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THE CAUCASUS REGION AND RELATIONS WITH THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

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Transcaucasia - the area that lies south of the main range of the Caucasus, north of Turkey and Iran, west of the Black Sea and east of the Caspian - is one of the most diverse, rich, and vital regions of the Soviet Union. Its three principal nationalities - the Armenians, the Azerbaijanis, and the Georgians - belong to three distinct linguistic families and three separate cultures. However, they are only the largest of many groups that inhabit the land which the Arabs once called "the Mountain of Languages."

Though annexed to Russia over a hundred and fifty years ago, Transcaucasia has largely preserved its non-Russian character. Its peoples are deeply conscious of their ancient heritage and do not intend to relinquish their cultures in favor of the Russian culture. It is this psychological element - the desire to ensure the survival of their cultures, and a certain Middle Eastern style of art, food, manners, and attitudes, that characterizes the Armenians, the Georgians, and the Azerbaijanis, setting them apart from the Russians who constitute close to ten percent of the population of the area.

Transcaucasia became part of Russia as a result of several wars with Iran and the Ottoman Empire. It was the power vacuum produced in Iran by the collapse of the central government under the blows of rebellious Afghans that drew Peter the Great into eastern Transcaucasia and led to the occupation of Iran's Caspian provinces (Darband, Baku, Talesh, Gilan, Mazandaran, and Astarabad). However, these conquests proved ephemeral.

Some fifty years later the continued weakness of the Iranian monarchy permitted King Erekle of Kartlo-Kakheti to pursue an independent foreign policy, becoming an ally of Russia against the Turks (1768-1774). In 1783 Erekle signed a treaty with Russia, renouncing his allegiance to Iran and giving up his right to conduct foreign relations without Russia's

supervision. Russia in turn promised Georgia protection and autonomy under Erekle's Bagratid dynasty. The treaty did not protect Georgia against an Iranian invasion in 1795 but gave Russia a pretext for intervention and the ultimate annexation of Georgia in 1801.

Iran could not remain indifferent to the loss of Georgia, the capture of Ganjeh in Azerbaijan in 1804, and the subsequent penetration of Iranian Armenia by Russian forces. The Shah felt compelled to wage two wars, both of which ended in defeat and the surrender to Russia of the khanates of Darband, Ganjeh, Qarabagh, Shirvan, Baku, Kubeh, Talesh, Yerevan, and Nakhjavan. In a brief war with Turkey (1828-1829) Russia acquired Anapa, Sukhumi, and Poti on the Black Sea. The annexation of the districts of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki brought Russian possession in Transcaucasia essentially to their present extention.

Though the conquered Transcaucasian territories were joined to Russia as provinces, disregarding historic divisions, Georgian kingdoms ceased to exist, segments of Armenia were not put together but directly incorporated as administrative units, the khanates of eastern Transcaucasia did not survive as political entities, none of this sufficed to prevent the rise of national sentiment among the subject peoples. Passage of time seemed only to increase their desire for autonomy or independence. The Russians unwittingly stimulated local nationalisms by introducing the Transcaucasian elite to European thought which, in the late nineteenth century, was dominated by various ideologies that glorified the nation-state.

Dissatisfaction with Russian rule explains the large number of Caucasians who joined the revolutionary movement late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century. Some, like Stalin, Shaumian, and Orjonikidze, removed themselves from their ethnic base and operated as members of an all-Russian movement. Others, among them virtually all Georgian Mensheviks, Armenian Dashnaks, and Azerbaijani Musavatists,

turned out to be patriots first. The separation from Soviet Russia in 1918 and the formation of the independent republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan produced an enourmous expansion of national consciousness of which politically sensitive Russians, such as Lenin himself, were very much aware. When the Red Army took over the Transcaucasian republics one after another in 1920 and 1921, Moscow disguised its rule, signing treaties with the Bolshevik "governments" of the newly reconquered nations and, later, merging them in a Transcaucasian federation that joined the U.S.S.R. as one of its constituent republics.

Though political and economic power quickly coalesced in Moscow, the peoples of Transcaucasia received a measure of cultural autonomy. Schools and universities educated the population in its native languages; native art, music, drama, and literature were encouraged. Soviet culture was proclaimed to be socialist in its content but national in its form. (In the nineteen-thirties this was translated to mean that everyone could praise Stalin in his native tongue.)

The degree to which Transcaucasia acquiesced in Moscovite domination varied from people to people. The Armenians, whose very existence was threatened by the vigorous and aggressive Turkey and whose attempt to defend their independence was finally crushed at Zangezur, were stunned and quiet. The Georgians, led by the overwhelmingly popular Social Democrats (Menshevik), staged an uprising in 1924. However, the contending forces were too unequal. Russian troops and the OGPU drowned the rebellion in blood. Some 10,000 Georgians were killed, another 20,000 exiled to Siberia. The Azerbaijanis staged a number of local uprisings that were led sometimes by mullas, at other times by tribal chieftains who continued to exercize considerable influence over the population. None of the attempts to overthrow Soviet authority had the remotest chance of success.

