

The Soviet Caucasus: Challenge and Opportunity  
Issachar Frontier Missions Research

*Based in Seattle, Washington (USA), Issachar is an interdenominational Christian information agency specializing in frontier mission fields in restricted-access countries.*

*The following article is excerpted from Soviet Caucasus Challenge Report: A Summary of Current Spiritual Needs and a Strategy for Response, a monograph prepared in 1984 by the Issachar Frontier Missions Research team in Seattle, Washington. This challenge report, designed primarily for the private use of individuals preparing for ministry in the Soviet Caucasus, includes confidential material that is not included here. Within the larger report is a survey of regional evangelistic challenges and a training manual. Specific coverage is given to more than a dozen topics, including entry options, current ministry opportunities, the use of evangelistic tools, and methods of dealing with rival belief systems.*

"Russia is always defeated, but never beaten." That old tsarist proverb aptly describes the Soviet Caucasus. This small, rugged piece of land, wedged between the Black and Caspian Seas and lying in the shadow of the Caucasus Mountains, has known little freedom in its long history. But the Caucasian peoples, rooted stubbornly in their ancient land and culture, have remained independent—at least in spirit. The Caucasus has seen many beginnings. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, which watered the Garden of Eden, begin high in the Caucasus Mountains. Mt. Ararat, where Noah and his family climbed out of the ark to begin cultivating the earth once more, lies near this area. The Caucasian peoples were among the very first to hear the Gospel and take it to heart. Today, however, the Soviet Caucasus needs another new beginning. Spiritual drought and the withering influence of Soviet communism have parched the region. We who have within us the Living Water are called to go and pour it out on dry, thirsty ground. The Soviet Caucasus—not beaten but spiritually defeated—is such a place.

Christianity wound its way over the mountain tracks into Armenia late in the third century in the heart of one Gregory, a young Armenian nobleman who had been converted while in Cappadocia (today southeastern Turkey). Although the Apostle Bartholomew, according to tradition, first proclaimed the Gospel there, the Armenian Church as we know it dates from Gregory, called "the Illuminator" for his evangelistic success. Returning to his homeland, he persevered in proclaiming his faith initially in the face of suspicion and persecution. Then King Tiridates III converted, and the nobility followed his example. Soon the general population moved over from paganism into the new faith. Many pagan priests became Christian clergy; even some pagan shrines were "converted" to Christian use. This "national conversion" created a church bound up with the people's national identity and indigenous culture.

For the newborn Church growth and purification became the challenge. By the end of the fourth century Nerses, Gregory's descendant, sought to lead the church into deeper piety, and the lingering paganism disappeared. Before another century passed the Bible, along with other Christian writings, had been translated into Armenian. In the fifth century the Persians attempted to impose their religion of Zoroastrianism on Armenia, but Christianity prevailed and more peaceful conditions returned.

The Gregorian Church held the nation together in succeeding centuries; it gave unity and encouragement to a people whose homeland frequently became a battleground for the armies of more powerful competing neighbors. As a national church the Gregorian Church maintained its distinctive character in the face of strong Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic influence. Its witness to authentic biblical Christianity, however, was corrupted by heresy and political ambition. In this century, under Communist control, the Church has been left intact as an institution, but Christianity has suffered ridicule and secular pressures from Soviet propaganda.

Evangelical Protestantism has reached Armenians, but usually among those who left to resettle in the West. Missionaries entered Armenia in the nineteenth century with a vision of reviving the old Gregorian Church, freshly translating the Bible and opening schools and seminaries. The Armenian clergy, however, saw them as rivals and in the ensuing conflict excommunicated those who responded to the missionaries. Although some evangelical groups resulted, the impact of this evangelistic mission on the nation and Church was small.

In Armenia today, although the ancient Church remains, it functions more as a symbol of Armenian nationalism than as a witness for vital Christianity. The Gospel has been distorted by heresy, obscured by ecclesiastical tradition, and today is oppressed by aggressive secularism. Christian witnesses must be recaptured by the vision that moved Bartholomew and Gregory to claim people for Jesus Christ.

