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LIVING WITH THE OTHER: CONFLICT AND COOPERATION AMONG THE TRANSCAUCASIAN PEOPLES

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Sometime in the long nineteenth century -- that is, roughly between 1789 and 1914 -- Armenians in Transcaucasia and the Ottoman Empire reconceptualized their ethnoreligious community, with its primary allegiance to a unique form of Christianity, and elaborated in its place a more European notion of Armenians as a secular nation marked by language, shared culture and history, and territorial homeland. Like other nations, so claimed the radical intelligentsia that displaced the clerics at the head of the "nation", Armenians had rights to national self-determination, cultural protection, even political autonomy, and, in the programs of some, independent statehood. That nationalist vision re-examined and redeployed the available historical record to justify Armenian national claims, just as other national states and nationalist intelligentsias were doing for their nations. That nationalist vision was embodied in the first Armenian republic (1918-1920) and even, ironically, was preserved in the rhetoric, if not always in the practice, of the Soviet republic (1920-1991) that succeeded it. The Soviet period was particularly important in reinforcing the notion of nationhood, reintegrating Armenians from the rest of the Soviet Union, the Middle East, and elsewhere into the tiny republic around Yerevan, developing and subsidizing an Armenian intelligentsia, urbanizing and industrializing the country, spreading mass literacy and learning in Armenian, institutionalizing Armenian culture in its acceptable Soviet version, and providing all the aspects of nationness to the Armenians of Transcaucasia except full sovereignty within their state and self-determination of their future.

The Soviet period most emphatically identified Armenia with the territory of the republic. Nationalists abroad, on the other hand, kept alive the notion of greater Armenia, which would include the former heartland of Armenians now in the Turkish Republic, but global politics, Western

security interests, and Soviet state policy made any expansion of Armenia a political fantasy.

Armenia's destiny, it seemed, was in the Caucasus, and its only practical chance for expansion came at the expense of Azerbaijan in Karabakh. For Armenians the claim to Karabakh had a dual legitimacy: the historic connection of the region (Artsakh) to Armenians; and the overwhelmingly Armenian demographic dominance in the region. Moreover, the separation of Karabakh from Armenia was considered illegitimate, connected as it was with the discredited Soviet region and the odious figure of Stalin. Thus, as the twentieth century comes to a close, Armenians have reconceived their national statehood as connecting Karabakh to Armenia and largely foregoing, at least in the immediate future, irredentist claims against Turkey.

The trend in the Soviet period and in the post-Soviet period has been toward greater homogenization of the republics, the nationalization of the new states, and therefore the creation of the problem of minorities that do not fit into the new nationalized states (e.g., Abkhazians and Ossetians in Georgia, Armenians in Azerbaijan and Georgia, Azerbaijanis in Armenia and Georgia). The answer to the problem of minorities in Transcaucasia since 1988 has been either expulsion or migration, inter-ethnic warfare, and/or political separation.

Were there, or are there, alternatives to ethnic cleansing, either the benign kind that leads to migration or the malignant kind that leads to mass killing? First, it should be noted that the homogenization and territorialization that has marked Transcaucasian nations in our century is both different from what went on in this region in the past and from what is happening in other parts of the world today. During much of its history, Caucasia witnessed extraordinary movement and migration of peoples, nomadic invasions through the isthmus, migration up the mountains to greater safety, movement down the mountains for better economic opportunity, transhumance up and down the mountains according to season, movement of peasants to towns, permanent or near-permanent migration from the region into the diaspora (either inside or outside the Russian and Ottoman empires or the USSR), and return (*hairenatartsutiun*) to the homeland from the diaspora. And in this process of constant moving, there was constant mixing of populations, blurring of ethnic boundaries, intermarriage, bi- and trilingualism, even to the point of some people becoming other people, and some disappearing into others, like the medieval Albanians into the Armenians plus the Muslims of eastern Caucasia. These processes of migration and mixing created a unique multiethnic, multilingual, highly diverse but distinctive Caucasian culture, shared by all the peoples of the region. Food, customs, dress, dances, rituals blended into one another, fed off each other. Geographical proximity was more important in determining culture plus relationships than abstract ideas of distinct ethnicity or ideological conceptions of nation. Who in fact originated the custom of tamada shared by all Caucasian people plus even the Russians? Does it really matter? Can you always tell a Georgian church from an Armenian? When endangered by Seljuk or Ottoman Turks or Mongols, Armenians migrated southward to Cilicia or northward into Georgia. Peoples lived together in complex ways. Georgian kings used Armenians, like the

