

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

BRINGING IN THE NEW YEAR'S BLUES

Jan 3rd 1993

Dear Peter,

I was arrested the other day.

Actually, I think it is better described as 'temporary detention.

I was taking pictures of police beating someone else because he wanted to attend a rally that had been canceled and I happened to be there so I started taking pictures and before you knew it I was being bundled off into a squad car on my way to the pokey.

At first it seemed almost like a joke but it wasn't really very funny when I thought about it, and I thought about it alot when the cops started interrogating me about why I was taking pictures of other cops beating up would-be demonstrators who had been unable to get to a demonstration that had been canceled.

I said to the colonel in charge of my interrogation: don't be stupid, taking pictures is my job.

He didn't like that at as an answer and so he asked me again why I was taking pictures of cops in action.

I explained that I had been taking pictures of cops and robbers and soldiers and corpses and coups and countercoups and the city and the sea and the mountains and the plains in and around Azerbaijan for the past year and it was the first time anyone had bothered to ask me why.

The colonel was about to release me around this time but I demanded that he write up a report and that the fat officer who had arrested me in the first place should apologize, and this was too much. So they started writing up the report and in order to conform my identity (my press credentials somehow not being enough) I told the colonel to call a friend of mine in Government but it was New Year's Eve and I didn't have his home number so I had to call my own to ask my wife to find it but found a friend from the American embassy answering my phone.

'Where are you?' asked my friend from the embassy.

'At the cop shop, I have been detained, or something.

'Tell me why.'

I did.

'Let me talk to that colonel.'

I handed the colonel the phone.

I knew what my friend from the embassy was going to say.

He was going to say to the colonel that the detainee sitting in his room was a friend not only of the President but even of the Minister of the Interior--the guy who was ultimately responsible for every arrest or detention in the country.

Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow researching the 'Turkic' nations of the former Soviet Union and peripheral regions

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.

The colonel started looking nervous.

He kept clipping and unclipping his leather gun strap with the clip on the end to attach to the service revolver stuffed in his pants, looking at me, and then away.

Then he hung up and told me it was time to go. He wanted me out of his office and out of the cop-shop pronto.

Its time for you to go, he smiled.

I said no, that it was time for us to submit his report about me. He didn't like this but we finally walked into the room next door to drop off the deposition filled out by the officer who had arrested me and the deposition room was filled with about 20 other people, including a few I knew.

They had been picked up for trying to go to the demonstration that had been cancelled as well.

The colonel didn't like my seeing all those people in the room, especially the ones I knew.

He liked it less when I started asking question and taking down names.

He said it was time for me to leave the cop-shop, now.

So he brought me downstairs where another 20 people were waiting to be arraigned on the crime of trying to attend a demonstration that had been cancelled, and some of them were bruised.

The colonel didn't like me chatting with them, either.

So he threw me out on the street, and he was no longer smiling. Then he shut the door.

I went over to the Popular Front HQ, the place where Abulfex Elchibey used to work before he got elected as president of the country, to find my friend Niyazi Ibrahimov, who was a comrade-in-arms of Elchibey in the old days and even the Presidential spokesman until he resigned because he didn't like what he saw.

I said: Niyazi, there are arresting people who wanted to attend the demonstration that was cancelled by the authorities, and they are cracking some heads.

Niyazi said: shit.

So we went back over to the cop-shop and Niyazi ran into a number of people he knew from the Popular Front who had been arrested or detained or whatever but they wouldn't let him up to the courtroom or the detention center, and so we got back in his car and sat there.

I said: Niyazi, somebody has got to tell the President.

Niyazi said: If I speak with him now I will explode.

I said: You have to tell someone, now.

Niyazi said: Okay.

So we drove up to the Supreme Soviet located across from the Martyrs' Lane and the television station and while Niyazi went in to talk with someone about what was going on I hung out with the security guards in front. We were old friends and I told them what their colleagues were doing in the city below and they were embarrassed. Then it occurred to me that I know a lot of cops and security personnel in Azerbaijan, ranging from narcs to soldiers and local KGB, and the funny thing about my temporary arrest and detention was that for all the cops I knew I hadn't run one when I needed one. Maybe it was better like that.