Like Armenia, Georgia claims an apostolic visitation; according to tradition, Andrew evangelized along the southeastern coastal areas of the Black Sea. In the fourth century Constantine, the Byzantine emperor, sent missionaries into Iberia, as Georgia was then called. Following pagan opposition and the martyrdom of St. Nino, King Miriani converted and led his people into Christianity. As in Armenia, Persia attempted to impose its own religion on the Georgians, but led by their king, the people rose against this and preserved their faith. The invasions of successive Islamic conquerors brought more persecution and conflict, but nonetheless the Georgian Church continued to grow. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a Christian kingdom prospered under King David and Queen Tamara, and Christian culture flowered. Isolated to a large degree, the Georgian Orthodox Church retained its independence into the nineteenth century despite pressure from various invaders.

During the nineteenth century, however, when Imperial Russia took over Georgia, the Georgian Church neglected its responsibility as a testimony to the Gospel and became embroiled in nationalistic conflicts. In the twentieth century, under Stalin, the Christian witness of the Church was nearly silenced altogether. Stalin, ironically himself a Georgian and one-time seminary student, launched the most appalling persecution ever suffered in Georgia as well as a steady barrage of anti-religious propaganda. The organizer of this persecution was the infamous Lavrenti Beria, another son of Georgia and commander of Stalin's secret police. The Georgian church leaders resisted valiantly, but only the diversion of the Second World War brought relief. By then almost all of the churches were gone.

Protestant missionaries made intermittent but heroic journeys into Georgia during the nineteenth century. Count Felician Zaremba, a Polish nobleman who was converted in St. Petersburg, and John Melville, a Scottish Presbyterian, were among the valiant few who traveled though the

Caucasus region with the Gospel. Baptists and Lutherans also worked in Georgia. None of these missionaries, however, made a lasting impact on the region. The chief Christian representative remained the aged Georgian Orthodox Church. Distracted by its long struggle for national independence, it is now manipulated by political issues, and Christianity no longer has a vital witness in Georgia.

Azerbaijan, unlike its neighbors to the west, has almost no Christian history whatsoever. Arabs conquered the area in the seventh century, and it has remained Muslim ever since. Christianity has come into the area via Armenians, Georgians, Russians, and other foreigners, but it has remained an alien religion. Russia conquered the region in the nineteenth century. Although the tsar forbade the Russian Orthodox Church to evangelize among the Azerbaijanis, some evidence does suggest that missionaries won a few converts from among the minority Sunni Muslims. Today, however, all of the old Orthodox church buildings stand closed.

The nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries mentioned in connection with Georgia also worked in Azerbaijan. Count Zarembo helped establish an Armenian Lutheran Church in Shemakha, west of Baku, which survived into the twentieth century. German Baptist and Lutheran church buildings stand unused in Baku, mute testimony to departed Christian activity. Baptists and Orthodox have claimed only small minorities scattered throughout the republic. The predominant religion and culture in Azerbaijan is Shiite Muslim. There seems to be no significant historical Christian witness which might serve as a point of contact for Christian witness today; there certainly is no national church. The history and tradition with which Christians must contend in their witness are as alien as any in the Muslim world.

#### MISSIONARY/TENTMAKER ACTIVITY IN TRANSCAUCASIA

At present, there is unfortunately very little missionary activity taking place inside the Soviet Caucasus. This includes, by and large, efforts both from within the country and external programs, i.e., cross-cultural. What is more, there do not seem to be any records of significant evangelistic activity in the region following the Second World War. Few international organizations of any kind are permitted in the USSR.

Although Transcaucasia *does* have a history of Christian mission activity, most of this activity took place in pre-Revolutionary days. Perhaps the major post-Revolution development in the region was the spread of Pentecostalism in the 1920's-1930's. The roots of the Pentecostal movement in the USSR can, in fact, be traced to the Caucasus area. Under the Stalin regime, however, all religious activities, particularly in the Soviet leader's native Caucasus, were hampered considerably.