Through the frightful years of collectivization, early industrialization, and Stalin's terror, Transcaucasia was ruled as a colony of Moscow. One by one local leaders disappeared from sight. The purges that began with Mensheviks, Musavatists, and Dashnaks, ended with a veritable massacre of Bolsheviks between 1936 and 1939. Transcaucasia was thoroughly "pacified." There remained no visible opposition. Nationalist deviationism became the worst sin a non-Russian could commit. It was no longer fashionable to remember Lenin's denunciations of "great power chauvinism." Stalin had transformed himself into a Russian and the Russians became once again the "gospodstvuiushchaia natsüa," (dominant people) of a reconstituted empire.

Those growing up in Transcaucasia in the 1930-ies and 1940-ies were simultaneously benumbed by the terror and stimulated by rapid industrialization. Change was the mode of life. Huge industrial complexes sprang up where yesterday goats pastured on the sides of mountains. Schools, hospitals, theaters, slogans, parades, banners, and the incessant din of propaganda that magnified every achievement, while hiding every failure, created an atmosphere in which there was no room for nationalism. Yet nationalism, that most potent force of the twentieth century, persisted among all peoples of the U.S.S.R. The very fact that the Russians were free to show pride in their past, to boast of Alexander Nevskii - a prince of Novgorod canonized by the Orthodox Church, of Tsar Peter the Great, of Suvorov - a general who helped put down Pugachev's peasant uprising and fought the armies of the French revolution, and even General Iermolov - the cruel conqueror of many Transcaucasian khanates, evoked in the Georgians, the Armenians, and the Azerbaijanis a thirst for their own past and a desire to affirm their identities.

The three principal peoples of Transcaucasia possessed a number of advantages that helped preserve their national consciousness. Each had its own language with a rich and varied literature. Each had a strong culture, quite original in the cases of Armenia and Georgia, largely Persian in the

case of Azerbaijan, but in all three instances rich in art, architecture, music, and thought. The Armeno-Gregorian Church and Shiite Islam provided further support to the Armenian and the Azerbaijani sense of separateness. The relatively high literacy rates, and high proportion of professional people - doctors, engineers, scientists,- in the population further increased the sense of pride and self-confidence, especially among the Georgians. The very fact that many Caucasian Bolsheviks, occupied important positions in Moscow, helped maintain a sense of their own worth among the peoples who gave Russia Stalin, Orjonikidze, Enukidze, Beria, Shaumian, Mikoian, and other figures, less known but still influential.

The Soviet government faced a paradox. Industrialization demanded a rapid increase in the number of engineers, doctors, teachers, scientists, agronomists, technicians of every kind. Yet the expansion of education led to the spread of national sentiments and a sense of separateness. In the 1920-ies this process was encouraged. National languages were given preference over Russian. A campaign was conducted for the "rooting" (Korenizatsiia) of officials in national republics. To maintain a position of responsibility every official had to learn the language of the republic in which he lived and worked, even if he happened to be an ethnic Russian. Most Russians resented the requirement of learning "difficult and useless" languages such as those of Transcaucasia. For them Azeri Turkish did not have the standing of French or German. The program did not make Russians bilingual. To this day most of them do not speak or even understand the languages of the peoples among whom they live. However, it did advance the cause of the linguistic nationalism in Transcaucasia. There was a large upsurge in the publication of books, the production of plays, and the general public use of national languages in every republic. Universities and institutes engaged in research into the past of native peoples, their folklore, their customs and traditions.

Moscow was not unaware that the promotion of national consciousness was enthusiastically welcomed by the peoples of Transcaucasia, nor of the concomitant fact that Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani national pride frequently turned into a dislike of other ethnic groups. Contrary to the constant official reiteration in party and government publications of eternal friendship among all the inhabitants of the Soviet Union, the peoples of Transcaucasia had a long history of mutual hostility of which the Armeno-Azerbaijani feud was only the bloodiest instance. The glorification of one's own historical-cultural tradition was often tantamount to the rejection, the denigration, and the dismissal of the cultural traditions of others, including that of Russia. Rousseau's belief that ancient practices of a people should be preserved was amply justified for these "will always have the advantage of drawing the people closer to their own land and will give them a certain natural repugnance for foreign nations." The Soviet government could have tolerated intra-Caucasian hostilities. It could not allow anti-Russian feelings, for it was the Russians who held the Union together.

