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THE NATIONALITY QUESTION IN PRESENT-DAY
TRANSCAUCASIA

by

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The remarks which follow represent not so much firm conclusions as suggestions and hypotheses derived from the study of generally unsatisfactory printed sources and rather inadequate personal observation.

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Of all the borderlands of the Soviet Union, Transcaucasia provides the most favorable conditions for the development of strong nationality movements. The following circumstances account for this: a relatively isolated location, Transcaucasia being removed a good distance from the center of Russia and protected by two seas and a range of high mountains; ancient native cultures capable of facing Russian culture on a certain footing of equality; a numerous local intelligentsia; and an economy which, in relation to the USSR as a whole, is on the decline.

Among the native nationalities the Georgians have shown over the past fifty years the greatest degree of cultural and demographic dynamism. Although less urbanized than the Armenians and less fertile than the Azeri Turks they have demonstrated the most steady population growth. Their population is highly concentrated. They have probably the highest proportion of persons with a middle and higher education of any borderland area in the Soviet Union, which means that they dispose of a large intelligentsia to carry out administrative and economic functions. They have shown no tendency to assimilate, and indeed have themselves been assimilating some of the minor Transcaucasian groups. And finally, between 1932 and 1953 they enjoyed, thanks to the Georgian origin of Stalin and Beria, a certain privileged position in Soviet society. All these factors have helped to establish

a Georgian hegemony in Transcaucasia.

In reaction to this the two other major nationalities, the Armenians and Azeri Turks, have tended to draw together in a common front against the Georgians. The Armeno-Turkic rapprochement was assisted by the fact that most of the causes which had engendered their mutual hostility before the revolution are gone. The religious conflict has subsided as a result of the elimination of religion from public life; the social conflicts have been undermined by the destruction of the Armenian middle class; and the racial antagonism, prompted by the persecution of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, has lost much of its intensity because there no longer is any Armenian problem in Turkey. The Armenians and Azeri Turks, regarding themselves (and not without justice) as second-rate citizens in regard to the Russians and Georgians, find a certain community of interest in opposing their more powerful neighbors.

In Transcaucasia, the Russians play a relatively minor role. They have never exceeded 15 per cent of the total population, and have been largely confined to the two major cities, Baku and Tiflis. There is no evidence of any increase in the number of Russians residing in Transcaucasia after the war. In fact, it is more than likely that the Russians have actually been leaving Transcaucasia as a result of the gradual shift of the petroleum industry from Baku and environs to the Urals.

In their Transcaucasian policy the Communists have tended to follow a divide et impera policy, with slight favoritism toward the Armenians. The Armenians, as the least nationalistic, least land-rooted group are the natural allies of Soviet power with which, in addition, they share a common tradition of hostility to the Ottoman Turks.

There is thus something akin to a balance of power in Transcaucasia. On the one hand are the Georgians, on the other the Armenians and Azeri Turks, the former of whom enjoy a certain measure of Soviet and Russian support. In all three republics, however, (except to some extent in Azerbaijan) the local regimes are native in composition and orientation. The Russians here seem less to rule (directly at any rate) than to supervise. The position of Transcaucasia in the Soviet empire resembles more closely that of a satellite than of a borderland area. For some time Russia's primary interest in this area has been strategic.

Economically, Transcaucasia has been developing less rapidly than the USSR as a whole. This fact can be illustrated in several ways. One is to look at the history of the republican budgets. Before World War II Transcaucasia's share of the all-Union republican budgets (ie., moneys allotted by the government for local use) was customarily around 10-12 per cent. After the war it dropped to 6 per cent, and it has been declining ever since, having dropped last

year to an all-time low of 4.4 per cent. Another way of illustrating this decline is to trace Transcaucasia's share in Soviet industrial growth. The growth of industrial output in the three Transcaucasian republics since 1940 has been consistently slower than in the USSR. This holds especially true of the two most industrialized republics, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

The relative economic decline produces a variety of effects which are not without bearing on the nationality question in this area. On the one hand, the population, and especially the intelligentsia, is dissatisfied by material deprivation caused by the failure of the Soviet regime to invest heavily in this region; the slow development of housing facilities is only one of the deprivations. On the other hand, an area lying outside the mainstream of Soviet economic development enjoys a measure of autonomy and freedom from Russian population pressure which areas of intense economic growth do not. Both these factors are propitious for local nationalism.

