

TCG-16

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Peter Bird Martin
ICWA/Crane Rogers Foundation
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

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Dear Peter,

You probably are getting tired of newsletters entitled 'Back in Baku' so I will avoid giving this epistle a name although it does seem to demand an introduction.

Because this is my fourth sojourn to Azerbaijan, and each one has been quite different:

The first journey was one of unexpected discovery and initial impressions; the second was made in the wake of the August 19th putsch; the third journey was a whistle-stop to help set up a household and to interview the patron of Nahchivan, Haydar Aliiev.

Now, after our non-meetings in Tashkent and Moscow, I am back again and it seems perfectly normal--almost, I guess, like home.

The reason for that is pretty obvious--namely, we've got one.

Our abode is a very pleasant and spacious apartment with high ceilings and parquet floors and French doors in a building constructed at the turn of the century, and located within walking distance of seemingly everything but the airport. As a structure, it is a prime example of the 'oil baron' era when Baku produced one half of total world petroleum production and people had money to spend on style; our bathroom, for example, has the toilet and sink in the same room and the faucet is not on a swivel to double as the source of water for the shower. Those two features are standards of the Khrushchev-era ghetto-boxes in which most people are obliged to live.

Lightbulbs and water are our main problems: the former simply cannot be found at any price while the later only comes every third day and then in the middle of the night, obliging us to set the alarm and then start cleaning dishes and clothes and filling every old vodka bottle and pan in hand to create a new depot.

There are no plastic water buckets or other such objects to be found in the bazaar that might make water accumulation easier; all those seem to be in Tashkent, where one cannot buy much else. The difference is possibly made up by many other things found in abundance here that are in short supply in Central Asia--coffee, tea, cigarettes, beer and even fax and answering machines.

The last is a little perplexing because the telephone system is incapable of supporting such electronic toys: we went through three new telephone numbers in ten days and the current one only sometimes works; never when it rains.

Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow investigating the Turkic-speaking Republics of the (former) Soviet Union

I have been told that this has something to do with the fact that the city's main wheat depot was placed next to the main telecommunications building and attracted a veritable legion of rats. Then the granary was moved but the rats remained and after they finished with the ancient grain they began chewing through the telephone cables, exposing all the wires: the result is that when water accumulates in the basement, the system collapses.

But water and telephone and lightbulbs or none, we had a new house and it was the holiday season and so as a sort of house-opening party and to cling to some sense of tradition we invited old and new friends and neighbors to a Thanksgiving sup.

The guests were our Russian teacher, a leading film director and his wife and a tag-along couple associated with the stage, a local publisher and his spouse and then several people from the infant foreign ministry.

Acquiring the requisite bird was the biggest problem and although I did manage to secure a small but tasty turkey (the only one in the poultry market) I was obliged to supplement it with a large rooster (actually, tastier than the gobbler). The dressing was the kind that grandma used to make--dried bread crumbs ground by hand, onions, assorted spur-of-the-moment seasoning (oregano only exists as tea around here), chestnuts, walnuts, almonds and raisins to taste.

Sadly, there was no cranberry sauce or sweet potatoes or anything resembling corn or wild rice, but we did mash up a batch of regular spuds--I think we will be forgiven for having had to add powdered milk, as the real stuff is simply unavailable.

A young friend mercifully brought over a gallon of Georgian wine, relieving us of the obligation to punch shots of vodka all evening and after a few glasses I felt obliged to relate the story of the first Thanksgiving with subsequent notes on the fate of the hosts at the hands of the guests. It might have seemed childish or even dumb until one considers that I am, literally, the first American any of the guests had ever met.

Anyway, the party was a great success and we ate left-overs for two days and then were obliged to attend several reciprocal banquets over the next week. This was just as well because the water didn't come back on until the third day as expected and we were unable to wash dishes or bath for a week. When we came up for air (as it were) it was time to hold another small bash, this time with a young diplomatic couple from Ankara, a pan-Turanic professor and an old friend from Bangladesh. Then a new group of folks arrived aboard the weekly Istanbul-Baku flight and we found ourselves hosting a group from Siemens/Turkey and a brace of journalists from Istanbul who had found their way to our door.