Stalin, a Georgian by birth and upbringing, tried to turn himself into a Russian, identifying with the dominant nationality of the Soviet Union. As early as 1918, when appointed by Lenin to be Commissar of Nationalities, Stalin began to display his pro-Russian bias. It was over the treatment of Georgian Bolsheviks by himself and Orjonikidze that Stalin clashed with Lenin who advocated a more sensitive, more considerate rule.

Lenin's fears that Russified non-Russians such as Stalin, or the Polish Bolshevik Felix Dzierzinski, would turn into oppressors of minority nationalities proved justified. Though the Stalin Constitution of 1936 guaranteed to the constituent republics all sorts of rights, including the right to secede from the Union, these remained on paper. The promulgation of the Stalin constitution coincided with the rapid growth of Russian nationalism which received official sanction and encouragement.

Transcaucasia suffered from the Stalin terror of 1935-1939 no less than other areas of the U.S.S.R. Mdivani, Mgaloblishvili, Orakhelashvili, Okujava, Lakoba, Lortkipanidze, Khanjian, Martikian, Ter-Gabrielian, Amatouni, Musabekov, Rahnanov, Efendiev , Akhundov, Huseinov - these were but a few of the leading Bolsheviks who were arrested, accused of crimes, and executed as enemies of the people. Transcaucasian Bolsheviks who fell afoul of Stalin were regularly accused of bourgeois nationalism, a charge never made against their Russian comrades. While all such charges were false, their constant repetition at purge trials in Baku, Tbilisi, and Yerevan, indicated Stalin's and Moscow's deep seated fears of nationalism and separatism among the non-Russian masses of the Soviet Union.

After World War II the peoples of Transcaucasia were subjected to an ever more intense Russian nationalism. The primacy of the Russian nation was now openly asserted. The Russian language was promoted not only as a means of communication among the peoples of the U.S.S.R. but as a carrier of a world culture superior, by implication, to the languages and cultures of others. The very conquest of the Caucasus by the Tsars, once branded as shameful aggression, was now praised as a positive good. The inclusion of Transcaucasia in the Russian Empire was represented as necessary for the survival of the Armenian, Georgian, and, mirabile dictu, Azerbaijani peoples, who had been threatened by "Asiatic barbarism."

The repressive policies of the last years of Stalin's life effectively prevented outward manifestations of nationalism among Transcaucasians. Beneath the surface resentment against Russia grew apace. Local hostilities also continued. The Azerbaijanis did not think much of the Armenians. The Armenians felt the same way about the Azerbaijanis. The Georgians complained that half the population of Tbilisi was Armenian. The Armenians and the Azerbaijanis felt that the Georgians received preferential treatment from Moscow because of Stalin. The Azerbaijanis also resented the fact that both the Georgians and the Armenians were allowed by Moscow to keep their ancient alphabets whereas Azeri Turkish had first been Latinized and then Cyrillicized.

Stalin's death shook the Soviet Union. In the ensuing struggle for power, the hated Beria made an appeal for the support of non-Russians by promising them better treatment and protection of their national rights. Beria, the butcher of Georgia, the dreaded head of the N.K.V.D. publicly admitted that there had occurred violations of such rights. He implied that somehow he, a member of a minority was the one most worthy of trust on this issue, as if Stalin had not been a Georgian like himself. Beria's bid for power failed, but the Party leadership made some concessions to minorities. The stridency of Russian chauvinism diminished perceptibly. The pre-revolutionary struggles of the non-Russian peoples for their independence and national survival were no longer equated with reaction. Even Shamil, the great leader of the Mountaineers of the Northern Caucasus, and a hero to all Caucasians was partially rehabilitated.

Here one must note a strange and ironic phenomenon: the apotheosis of Stalin in Georgia. The Georgian Bolsheviks who lived and worked in their home land after February 1921 had ample reasons to dislike Stalin. In 1922 and 1923 he had encouraged, or conducted, centralizing policies which the Georgian Party leaders resented. They were deeply hurt by the rude and brutal enforcement of such policies in Georgia by Stalin's friend, Orjonikidze. Early in 1923 a number of leading Georgian Bolsheviks, among them Philip Makharadze who had taught young Stalin Marxism, and Budu Mdivani, complained to Lenin. Lenin took up the cause of the Georgians, eventually breaking with Stalin over that issue. A stroke (March 1923) prevented Lenin from taking the case to the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

Georgian masses derived a vicarious satisfaction from Stalin's power. He was one of their own. The progress of the Soviet Union, the victory over the Germans in World War II, the might of the Soviet Union, could be attributed to the acts of Ioseb Jughashvili, son of a cobbler from Gori. His cruelty could be forgiven. Did not the Russians glorify Ivan the Terrible? Did not the Persians glorify Nader Shah? When Stalin died many Georgians

felt bereavement and fear for their future as a nation. Somehow they had come to think that they indeed had been granted a privileged status by their distant and great compatriot.