From the point of view of cultural development, the Transcaucasian nationalities seem to have been undergoing a process of secularization and Westernization, through the medium of Russian culture, observed in other borderland regions of the Soviet Union. If the process here is somewhat less dramatic than elsewhere it is because it got underway some time before the Communist conquest, and in some ways goes back to the mid-19th century.

Broadly speaking, in the past fifty years the population of Transcaucasia has been transforming itself from a loose agglomeration of small groups whose loyalties were to their religion and locality into three cohesive nationalities. This process of transformation was spontaneous in its impetus, but it was also assisted, for reasons which cannot be gone into here, by the Soviet regime. The three nationalities are, of course, the Georgians, the Armenians, and the Azeri Turks. The Georgian nationality has emerged through the fusion of the various Kartvel groups (including the Mingrelians, Svanetians, and Imeretians) and the assimilation of some minor Christian groups of non-Kartvel origin. The Armenians in particular have proved themselves susceptible to the lure of Georgian culture, and a certain proportion of the Armenian population residing in Georgia has become linguistically assimilated. The Azeri Turks have been absorbing the smaller Muslim nationalities, while the Armenians, whose loyalty to their culture is least developed, have assimilated some Kurdish groups. None of the three principal Transcaucasian groups has shown itself susceptible to Russification. In Georgia the use of Russian is virtually unknown in the villages and smaller towns, and even the intelligentsia (including leading members of the Academy of Sciences) speak it poorly.

Intermarriage between Russians and natives is rare, although not as exceptional as in Central Asia. Due to their common

religious heritage, intermarriage involves for Russians, Armenians, and Georgians less of a break with their cultures than it does for Russians and Muslims. But the cultural gap is wide enough to prevent intermarriage from assuming significant proportions. Georgians have told this writer that Russians and Georgians at the university frequently dated each other. But the question whether they also married elicited an emphatic "no". The reason given was "difference in customs and traditions". This is less of a factor in cases of intermarriage involving Armenians. The Armenians who marry outside their nationality, whether with Russians or Georgians, seem to become assimilated, and their children are no longer considered Armenians.

Despite growing "modernization" of local life, social customs seem to survive. An example of this is the local attitude toward the gainful employment of girls and young women. Traditionally, Transcaucasians regarded it as highly improper for women to work outside the home. The Communists, for reasons which are obvious, have been very anxious to alter this attitude, and to drive able-bodied women to work. One of the methods which they employed and still employ is to pay such low wages to the men that the female members of the family too must seek work. Despite this economic pressure one almost never sees in Tiflis a Georgian girl in a place of public employment; on those jobs where women are usually employed (eg., in restaurants and on street-cars) they are invariably Russian. The reason

for this unwillingness of Georgian girls to find jobs is the strict conception of morality which Georgians apply to their own race. A woman publicly employed is subjected to such abuse that with the best intention she cannot maintain the self-respect which natives expect of her. Conversations with natives confirm the impression that Georgian girls past the age of adolescence stay home under their mother's watchful eye.

The natives display much the same traditionalism in their other habits and attitudes, including food. In this respect the situation in Transcaucasia does not differ from that observable in any other area inhabited by minorities.

In view of the absence of all data it is very difficult to form any opinion of the attitude of the natives toward foreign powers. One thing, however, is fairly certain. The pro-Western, pro-Russian, and pro-Turkish attitudes which characterized respectively Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani politics before the revolution have become significantly modified. Two factors account for this: the memory of actual independence during 1918-21, intensified by the trappings of pseudo-independence provided by the Communists since 1921, and the emergence of a host of new Middle Eastern states after World War II. Both mean that the Transcaucasian nationalities can rely more heavily on their own resources and on alliances with the new Middle Eastern states, and less on the Western powers and Russia. As for Azerbaijan and Turkey there is little reason to suspect deep feelings of sympathy between them. Thanks to its colonial status Azerbaijan has

developed in some ways more rapidly than Turkey, and if the experience of Azeri Turkic DP's is any indication, Azeri intellectuals consider themselves more truly "Western" than their Turkish cousins. In other words, today the Western powers and Turkey can count less on the political sympathies of the Transcaucasians than in the decades preceding the revolution. The cultural pull to the West, on the other hand, is every bit as strong among the youth of Transcaucasia as it is among the youth of Russia, and if anything stronger than it was before 1917.