As far as foreign missionary activity is concerned, the *World Christian Encyclopedia* gives a 1973 figure of 30 personnel inside the Soviet Union. Of these, twenty were from the Western world, and included ten Protestants, five Orthodox, three Roman Catholics and two Anglicans. The remaining ten foreign personnel were Orthodox from other communist countries. The exact number of these foreign Christians stationed in the Caucasus, although not known for certain, is believed to be a very small number—if any at all. In addition to the rather meager efforts of the existing local churches in the Caucasus (the underground Pentecostals exhibit the most zeal), some ongoing foreign ministry work does exist. This work may be categorized in one of three

ways: 1) aid to the suffering church, 2) short-term evangelistic work conducted by tourists and 3) longer-term tentmaker ministries, generally involving students.

Several Christian mission organizations are involved in aiding existing congregations (both registered and unregistered) with spiritual and practical support. Couriers from these missions arrive periodically to inquire about current needs and deliver assistance. Very rarely do these workers engage in direct evangelism. This latter type of activity is more common among Christian tourists visiting the Soviet Union for short durations. Although this type of ministry has picked up in recent years, it still does not begin to compensate for the lack of outreach by the indigenous churches.

A few "tentmakers" are currently resident in the Soviet Caucasus. Most of these are students from various Third World countries. Although only a handful have come to the USSR with the express intention of engaging in evangelism and discipleship, most have nevertheless made themselves available to the Lord. Those who are active in Christian work often suffer educationally. Apparently Soviet authorities frequently mark down the grades of such students, which may in turn, cost them their government grants. Other types of tentmakers have, to date, been virtually non-existent.

#### PROFILE OF A PEOPLE: NATIONAL BACKGROUNDS AND TEMPERAMENTS

"Nowhere else in the world is there so great a variety of races and peoples, or such diversity of speech and custom in so small an area as here," writes one authority of the Caucasus region. The Caucasus is where East meets West and old mingles with new. "Here are cities bustling with industry... and tribes of mountain folk who have scarcely reached the perimeter of civilization..." Beneath all the clamor and color of this region, though, lie the deep roots of ancient peoples.

With a history dating back to the days of Noah, the Caucasus has long been one of the most settled and economically developed areas of the Soviet Union. For centuries the people living in the Caucasus suffered under the tyrannical yoke of numerous foreign invaders. Plundered, often devastated, the Caucasus was tossed by rival powers. Attempts at forced assimilation were sometimes successful, sometimes not. Influences were strong politically, economically, and culturally.

Although each republic has a distinctive character, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan have in common a strong nationalistic spirit. Perhaps it was several millennia of forcing a livelihood out of the mountains; perhaps it was centuries of living as oppressed people; or maybe it was simply an awareness of the value of their ancient cultures. Whatever the reasons, the Caucasian nations today are famous for resisting the Soviets' dogged attempts to russify them. Because of the demonstrated spirit and enterprise of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan—and also because the Russians depend upon what these republics produce—Moscow has found itself adopting a policy of mild leniency toward them. Officially no conflict exists. Realistically, these republics continue to hold fast to their respective national cultures and heritages.

"Their 'independence' is, of course, a fiction," one writer cautions. No matter how free the atmosphere or how strong the local "flavor," Moscow still pulls all of the important strings in these republics. The independence of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan exists, if it exists at all,

in the minds of the people; they view themselves that way. An old Georgian joke aptly expresses the independent response felt throughout each of these republics. As the train to Moscow pulls out of the Tbilisi station, the guard shouts, "All aboard for the Soviet Union!"

## **Georgia**

Visitors to Georgia are invariably charmed by the uninhibited and extroverted nature of the people. A Frenchwoman who traveled through the county in 1924 found them "hospitable to the point of folly, incapable of prudence or calculation, hotheaded, warm-hearted, ardently patriotic and absurdly sensitive; their manners are affable and simple, politely cajoling, and proud at the same time." Visitors should beware of saying anything critical—the Georgians are quick to defend their country. Over the course of their 2500-year-old history, they have witnessed the comings and goings of many different world powers and peoples, and Georgians are justifiably proud of the fact that they have retained their national culture amidst all the fluctuations and disasters of their history.

