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THE TRANSFORMATION OF ARMENIAN SOCIETY
UNDER STALIN

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I am grateful for the opportunity afforded by this conference to reflect, after two decades, upon a subject I once studied intensively and in detail. While no important new facts about Stalinist Armenia have emerged, to the best of my knowledge, I now see new dimensions in the body of old facts. In particular, the study of ecology, anthropology, and the comparative social history of Europe has served to expand my point of view.

Now I am more aware of continuities between pre-Stalinist and Stalinist Armenian society, and between pre-Stalinist and Stalinist policies toward that society. It seems that there are constraints on the organization of human life that are too strong to be altered in a generation or even several generations. At the same time certain Stalinist policies did change the structure of human relationships in Armenia, and it is now easier for me to identify which policies were most important.

In my youthful frame of mind I regarded ideology -- some kind of modernizing ideology -- as an important influence on the behavior of Soviet leaders. I assumed that there was a blueprint in Moscow for the building that these people were trying to construct. Now, in my more cynical middle age, I see Soviet

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leaders as primarily concerned with erecting an economic base that would secure them in power against all potential contenders, domestic and foreign. The reasons they gave for what they did, and the real reasons, were very different. The transformation of Armenian society that they effected was in large part probably unplanned and even unintended.

In order to understand what Stalin and his associates were trying to do in Armenia, as well as what they actually accomplished, it may be helpful to examine the unpleasant realities that they had to face initially, in the Nineteen Twenties.

First, the actual control of the central government over the behavior of individual Armenians, especially those living in villages, was quite weak. The Soviet authorities lacked loyal and competent personnel in rural areas.¹ This, of course, represented a continuity from the past: Persian shahs and Russian tsars were no better equipped than the Communists to deal with the Armenians.

The second unpleasant reality was that the pressure of population on scarce resources in Eastern Armenia was increasing. This had started in the mid-nineteenth century. Between 1831 and 1873 the population within the area of Soviet Armenia tripled, and between 1873 and 1913 it doubled, reaching one million. This pace of growth was more rapid than that

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of tsarist Russia generally. During the period 1918-1920 the Eastern Armenians were caught in an unromantic triangle with the Russians and Turks; Malthusian forces -- war, famine, and disease -- reduced the Armenian population by about one-third. But the Armenians made up the loss in twenty years, reaching 1.3 million in 1940. Since World War II was not fought on Armenian soil, the loss of population there was much less than in the previous conflict; in five years there was a 10% decline. In the subsequent twenty-five years the population of Soviet Armenia more than doubled, exceeding the predicted maximum of Malthus, and reaching 2.5 million in 1970.²

An important cause of rapid Armenian population growth was the age of brides: in one village, of those females born in 1905 or earlier, 68.2% were married by the age of 18, and 95.5% by the age of 22. In another village, 82.2% were married at 18 and 97.7% at 22.³ Early child-bearing was supported by custom; young couples tended to live with the groom's family, and several women cooperated in the work of child care. The introduction of modern medical care into Eastern Armenia in the late nineteenth century served to stimulate population growth by reducing mortality from smallpox and malaria.⁴ A tendency to warm weather between 1890 and 1940 may have helped increase the food supply.

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Rapid population growth is not a debit from the point of view of rulers if they can put to work the torrent of young people entering the labor market; however, the willingness of people to work is a function of rewards and punishments. In a poor country rulers have limited ability either to reward or punish effectively.

A third unpleasant reality faced by Stalin was an initial shortage of educated Armenians in the territory of Soviet Armenia. Those educated Armenians that existed preferred to live in Tiflis, Baku, and other towns of the Russian Empire which had economic and cultural attractions greater than those of poor and backward Erivan. In Stalin's time it was not difficult to attract a substantial number of educated Armenians to Soviet Armenia to participate in the building of a modern capital city. For after the Genocide of 1915, Armenian nationalist sentiment was very strong and there was a kind of "zionist" urge to return to the Armenian homeland. But it was more difficult to tempt educated Armenians to work in the unsanitary, unenlightened, and isolated Armenian villages.

A fourth unpleasant reality faced by Stalin was competition and conflict between the various ethnic groups within the vast territory of the U.S.S.R. Ethnic tension was not strong in Armenia, where the population was 85% Armenian, but

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it was intense in Transcaucasia. Armenians, Georgians, and Azerbaijanis competed for money from the Union budget. This problem could not be solved by a program of assimilating these peoples into Russian society: There were few Russians living in Transcaucasia, and the natives were remarkably uninterested in learning Russian even when there were public schools available that taught it.