Zakharian-Mkhargrdzelis, as *atabegi* (commander-in-chief) and *msakhurtukhutsesi* (master of the king's personal estates). Medieval Georgian chroniclers had no problem recognizing the intimate relations of Armenians and Georgians, even naming Haik, the founder of the Armenians, the older brother of Kartlos, the founder of the Georgians. Though not without conflict or pride in language and their particular form of religion, these two Christian peoples learned from each other, and lived and worked for generations under rulers of the Bagratid family, originally Armenian but one branch soon to be Georgian. And though threatened and conquered by Muslims, Caucasian Christians were able to live and work with Muslims as well, tolerated by them as "people of the book". The medieval cities of Armenia and Georgia, including Dvin and Tbilisi, were largely run by Muslims, who at one time were the major tradesmen and merchants of the region. Later the Georgian king founded the city of Gori for Armenians, and in time Armenians became the monied middle class of Georgia and eastern Transcaucasia. Baku and Tbilisi were models of interethnic cohabitation; Tbilisi at one time had an Armenian majority, and Yerevan was primarily a Muslim town at several points in its long history.

Loyalty in much of Caucasian history was not to any notion of exclusivist nationness, but to supranational religions -- Orthodoxy, Christianity, Islam -- and to local dynasts -- to the Bagratids or Artsrunis, Rstunis, Siunis. And even to extranational imperial rulers -- the Persians, Byzantines, kings of Georgia, the Ottomans, the Russians, the Soviet Union. Georgia and Armenia were hardly ever united countries, but usually fragmented into principalities, emirates, and minor kingdoms. Only in the nineteenth century, with the Russian conquest of Transcaucasia were most of the Georgians effectively placed under a single government, but at the same time they lost all semblance of statehood. Armenians were divided between the Ottoman and tsarist empires, but the smaller Russian part benefitted from the more Europeanized culture of the Russian empire. And Azerbaijan was divided between Persia and Russia, and without question Russian Azerbaijan developed more rapidly than Iranian Azerbaijan.

The legacy of the Russian imperial experience, like that of the Soviet that followed, was complex and contradictory, but perhaps the greatest effect of imperial rule was the genesis and acceleration of the nation-building process. In the 19-th century the dominant idiom in which Georgians and Armenians understood themselves became the language of the nation. But the spread of the idea of ethnic nationhood separated peoples one from another, hardening the formerly fluid boundaries between them. Differences of religion and social class were redescribed in ethnic terms, and difference were therefore naturalized, even biologized. Language became the key marker of distinction, and nationalist intellectuals sharpened distinctions that had largely been irrelevant in the past. Interestingly enough, nationalism was not the dominant intellectual and political movement in either Azerbaijan or Georgia before the Russian Revolution; in the former loyalty to Islam and to the traditional clerics remained dominant, and in Georgia the principal political movement was Menshevik Social Democracy. Only in Armenia was a nationalist socialist party -- the Dashnaktsutiun -- the principal spokesman for the nation.

The main point to be made here is that nationalism was far weaker in the period before the Russian Revolution than most historians have allowed. It was only with the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917 that the principal political parties in Transcaucasia began the gradual movement to separate their peoples from the Russian state. Just as in 1988-1991, so in 1917-1918, it was the weakness, indeed collapse, of central Russian authority that led to the exit from Russia of the Transcaucasian states. The push out from the center was greater than the pull from the periphery.

