In 1989-91, the Soviet Union experienced a revolutionary process – not unlike that of Russia in 1905, or indeed February 1917 – in which the old bureaucratic despotism was shaken, and for millions of people genuine emancipation seemed close. Their hopes were bitterly disappointed. The failure of revolutions to bring about their hoped-for outcomes is, of course, familiar; but the failure of this particular revolution to deliver what it had promised was more then usually painful, and this seemed to call for a more persuasive explanation than the mere logic of global neoliberalism. Something, it was presumed, had to be wrong with the peoples of the USSR, especially those in its peripheries. With the partial exception of the Baltic states, which are small, and close enough to the European Union to expect to be invited to join it, the peoples of the Soviet peripheries had failed to understand liberalism and had corrupted the transition to the market. An explanation was found – in the deep flaws of local ethnic cultures (or more grandly still, in the ‘clash of civilizations’) – and it looked superficially convincing, given the almost universal evidence of ethnically-channelled corruption and ethnically-organized crime, and the widespread incidence of ethnic wars in the former USSR, as well as in the former Yugoslavia. And indeed ethnicity, and ethnic leaderships, did play a key role in the revolutions of 1989-91.

But if we are serious about the analysis of contemporary history, we need to answer the following questions: What processes created these revolutionary situations? Who were the leaders? Why did they uniformly choose the same strategy of national democratic reform? And what conditions and constraints drove these movements to often bloody failure? Answering these questions requires us, in my
opinion, to conduct an analysis on three different levels simultaneously: the micro-level of the events and personages of 1989-91; the level of national histories, and especially the past formative moments of 1905 and 1917, from which the revolutionaries of 1989 drew their symbols and scripts; and, finally, the global level of the modern world-system which provided the main reference point for all nationalist movements in the former USSR.

The analysis focuses on the trajectory of Azerbaijan over the last two decades. Azerbaijan not only provides a good empirical summary of the depressing trend in a large set of countries, from the Balkans to the Caucasus and Central Asia – political contestation leading to ethnic conflict, state breakdown, and an apparent return to Third World backwardness. It also happens that the Azerbaijan revolution, intertwined with an ethnic uprising in Nagorno Karabagh, an autonomous Armenian province inside the Azerbaijan SSR, signalled the final crisis of Soviet power. The manifest powerlessness of Gorbachev’s administration in face of the escalating violence in the Caucasus started a chain reaction of national uprisings which in 1991 resulted in the disintegration of the USSR. But if we focus on Azerbaijan alone, we may succumb to the usual pitfall of attributing Soviet disintegration to nationalism alone. Therefore let us first undertake a compressed analytical description which should allow us to see more clearly something central to all the uprisings that precipitated the Soviet collapse – the position of national intelligentsias under state socialism.

For the pre-eminence of intellectuals in East European politics in 1989-91 seems universal. This observation holds for the entire region and thus the usual explanation in terms of national tradition obviously does not hold. Take the roster of the top post-communist leaders: in Lithuania it was a musicologist (Vitautas Landsbergis), in Estonia a visual anthropologist and documentary film-maker (Edgar Savisaar), in Czechoslovakia a playwright (Havel), in Poland a whole host of philologists, medieval historians and social scientists. In the former Yugoslavia we find educators, historians, novelists (Serbia’s Vuk Draskovic is just one example), and a former psychologist turned poet and then a warlord (Bosnia’s Radovan Karadzic). In a totally different region, predominantly Muslim Central Asia, we encounter a physicist (Askar Akayev) turned president of Kyrgyzstan, an extremely gifted poet (Muhammed Salih) in the leadership of Uzbekistan’s democratic opposition, and a young film director (Dovlat Hudonazarov) inspiring the rebellious masses in Tadjikistan. In Georgia in the early 1990s a typically bitter joke ran like this: God, save us from another civil war between the Shakespearean scholar (i.e. President Zviad Gamsakhurdia), the sculptor (the rogue commander of Georgia’s National Guards, Tenghiz Kitovani), and the professor of cinema history (the self-styled warlord Prof. Djaba Ioseliani).

In the immediate neighbourhood of Azerbaijan, in the Caucasus, the same trend seems even more pronounced. In 1990–97 not just the political but even the military elite of Armenia was composed of former historians, musicians, school teachers, journalists, computer scientists and nuclear physicists. The vile
chief of Armenia’s police after 1990, Vano Siradeghian, previously earned a living by writing short stories for children, and the first President of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosian, at the height of the Karabagh war proudly continued his work on the Biblical translations from the medieval Syriac sources which he considered imperative for national spiritual revival. In the case of Azerbaijan, the post-Soviet elite was heavily populated not just by intellectuals but by orientalists, graduates of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Azerbaijan State University. Foreign journalists and other observers noticed how puzzlingly numerous were these specialists in classical Arabic or Persian among the post-Soviet Azeri political elite.¹ Azeri intellectuals took this fact for granted, with an occasional chuckle: being native, they knew the reason. For us, explaining the reason will prove a useful way of grasping the social environment of Azerbaijan on the eve of the 1989 revolution.