Georgia's origins extend as far back as history itself. They trace their ancestry to Noah's son Japheth and the first people to inhabit ancient Anatolia (present-day Turkey). The history of this land, where Jason is supposed to have searched for his Golden Fleece, has been the history of a conquered people; Rome, Greece, Byzantium, Persia, the Mongols and Turkey have all marched across Georgia, dividing, conquering and plundering the nation. Although Georgia has been dominated politically by Russia during most of the past two hundred years, the people remain fiercely patriotic. They stubbornly speak the same language they have spoken for centuries, and they marry only within their own cultural community. Soviet attempts at russification have met with strong and even violent resistance.

Georgia experienced a brief Golden Age during the Middle Ages. In the eleventh century, King David II set up a united kingdom, and under his great-granddaughter, Queen Tamara, Georgian arts and letters flourished. During the reign of this pious, diplomatic, and accomplished woman, Shota Rustaveli wrote his epic poem, "The Knight in the Panther's Skin," and dedicated it to his queen. The country never again enjoyed such peace and independence, but Georgians ever since have pointed with pride to the accomplishments of those years.

In the last few years of the eighteenth century, Georgia looked to Tsarist (Christian) Russia for protection from the Islamic powers that were threatening all of Transcaucasia. The king was careful to stipulate their independence in the treaty, but in 1801 Russia incorporated Georgia into the Empire anyway. The nationalistically-minded Georgians resented this new status. Becoming a Russian colony ensured their survival as a nation, but it disappointed their national hopes. The Russian Church, the Russian language and Russian culture elbowed their way into Georgian life.

Nationalistic tensions and resentments have characterized relations between Georgia and Russia ever since. In 1917 Georgia cheered the demise of the Tsarist government in Russia. Riding the wave of the revolution, they declared their own independence in 1918. In 1921, reneging on an earlier promise of national independence, the Bolsheviks forcibly annexed Georgia as a republic in the USSR. History had repeated itself. Today, of the three million people who live in the Georgian SSR, 69 percent identify themselves culturally and ethnically as Georgians. Armenians and Russians each account for about ten percent of the population, and 250,000



Azeris live in the southeast corner. About half of the population live in urban areas. Tbilisi, the capital city, has over a million inhabitants.

At first Georgians prospered under their new masters. But as the Soviets' goal of "merging" their empire's disparate nationalities became clear, it met with tough resistance in Georgia; "merging" really meant "becoming Russian," and at that a 2000-year-old national pride came out swinging. Much of the conflict since then has centered around the Georgian language. Unintimidated by Moscow's heavy-handed manners, 5000 Georgians demonstrated in the streets of Tbilisi in 1978 to uphold the official status of their language. Moscow, in that case, conceded to Georgian nationalism. Since 1978 other demonstrations have occurred protesting the increased use of Russian in the universities and demanding greater emphasis on Georgian language, literature, culture, and history. The celebrations in 1983 of the bicentennial of the treaty between Georgia and Russia, which the government billed as "the first manifestation of friendship between the Georgian and Russian peoples," sparked further expressions of Georgian nationalism. Since 1981 student involvement in both nationalist and religious groups has risen sharply. So has the incidence of crime among young people. These trends are seen by Western analysts as "symptomatic of nothing if not a blatant disregard for the tenets of mature socialism...." But, more importantly, they are yet another expression of the depth of Georgian patriotism.

Georgians are not anti-Communist per se; there are proportionally more Georgians in the Party than any other nationality. But their perception of themselves as a separate and individual nation prevents them from fully integrating with the Soviet system. Russia is a "friendly but foreign land," and Russians who visit Georgia are considered foreigners. This nationalism extends to embrace one of Georgia's most infamous sons—Joseph Stalin. Even though Stalin obliterated all of Georgia's intelligentsia during the purges of the 1920's and 1930's, Stalin has become a folk hero in Georgia. "Stalin was ours," they say. "This ours/yours distinction is a crucial one," notes one observer. "Georgians are loath to surrender to Russia anything Georgian, whether it be the memory of Stalin or a cup of coffee that a Russian soldier tries to buy from a Gori vendor who studiously ignores him." Americans, on the other hand, are welcomed with open arms because they are adversaries of the Russians.