Then Niyazi returned from wherever he had been upstairs and we got back in his car and drove back downtown, but we didn't talk much.

'This is,' he said at last, 'just the beginning.'

'What do you mean?' I asked, but I knew.

The demonstration that wasn't was probably a provocation.

Organized by Azerbaijan's self-style 'independent' labor movement leader Nimet Panahov, the December 31st meeting was to have been a mixture of anti-government protest and celebration of 'International Azerbaijan Solidarity Day'--a queer mixture, it is true. The venue was to be Azadlik Meydani, or Freedom Square--the same place used by the Popular Front of Azerbaijan for its own anti-government demonstrations before the organization came to power in elections held last summer.

Panahov, who split from the Front in the summer of 1991, organized two other meetings on Azadlik Meydani in the Fall of 1992--one in November was hijacked by the government; the second, on December 4th, attracted a mere two or three hundred people.

But the authorities didn't like his linking his own protests to the pan-Azeri Solidarity day, and thus refused permission for the demonstration at the last minute. To re-enforce this, they put up three lines of police barricades to keep people away from Freedom Square. Many citizens came to the square anyway, either to show support for Panahov, to celebrate Azeri solidarity, or to register their displeasure with the government for not trusting them to use their own brains.

"We simply want to exercise our right as citizens of a free and independent country to walk across the square," said one of two well-dressed middle aged women who had managed to talk their way through the first two lines of police.

Like me, they were stopped just short of the empty square by another group of security men who said that the square was off-limits because of 'manoeuvres.'

Unlike me, they were unable to talk their way through.

There wasn't much to see: an empty square facing the Caspian Sea, and backed by the 'Stalin Wedding Cake'-style government house. A row of squad cars and jeeps were parked in front of the dais that Elchibey and his associates used to speak from, insuring that no-one like Panahov would be allowed to try.

I saw a number of cops whom I had become acquainted with over the year--guys from the heading days of the coup and counter coup of May 14th and 15th, other from the Karabakh front, still others from Nakhjivan and Lenkoran.

I asked them: why no demo?

They replied: our orders are to prevent one.

So I walked back across the empty square to where the two well dressed ladies were still arguing with a knot of cops about exercising their right to walk where they pleased.

They said: the government is sending untrained 18 year old boys out to the Front, but here are you trained gunmen, thousands of you, guarding an empty square.

The cops didn't like that argument.

But they didn't take it out on the ladies.

Nearby, another man who had managed to penetrate the outer picket was being roughly thrown into a squad car and rushed away, allegedly for using 'insulting language' when stopped by the police. Maybe he had said the same thing.

But one thing was pretty clear.

There wasn't going to be any demonstration today.

It had been scheduled for ten in the morning and then allegedly re-scheduled for two in the afternoon and it was now

getting on toward four and it was New Year's Eve and I had some shopping to do and so I started making my way home.

I passed one line of police pickets and then stopped at a second, in order to eavesdrop on a spirited conversation between the wall of police and a handful of people who seemed very insistent about getting through the lines.

Maybe they were agent provocateurs.

Maybe they just wanted to go home and lived inside the cordon. I didn't have time to ask.

Because suddenly, four or five cops grabbed one of the people and started pushing him across the street, and then started knocking his head. This seemed pretty unfair given the fact that the place was crawling with cops and that they already had him four or five to one, so I pulled out my camera and started taking pictures.

That's when I got arrested, or detained, or whatever.

They bagged about 1,000 of us over the course of the day at dozens of different places. Most were released after Niyazi's telephone call. A couple of hundred, including Panahov, were still in detention three days later.

The government called it provocation.

I call it stupidity.

There has been a lot of that around here of late.

Here is another item.

On Christmas day, members of the opposition Social Democratic Party were detained for some ten hours after trying to mount a demonstration protesting the decision of the National Council to change of the name of the official state language from 'Azerbaijani' to 'Turkic.'