Who knows who it will be next, but one thing is pretty clear: almost overnight and totally inadvertently, we have established ourselves as a sort of honorary consulate/foreign press club/business center and as such we are privy to the public and private details of everything from Azerbaijan's future communications net-work to its political relations with the outside world.

And November was an exciting month, diplomatically speaking.

Turkey had finally shrugged off its anxiety of possibly offending Moscow and had become the first country to recognize.

Azerbaijan as a sovereign state (the level of anticipation was such that there were three false announcements, and then total jubilation when recognition was confirmed.)

Next came a large delegation from Pakistan, in Baku to see whether they should become the second country to recognize Azeri independence. The point was confused a bit by the announcement of the visiting Minister of the Economy that Pakistan already had recognized Azerbaijan, but was merely waiting for a presidential visit to seal it 'officially', whatever that means.

And then it was time for the Iranians, with Foreign Minister Ali Veliyati promising the economic world (trains, roads, planes, ships, oil imports, new bank, etc) but ducking the recognition issue by uttering such fog as 'The Azeri people know that the Iranian people have the Azeri people in their hearts for 170 years--that is the important thing'.

To some ears, this seemed to be less political prevarication than veiled irredentism, because 170 years ago Azerbaijan was a part of Iran. Later, at a speech at Baku University, students (many females and none wearing veils) gave it to the Iranian VIP with both barrels for trying to dodge the recognition issue: why was Iran waiting for the December referendum on independence when Turkey had not felt so constrained? There was no good answer, and Veliyati cut short his talk and left, much to joy of the secularists and the chagrin of the fundamentalist fringe.

(Although it is easily exaggerated, there is no question about the reality of the growing Turco-Iranian rivalry for the hearts and minds of Azerbaijan (and Central Asia). One bizarre project is a plan by Ankara to supply Azerbaijan with tens of thousands of (presumably used) Latin-character typewriters to help Azerbaijan make its conversion back to a Latin-based script, a move condemned by Iran on the note that Latin characters are 'Christian'...The typewriters remain unsent because the Azeri government has not officially asked for them and has developed no program or time-table for the conversion.

But beyond the issue of recognition and speculation about who would become the major trading partners and/or cultural influence, there was and is a more fundamental question, and one that most were reluctant to ask--namely, whether Azerbaijan would be allowed to survive as an independent state.

I don't want to be overly alarmist, but an entirely different mood has settled over the nation than the halcyon days of Autumn, 1991: the spirit of determined hope seems to be unraveling, and in its place has come a nameless dread.

The signs are there for those with eyes to see: President Mutalibov has started mumbling about the necessity to sign the new economic treaty with the Kremlin after all; the old communist louts who were on the run in September seem to be slipping back into positions of power; the disinformation services appear to have been restored, with Tass and Novosti again writing half truths and sometimes blatant lies about events in the country, as if preparing the ground for intervention to 'restore order'.

This last element is pernicious indeed and reminds one that despite all the freedom and openness in Moscow, there are still those in control of public information who appear to be perfectly willing to use the media for obscure ends.

Let me give you a few examples.

First came a balloon report from Nahchivan, claiming that 10,000 Azeris had gone to Turkey during the course of the opening of a temporary bridge and had declared themselves to be refugees; in fact, some 1,000 relatives gathered on the Turkish side of the bridge for a party, and then trooped home without incident.

Next came a report about a Russian taxi driver in Moscow who was robbed and killed by thugs who were then identified as being 'Azeri', although no suspects were ever rounded up.

Then came several reports about ethnic Russians being worried about being 'massacred' by the Azeris, although most of these same people have actually joined the Popular Front and declared themselves ready to change their documents, which now declare them to be 'Russians' to that of 'Azerbaijanian'.