A final unpleasant reality was the international situation. Stalin and associates were conscious of -- some would say paranoid about -- the potential threats to their security posed by foreign governments. They ruled a country rich in fossil fuels and ores needed by industrial societies, but poor in the means to defend these riches, lacking as they did industrial capacity, railroads, modern weapons, and personnel capable of manning them. This was revealed in World War I. International lateral pressure was probably one stimulus that prompted Stalin to adopt policies that were radical, risky, and repugnant to millions within the Soviet Union.

To be sure, many of Stalin's policies were a continuation of, or variations on, Tsarist themes. The recruitment of Armenians to run Armenia -- korenizatsia¹ -- was an extension of the tsarist policy of cooption.⁵ It was simply the easiest way to recruit personnel. Stalin's push to spread literacy,

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and to teach Russian as a second language, was another extension of the will of the tsars. Industrialization itself was, of course, promoted by the last three tsars as well as the Bolsheviks. Stalin did more than the tsars to develop means of repression, but he was no different from the tsars in his aspiration to achieve as much control of the population as was necessary to remain securely in power.

However, it is possible to identify certain Stalinist policies as relatively innovative. Whether or not the results they achieved in Armenia were intended or not, I cannot say, but these policies did change the structure of Armenian society.

The first policy was to reward and punish individuals as individuals, without discrimination as to family, sex, or nationality. Of course, there was actually some discrimination, especially in giving access to the highest level of rewards. Children of Soviet leaders, Great Russians, and men, had advantages greater than average. But, as compared with tsarist policies Stalinist policies did sanction greater individuation of rewards and punishments.

Specifically, this meant that on a collective farm all family members were remunerated individually. In this way the system worked to liberate wives and children from patriarchal authority. This was even more true of wage and salaried workers.

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While individual family members might choose to pool their resources, they had the option to do otherwise.

The process of individuating rewards and punishments began in the late nineteenth century when young Armenian men went to urban and industrial areas to do wage labor, often on a seasonal basis. Some were reluctant to turn over all their earnings to their father for the general family fund. However, Stalin speeded up this process by officially decreeing individuation of rewards and punishments and also expanding rapidly opportunity for individually rewarded labor.

Women constituted a great untapped source of labor in pre-Stalinist Armenia. They were just as capable as men of doing most of the jobs that needed to be done in the new industrial economy. Stalin ended discrimination against females at all educational levels. He paid husbands such miserable wages and salaries that they gladly "consented" to let their wives work full-time for wages or salaries. When women did this they did not marry so early or have so many children.⁶ So at times per capita productivity grew faster than the population.

Stalin opened opportunities for advancement to all, regardless of ethnic origin. The brightest young Armenians were welcome at the Universities of Moscow and Leningrad. Anastas Mikoyan went to the top and stayed there, as did many other

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Armenians. Stalin recruited non-Russians more systematically than the tsars and used them throughout the Soviet Union, not just in their home territory. Of course, Stalin did not abolish all ethnic discrimination; indeed he was probably guilty of mass deportation and genocide of certain ethnic groups during World War II and in addition he was probably anti-Jewish. But in Stalinist Russia there was room at the top for talent, and Stalin kept the top roomy by periodically purging and exterminating some of the people who lived there. Usually, his victims were from all ethnic groups, but no ethnic group in particular. Usually Stalin individuated punishment as well as reward.

There was a political advantage in the individuation of rewards and punishments. While it created disaffected individuals, it was less likely to create disaffected families, villages, and ethnic groups. Disaffected individuals lack a natural tie, such as kinship, common community, or language. They may form a voluntary association, such as a political party, but a voluntary association is more detectable than opposition within a "natural" social unit, and thus easier to control.

In addition to the individuation of rewards and punishments other Stalinist policies were innovative. Stalin approached

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the problem of projecting central authority into localities in a new way. His method was crude and violent and in many respects counter-productive, but at least he succeeded, in a political sense, better than any other previous ruler. I refer, of course, to his program of collectivization of agriculture.