This is, it is true, an exceedingly sensitive if complex subject in this heterogeneous Caucasus country, still seeking its national identity after almost 170 years of Russian/Soviet rule, and it left a lot of people very upset.

And there were a lot of other people around to try and take political advantage of the government's bone-headedness in this and other matters.

"Today they decide that our languages is Turkish, tomorrow they will decide that we are all Turks, and next they will decide that we should become a province of Turkey," said Social Democrat Party chairman Araz Alizade at a hastily arranged press conference attacking the Council's decision, "We need a referendum on the language issue and on the government itself!"

Alizade also stressing the 'undemocratic nature' of the National Council, a select, 50 person organ that currently serves in lieu of the 360 seat parliament. New elections to that body have been repeatedly promised, but remain unscheduled.

Two days later, the Social Democrats were back in the news after one of its leaders, Arzu Abdulayeva, winner of the Olaf Palme Prize and a member of the Helsinki Citizens' Committee, attempted to enter the disputed territory of Mountainous (Nagorno) Karabakh to work out details of an exchange of prisoners of war with the representatives of the self-declared 'Republic of Nagorno Karabakh.' The delegation, including the Committee's chairman, Peter Jerman from England, was stopped near the front and sent back to Baku because they lacked permission to enter the war zone; the Defense Ministry in Baku suggested that the foray was no more or less than a provocation; Jerman himself said as much to a US embassy official, saying that 'she was determined to get arrested, this way or that.'

But even if Panahov, Alizade and Abdulayeva have ulterior motives, their actions still have a deep resonance in Azerbaijan today because of the failure of the Popular Front government to make any real progress in terms of concrete political and economic reform or the military campaign to regain control of the disputed territory of Mountainous Karabakh.

The war has resulted in up to 4,000 deaths in Azerbaijan alone over the past year, and has now bogged down into an increasingly bloody stalemate, where many of the Azeri casualties are the result of 'friendly fire'.

In order to offset public distress over recent incursions by Armenian forces into Azerbaijan in the southern sector of the border zone, the Azerbaijan Ministry of Defense publicly announced the 'success' of several incursions into Armenia itself in the northern sector--thus depriving Foreign Minister Towfig Gasimov of what he calls his 'one trump card' in international discussions--namely, that Armenia is the sole 'aggressor' in the conflict, territorially speaking.

Further complicating the situation is the growing influence of Iran in Azeri affairs.

After a limping start in the much touted Turco-Iranian rivalry for 'influence' in Azerbaijan and Central Asia, the Islamic Republic has made increasingly resonant inroads through the astute use of diplomats, businessmen and clergy, dwarfing anything the Turkish embassy has ever dreamt of doing.

I swear, the Iranians must be reading my newsletters, because they are doing exactly what I was saying I would do if I were in their turbans--namely, embark on an ethnic 'outreach' program on the basis of its own large and increasingly self-conscious Azeri community.

Today, while locals are increasingly grumbling about the condescending attitude of the Turks and their refusal to make the first concession to Azeri culture and language, the Iranians have literally filled their embassy with a staff of Iranian Azeris (or Azeris from Iran) who are able to talk straight up with their 'brothers' from the Azerbaijan Republic--and as Azeris, and not as 'Turks.'

Recently, a couple of days after the founding of an Islamic Party, the Iranian (Azeri) ambassador gave a two hour press conference/chat followed by a two hour reception/snack for local pundits, and me. It was quite a performance. Starting with an invocation of the name of God, and orchestrating quite a few pious epithets of 'Allah!' and 'Ya Salaam!' when he mentioned such names as Khomeini, Khamani and Rafsanjani, he proceeded to fill people's ears with the beauties and progress made by Iran, the country that dared go it alone in the face of the world--and survive. There was a great deal said about Iran's love for Azerbaijan, which had formerly been of one piece with Iran until ripped away by the perfidious Russians. Now, as Azerbaijan attempted to break free of the Russian and Soviet yoke, Iran was ready to assist with all manner of aid and development programs, ranging from the supply of natural gas to heat the offices of the newsmen attending the chat, to throwing open the doors of hospitals in Iran to treat wounded soldiers from Karabakh (I recalled a television program about a month before, showing the ambassador and all his staff giving blood).