Finally, incidents that can only be called provocations began to occur: sudden 'rumors' spread about the time and place that the Soviet military was planning on discretely removing military equipment in the dead of night, and by such and such a route. The reports naturally worked like prairie fire among the populace, who then gathered at the designated spot to stop the illegal transfer, leading, inevitably, to bloodshed and death as citizens armed with stones confronted armed personal carriers filled with Speznatz (special forces) troops.

All of this reminded people of the events leading up to January 1990, when the Soviet army rolled into Baku to put down anti-Armenian rioters in accordance with what is widely believed here to have been a pre-arranged plan.

And then the first big blow fell, as if fulfilling the direst predictions of the most pessimistic sage.

The date was November 20th, 1991, and as it will go down as being a seminal date in the history of Azerbaijan, I think it might be appropriate to dwell on it in a little detail.

There was a helicopter crash in Karabakh and a bad one: all 23 crew and passengers, among whom I had friends.

They were actually more acquaintances than friends--members of a group of Azeri government officials traveling with Russian and Kazak observers associated with the Yeltsin/Nazerbaiyev Ten Point Peace Plan designed to keep Azeris and Armenians from killing more of each other in the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh.

But if I am to quibble about nouns like 'friend' and 'acquaintance' I might also quibble about verb usage and the difference between the relatively passive 'killed' and the more accurate 'murdered'.

Because the helicopter was shot down and although the subsequent investigation is not over yet there are only two reasonable possibilities as to the identity of the perpetrators:

1) They were Armenian nationalists who shot at the chopper because it represented the authority of Azerbaijan they refuse to countenance, or

2) They were Soviet soldiers, or KGB, who shot at the chopper in order to increase the level of tension and hostility between the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The first scenario, if sad, might even be regarded as normal: helicopters, buses, cars and people identified as being Azeri are shot at with regularity in Karabakh by guerrillas who, although

deriving emotional support from Yerevan, are not necessarily armed by Armenia or under Armenian control.

The second scenario, if true, is truly chilling and a sobering reminder that the Center, represented by Mikhail Gorbachev, is still capable of a lot more than democratic reforms a la 'glasnost' and 'perestroika.'

It is, in a word, capable of murder.

There is strong evidence, and with the limited evidence at hand, I am reluctant to go off on a limb and say it was so.

But the stunning amount of disinformation both inside and outside the Soviet Union about the crash ineluctably leads one into the soft sands of conspiracy theories.

First came the description of the crash and its victims: "government officials from Azerbaijan and Russian and Kazakh observers" died when their chopper crashed into a mountain due to heavy fog and low visibility at dusk.

Sorry.

November 20th was a fine, sunny day and the helicopter went down in a plain; there are no mountains or even hills anywhere near. And as for the 'Azeri officials and Russians and Kazaks', the passengers might have been better described as being the Azeri equivalent of the White House spokesman, several important US senators, the Attorney General, two NATO generals from other countries and four UN observers selected by the security council.

Next, came reactions from Azerbaijan, with Russian television and the BBC quoting President Ayaz Mutalibov of accusing Armenia of shooting down the helicopter. Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan's reaction naturally followed, denying Armenian complicity and demanding that an international team of investigators be brought in to look at the crash. Another Armenian minister said that Azerbaijan's contention of Armenian complicity was tantamount to a declaration of war.

Great.

Now, I cannot comment on the accuracy of the Armenian pronouncements, but the record of Mutalibov's statements over the next few days is perfectly clear--at no time did he use the word 'Armenia'. Even at the emotional funeral procession on November 22nd and in subsequent parliamentary debates over the issue he used terms like 'our enemies' and once, even, 'Armenian bandits and those who support them' but not once did he make any direct, overt accusation that the state of Armenia had a hand in the matter. I am not privy to the record of the Armenian president's speeches but on general principle I feel obliged to question the accuracy of his quotes as well.

But the purveyors of conspiracy theories were already at work.