But to go back for a minute to the phenomenon in its most general form: from Estonia to Tadjikistan, these are historically very different countries and their revolutions led to quite different political outcomes. So what could they have had in common to produce such an impressive uniformity of leadership at the peak of all their revolutions? The immediate reason for the unusual political role of what I will call cultural intellectuals is the common social structure created by state socialism throughout the USSR. After the revolution of 1905 Lenin famously said that Leo Tolstoi was the mirror of its contradictions.² The cultural intelligentsia of the USSR were likewise a mirror of the contradictions of the revolutions of 1989-91. These contradictions were created by the bureaucratic Fordism adopted by the Bolshevik leadership after 1917.

SOCIALIST BUREAUCRATIC FORDISM

In the initial phases of Bolshevik state-building the old social structures were drastically reduced and simplified. From the Civil War to the great purges the inchoate multiplicity of old social statuses, ranks, class and religious identities was uprooted and deliberately destroyed. The policy was initially spontaneous, but very soon – indeed before Stalin gave his name to the strategy – the destruction of actual and potential sources of political opposition became standard Bolshevik policy. From the Red Terror of August 1918, and Trotsky’s infamous campaign of ‘de-Cossackization’ in the course of Russia’s Civil War, the strategy was pursued through the collectivization of the peasantry (and its lesser-known analogy in Central Asia, the brutal sedentarization of nomadic tribes) until its culmination in the purges of 1936-38 and the ethnic deportations of the 1940s. The result of all this violence was that potentially oppositional social groups were simply eliminated: there were no landowners, no bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie, no liberal professions, no autonomous clergy, indeed no peasants. The social hierarchy was reduced, in theory at least, to the semi-closed caste of cadre bureaucrats (the nomenklatura) and the newly-created mass of proletarians — proletarians in the most fundamental sense of a social class whose livelihood depends on wage employment in the absence of alternative income. Whether
they worked in towns, or on state farms, is not important; within a generation the whole Soviet Union was recast as a gigantic industrial enterprise which was a self-conscious emulation of the Fordist factory, the symbol of technological and organizational progress of its age. Extremely rapid proletarianization, carried out by despotic methods, was both the biggest tragedy and the biggest achievement of Soviet development.

The new Soviet proletarians faced formidable barriers to collective action. Under Stalin the secret police and informers were omnipresent and strikes were put down with machine guns. Later the Soviet rulers switched to less crude methods – the rituals of ‘unanimous popular politics’ (to pre-empt any actual politics) and, at the level of socio-economic structures, the cultivation of paternalistic dependency. The distribution of goods and welfare benefits was tied to the workplace and controlled by factory administrators and the official trade unions. The infamously shoddy quality of Soviet-made goods was not a manifestation of the cultural inferiority of East Europeans but a triumph of the perverted class struggle waged by Soviet proletarians. Unable to bargain for higher wages, workers tacitly decreased their work effort – as the wry joke put it, ‘they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work’. In the aftermath of Stalinism workers won a far better deal, though it remained unevenly shared between economic sectors and regions; the overall effect was to disperse and tame potential industrial protest. Protests still occurred, and sometimes reached spectacular proportions, like the 1962 strike of the locomotive-builders in Novocherkassk (it was put down with extreme brutality but it was in the wake of Novocherkassk that Moscow resolved to begin importing food from America). The huge industrial investments of the previous generations began to pay off in the 1950s and 1960s. Later, in the 1970s, as the smokestack heavy industries stagnated, while consumer expectations continued to rise, mass consumption was subsidized with the proceeds of oil and other mineral exports. This, in its barest bones, was the mechanism of internal peace under Khruschev and Brezhnev.

THE NATIONAL CULTURAL INTELLIGENTSIAS

According to ‘scientific communism’, fully developed socialist society had only two ‘non-antagonistic’ and increasingly merged classes, industrial workers and collective farmers. Bureaucratic office-holders were just a cadre of able and professionally competent managers advancing from the ranks of the people. This fuzzy and rosy picture of the ruling elite could be extended to include highly trained technicians without administrative powers, like engineers or medical doctors; and indeed the bureaucratic ladder of social mobility continued to operate throughout Soviet history, though at a rapidly decreasing rate. Once Brezhnev’s famous ‘stability of cadres’ arrived, managerial openings in the top echelon grew scarce and careers slowed down considerably. A typical character under late socialism was the disenchanted low-paid engineer, stranded in the lower echelons of some sprawling bureaucratic organization, or in the unenviable position of a petty shop-floor manager, squeezed between a demanding boss.
and half-heartedly compliant workers. The social frustrations of this technically-trained intelligentsia, however, rarely found any political expression. Technicians were part of the same industrial compact, well-policed and at least satisfactorily fed. In addition, unlike ordinary workers, technicians remained the reserve pool for recruits into industrial management. The prospect of career advancement offered some hope.

What is notably lacking among all the classes and strata, including the intelligentsia, mentioned so far, is any ethnic character. The reason for this is the impact of proletarianization itself. It is not generally appreciated that the national dynamics of the Soviet Union, that gigantic example of bureaucratically-built Fordism under the banner of socialism, resembled contemporary America more than it resembled the old tsarist empire. The old empire was the infamous ‘prison-house of the nations’, whereas the Soviet Union, like the USA, was a melting pot – or more precisely, the USSR’s big industrial towns, the all-Union bureaucracies, the armed forces – and the GULAG – were melting pots, fired by rapid proletarianization. So it seems a keen historical irony that Soviet developmentalism, having produced tens of millions of ethnically homogenized proletarians, should have ended in a concerted series of nationalist revolutions.

To understand how this could happen we must first look at a different segment of the Soviet intelligentsia – the cultural intelligentsia.