Another practice which sets the Georgians apart from Russian overlords is their tendency to cling to "a very un-soviet scale of values." They have become the "black sheep" of the Soviet Union. Resourceful and ambitious, Georgians take great delight in beating the Soviets at their own economic game. They are legendary throughout the Soviet Union for doing just what the centrally planned state economy cannot seem to do. Private enterprise not only survives in Georgia, it flourishes. In 1977 authorities discovered in the Caucasus Mountains an entire village running a successful mail-order business in woolen garments. Border guards are kept busy trying to catch farmers who manage to travel to Moscow or Leningrad with briefcases full of tangerines and oranges bound for sale on the black market. Despite wages well below the national average, living standards in Georgia remain higher than anywhere else in the Soviet Union. Socialism seems to have gained little more than a shaky foothold in this republic where "money talks too loudly to suit a proper Communist."

On a more negative note, though, Georgians are legendary bandits. Among most of the Caucasian peoples, robbery was once considered an honorable occupation. At one time a

Georgian young man had a difficult time finding a wife if he had not stolen at least one horse. One seventeenth-century visitor described the Georgians as "arrogant, drunken, and immoral knaves." That visitor may have been biased, but today crime and alcoholism are growing problems in Georgia.

The Georgians see in themselves, however, more art than cunning. "Georgians are not merchants," insists one student. "They are artists: singers and movie directors and politicians who are so good that they accept the Russian rules and still win." And they do it with a certain flair. In spite of the seriousness with which they insist, "We are Georgians first and Soviet citizens second," they are likely, in the same breath, to call for wine, music and celebration.

### **Armenia**

Armenia, in contrast to the lively carefree spirit of its Georgian neighbors, stands out in its long and tragic history of wars, occupations, massacres, and deportations. Soviet Armenia is all that remains of the ancient realm of Great Armenia, which at one time included much of northern Turkey. Even so, thousands of Armenians dispersed throughout the world look at the Armenian SSR as their homeland. About five million people live in Soviet Armenia today; seventy-eight percent of them are of Armenian descent and the rest are Russian, Azeri and Kurdish. Two-thirds of the population live in cities; Yerevan, the capital city, has grown from a dusty village of 30,000 in 1920 to a city of over a million today. The republic is one of the most free and open in the USSR, due in large part to the character of the Armenian people.

Armenians have maintained a foothold on their land for over 3000 years, a notable achievement for a nation that has suffered so much dislocation and persecution. Historians have noted this "remarkable archaeological record of continuous human occupation of the region around Mt. Ararat since the Old Stone Age." The Armenians themselves look at Mt. Ararat, which they call "masis," as a cultural point of reference. The twin peaks symbolize who they are and where they have come from; now that the mountain lies just inside the Turkish border, it also reminds them of what they have suffered and how much they have lost.

The Armenians are very conscious of their ancient origins and proud of their roots in the civilizations of antiquity. Gevorg Emin, an Armenian poet and winner of the USSR State Prize, writes, "There are many different kinds of stone in Armenia, but you will never find an illiterate one. Step carefully on this land. Handle each stone gently even though it may be covered with moss and lichen and look rough and speckled. You have to be careful because you have only to scratch off a bit of moss to discover that the stone bears a picture made by prehistoric man or some Aramaean, Hittite, Chaldean or Urartu cuneiform writing...."

Throughout its history Armenia, like Georgia, has been prey to repeated invasions from both the East and the West, but, also like their Georgian neighbors, Armenians have managed to preserve a distinctive culture even as a conquered nation within a larger empire. For many years the Christian Armenian community lived unmolested under the Ottoman Turks. They were outnumbered in their own country by Muslim Turkic peoples, but the government allowed them a reasonable degree of autonomy. Always enterprising, Armenians were successful bankers and merchants and administrators in the Turkish government. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, the Turks turned against their loyal minority. Within twenty years half of the

Armenian nation had been slaughtered, and the survivors were scattered all over the world or reduced to starving refugees in their own country.

This tragedy reached its horrible climax in 1915 when the Young Turks controlled the Empire. On September 15, 1915, the Turkish interior minister Talaat Pasha telegraphed the governor of Aleppo with the following message: "You have already been informed that the government has decided to exterminate entirely all the Armenians living in Turkey. No one opposed to this order can any longer hold an administrative position. Without pity for women, children, and invalids, however tragic the methods of extermination may be, without heeding any scruples of conscience, their existence must be terminated."