"I am not here as a rekabetchi (to the Turkish ambassador) but as a refahetchi!," declared the Iranian emissary, playing with the words 'rival' and 'philanthropist'.

The Turkish ambassador, needless to say, has never done anything so public; and when he does anything public at all, he speaks Turkish.

The Iranian ambassador (and all his staff) speak Azeri.

About a week later, 15 (count 'em, 15) Azerbaijani ministers were on a junket trip to Tehran, checking out everything from the possibility of joint-ventures in farming, medicine and education to Iran's importing Azeri crude and exporting Iranian rockets.

This is no joke; I saw the catalogues, and one of the Azeri delegation (who shall remain nameless) even showed me a 'gift box' containing a miniature, replica Iranian-made 'Stinger' type missile, presented him on a visit to an armaments factory.

Compare this with the Turkish effort over the past year.

After the initial gush of pan-Turkic friendliness between heads of state, Ankara's cultural and political influence has been reduced to an official trickle; the 'Turkish presence' in Azerbaijan and Central Asia is almost exclusively made up of ultranationalist and pan-Islamic types as well as a range of confidence men and fly-by-night artists, looking for a once-off quick commercial kill.

Forget about all the glowing reports in the international press about the coming 'Century of the Turks' and all that.

At close range, the process looks quite different.

Indeed, there is very good reason to think that Turkey is already letting the initial good feeling generated by 'Turkicness' go up in the smoke of camp fires of political oafs who, after decades of feeling like the un-wanted working class scum of Europe, have now finally found someone they think they can condescend to: their eastern cousins.

It translates into this

'Turkic' as a language means Turkish; everything else (Azeri, Uzbek, Turkmen, Kazakh) is dialect.

'Turkic' as a culture is Anatolian (or even Istanbuli); everything else is bizarre and heathen.

The 'Turkey' model for economic development is just the ticket for the emerging economies of the Muslim republics of the former USSR--although the only thing I see that fits the notion of 'Turkic' economics or business is the ancient art of the bribe.

And there is another habit of the visiting Turks that is starting to make waves.

It is the ancient art of picking up chicks.

Now, snuggling up to a British bunny on a Bodrum beach is as Turkish as, well, shishkebab--as is, increasingly, taking a walk on the wild side with infidel Natasha in a Trabzon hotel (the theme of a new hit song in Turkey).

The Azeris would like to be there, too.

But allowing an itinerant Turk to count coup among Azeri women is something else again, because one of the cultural traits shared by Turkish and Azeri men is the preservation of the public virtue of their own women.

The visiting Turks, apparently, only see cheap whores.

This is, of course, an angle now being worked by Iran.

They say something like this:

You say we should support you against the Armenians because you are Muslims and they are not. But what distinguishes you from them? Both you and the Armenians drink like fish, eat pork and--forgive me my words! fornicate all day. By all public

indications, you are not Muslims at all, and are thus undeserving of our aid (although for the love of Allah we will aid you anyway) until you return to the faith...

There has been a lot more religious programing and public displays of piety as of late.

The subject of fornication and the overbearing Turk has quietly been taken up by the most recent diplomatic addition to the Baku scene as well.

I refer, of course, to the Russians.

It took them awhile to actually send in an ambassador after having formally established diplomatic relations, but when they did, they sent in a doozy: Walter Shonia, formerly the head of the political section at the (former) Soviet embassy in Ankara.

A native Georgian who apparently felt more comfortable with a Russian identity in the post-Soviet period, he speaks a number of languages fluently, including Turkish (and by now, I presume, Azeri) and his mission is crystal clear: wean the Azeris away from the Turks and back into the (post) Soviet fold.

In addition to suggesting to common folks that the Turks are playing fast and loose with their women, the new Russian ambassador has also been actively cultivating local Russians and Russified Azeris at diverse 'cultural' affairs.

Usually, the sort of folks who attend such activities are called (and indeed, refer to themselves as) 'intellectuals.'