By a necessary process of analytical elimination we have finally arrived at the social group that led the revolutionary assaults against state socialism in 1998 – the national cultural intelligentsias. The connection between ‘national’ and ‘cultural’ is not coincidental. Technological skills are not national. It would be ridiculous to speak of Azeri engineering or Ukrainian mathematics (not that such attempts are entirely unknown, but still they are considered extreme even by most nationalists). History, however, the humanities, and artistic expression draw their material from cultures that are often defined in ethnic terms, and in the Soviet Union this relationship was officially recognized and institutionalized in bureaucratically isomorphic forms: each republic (with the notable exception of Russia) had its own academy of sciences, its own university, its own teacher training colleges, national museums and art galleries, national theatres, a national publishing house, a film studio, national dance companies, etc.³

The policy of promoting ethnic cultures – indeed creating them almost from scratch – has no precedent in classical Marxism and seems not only unnecessary but actually contrary to the core tenets of the Soviet ideological program, which called for the maximum concentration of material assets and labour resources under the supposedly rational control of a central bureaucratic agency. Besides, industrial efficiency required the social homogenization of the newly-made proletariat. Soviet nationality policy therefore looks superfluous, and even contradictory, and has to be explained. It was in fact a set of complicated and mostly ad hoc compromises dating back to the very beginning of Soviet state, to the Russian Civil War, which the Bolsheviks won in large part by gaining the active support of – or at least dividing and placating – various nationalist forces.
The social make-up of the nationalists of 1917-20 betrayed the agrarian-bureaucratic nature of the old Russian empire. Precious few consolidated national bourgeoisies existed. The people who created and governed the putative national states of this period were overwhelmingly the local intelligentsias, above all teachers and journalists. Their ideas were a mixture of socialist populism and enlightenment directed towards their (idealized) national peasantries, whom they saw as communities of egalitarian, but somewhat backward, rustics, whom they intended to enlighten and educate so that the nation could join the world of progressive Western nations.

In reality the peasant masses proved far less ideal. The defunct empire exploded in a series of agrarian revolts that were fuelled by the juxtaposition of tremendous demographic growth (between the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and the revolution of 1917 the population of the empire had nearly trebled), the pattern of land tenure, which resulted in desperate land shortages, and the spread of guns and military skills among peasants who had been recruited as soldiers in the First World War. Much of the grass-roots violence during the period, especially in the Caucasus but also in Ukraine or Central Asia, appeared ethnically motivated, as the different ethnic peasant communities engaged in myriad local revolts and fights. But on closer inspection we discover everywhere confrontations over land rights. The fledgling national governments faced a choice of being swept away by spontaneous agrarian violence or trying to direct it in defence of their own peasant masses.

An additional catalyst, which is often forgotten today, was provided by the liberal conditions dictated by the Great Powers gathered at Versailles. In 1919 the new states emerging from the Russian empire were given twelve months to meet three requirements for diplomatic recognition: historical and cultural rights to territory, the will of the local population (to be determined in plebiscites), and what the international law of the colonial epoch called the right of effective occupation. Sure enough, committees of national scholars immediately got busy discovering the historical and cultural ‘facts’ regarding territorial rights; the rudimentary national armed forces and armed volunteers were sent into the problematic borderlands to suppress or expel separatist populations; and since these forces were insufficient, they often recruited and armed the local militias of their own ethnic kind against neighbouring communities that were now considered alien. The expression ‘ethnic cleansing’ had not yet been invented but the extent of these massacres far exceeded anything we have witnessed in the last decade: in the Karabagh war of 1990-94 the Azeri and Armenian casualties together are estimated at 10-15,000, but in 1919, in the same Karabagh, in just one episode lasting three days and nights nearly 20,000 people were slaughtered. This helps us to understand why in so many places the 1920 advance of the victorious Red Army was greeted with resignation or even hailed as a return to order.

The Bolsheviks promptly shut down ethnic and agrarian violence by using the dictatorial means forged in the Russian Civil War. But Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin were also realist and very inventive politicians. They tried to remove the imme-
diate causes of conflict by forcefully resolving territorial disputes, carrying out land reform and then collectivization, inviting the acceptable leadership among the nationalists (mostly artists and educators) to pursue their projects in the framework of the Soviet multi-national state, and, most inventively of all, not abolishing the national states. This tactical shift went against the expectations of both nationalists and orthodox Marxists, but it worked. Strategically the Leninists hoped, not wholly unreasonably, that with the impending industrialization the nationality question would evaporate. Later, in the 1930s, Stalin decided to speed up the extinction of the nationalists with the help of police terror. The remnants of the old intelligentsia were eliminated wholesale. This removed the potential danger of national rebellions. The new, Soviet-made national intelligentsias were perfectly docile and, having been produced in the paranoid isolationism of the Stalinist regime, possessed a very limited world-view.