The methods of extermination were ruthless and sadistic. "In every town and village of Turkish Armenia and Asia Minor, the entire Armenian population was ordered out. The men were usually led away and shot just outside their villages. A far worse fate awaited the women and children: they were forced to walk southwards in huge convoys to the burning deserts of northern Syria. Few survived the privations of these terrible death marches. For months afterwards the roads and tracks of Anatolia were littered with corpses and skeletons picked clean by vultures." Rafael de Nogales, a Venezuelan mercenary serving in the Turkish army, describes an encounter with a group of Armenian deportees who had stopped for a moment in a village marketplace: "Their sunken cheeks and cavernous eyes bore the stamp of death. Among the women, almost all of whom were young, were some mothers with children, or rather, childish skeletons, in their arms. One of them was mad. She knelt beside the half-putrefied cadaver of a newborn babe. Another woman had fallen to the ground, rigid and lifeless. Her two little girls, believing her asleep, sobbed convulsively as they tried in vain to wake her. By her side, dying in a scarlet pool, was yet another, beautiful and very young, the victim of a soldier of the escort. The velvety eyes of the dying girl, who bore every evidence of refinement, mirrored an immense and indescribable agony. . . ."

Those who did survive the trek to Syria were herded into open-air concentration camps where—starved, beaten and tortured by their guards—their agony was prolonged. An eyewitness described a "death pit" in the infamous Keir-al Zor camp in Syria: "Into this pit, 150 feet deep, hundreds of Armenians were thrown. Those at the bottom died, either crushed or smothered, while those at the top lived on for days *in extremis*. Guard prevented any from escaping."

Even after the Allied forces defeated the Turks, the Armenian people remained in a deep pit of suffering. Living conditions in the country were catastrophic: "Half a million refugees, dressed in filthy rags, roamed the land or shivered in caves and dugouts." Without food or medical care, "they were reduced to eating grass or gnawing on human bones until death released them from their misery." In 1920 the fragile Armenian government caved in before the advancing Bolshevik army. The Soviet Union and Turkey divided Armenia between themselves. At first in Soviet Armenia conditions were not much better, but eventually the Soviets proved to be kinder masters than the Turks had been. Stalin chose to make Armenia a showplace and poured money into the rebuilding of the republic. He encouraged Armenians dispersed in countries all over the world to "come home." Armenian cultural institutions sprang back to life with remarkable speed. Although conditions immediately following World War II were difficult, the 1950's saw a dramatic improvement in the quality of life in Armenia. Between 1940 and 1975 the



population of the Armenian SSR doubled. Armenians today experience the same constraints on their freedom imposed by the Soviet system on all its citizens, but many Armenians see their present situation as an improvement.

The memory of what they suffered at the hands of the Turks, however, has left a deep scar on the psyche of the Armenian people. Turkey has never been prosecuted for its acts, nor even admitted that a calculated genocide took place. That, added to the fact that Turkey still controls much of historic Armenia, has created an obsessive desire for retribution (or at least restitution) among Armenians. On April 24, 1965, on the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide, there was a huge demonstration in Yerevan, "perhaps the largest genuinely popular demonstration the USSR has ever seen, and it expressed fury and resentment against Turkey. Over and over again the participants shouted, 'We want our lands.'" The USSR has, for its own political reasons, refused to pursue Armenia's claim against Turkey.

The Armenians have been deeply affected by their tragedy. One observer notes that "beneath an outer veneer of hardness and fierce independence, Armenians carry deep inner wounds and suppressed feelings of rejection, isolation and hurt." But their history has taught them to cherish life. "...The Armenian people have a tenderness and compassion only produced by their identification with suffering. Their warmth and love is a genuine expression of their value on life...."

Like the Georgians, the Armenian people are fervently nationalistic. There are pressures to assimilate, both in the Soviet Union and in the West, but the Armenians have managed to preserve their ethnic and cultural individuality. As one writer put it, "One cannot fail to be struck by the fact that, although to be born Armenian is not to have the blessings of life automatically bestowed on one, Armenians themselves treat it as a cause for joy, and something that is in a most profound manner worth preserving."