Destalinization was unpopular among the Georgians. A Tbilisi cab driver did not try to conceal his resentment over the treatment "these Russians" gave the great son of Georgia. The Russians, he lectured, did not know how to manage their affairs. Their state was created for them by the Vikings. When the Viking blood was diluted and the Tsars were Russified, the country began to disintegrate. Ultimately it was a Georgian who saved Russia and made her the greatest and most powerful state on earth. In recompense the Russians have pulled down his statues. "But not in Georgia! We remember him." Thus the cult of Stalin was transformed in his native land into an adjunct of Georgian nationalism.

The relaxation of Russian pressure on Transcaucasia was temporary. Even before the downfall of Khrushchev signs of a partial return to a sterner treatment of non-Russians could be discerned. More recently Soviet publications have been reemphasizing familiar slogans and doctrines: the conquest of the Caucasus (always called the union of the Caucasus and Russia, the word conquest being tabu) was a progressive event, Russian culture is the most progressive of cultures, the Russian people is the older brother of other peoples of the U.S.S.R.

In its dealings with Transcaucasia Moscow faces a number of complex and mutual contradictory issues. There is, for instance, the need to treat Transcaucasia as a single unit. Soviet literature uses the term Transcaucasian Economic Region to refer to the advanced integration of Transcaucasia's industry. Though Transcaucasia's importance to the economy of the Soviet Union has somewhat decreased with the relative diminution of Baku's oil output, which accounted for 71% of the total Soviet oil output in 1940 and for only 5.7% in 1970, Transcausia is still an area vital to

the economic wellbeing of the Union. Its petrochemical industry, its hydroelectric power plants, its manganese and copper, its tea, wine, and fruit crops, its health resorts, play a conspicuous role in the life of the U.S.S.R.

Treating Transcaucasia as a single entity, however, is fraught with danger. On the one hand such treatment tends to create a fairly powerful unit that, under some circumstances, might challenge Moscow; while on the other hand, economic unification is resented by Transcaucasian nationalities which see in it an attempt to destroy the economic basis of their national existence.

From Moscow's point of view the peoples of Transcaucasia are excessively preoccupied with their own languages, histories, and cultures. Moscow has been pushing the teaching of the Russian language, demanding that it be more widely used, and that some of the instruction in national schools be conducted in Russian. The Transcaucasians are obviously anxious for the future of their tongues and extremely sensitive to anything that suggests the slightest decline in the standing of their languages. In 1978 during the discussions of new constitutions to be adopted by Soviet republics, drafts of the new constitutions were published in the three Transcaucasian republics,as elsewhere. It was immediately noticed that the new constitutions in each case omitted all reference to national languages as official languages of the republics. This was taken to mean that Georgian, Armenian, and Azeri Turkish were being "disestablished" and that eventually they would be replaced by Russian. Protests occurred in Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Baku. In Georgia and Armenia students rioted. The government had not been prepared for the vehemence and the scale of the protests. The riots were put down by force, but the drafts were withdrawn. When the final texts of the constitutions were promulgated, they contained the old clauses, mentioning Georgian, Armenian, and Azeri as official languages of their respective republics.

The nature of the Soviet state and of the Communist Party, and the overwhelming strength of the Russian element in the U.S.S.R. are such that no separatist movement can exist in Transcaucasia or in any of the other constituent republics of the U.S.S.R. Political nationalism would be suicidal. Disloyalty to the regime and open opposition to Moscow on nationalistic grounds would invite immediate and crushing retaliation. However, cultural nationalism will continue. Suppression can only fan its flames. Thus Moscow vascillates in its policies between attacks on "bourgeois nationalism" and concessions to national cultures. The conflict between the "imperial", the Russian view, of the U.S.S.R., and the local "federalist" view is a source of constant tension and will continue to produce mutual distrust.

The future may be unpredictable, but one can say with a fairly high degree of confidence that the peoples of Transcaucasia are unlikely to experience a radical change of status and condition in the foreseeable future. Local populations are growing faster than the Russian population. The ratio of Russian to non-Russians in Transcaucasia is either stable at about ten percent or changing in favor of non-Russians. The three principal languages of Transcaucasia are holding their own. The cultures of the three republics are heavily influenced by Russian examples, but they are not immune to influences that penetrate from the West as well. Some of the Transcaucasian intellectuals cross the line, turn Russian, since there are advantages to being a member of the dominant nationality. However, a vast majority stay home and preserve their ethnic and cultural identity. Transcaucasia will continue to be an integral part of the Soviet Union, contributing to its economic might, adding color and zest to its life, but remaining a separate area with its own distinctive character and its own dreams.