The Stalinist nationality institutions were often dismissed as being artificial, intrinsically provincial, and mere ornaments on the Soviet imperial facade. To some extent they were. In a state as rigidly centralized as the USSR the big academy conducting ‘real’ scientific research was the mighty Soviet Academy of Sciences, and the leading film studios and publishing houses were in Moscow and Leningrad. But as time passes all institutions tend to acquire lives of their own. Even though the quality of research, education and the arts in the national republics might often seem mediocre (though marvellous exceptions occurred, especially in film-making and literature), the institutions of national culture did create numerous professional positions for the national intelligentsias. These jobs were respectable, relatively well-paid and not too demanding, which made them attractive. Moreover the institutions catering to national cultures fostered tightly-knit professional communities of educated men and women who normally lived their entire lives in the same town, the capital of their republic, since their credentials did not travel beyond the republic’s borders. An engineer with a diploma from Siberia or Kazakhstan could find a job anywhere there was a factory, but a specialist in Azerbaijani poetry was hardly transferable to Estonia or Russia. Yet Soviet centralization, and the festivals of nationality cultures, regularly brought the artistic intelligentsias of the different nationalities together. Moscow’s aim was to foster internationalism, but unofficially this allowed these cultural nationalists to exchange ideas and dreams. Little wonder then that the documents of Azeri nationalism in 1989 appear to be literal copies of the more advanced Estonian nationalist programmes – they were in fact copies, widely circulated through the national intelligentsias’ network. The common dream was independence from Moscow, which promised to make the lesser national academies, universities, museums, etc. into institutions of sovereign states with direct access to the world arena. As long as the power of the Soviet Union looked rock-solid, this remained a pipe-dream. But things changed in 1988 with the events that took place in Nagorno Karabagh. And here, let us turn to the specific case of the Azeri orientalists.
Because of its easily accessible and rich deposits of oil, Azerbaijan became the site of industrial growth early on, in the late nineteenth century. Industrialization, however, was highly concentrated around Baku, the town on the coast of the Caspian Sea which allowed for the bulk export of Azerbaijan’s main commodity. Fed by the oil boom of the 1880s-1900s, Baku rapidly evolved into a cosmopolitan town with a picturesque blend of cultures brought by western European investors, like the prominent Russo-Swedish Nobel family; by Russian colonial administrators and skilled professionals (of whom perhaps a majority were Russian subjects of other nationalities including Poles, Jews and Germans); and most importantly by Armenians, who were both native to the area and had the cultural advantage of being Christians, and hence being favoured by foreign employers. The Muslim natives (which is how they were perceived at the time – as just Muslims) occupied a typically ambiguous position. At the top of Baku society one could find quite a few Muslim merchants and landowners who had invested their wealth and social skills in the new oil business with great success. At the bottom of the social hierarchy were the numerous unskilled Muslim labourers and urban lumpens who had recently come to town. There were some Muslim intellectuals in the middle, but they were vastly outnumbered by Russians, Armenians, Jews, and Poles. This ethnic mosaic persisted in Baku throughout the entire Soviet period. The Western nationals were gone, the native bourgeoisie was undone, the old intelligentsia perished almost wholesale in the purges of 1936–38, and Soviet nationality policies had promoted many Azeris into official positions at the top. But the town remained a prosperous cosmopolitan enclave centred on its oil industry and the administration of the hinterland.

Outside Baku the hinterland remained another country altogether. The main native group of the region were Azeris whose ethnic identity was even more diffuse than elsewhere. Linguistically they were Turks, but before the arrival of Russians in the early 1800s the area had for many centuries been a province of Iran, so that the dominant culture was Persian and the prevalent religion was the Shiite brand of Islam practised in Iran. The very terms ‘Azeri’ and ‘Azerbaijan’ were invented by the nationalizing native intelligentsia in the early 1900s–1910s, and became official under the Soviet regime only after 1936. The rural population had no national identity. They knew that they belonged to the larger community of Shiite Muslims, and this identity was regularly exercised in religious rituals and codes of behaviour. They also belonged to local networks of extended families and village communities centred on the rural market towns that were controlled by quasi-feudal ‘counties’ – the khanates of Nuha, Shemaha, Gyandja, etc. These were small and fairly closed societies that rarely interacted with each other and maintained contact with Baku only via the export trade and the state administrative apparatus.

The traditional division of the area into ‘counties’ had been perpetuated de facto by the Russian colonial administration, and was continued by the Soviet
state under the rubric of ‘districts’. The main reason was purely administrative.
On the one hand, the pre-existing territorial networks centred on small towns
offered a logical basis for local government. On the other hand, there was no
political need to disband the traditional ‘counties’ because they never served as
a base for any organized resistance. The usual explanation offered for this is ethnic
character – the idea, presumably, that Azeri peasants were particularly docile or
devoid of civic spirit – and as usual it is a deceptively superficial stereotype. The
political history of the region in the centuries before the Russian conquest was
extremely volatile and violent. The Iranian shahs never firmly controlled this
borderland area. The tiny khanates were fertile grounds for various mobile rack-
eteers, predominantly Turkic nomadic chieftains; and in the mountainous
Karabagh, for the last surviving dynasties of Armenian Christian lords, who
competed fiercely among themselves for the right to exact rents from the peas-
antry and the artisans in the towns. These petty despots used to come and go,
unseating each other in perennial violent feuds, while the Iranian shahs were only
cconcerned that they provided auxiliary troops and supplies for their endless impe-
cial campaigns against Ottoman Turkey. In this environment the defenceless
peasants developed an aloof resignation towards political power, hoping only that
the next local ruler would not be too predatory. From this perspective the
Russian colonial administrators, though infidels, seemed acceptable, because they
prevented runaway violence and did not exact very much in taxes, since their
revenues were largely provided by the oil industry of Baku.

