

*Caucasus and an Unholy Alliance*, edited by Antero Leitzinger. Vantaa (Finland): Leitzinger Books, 1997. ISBN: 952-9752-16-4

The various ethnic conflicts that have been going on in the Caucasus since the gradual disintegration of the Soviet order began in the late 1980s have already produced abundant secondary literature in English and other languages. The supporters of the various warring sides involved in these conflicts have poured out dozens of books and hundreds of articles on the problems of Abkhazia, Chechnya and Mountainous Karabakh. So have various foreign institutions and individual experts interested in understanding the intricacies of what is really happening in this part of the world, which had been generally ignored in the past by western academics. These works often disagree sharply when analysing the dynamics of these troubles and have thus created another terrain where an adjacent war is being waged to capture the sympathy of world public opinion in favour of this protagonist or the other.

Finland, a relatively small country in Northern Europe, appears on the surface to be sufficiently remote from developments in the Caucasus so as not to harbour fervent views on what is going on there. Her only previous involvement in this region's politics was confined to her being briefly the co-chairman of the Minsk group established by the Conference (now Organisation) for Security and Co-operation in Europe to find a negotiated solution to the conflict in Mountainous Karabakh. The book under review, *Caucasus and an Unholy Alliance*, indicates, however, that there also exists in Finland a probably small, but extremely passionate, group of activists and intellectuals, who are dedicated to the cause of Chechen independence, as well as to the anti-Russian nationalist aspirations championed by the followers of the late Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the Popular Front in Azerbaijan led by former President Abulfaz Elchibey.

Antero Leitzinger is - as both editor and publisher - the inspiration behind this volume, as well as being the author of six of the twenty-five articles included in it. He is also personally responsible for selecting the remaining contributions and arranging them into a logical framework to offer the reader what he considers an overall picture of the history and politics of the Caucasian countries. Many of the said articles - including separate pieces by Gamsakhurdia, his wife, Elchibey, and the late Chechen President, Jokhar Dudayev - have been previously published elsewhere, but are nevertheless relatively unknown to the public.

This is certainly a volume written and compiled with passion, and Leitzinger does not indeed claim neutrality. He admits that most of its articles are openly critical

of Russian colonial policy in the region, arguing that "pretending impartiality in an ethically doubtless (*sic!*) situation would be hypocritical and an insult to the intelligent reader" (p. 8).

For Leitzinger and the authors whose articles he has deemed fit to have in this volume, all successive Russian governments from Tsarist times to the present have consistently aimed at exterminating the local peoples in the Caucasus. "The Russian obsession with crude geographical grandeur has been destructive and unjustified - it has been the cause of a lot of misery to both Russians themselves and to other nations" (p.348). Today, the Russians are allegedly again exporting tension to the Caucasus by encouraging separatism, ethnic nationalism and the growth of a paternalistic mood in the region, and the Kremlin is systematically provoking conflicts in Abkhazia, Ossetia and Ingushetia to break apart the common anti-imperial struggle of the Caucasian nations.

But this kind of passionate language and attitude necessarily breeds controversy, and many of the 'facts' and interpretations presented to the readers in these pages are bound to be hotly contested by experts espousing other views and methods of approach as regards developments in the area. The volume does not include articles, for example, that depart from the above-summarised anti-Russian tone.

There is no doubt in Leitzinger's mind about who was behind and is still cashing in on the ongoing turmoil in Mountainous Karabakh. The Bolsheviks had given Karabakh autonomy within Azerbaijan in the early 1920s to ensure that relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis would remain strained, and Russia would thus have the means to become involved in the matter if needed and control both sides.

This is, he believes, what actually happened in the late 1980s. The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, says Leitzinger, was apparently scared by the demonstrations in Alma-Ata (now, Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan) on 16-17 December 1987 against the appointment of an ethnic Russian as the leader of the local republican party organisation, as well as by the determination of the Crimean Tatars to return to their homeland, from which they had been deported by Joseph Stalin in 1944. Gorbachev therefore assigned to the Soviet security services, the KGB, the risky task of developing a strategy to make a cautionary example out of the rising nationalist fervour of Soviet Muslims. The KGB dutifully re-ignited within trusted Armenian circles the campaign to shift Karabakh from Azerbaijan to Armenia. Funding for the project was organised with relative ease from the wealthy, fervent and Communism-accepting Armenian emigrant societies. Leitzinger believes that all the statements made in the second half of 1987 by Armenian activists like the author Zori Balayan, the economist Abel Aghanbegian, and Sergei Mikoyan, the son of a former Soviet Head of State, in favour of annexing Karabakh to Armenia were done through the KGB or at least with its approval. Otherwise, he argues, this kind of talk and similar writings would have

been punished.