The twentieth century in Transcaucasia has seen the consolidation of the national territorial states of the Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians. Yet at the same time much of the rest of the world has moved away from territorialization to deterritorialization, away from exclusivity to cosmopolitanism. Migration and mixing of populations has become a global trend. In the age of globalization nationalist exclusion is fast becoming an archaism. Global capitalism has rendered borders less relevant. International media blends cultures. And the movement of peoples, the globalization of culture, capital, and media, clashes with ideas of homogeneity within nations and sharp, hard differences among them.

The Place of Nationalism... and its Limits

Nationalism, as the Karabakh movement demonstrates, is an effective mobilizing ideology for an anti-imperialist independence movement. Nationalism, as Armenia's recent successes in the Karabakh war demonstrates, is an effective instrument for unifying a people around strategic goals. And as Azerbaijan's failures in the war demonstrate, a less than compelling national identity and nationalist ideology severely cramps efforts to field armies and endure defeats. But as the domestic history of the second Armenian republic demonstrates, nationalism does not necessarily produce internal consensus, unity around a given political leadership, or, in a democratic or proto-democratic setting, the end of divisive politics. It remains to be seen if nationalism aids the process of authoritative (not authoritarian) state-building, the prerequisite to effective democratization, the instituting of a rule of law, and even a productive market economy.

We have lived in a world of states since roughly the sixteen and seventeenth centuries. As I mentioned earlier, since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, states have been considered most legitimate when their governments represent their people conceived as a nation. Nationalism in Transcaucasia has played, and I would argue, exhausted its role in creating independent states. At this point the positive effects of anti-imperialist nationalism metamorphose -- one is tempted to say metastasize -- into the negative effects of exclusivist, even expansionist, ethno-territorial nationalism. At this point something else is indeed happening -- a revival of the more cosmopolitan pan-Caucasian tendencies of the past.

If we understand the nations of Transcaucasia as fully-formed modern nations with long and continuous national pasts, the tendency toward fixing and bounding these nations is encouraged. We have arrived, in a sense, at the end of history with capitalism and democracy of the Western

type within a constellation of nation-states. But if, instead, we see nations as always in formation, different in their present form from what they were in the past and evolving in unpredictable directions in the present, then we can encourage tendencies to accept fluidity and complexity, acceptance and tolerance of difference. The possible connections and similarities between neighbors can be emphasized, and the potential for interaction and cooperation is elevated.

Rather than fixed entities with indelible essential qualities, nations can be reconceived as fields of culture within which various actors compete over the meaning of the nation and, dare we forget, for power within the nation. As Foucault, following Marx and Gramsci, taught us decades ago, meaning and power are intimately connected, for who holds power will often determine meaning, and in the political arena a contender that can determine meaning has a unique claim to power. Nations are sites of cultural conflicts over meaning, identity and values, aspirations and hopes, that is goals and interests, as well as places where it will be decided who is to be included within and excluded from the nation. These struggles over meaning and power are ongoing and all-important. They can lead to turning inward and shutting out the world -- a fate suffered by all the Soviet republics in the years of Stalinism -- or they can lead to opening up, surrendering the parochial, and enriching the national culture by infusions from the rest of the globe.

For Armenia in the early years of independence, nationalism provided legitimacy to the Ter Petrosian government. That was to be translated into democracy, capitalist prosperity, and victory in the Karabakh war. The war went well, though not fast enough for the Dashnak opposition and many in the diaspora. Democracy floundered in December 1994 with the suppression of the Dashnaksutiun and the subsequent "free but not fair" elections to parliament in 1995. It suffered a second blow in September 1996 with the tainted elections of the president and the riots that followed. Yet the dire characterization of Armenia as authoritarian, non-democratic, or having created a constitutional dictatorship is far from the mark. With the world watching Armenia closely, and the tiny state dependent on the good will of the donor community, particularly the United States, it should be clear to all that the republic remains incompletely democratic, not authoritarian. The press is not completely censored; opposition exists; and governments can fall. The Ter Petrosian government has not turned the courts into instruments of state power, though they are still far from fully independent. And negotiations with the outlawed opposition parties have been opened. Nationalism is now insufficient as a source of legitimation for the government. It must be supplemented by real democratic practices, a prosperous economy, and a successful resolution of the Karabakh problem.