The same traditional attitude continued throughout the Soviet period. The
local administrators became native Azeris and were ostensibly communist, but the
rural districts continued to be seen as a source of revenue and private enrichment.
We have no reliable data whatever on the actual operations of local power in
Soviet Azerbaijan (or any republic of Soviet Transcaucasia and Central Asia), but
the extensive anecdotal evidence suggests that the position of district party secre-
tary was as a rule sold to prospective office holders. We even know the price-tag
– around 100,000 rubles during the Brezhnev period, which could be higher in
particularly lucrative districts. Generally speaking, it worked in the following
way. First, a locally prominent family accumulated money that was then lent to
an ambitious career-oriented relative who was seeking office. By itself money
was not enough; one also needed connections in Baku and an opportunity to
present the bribe. Those who had been educated in the big town thus had a
better chance, while the proper education credentials were themselves obtained
with the obligatory bribes paid to professors during the admission process and in
all the successive examinations up to the university diploma. Ironically, if one
judges on the basis of Soviet statistics, by the mid-1960s the Azerbaijani nomen-
klatura appeared exceptionally well-educated: nearly half of them had doctorates
– which was, of course, a fictitious overstatement, since these were doctorates
acquired through bribes. Higher education and the career it opened up was the
way to develop the necessary contacts and the opportunity to join the patronage
networks of the bigger bosses, all the way up to the First Secretary of the
Republic. Once the desired position in the party apparatus had been purchased the new office holder would begin to repay his debts by appointing his relatives and clients to locally lucrative subordinate positions: the chief of financial inspection, the head of the local police force, managers of cooperative shops, chairmen of collective farms, directors of building materials factories, etc. In turn these lesser officials would establish various illicit operations under their control so as to skim off funds with which they enriched themselves and paid regular bribes to their superiors for patronage and protection.

From the normative standpoint of rational bureaucracy this system looks thoroughly corrupt and deviant, an astonishing inner failure of the Soviet state that remained disguised and ignored by outsiders. Yet soberly speaking, the pattern of social power in Azerbaijan’s countryside was not substantially different from the situation in other republics of Transcaucasia and Central Asia. The Soviet state simply failed to penetrate these areas, and Moscow eventually contended itself with the formal compliance dutifully exhibited by the various national nomenklaturas. It was essentially the continuation of an ancient prebendal system that worked like a siphon, taxing the local economy and funnelling the proceeds upwards, all the way to Baku which in turn paid off inspectors from Moscow and lobbied the Soviet central planning agencies for higher levels of investment in Azerbaijan.

This systematic corruption was unstable, because internecine bureaucratic feuding over the coveted positions was inherent in it, and Moscow periodically lashed out by removing the upper echelons of officials in the national republics. In 1969, for example, with the help of the KGB chief Yuri Andropov, the entire government of Azerbaijan was sacked and the reputedly honest and capable young chief of Azerbaijan’s KGB, Gen. Heidar Aliev, was appointed to lead the purge. Incidentally, four years later in a similar move in neighbouring Georgia the KGB brought to power another police general, Eduard Shevardnadze. Both these young leaders conducted massive purges of corrupt officials and appointed their own clients, who proved even more corrupt. The problem was institutional and cultural, not one of wicked personalities. Both Aliev and Shevardnadze, arguably excellent politicians in the Machiavellian mould, clearly realized that their key role was to placate Moscow while consolidating their local power base by appointing loyal clients who, in order to rule and deliver, would have to indulge in the deeply entrenched practice of corruption. Any official who denied appointments to his relatives would lose the support of his family and hence would be eaten alive by competing families. Besides, the ethnic cultures of the region, not unlike those of the Mediterranean, required conspicuous consumption as proof of social status. An officeholder who could not provide the ‘proper’ level of entertainment and gifts for his relatives and guests would be judged a miserable failure.

It must be noted, however, that though the peasants had no hope of ever changing this corrupt system, they did not entirely give up hope of earning a better life for themselves and their families. The industrialization of the Soviet
Union and its growing prosperity in the 1960s–1970s translated into two major opportunities: labour migration and long-distance market trade. Many thousands of Azeri oilmen could be found as far away from home as the Soviet Arctic where they assiduously accumulated the hefty ‘northern bonuses’ before returning to their villages to get married and build sometimes ostentatious houses. Meantime many more Azeri peasant traders appeared in the markets of large Russian towns, where they specialized in selling produce from their sub-tropical native republic, mostly fruit and fresh flowers. Once again we know precious little about the actual organization of these market networks because from the standpoint of Soviet law code they bordered on crime. Yet it is clear that the peasants alone could not have managed the massive takeover of the arable land that was ostensibly under the control of collective farms, and the subsequent switching of the main crops away from industrial raw materials like cotton, whose cultivation was dictated by Moscow’s central planners, to lucrative fruit and flowers. The local officials in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and the other predominantly agrarian republics in the southern tier of the USSR, actively connived in this tacit de-collectivization and marketization in which they obviously had a pecuniary interest – for as the peasants grew richer they could afford bigger bribes, so long as their semi-legal enterprise continued to depend critically on an official cover-up.

The economic autarchy practised by the Soviet government, which excluded the frivolous expenditure of hard currency on imports of fresh produce, in effect ensured a steady monopolistic rent to domestic suppliers like the Azeris. The profits, of course, were redistributed by the endemic, highly inegalitarian, networks of corruption. Tremendous social inequalities and pervasive servility were thus glaring features of Soviet Azerbaijan society, but they remained mostly unnoticed by outsiders, and even by visitors to Baku. The city preserved its composite Oriental-Westernized charm and the oddities of local social patterns were presumed to be just the exoticism of the East.