In a follow up report on the BBC to the 'Mutalibov accuses Armenia' piece, a correspondent from Reuters who had traveled with Armenian guerrillas operating in the Karabakh region related how the guerrillas had set up a heavy machine gun to pepper a tank with hot lead but had failed hitting it although it was standing still. Why one would attack a tank with a machine gun is beyond my comprehension, as is the reason why a tank under such an attack would remain immobile, but the reporter assured his audience that it was so and extrapolated from this that the helicopter shoot-down could not possibly have been his

combat-inept commando friends: unable to hit a tank at close range, how could they hit a helicopter in the air?

If this was reductio ad absurdum, the Reuters man then outdid himself by stringing together several disparate pieces of non-information to create a unique whole: reminding listeners that Mutalibov was one of the few Soviet leaders who supported the August 19th putsch against Gorbachev (questionable) and that he has made common cause with the Popular Front of Azerbaijan over the issue of Karabakh (in context, the PF appeared to be some illegal, fanatical organization) the reporter then took the expected quantum leap. It was most likely, he implied, that in an attempt at whipping up anti-Armenian hysteria, the Azeris had shot down the bird themselves.

Dallas. KAL 007. Marilyn Monroe. Allende.

Grand conspiracy at its best.

And the conspiracy-prone Azeris were not far behind. Thanks to the initial disinformation passed along by Tass and, unwittingly, the BBC, the local rumor mill was and is working overtime, a state of affairs compounded by the debilitating belief that no-one will ever know the truth about what happened anyway.

Here are some widely held wild theories:

The crash happened because of a shoot^oboard the craft.

The helicopter was not shot down, but landed; only afterward were all the passengers butchered and then burned after having been picked clean of their watches and rings and wallets; a briefcase holding documents was found in a remarkably good state, but the documents inside it were gone.

Of the 23 people aboard, only 15 charred corpses were found, watches and wallets missing; the eight others were Russians: where had the bodies gone? Had they been whisked away, alive?

The last words of the pilot on the black box were 'we are being shot at', but then black box was heisted away to Moscow...

Well, I have made an effort to get to the bottom of the mess and have succeeded in disposing with at least some of the wildest rumors. According to the head of the investigation committee, Timurlang Karayev, initial research suggests that there was a mid-air explosion due to the distribution of fuel and machine parts on the ground. Although badly burned, all corpses have been identified; also, it is apparently true that Armenians living in a nearby village got to the crash site before the Azeri authorities and, grisly as it may seem, picked the (burnt?) bodies clean of all valuables.

Of greater significance is the fact that the black box is still in Azeri hands. The reason for this is that the commission of inquiry has refused to hand it over to the Center for deciphering because they fear that the contents will be cooked. But lacking the means to decode it themselves, the commission now has called on an 'international team' to decode the box; Georgia has reportedly volunteered to fulfill the Azeri condition.

Well, the jury is still out, and probably will remain so. My own gut feeling is that the perpetrators were most probably a straight-shooting group of Armenian guerrillas in Karabakh who managed to hit their mark--simple terrorist murder. Backing up this assumption is the firing on two more helicopters in the wake of the November 20th shoot-down and continued violence inside and

outside the province.

But even if it as simple as that (!), there is growing and compelling evidence to suggest that dark forces are indeed at work, as evidenced by the initial disinformation and then the rumor rash that has spread through the population as a whole.

The Center--that faceless, formless thing in Moscow that was supposed to have died along with the Communist Party after the aborted coup and the much proclaimed Second Russian Revolution and the rebirth of freedom and democracy and the market economy in Mother Russia, is alive and well out here on the fringes of the erstwhile Evil Empire, extinguishing lives like play things, killing my acquaintances and frightening my friends.

Get back in line, it says, I can affect you.

And everyone feels affected--be it an advisor of the president, the head of the opposition or the man on the street: All believe in the reality of the cynical manipulation of events by an unseen hand, and to a degree that is difficult to comprehend for anyone who has not been so manipulated before.