Whatever else may be said about the Armenian people, their ability to survive and overcome tragedy is striking. Foreign observers have applauded the Armenians as an example of "what human courage and endeavor can achieve in the face of insuperable odds." Armenians inside and outside the Soviet Union show great incentive and determination to create some tangible prosperity out of the devastation of the beginning of the century. "In Armenia everything is of stone," reflected an Armenian journalist. "It is impossible for us not to be industrious. Whatever our work—engineer, journalist, scientist—we preserved the peasant attitude: to work hard...." Armenians today have something to show for their efforts: some of the best film directors, musicians and athletes in the Soviet Union are Armenians, and the country itself, which only a generation or two ago was saturated with Armenian blood, is now a vital, relatively prosperous republic.

The Armenians seem determined, though, to preserve the memory of the genocide. A huge monument to the victims of 1915 was designed and erected in Yerevan by an Armenian architect. "We have good memories," a journalist explains. "We never forget the good done to us. Nor the bad, for we have merciless enemies. Our character is like our climate: sharply continental. We love or hate strongly." The tragedy that the Armenians have endured, though, has not destroyed their warmth as a people, their generous hospitality, or their ready sense of

humor. This people has a great capacity for hope that is perhaps best symbolized by the mountain where God allowed humanity to alight and begin again.

### **Azerbaijan**

"As one approaches the Transcaucasian states from the north or north-east, the northern slopes of the mountains skirt the Caspian Sea at the city of Derbent. Here along the main route of the busy caravan roads of old runs the narrow passageway known as the Bab-ul-abvab or the Gate to the East. And indeed, this is where the East begins, the East which differs from the West in its religion and mores, its customs and skills, in its arts, architecture, techniques and attitude to the world as well as in such things as the colour of the skin, the notion of time and the judgment of actions. And, some twenty-five kilometers south of the Gate to the East lies Azerbaijan."

"There are a number of similarities between the peoples living in the Caucasus," continues Hungarian writer Ilona Turanzky, "but there are at least as many differences." Azerbaijan is the odd sister of the three Caucasian republics. Azerbaijan was removed from the European influences that shaped Armenia and Georgia and unlike her neighbors, had no strong Christian tradition to cling to during the cultural and political storms that rocked her history. Lying on the junction of the major caravan routes between Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan took something from each of the peoples that traveled through. When all of Transcaucasia was under foreign domination, and while Armenia and Georgia were determinedly preserving their own distinct national cultures, Azerbaijan was, with a resigned shrug of her shoulders, blowing with the prevailing winds.

Azerbaijan can trace its history back as far as 2000 B.C. The Azeri people are descended from the nomads who at one time wandered all over the eastern world. Several millennia before Christ some of them paused at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains and settled down to raise crops and livestock. Archaeologists have unearthed the bits and pieces of what was once a thriving, technologically advanced society. Persia subdued this area early in its history and controlled it again between the third and seventh centuries. In the eighth century the Arabs invaded and conquered Azerbaijan, and the Turks followed them in the eleventh century.

Each of these conquering peoples colored Azerbaijan in some way. The local people had been skilled architects and craftsmen for centuries; now they adapted the colorful, ornate style of Persian art to their own. Persian Zoroastrianism mingled with pagan rites of fire worship. Under the Arabs, Baku became an important town. More significantly, Islam became the dominant religion and cultural force in Azerbaijan; thereafter, the styles and thought of Azerbaijan would grow out of the worldview of Islam. Today seventy percent of the Azerbaijanis are Shiite Muslims. Azerbaijan inherited its language from the Turks. The Azeri language is close enough to Turkish that a native of Baku can still communicate easily with a visitor from Istanbul. Today in the Azerbaijan SSR 98 percent of the people claim Azeri as their native language, and 70 percent of all publications, broadcasts, and classroom lectures are carried on in Azeri.