Indeed on the eve of 1989 revolution Soviet Azerbaijan looked like a lesser version of the latter-day Ottoman empire. Big, prosperous, cosmopolitan Baku dominated the rural districts populated by unwashed ethnic peasants and petty despots. Like the Constantinople of yesteryear, the mixed population of Baku was ethnically and socially distinct from the countryside. The difference was very noticeable and strictly enforced by the urbanites. The latter had evolved into a composite pan-ethnic urban population of urbanized Azeris and Armenians, locally rooted Russians and Germans, Jews, Persians, and a myriad lesser minorities like the Tat, Lezgi, and Talysh, who all preferred to call themselves ‘Bakintsy’. Their lingua franca was Russian, spoken in the colourful local Baku accent. Just as the inhabitants of Ottoman Istanbul, the Stambuli, did not regard themselves as Turks, and used the appellation ‘Turks’ only as a pejorative term for unwashed semi-nomadic people from the interior deserts of Eastern Anatolia, the Bakintsy invented a variety of pejorative words for rural Azeris. But the worst ridicule was reserved for recent arrivals in town who had to settle in the dusty...
and overcrowded suburbs – the much-ridiculed Mashtaga and other exploding slums, situated outside the town proper, in the former villages of the Apsheron peninsula. All jokes about homosexuals, gullible husbands, or fat, stupid and greedy wives were about the dwellers of those indeed fabulously corny places, the middle ground between village and town that had already lost the traditional norms of the village but had not yet acquired the cosmopolitan norms and codes of behaviour of the city. The jokes kept the ‘Mashtagintsy’ and their ilk in their proper place.

For the same reason in 1990-93 the semi-rural suburbs of Baku saw a brief (as it turned out), but probably not the last, flowering of Islamist fervour, whose seeds were supplied from Iran. Fundamentalism emerges in marginal spaces, in those urban margins that lack a proper name in English (where ‘suburb’ is associated with a middle-class lifestyle). Traditional peasants are comfortable with their religious rituals; they need not prove to anyone, least of all to themselves, that they are true Muslims, while true urbanites scorn religion for which they have little use except on such purely ritual occasions as the funeral of an old grandma who used to pray. Mashtaga, by contrast, yearned in its own clumsy way to fill the gaping void in its culture with something huge and respectable, like the newly assertive Islam.

The language of Baku was colonial Russian, and therefore the immediately obvious measure of social status was one’s Russian accent. It varied from the thicker, sweet, Persianized vernacular of the Baku bazaris to the impeccable aristocratic smoothness cultivated in ‘good’ families. It must be appreciated that the Russian spoken by Heidar Aliev, the only Muslim ever to become member of the Politburo, was far more elegant and grammatically correct than that of Brezhnev or Gorbachev, who both spoke with bluntly southern Russo-Ukrainian peasant accents.

As anyone who has been to places like Oxbridge knows, you either acquire the right accent in your family, or you send the children to the right school – and you had better do both. Thus a meeting of two Bakintsy in the corridors of Moscow State University (where I observed them at length) always started with Masonic-sounding cryptic exchanges:
— Twenty-fourth. And you?
— Seventeenth.
— In Armenikent?
— And you, not by any chance on Darwin Street?

The numbers are the ‘good’ schools; and a ‘good’ street, like Hagani St., right behind the Government building, was the tell-tale address of several of my old friends in Baku.

But what happens after the good high school? In many countries it used to be the elite military academies, in modern France it has to be one of the grandes Écoles that train the bureaucrats, while the US ruling elite comes from the law schools. The ruling elite of Soviet Azerbaijan, to nobody’s surprise, came mostly from the State Oil Polytechnical Institute. Its diploma allowed one not to
become a grimy *nefchi* (oilman) on a platform out in the Caspian sea; it provided the best credentials for becoming a Party apparatchik who was supposed once to have been (if mostly on paper) an oilman – the ‘true vanguard of Baku and the whole Transcaucasian working class’. Under the Soviet system of affirmative action, the party *nomenklatura* in the national republics had to be native, which made the Oil Institute a preserve of ethnic Azeris from Baku. In a social environment dominated by bureaucratic patronage and bribes the admission process, of course, was largely a charade, yet the competition was genuinely acute since the elite families had more sons than there were coveted freshman places. In a celebrated scandal of the late 1970s a young applicant was caught cheating: he stated on the admission forms that his father was a simple oil driller, a true Azeri proletarian, when in fact his parent was a prominent lawyer – since even such a lucrative position, when competing with the interests of other elite families, could not guarantee admission.

Slightly lower on the scale of prestige came the Medical Institute. Brecht’s famous line in the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* about the merchant who sent his sons to medical school to teach them how to earn money was eminently true of Baku’s medical establishment. The nickname of its Rector in the late 1980s was telling: ‘Comrade Dollar’. Few *nomenklatura* officials were ever medical graduates but a medical diploma promised a comfortable and well-supplied life. Thanks to its relative political unimportance and profitability the profession was accessible and indeed favoured by Baku’s ethnic Armenians, Jews, and Russians, as well as many Azeris. In the bribe-ridden society of Azerbaijan it was profitable because patients automatically expected to pay doctors something extra, hoping to get better and faster treatment in return. But best of all, the medical profession was the safest profession. Doctors, after all, were not running restaurants or shops where the state auditors were an unavoidable risk. The best doctors could not, after all, help receiving ‘gifts’ and other tokens of respect from grateful patients.