The psychologists no doubt have a term for this--victim consciousness, or something; there must be a national equivalent: the acceptance, almost a yearning for inevitable tragedy--and a repeated one at that: January, 1990.

Some people are taking measures; the Popular Front has even gone so far as to cancel its weekly Friday night rallies on Independence Square: the rationale is that it would be too easy for the faceless 'them' to cause an incident and then invite themselves in to restore order.

Predictably, perhaps, not all have heeded the advice of the leadership and a crack has now resulted in the Front--just the thing that 'they' want to see: while the rational leadership desperately tries to keep things in line (like stopping unarmed volunteers from entering Karabakh for a little free-lance ravaging of Armenian villages in revenge for the helicopter), the irrational fringe mounts provocative demonstrations that literally beg countermeasures.

The most recent such show of force was an attack on the new Defense Ministry, and it was almost a miracle that no windows were smashed and the building looted. The incident was only defused when the mob was invited to join the regular army. Two days later, the first 200 men of the newly formed Azerbaijan national army (the same guys who had been demonstrating? I don't know) took their solemn oaths at a ceremony at Martyrs' Park and then shipped off to the front.

It seems almost impossible that Armenia will not respond, and, after another notch or two of tension is torqued up, it doesn't take much further insight or sagacity to predict open war.

This is incredibly depressing, a horrible deja vu come true:

We have gone rafting down this river, heard the cataract before; we felt the current, knew its speed but let ourselves be sucked up in the torrent and born ineluctably toward the brink, paddling down stream all the while.

The year was 1920, and the protective umbrella of the Entente powers' occupation had just been removed from the infant Azerbaijan Republic--the first experiment in secular democracy in

a modern Muslim state. And then the poop hit the fan.

Curiously, I just finished reading a lovely little novel about exactly this period. Entitled *Ali and Neno*, it deals with a Romeo/Juliet sort of romance between an Azeri lad and a Georgian girl. It was written by one 'Kurban Said,' who is described as being an obscure Azeri writer who fled to Germany after the Soviet take-over in 1920, wrote the book (in German) and then disappeared and died in Italy. My suspicion is that he was not Azeri at all, but probably a German orientalist (whose name escapes me now) whose claim to fame were his translations of Azeri and Georgian poetry that never existed in the original.

Anyway, the story commences at the graduation ceremony of the local Russian-language school for Azeri boys in the days leading up to World War I, and flows into a multi-ethnic/sectarian love affair between Ali and Neno. Much of the courting occurs in Karabakh. The propriety of the relationship is violated by an Armenian who, after seeking a union of the Caucasus peoples, finally decides that it is hopeless trying to work with the Azeris and makes an attempt to elope with Neno in order to save her. He is killed and a blood feud erupts that ends with Ali's exile in the mountains of Daghistan. Neno joins him there until the Armenians are driven out of Baku by nationalist forces, at which point they return--only just in time to participate in the first defense of the city against Armenian/Russian gangs. The family is obliged to flee to a strangely familiar 'fundamentalist' Iran where cultural differences (and unhappiness) begin to emerge; Ali even finds himself participating as a self-flagellating penitent in the Ashura ceremonies marking the death of Imam Hussein. The marriage is cracking, but is saved by the arrival of the Ottoman Turks whose arrival in Baku allows Ali and Neno to return home again. There, they participate in the establishment of a western-looking government with the aid of the presence of the Allied occupation forces. But then comes Versailles and then the final collapse of the infant Republic at the hands of Bolshevik oil and railway workers and vengeful Armenians. Ali dies defending a bridge.

Romantic schlock? Yes, but it all fits like a glove today.

Indeed, so similar are the themes and issues (Azeri/Armenians/Georgians; Turks and Iranians; Colonial Russia and Caspian oil) that I am now looking into the possibility of deriving a scenario from the book and turning it into a film with some of my local cinema pals.

I only hope that we have time to film it before life, as it so often does, starts to mimic art and the house of cards we are living in collapses on our heads.

Best Regards,

Thomas Goltz/Baku