Azerbaijan faces even greater problems with legitimacy. Here power, not authority, rules. The government poses as national but is really one political clique ruling over others. It has lost the Karabakh war, failed to unify the nation, and lives on the promise of future oil riches. It is neither democratic nor really national and survives because it is the best alternative for reconstructing the state. Aliiev can be credited for bringing order and greater stability to a country that was tottering on the brink of disintegration. His achievement has been state-building, an important first

step toward a more representative political system. Here, unlike in Armenia, nationalism or some form of state patriotism is still needed to provide a civil religion or social mythology to bring the disparate elements of the population together. The form of that national mythology is openended, unpredictable, but given Aliev's past experience it is unlikely that it will degenerate into chauvinistic, expansionist nationalism. Azerbaijan can easily reimagine itself as a progressive secular state, a model for the Islamic world of a culturally Muslim nation unwilling to descend into fundamentalism. Iran, which has a dismal record of rule over its own Azerbaijani population, does not present a mirror to Baku's future, whereas a secular Turkey is much more attractive.

The most complex picture is presented by Georgia. This is a country that self-destructed, tore itself to pieces in an orgy of chauvinistic nationalism, inviting, indeed encouraging, secession of its minorities and intervention by Russia. But in the last five years Georgia under Shevardnadze, who represents an incredible national resource of international significance, has resurrected itself, building state institutions, eliminating paramilitary organizations, attempting to use Russia (with very limited success) to bring reintegration with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and practicing a kind of rough democracy. Given where Georgia was in early 1992, with the center of Tbilisi burning and Georgians killing Georgians, the achievement of the Shevardnadze government has been extraordinary.

It is important to remember that nations are congealed histories. They are made up of stories that people tell about their past and thereby determine who they are. Histories in turn are based on memories organized into narratives. Whatever actually happened is far less important than how it is remembered.

What is remembered, what has been forgotten or repressed, provides the template through which the world is understood. Nationalist violence or inter-ethnic cooperation and tolerance depend on what narrative, what tales of injustice, oppression, or betrayal are told. Tellers of tales have enormous (though far from absolute) power to reshape, edit, shape their stories, and therefore to promote a future of either violence or cooperation.

Regional security requires strong, authoritative states. Weak states that cannot keep the peace internally are unreliable partners in international relations and encourage the imperial fantasies of larger, more powerful neighbors. Weakness, especially in a region like Transcaucasia, is related to instability. What then is a strong state? Is it one with a billion dollars worth of Russian weaponry in its arsenal? Or is it one that provides security, yes, but also goods and services on a reliable and consistent basis to its people? By delivering the goods a state gains legitimacy. Nationalism has seldom been enough, at least for a long time. A liberal democratic government requires such stability and predictability. As the political theorist Stephen Holmes puts it, "One important moral and psychological basis of any functioning liberal democracy is an exchange of popular cooperation for the provision of elementary public goods" (1). In the rush to privatization in the postcommunist former Soviet Union, government itself has in many republics been privatized until there hardly

exists a sense of the public good. That selling of the government to the highest bidder is a sure road away from democracy to a destination that remains bleak and unknown.

What have I argued in this contribution?

1. For the South Caucasus to survive independently of regional imperial hegemony it must build strong, legitimate, democratic, authoritative (not authoritarian) states based on the rule of law.
 2. Nationalism, for all its past services, has reached its limits, and ethno-nationalism of an exclusivist type is positively dangerous, even self-destructive, as demonstrated by the Gamsakhurdia episode in Georgia.
 3. The Caucasus has long and rich traditions of a fluid, integrated, synthetic, cosmopolitan shared culture that needs to be revived, treasured, modernized as a far more appropriate form of civilized modernity for this region in the 21st century. That century, need I remind you, is less than 1000 days away!
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Notes:

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1. Stephen Holmes, "Cultural Legacies or State Collapse? Probing the Postcommunist Dilemma", in Michael Mandelbaum (ed.), *Postcommunism: Four Perspectives* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996), p. 54.

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