Still, what about those refined scions of high-status Azeri intelligentsia families who neither had the guts or the nerve to become apparatchiks, nor desired a medical career? Their choice was Azerbaijan State University. Inside the university there existed a scale of departmental prestige, directly translatable into the relative difficulty of admission. Chemistry and physics were considered relatively easy to get into because the curriculum was challenging and the job prospects not that great: half the graduates would end up teaching science in schools. The fact that genuine scientific credentials earned low pay (or led to jobs where bribes were only sporadic) caused feelings of injustice, and so we do find some scientists among the revolutionaries of 1989. Law, by contrast, was a status quo department. In the Soviet system court litigation was not very important, lawyers were few and by default disproportionately Jewish. The best career for someone with a degree in law was in the state prosecutors’ agencies, the KGB and the police, all entrusted with fighting crime and corruption and thus wielding powerful tools for eliciting bribes. Soviet jurists thus tended be politically conservative. The radicals were found in the departments of history and philology.
They were the custodians of the nation’s past, its national language and culture. Admittedly it was a local past and a local culture, preserved in museums and academic research institutes – respectable but low-paying institutions. Their young custodians vaguely yearned for a better appreciation of their symbolic value but as long as nationalism remained a political taboo this remained merely a dream.

Nonetheless there remained one relatively small and exclusive ‘cultural’ department that combined high prestige with the prospect of diplomatic career – the Faculty of Oriental Studies, or ‘Vostfak’ in its Russian abbreviation. Since Azerbaijan was historically an Islamic country, some limited training of native specialists was undertaken mostly with a view to placing a few Muslim non-Russians in the Soviet embassies in the Middle East. Vostfak offered training in real foreign languages like Arabic and Persian and, most importantly, foreign service assignments paid very hefty salaries in hard currency. All perfectly legal, very prestigious, very diplomatic. Moreover this was as close to a professional political training as one could get, not counting the KGB academy. In reality only a chosen few among the graduates of Vostfak, primarily those who had been recruited into the KGB, would ever get permanent jobs abroad. The Soviet foreign service was controlled from Moscow and even the best Baku families could not help their children there. Most Vostfak graduates ended up in academic research institutes and museums spending their lives studying, at a leisurely pace, old oriental manuscripts. If only Azerbaijan had had its own ministry of foreign affairs!

This description does not exhaust the actual pyramid of higher education. Below the Oil and the Medical institute, below the National University, there were the worthless pedagogical institutes (teachers colleges) that ranked very low because their diplomas assured postings in the least prestigious schools. In Azerbaijan, as in all Soviet republics, teacher training was divided into streams offering education in either Russian or native languages. The latter were the lowest of the low. The native language schools were predominantly situated in villages. Teaching in them commanded no prestige, the jobs were low paid, and there was little prospect of ever leaving this dead-end career. The students for teacher training in native languages were therefore drawn from the villages, many of them could speak only some broken Russian, they were poor and felt deeply alienated from Baku’s urban life. No urban girl would ever give them a second glance. These students produced the most radical nationalist fringe in 1989 when it suddenly turned out that they actually spoke the native language of the angry masses.

The social dynamic of the Armenian-Azeri conflict now begins to look more comprehensible. Back in the 1920s the Bolsheviks had no alternative but to staff the new state apparatus, including the dreaded secret police, with the better-educated and more urbanized Armenians. Until the late 1930s there were almost no Azeris in the positions of leadership. But a generation later, thanks to Soviet nationality policy, the ethnic Azeris began to catch up. After 1956 they were helped by de-Stalinization, which rotated the cadres, and most of all by the
tremendous expansion of the state apparatus in the prosperous and hopeful age of Khruschev. By the mid-1960s a great many Azeris had made it into the elite, but in the process they assimilated the lifestyle and the norms of Baku and effectively ceased to be like Azeris from the villages. The new elite assiduously prevented their children from learning the native vernacular, so that they would avoid having an uncultured ‘bazari’ accent and bazari manners. The same, incidentally, happened with the Baku Armenians who detached themselves from both the Armenian church and their rustic brethren in the backwaters of the Armenian enclave of Karabagh. In fact the great era of Baku’s role as a melting pot was 1956–89. The new arrivals transformed themselves into members of the new urban society and effectively prevented further social mobility by establishing among themselves rigid hierarchies of official ranks, unofficial (yet ever more important) private networks, and general cultural statuses. The gates of the town were shut again.

As long as the USSR lasted the rural population were kept in their place, whether they were Azeris in the rural districts or Armenians in the god-forsaken distant province of Karabagh. The structural tensions were great, but up till the late 1980s they remained hidden. In February 1986, two years before the political eruption started, while travelling in Azerbaijan I got a few glimpses of the astonishing social hatred that lay just beneath the surface. First, in Baku, an Azeri driver, after his boss had left the car and entered the premises of Azerbaijan’s Central Committee, spat in disgust and muttered in very coarse Russian (evidently learnt in the army): ‘Bloodsuckers! The damn Party bloodsuckers! Look at their fat butts, they all eat caviar while we have to pay bribes for everything and my children eat bread and tea. How can I support a family on what they are paying me?!’ Another incident happened not far from Karabagh. On a rural road the bus, with Baku licence plates, was stoned by a crowd of angry children. They were Armenians, an Azeri man sitting next to me explained. He felt appalled by this act of ‘hooliganism’, but not at all surprised, since such attacks happened routinely. The conflict was between two neighbouring villages, one Armenian, the other Azeri. The Armenians were protesting against the arrest of the accountant at a local fruit-processing plant. The accountant, an Armenian, had helped his boss, an Azeri, to cover up a typical embezzlement scheme. The accountant had received a death sentence, the Azeri boss walked free – because, it was widely assumed, he had bribed the entire police command and the court in Baku, all of them also Azeris.