Leitzinger says that the KGB's real goal, however, was simply to irritate the Muslim Azeris. Their violent reaction to Karabakh Armenian separatism would be presented to the USSR's Orthodox population, as well as to the West, as proof of the alleged blood-thirstiness of Muslims and of the threat of genocide should Moscow lose its influence in predominantly Muslim regions or anywhere in the Soviet Union. The continuation of the Afghan War could also be thus rationalised. He claims that leading Communists from Moscow themselves spread rumours both in Baku and Yerevan of Armenians and Azeris being killed in riots soon after the appeal sent by the supreme council of Karabakh in February 1988 to Moscow to secede from Azerbaijan.

Leitzinger likens the pogrom at Sumgait to *Kristallnacht*, which the Nazis organised to foment hatred against the Jewish population of the Third Reich. The events in Sumgait, which, Leitzinger claims, occurred under mysterious circumstances, had far-reaching consequences. Gorbachev provoked them to coax Armenians to become front-line fighters for Russia. Meanwhile, the Communist leaders of both Azerbaijan and Armenia took advantage of them to rally their subjects and to prove that the only way to ensure peace in the Caucasus was to keep the Soviet empire intact and continue with a strong Russian military presence in the region.

Leitzinger believes, however, that the Karabakh crisis later backfired on Gorbachev. The Armenians became disappointed with him in the spring of 1988, the democratic movement in Armenia became radicalised, resulting into the open use of nationalist symbols, and many nationalist activists had to be imprisoned by the Soviet authorities following the severe earthquake that shook Armenia on 7 December.

Leitzinger is not clear, however, to what extent he thinks Armenian nationalists have distanced themselves from the conspiratorial policies of Moscow. He thinks that the Karabakh crisis, which is dormant at the time of writing, will without doubt "be reactivated in the future should Azerbaijan again try for true independence. As Russia's most trusted ally, Armenia is ready at any time to be used for this kind of an operation" (p.30). He also argues that the break with Azerbaijan that followed the Karabakh crisis has cost the Armenians dearly. It has distracted their attention away from political reforms, and "the real fault" in the lack of progress in Armenia toward democracy and economic progress lies with her "dependence on Russia" (p.40).

An article by the Dutch journalist Charles van der Leeuw narrates the sequence of events in the Karabakh conflict from 1988 to the end of 1995 and its repercussions on internal Azerbaijani politics. His arguments are also generally pro-Azerbaijani, though relatively more balanced and less controversial than those expressed by Leitzinger. Van der Leeuw's article, too, is unfortunately not void of various inaccuracies in factual details. Another article by van der Leeuw included in this

volume makes a brief history of oil extraction in Azerbaijan and touches upon modern-day oil-related environmental concerns in the country. It is very difficult, however, to agree with him in this latter case that Azerbaijan was actually an independent entity before the Russian conquest early in the nineteenth century; it was governed by Muslim khans who owed allegiance to the Persian Qajar dynasty. Nor could the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC), the twelve-member consortium set up to manage the extraction and export of oil from the Chirag, Azeri and Guneshli offshore oil fields in the Caspian Sea, have negotiated an oil deal in the spring of 1993, for it was formed only in January 1995 after western oil companies reached an agreement with the Azerbaijani government in September 1994 to exploit the riches of the three above-mentioned oil fields.