And when I hear the word 'intellectual' in the old Soviet Union, I know that someone is reaching for their gun.

In the context of the old Soviet Union, that is usually the 'intellectual' his or herself, ready to make counter-revolution, a la Georgia in the Fall of 1991.

There are other embassies as well, but none very active.

The Iraqi consulate was up-graded into a full mission some time back, although I can't ever recall seeing or meeting or even hearing about any sort of activity from that quarter. The Chinese are said to be working out of some hotel room somewhere, and a young Russian-speaking German diplomatic couple have renting an apartment said to belong to Mutalibov's son for a cool \$1500 a month while the new French ambassador continues to complain bitterly about the lack of proper protocol and the fact that he is ensconced in the government guest house and not in the sort of truly luxurious residence that befits a gentleman of his stature. The United Kingdom sent in a man with ambassadorial rank to run a trade mission, but like most other countries, UK continues to run its Azerbaijan desk through Moscow.

Then there are the Americans.

Sadly, despite having perhaps the best staff of any of the embassies in Baku, American interests have largely been put in the cooler due to the understandable Azeri reaction to the Armenian-lobby inspired congressional ban on American aid and assistance to Azerbaijan, ranging from joint police work to counter the growing narco-business in the country to Peace Corp and even labor syndication activity. The irony for anyone with eyes to see is that the aid ban will probably promote exactly what it was supposed to correct--namely, a change away from the imperfect atmosphere of pluralistic democracy fostered by the current leadership to that of authoritarianism, as a friendless regime struggles to survive.

And that process of deterioration would now appear to have begun.

Not only are many people associated with the former elite still in their positions of power and still embezzling vast amounts of the nation's wealth, but even former intimates of President Elchibey now appear to be running amok.

There is Panakh Husseinov, one of the strongmen of the Popular Front who now works as State Secretary in the Elchibey government, the man, as the streets have it, who 'drives a white Mercedes during black times'. Then there is 36 year-old Isa Gamberov, leader of the reborn Musavat Party. As chairman of the Supreme Soviet, he now drives around town in a black Mercedes, and the word is that the reason he does not call for new elections as promised by the Front is that he is afraid to be reduced to a Volga or Lada again. There are others, many others, but the man of the moment is Minister of the Interior, Iskender Hamidov. He has been the man of the moment for the past six months. Often described as Elchibey's doberman-pinscher, Iskender has openly embraced Pan-Turkic nationalism and has close links with the so-called 'Gray Wolf' extreme right wing movement in neighboring Turkey. Association with this bunch of vicious characters is bad enough for Azerbaijan's image abroad (and especially in Turkey itself where the Gray Wolves are political pariahs), but Hamidov has brought it further, repeatedly embarrassing Elchibey by such antics as personally roughing-up journalists who displease him and even declaring himself to be in the possession of two tactical nuclear devices to be used against Armenia if the need arises.

Elchibey has consistently backed the popular and powerful minister (who compares to Jesse Jackson's associate Louis Farrakhan from a certain aspect) apparently out of concern that alienating him at this juncture might result in a coup.

Indeed.

Without drifting out into the ozone zone of alarm, there are uncomfortable parallel developments in Azerbaijan with those of late 1991 in neighboring Georgia, when local 'intellectuals,' with the aid national guardsmen, put paid to the government of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia and paved the way for the restoration of old Georgia Communist Party boss Edvard Shevardnadze to power in Tbilisi.

Around these parts, it is called 'The Georgian Syndrome'.

The parallel becomes more than a little striking when one takes into account the recent political moves of former Azerbaijan CP boss and (like Shevardnadze) ex-USSR Politburo Member Haydar Aliiev from his power-base in the Azeri province of Nakhjivan. Having effectively chased the Popular Front from his domains, the 69 year old Aliiev has now set up a new political party with branches throughout the country--many headed by the cadres that he cultivated during his long years in power.

Yes, indeed! 1993 looks like it will be a very interesting year in Azerbaijan, the kind of 'interesting' that the Chinese use as a curse.

Best Regards for the New Year,

Thomas Goltz