"Collectivization" is a misleading term, perhaps intentionally misleading. Stalin confronted an agrarian economy that was already collective in the sense that the household, not the individual, was the unit of production and consumption. In addition, various households collaborated in certain activities. Stalin did not create positive "togetherness" in the village, only the negative "togetherness" of common misery and common desire to beat the system. Perhaps it is not much of an exaggeration to say that Stalin enserfed the peasants. They were bound to the land, since they couldn't leave without exit permits; they had an alien overseer, the kolkhoz chairman; and this overseer forced them to produce what Stalin wanted at the price he was willing to pay. Collective farms were failures measured in terms of potential productivity, but they were successes as instruments of central government control over local communities. Stalin did much to plug the cracks in the leaky basement of his empire.

Stalin's policies in the countryside were something new

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in the experience of the Armenians. They had been able, by devious means, to frustrate the ambitions of shahs and sultans because the latter could not project their power into the Armenian villages on a continuous basis. Stalin treated his cadres like soldiers, subject to military orders, fighting constant battles. He relieved their lonely lot with radios, movies, and free copies of The Complete Works of I. V. Stalin. He provided them with carrots and sticks for dealing with the resentful people under their supervision. It was harder to evade the orders of these minions of central government.

Stalin also used the nationalist sentiments of the Armenians and other nationalities to advantage in building the economy of the Soviet Union. This was possible because nationalism may serve merely to define a communication community; a nationality does not have to have an independent state. In Soviet Armenia the Armenian language was the official language of government and instruction, as well as everyday life, even though Soviet Armenia was in no sense a sovereign state. Moreover, the ideology of nationalism does not include any particular set of values or goals for an ethnic group: these are flexible. One can be an Armenian and build socialism, capitalism, or whatever. So nationalist sentiment was not necessarily a threat to central government in the Soviet Union: it was a

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sentiment that could be manipulated for the purposes of the central leadership.

This meant that Stalin told the Armenians, "Ok, you can go on talking Armenian among yourselves. Just watch what you say. You can work together as a tribe. Just do the work I give you and take the slice of the pie I give you without making a fuss or trying to cheat." The Armenians didn't always watch what they said. They often made a fuss about their slice of the pie and tried to beat the system, often successfully. But in general they accept Stalin's policy because there were no other practical alternatives. Even the theoretical alternatives were worse: the Armenians were too few and isolated to take an independent international role. Those that emigrated to Western industrial countries tended to lose their ethnic identity by assimilation. Under Stalin at least they were fruitful, they multiplied, and they remained Armenian. "Capitalism" and "socialism" were abstractions they heard about in school; nationalism was a feeling that they could express in a sad song or at a soccer match with some other ethnic group.

And so the Armenians worked hard -- for themselves and for Armenia, they thought, but also for Stalin and the U.S.S.R. They and the other peoples of the Soviet Union, under the leadership of Stalin and associates, did lay the foundations of

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an industrial economy. They did this within the framework of a strong, multi-national state. Stalin was unjust and cruel and had vulgar taste in architecture, but he deserves some credit, after all.

My final reflection is that what Stalin did to Armenian society in a single generation was neither better nor worse than what happened to families, villages, and ethnic groups over many generations in the industrial West. The story of Armenian society under Stalin is not just their story; it is ours as well. Their story was played at fast forward; ours, in slow motion. Stalin may be interpreted as the personification of forces that have engulfed all of us. For we, like all the Soviet peoples, belong to a social system in which rewards and punishments are individuated, in which the authority of central government reaches into our everyday experience, and in which political leaders appeal to our tribal loyalties to gain control over our hearts, our minds, our money, and our lives.

NOTES

1. Mary K. Matossian, The Impact of Soviet Policies in Armenia (Leiden, 1962), pp. 35-52.
2. G. E. Avakyan, Haykakan S.S.R. Bnakchutyune (Erevan, 1975), pp. 28-35.
3. A. E. Ter-Sarkisants, Sovremennafâ sem'ia u armian (Moscow, 1972), pp. 109-111.
4. R. S. Pasardanyan, Hayastani aroghchapahutyan patmutyun, 1828-1965 (Erevan, 1973).
5. S. Frederick Starr, "Tsarist government: the imperial dimension," Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices (J. R. Azrael, ed.) (N.Y., 1978), pp. 18-19.
6. Ter Sarkisants (1972), pp. 110-111 and Avakyan (1975), pp. 38 and 44.