Van der Leeuw's article about the Karabakh problem is largely descriptive. Leitzinger, however, tries to look to the future and suggests that this problem can be solved by connecting territorial exchanges to a wider security system and to building relations with Turkey. Russia, he argues, has fomented and taken advantage of the unresolved feud between Turks and Armenians, which he describes elsewhere as "to a large degree a politically expedient myth expounded by Russia" (p.36). He does not deny that as many as 1.5 million Armenians may have perished at the hands of the Turks during the First World War, but argues that Turkey changed via revolution at the end of that war from a multinational empire ruled over by the sultan to a national state. The modern Republic of Turkey, he says, cannot, therefore, be held responsible for the fate of the Armenians in 1915. He argues that Armenians have forgiven with ease the Kurds, who also took part in those killings. Why then would it be impossible for them to come to terms with the Turks? In the event of a desired Armenian-Turkish reconciliation, Leitzinger suggests that Karabakh's borders could be redrawn with Shusha being separated from the rest of Karabakh and a corridor established between Armenia and the rest of Karabakh. In return, Armenia could hand over to the authorities in Baku the Zangezur corridor, which separates the autonomous region of Nakhichevan from the rest of Azerbaijan. Turkey, in turn, could acknowledge the Armenian genocide that occurred during the imperial administration and hand over to Armenia the symbolically important town of Ani and the north face of Mount Ararat. Leitzinger warns, however, that "as long as Russia wants to continue its involvement into Caucasian affairs and is let to play Armenia against its neighbours (even Georgia has been fighting Armenia in the past), this remains a dream" (p. 46).

Mehmet Tütüncü, the director of the Netherlands-based Research Centre for Turkestan, Azerbaijan, Crimea, Caucasus and Siberia (S.O.T.A.), also refers to Turkish-Armenian relations in his article on Turkey's foreign policy in the Caucasus. He, too, claims that "Armenia is behaving like a Russian protectorate" (p.334) and hopes for a solution to the Karabakh problem, which, he believes, will create conditions for Turkish

aid and assistance to Armenia. Otherwise, Tütüncü suggests that Armenia will be the biggest loser in the region by being deprived of pipelines and other economic gains. He does not propose any formula, however, on the basis of which a compromise can be reached between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Some of Tütüncü's claims are inaccurate, like his allegation that the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutiun) was behind the terrorist organisation known as the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia. Nor is his suggestion that the Armenian diaspora actually conducted all the public relations activities for the visit of Turkish President Celal Bayar to California in 1954 substantiated to the reader's satisfaction.

The section on Azerbaijan and Mountainous Karabakh also includes an article by former President Elchibey - written at the end of 1993 - analysing the conditions under which the Popular Front government came into power in Baku, its achievements and mistakes during its one-year tenure in office, and the insurrection in the town of Ganja which led to its demise and brought to power in its stead Heidar Aliev, the former Communist leader of the country. Elchibey claims that, "there is a large number of facts confirming the direct participation of Russian and Iranian military and political circles in the preparation and realisation of the insurrection" (p. 84).

Aliev's rule in Baku is not analysed extensively in this volume, but the overall attitude toward its record is lukewarm. Nor is there a separate article about internal developments in Armenia, though the way the presidential elections were held in September 1996 is criticised and President Levon Ter Petrosyan's second term in office is indirectly referred to as being illegal, together with the presidencies of both Aliev in Azerbaijan and Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia.

Indeed, the set of articles on Georgia and the conflict in Abkhazia consistently praises the stand and achievements of former President Gamsakhurdia and is extremely critical of those who toppled him in January 1992. Opposition figures like G. Chanturia, J. Ioseliani and the latter's *Mkhedrioni* forces are unequivocally branded as criminals. Shevardnadze is frequently referred to as "Bloody Eduard" and as a "general of the KGB who ... terrorized the country for years together with the army." He is consistently accused - together with other so-called pro-Kremlin forces in Georgia - of having directed the putsch against Gamsakhurdia and established a military-terrorist dictatorship of a criminal junta in its stead. The incumbent Georgian Orthodox Patriarch, who christened the former Communist Shevardnadze after his return to Georgia in 1992, is also accused of having been "a long time agent of the KGB," a colonel with his own code-name, *Iverieli*. Shevardnadze is also blamed for provoking - with "KGB general" Yevgeni Primakov - the war in Abkhazia. "Shevardnadze's aim was to overthrow the legal authorities of the autonomous republic," writes Gamsakhurdia, "because they did not persecute my supporters and were against introducing the totalitarian rules of the junta to Abkhazia." He wanted to establish his

"dictatorship and the rule of the mafia in the region" (p. 119). The war in Abkhazia is said to have led to the "genocide" of the Georgian people there, and western countries, Germany and the USA in particular, are castigated for rendering political and financial support to Shevardnadze.