The Mongols invaded Azerbaijan in the thirteenth century, and this time there was no question of assimilation. The Mongols simply razed the cities, laid waste the orchards, and wrecked the irrigation systems. Over the following several centuries, Azerbaijan was tossed between the rule of the Seljuk Turks and the Mongols. By the fifteenth century the area consisted of several

Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan states and was, for 300 years, the object of rivalry between Persia and Turkey. In the midst of a power struggle between the warring states, Azerbaijan eventually fell to Persia. During the eighteenth century Persia and an expansionist-minded Russia vied for territory in Azerbaijan. In 1806 Baku and northern Azerbaijan were successfully incorporated into the Russian empire. At the time of acquisition the country was relatively backward and remained in this condition for the remainder of the century. As a country it had little appeal; persistently exploited for its oil, Baku had become a rather squalid, unattractive center of corruption. Russian rule initially had little effect on Azerbaijan and conditions remained comparatively peaceful.

The turn of this century, however, marked the beginning of a new sort of invasion into Azerbaijan. And once again, unlike its immediate neighbors in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan appears to have acquiesced to Soviet socialism. The large and often idle work force in Baku responded enthusiastically to Lenin's new ideas, and in 1917 they staged a revolution of their own. In 1921 Azerbaijan became part of the USSR. Remnants of both their ancient paganism and deeply-entrenched Muslim faith linger, but Azerbaijan has responded more quickly than most republics to anti-religious propaganda. Islam has become a matter of national identity rather than deep faith. One young woman remarked, "If you're born an Azerbaijani, you're Muslim. Not because of what you do or believe but because your nationality happened to be that particular one." Nevertheless, Islam has not been completely eradicated and continues, despite the government's efforts to discourage it, to affect the cultural mindset of Azerbaijanis; many are quite comfortable espousing Marxism in public while believing the faith of their parents and grandparents at home.

Nearly six million people live in the Azerbaijan SSR today and half of them live in cities. They are a diverse population—there are between 70 and 110 different nationalities in Azerbaijan—but 78 percent are ethnic Azeris. Russians and Armenians combined account for another 16 percent. Friendships that cross the social barriers between Azerbaijanis and Russians are rare. The population of Azerbaijan is growing much faster than the Soviet average, due primarily to a high birthrate and great longevity.

The capital city of Baku is, with over a million and a half residents, the fifth largest city in the Soviet Union. At the turn of the century Maxim Gorky described this dirty, industrialized oil town as "a brilliant picture of dismal hell." Since then the Soviet government has cleaned up Baku, planted trees, and rescued some historic buildings.

Today the people of Baku are well-educated, progressive, and modern in their outlook.

In remoter areas, however, modern ways have not saturated the ground as thoroughly. Rural mountain people lead a quieter, more relaxed existence. These people are the longest-living in the world: 49 out of every 100,000 live a hundred years or more. A doctor describes some centenarians now living in Baku: "They are early risers and they work hard. No lazybones ever lived long." Not only industrious but also jovial and open, "they are fond of music and like to dance. They sing and joke and visit each other. We are an emotional people!"

Some Western visitors to Azerbaijan have seen another side of this people's character—something secretive, even sinister. One American man tells of an encounter with two Azerbaijani men. He began what appeared to be friendly and open conversation with them but

soon realized that they were only interested in buying his wristwatch. When the American refused, they followed him to a deserted place. "The one guy asked me what time it was," the American recalls, "and when I put my wrist out he grabbed my arm very strongly and the other guy jumped me from the back and knocked me to the ground and started kicking me. Then the other guy took a rock and hit me in the back of the head." The would-be thieves were unsuccessful and the American escaped without serious injury; stories of Azerbaijani violence suggest that this was not an isolated case of petty thievery. Christian African exchange students living in Krasnodar in the RSFSR reported to American field teams that they were afraid to go to Azerbaijan. They said that the Azerbaijanis were racially prejudiced and violent people. There had apparently been a series of assaults on African exchange students in Azerbaijan and several had even been murdered.

Although Azerbaijanis are proud of their cultural heritage, they lack the intense national pride so close to the surface in both Armenia and Georgia. In character, they appear to be more malleable than their sister republics, more willing to accept the fact that Moscow runs things now, and more content to simply go on about their business. Even Islam, which usually refuses to compromise with any other worldview, has formed a cautious truce with Marxism in Azerbaijan.

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