards by fuel seekers was an exaggeration, it was real enough here. At least half the city's trees had been chopped down, and the second half looked doomed to go before the winter was out: kids sawed at upper branches of the remaining trees while dad and older brother whacked away at the base below with axes.

Our departure was slowed by our need to repair our spare tire, and that repair was slowed by the lack of electricity to work the requisite machines. A mechanic/tireman on the edge of town was able to effect this, however, and after about an hour, we were rolling by a large, new cemetery dedicated to the memory of those killed in the 1988 earthquake. I couldn't help but reflect on the several days and nights I had spent on the Turkish side of the frontier at the time, listening to the constant drone of relief airplanes landing, but unable to get across to report on the story: there was still a Soviet Union then, and visas were tough to get if you weren't a journalists based in Moscow.

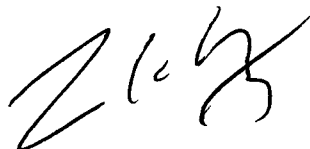
But that was then and now it was today, mid-February 1993, driving down a snow-bound road on the far side of the frontier away from a town now renamed Giumri to another now renamed Spitak. We were going home. Our progress was halted for an hour or so by a line of cars behind a snow grader; the driver refused to budge until properly 'tipped' for having performed his state-appointed task of pushing some 20 meters of deep snow off the road to let us pass. We shamed him into performing his job to the applause of the other motorists and then proceeded, wending our way along the road through long and tedious snow-fields until we arrived once again in Spitak, after which we turned North. The denuded snow-fields began melting into grey-green winter pastures and forests, and we cheered when we passed the last of two dozen petro-tankers lined up at frontier check-point and entered the banditland of southern Georgia.

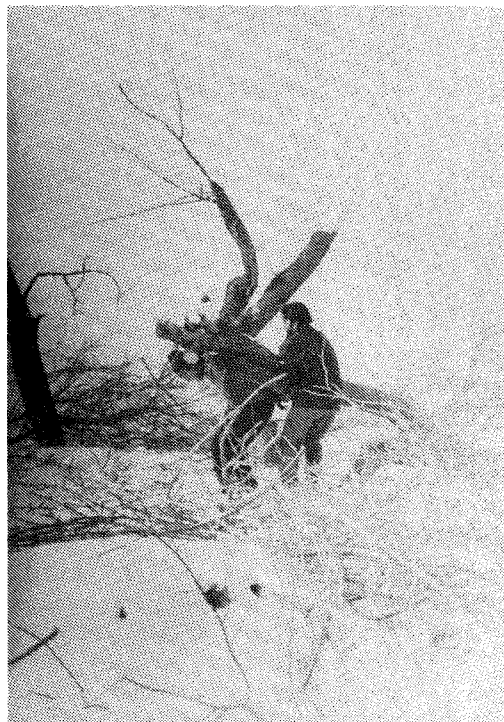
The snow-job was over, but the blizzard was about to begin.

The mid-wife to Glasnost and Perestroika, Eduard Shevardnadze, was in big trouble at home: the local mafia he used to head was tearing Tbilisi apart and the Russians were bombing Suchumi, the capital of Abkhazia, a place that really had been reduced to a catastrophic state: there had been zero electricity for three months, and water was brought from wells.

No-one was writing about it because no-one was whining.

Thomas Goltz
February 20th 1993





Photographs: Upper Left--A petro tanker in Yerevan, selling high-octane fuel flown in from the southern Russian town of Sochi; Upper Right--fuel scavengers outside of Giumri (Leninakan); Lower Left--Alfresco Pork Chop stand; Lower Right--Row of cig and snack stands on road to October'an