Leitzinger is himself the author of two lengthy articles in the section dealing with Chechnya. The first narrates the history of the Chechens and their long struggle against Russian infiltration into their homeland, taking up events until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Particular emphasis is, of course, paid to the deeds of the legendary Shamil. The second of Leitzinger's articles is a chronological account of developments in Chechnya since 1991, in particular the invasion of Russian federal troops of the territory in December 1994, and ends with the deal which the Chechens reached with the Russian General Alexander Lebed in 1996. Leitzinger defends the right of Chechnya to secede from the Russian Federation and become independent. He and other contributors also lavishly praise the late Jokhar Dudayev and his policies.

Leitzinger rightly points out that although the rest of the world finally dared to recognise the independence of the former Soviet republics in 1991, the autonomous republics within the former Soviet union republics - like Chechnya within the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic - were simultaneously denied the same right. Thus "the arbitrary nationality politics" of the Communists were in effect accepted by the international community "as being the deciding criteria" (p.236). Nowhere does he raise the possibility, however, that the desire of both Abkhazia and Mountainous Karabakh to secede from Georgia and Azerbaijan respectively may also be justified in the same way.

Leitzinger's charges against the conspiracies manufactured by the Russian state do not remain confined to the Caucasus. He interprets the Afghan War as being in essence Russia's war against Uzbek and Tajik nationalism which emanated from Moscow's fear that its colonial power was in decline.

For authors like Leitzinger and Hikmet Hadjy-Zadeh, one of the close aides of Elchibey, the close links between Russian colonial policy and modern Islamism in Iran are not a coincidence. Their aims are almost the same, as the current regime in Iran does not want - allegedly even more than Russia - to see an open society near itself; taking into consideration that about 20 million ethnic Azeri Turks live in Iran. It wishes to distract attention from the conditions of the latter. This is why the Islamic regime in Iran is alleged to have ignored and even at times accommodated the colonial policies of the atheistic USSR while at the same time declaring a "holy war" against Israel and the USA as the "Great Satan." The USSR and Iran are also blamed - through the Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar - for the continuing instability in that troubled country long after the fall of the Communist regime of Najibullah in April 1992.

Western negligence or naiveté is identified - together with Russian imperialism and Russian-sponsored Islamism - as the third pillar of the new "unholy alliance" seeking to victimise the Caucasus. Leitzinger argues that "chaos within Russia has nearly always been more of a worry to the West than the disregard of the rights of the people under it and its colonies" (p. 217). Hadjy-Zadeh, in turn, claims that western observers do not acknowledge direct and conspiratorial Russian involvement in the area only because they have to then come up with a firm policy against Moscow's practices. He has no doubt that the "Evil Empire" is now reviving with the silent connivance of the West, and that, in the future, western countries will face a state that is now again rising from the ruins and which is great only because of its aggressive appetite for conquest.

The policies of the government of Turkey are, overall, dealt with mildly in this volume. The Arabs, however, do not escape without reproach. Leitzinger criticises them "for complaining about their fate under French or British colonial rule, about the founding of the state of Israel, and about continuing western involvement in Arabian affairs" and harbouring "no sympathy for the sufferings of their Turkic brethren." The Arab nationalists, says Leitzinger, "used to act as Soviet proxies during the Cold War, and even today, Islamists (fanatic Islamic fundamentalists) all over the world eagerly share the feelings of Arab nationalists in the name of Islamic solidarity while hardly giving a thought to the responsibilities of Russia" (p. 14).

Leitzinger calls on all Caucasian peoples to co-operate to reduce the importance of Russia in the region. "My dream," he writes, "would be to see the victims of Russian *divide et impera* policy - Azerbaijan's (legal) president Elchibey, his Armenian colleague [Vazgen] Manukian [who contested the 1996 presidential election against Ter Petrosyan], and Georgian Prime Minister in exile [Bessarion] Gugushvili - putting their lessons together and drafting an exemplary peace treaty for the whole region. Turkey and the West too should promote reconciliation and make efforts to create solutions excluding both Russia and Iran from disturbing the Caucasian scene" (p.347).

In addition to some of the factual errors referred to above, there are in this volume many other minor inaccuracies in the details of political developments and military clashes, as well as a substantial number of printing errors. This is certainly not a book that can be suggested to the casual reader interested in discovering a few fundamental facts and realities about contemporary Caucasian politics. It is of some interest to those interested in analysing the ideological currents active in the region, for it can be taken as the manifesto of one of them. Moreover, the translated articles of major political actors like Elchibey, Gamsakhurdia or Dudayev may be of particular use as primary sources to graduate students specialising in Caucasian affairs.

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