As with many previous revolutions the triggering event in Azerbaijan was a convoluted intrigue. In February 1988 a clique of provincial officials in the capital of Karabagh, Stepanakert (pop. 40,000), decided to gain some additional leverage against their corrupt bosses in Baku, and incidentally to redistribute some local commodity flows that were then monopolized by the crafty bazaris and officials in the nearby Azeri market town of Agdam. The plan was to convince Moscow to allow the administrative transfer of Azerbaijan’s autonomous province of Karabagh to the jurisdiction of neighbouring Armenia. To the conspirators it
seemed simple and straightforward: the population of Karabagh was predominantly Armenian, the Armenian homeland lay just a few kilometres away, and Karabagh had ended up inside the borders of Azerbaijan by mistake, because back in 1921 the evil Stalin had said so; and besides, two of Gorbachev’s top advisors were Armenians from Karabagh. It only remained, in the spirit of glasnost and perestroika, to organize a demonstration of popular will. The organizers of the campaign were provincially-minded bosses from a remote province. They presented Gorbachev with a potentially utterly disruptive precedent, because the Soviet apportionment of all ‘national autonomous provinces’ was no more logical than the determination of any other colonial borders. In addition the proposal gave Gorbachev’s opponents in the Politburo a hefty counter-argument against further democratization: ‘look at what begins to happen once you allow the freedom of expression’. Sensing Gorbachev’s impasse, the leaders of Azerbaijan branded the Karabagh campaign an affront to the republic’s sovereignty. Although most Azeris had been barely aware of Karabagh’s existence (it was and still is an insignificant borderland province, far removed from any economic centre), the Armenian demands suddenly provoked a massive emotional response. The rest is well known. In the ensuing war Agdam was seized by the Armenian insurgents and now lies in ruins, Baku lost its power over Karabagh – and one of the original conspirators is now president of the internationally recognized Republic of Armenia, so at least his bet paid off better than he could ever have expected.

This little provincial intrigue unexpectedly burst the dam. The first petition campaign and rallies conducted in Karabagh by the Armenians provoked wildly escalating counter-rallies in Azerbaijan. In the grimy industrial township of Sumgait outside Baku an irate crowd of Azeri lumpens went on a rampage, killing local Armenians on the pretext of clearing their apartments to make room for Azeri refugees from Armenia. Despite the wildest rumours, the first pogrom was almost certainly spontaneous. It is very hard to imagine that even the most corrupt Soviet-era officials would dare to play with street violence. The social environment of Sumgait was as bad as an inherently violent industrial suburb could be. The township had been built by prison labour around the oil-processing plants. It became the reservoir for Baku undesirables: all sorts of hoodlums, former convicts and drug addicts, cleansed from the boulevards of Baku. Sumgait had the highest crime rate in the entire USSR and witnessed serious rioting even in the Brezhnev era. Little wonder that the first pogrom (in February 1988) occurred there. Several weeks after Sumgait – and after the whole country had witnessed the confused response from Gorbachev – street rioting entered the repertoire of local collective action. Violence and counter-violence escalated. In 1988-90 we see the spread of pre-emptive and retributive strikes (sometimes in ‘revenge’ for massacres committed generations before) with the attendant emergence of self-defence militias in every village, helped by volunteer detachments arriving respectively from either Baku or Yerevan. On both sides the fighters were either romantic students, inspired by nationalist ideas, or just city street ‘tough guys’ who had suddenly acquired a cause.
Meantime, in the spring of 1988, a bunch of local elite intellectuals concentrated in Baku, who had known each other well since their university days, decided it was time to lead the Nation. Do not forget that in the previous years of glasnost they had been avidly watching the meteoric rise of the top Russian intellectuals in Moscow to the status of media celebrities and custodians of the national consciousness. Azerbaijan’s bureaucratic elite was at loss. On the one hand, they had been disgraced by their inability to contain popular violence; on the other hand, they could no longer tell who their boss was in Moscow, or how to deal with Gorbachev, who talked endlessly without issuing any direct commands. Besides, most party apparatchiks showed dismal qualities as public speakers, quite unlike the literary intellectuals who delivered public speeches with gleeful panache. It was the hour of big speeches and thus the hour of oppositional orators: the liberal, Westernizing, high-status, patriotic intelligentsia.

And then the rioting worsens as the parading crowds get frustrated by their inability to achieve anything, and as the local elite and the KGB learn how to use the street violence in their intrigues. Unlike Sumgait, later pogroms and massacres seem pre-planned or at least channelled, although in the tumult it is impossible to determine by whom. In this mayhem a new force appears – those third-rate students from the Azeri-language teachers colleges and equally appalling places (the college of veterinarians, the association of village poets, etc.). This force had to be recklessly radical for they had no social status to lose and everything to gain. The pyramid of social symbols was now turned upside down. What previously was terribly uncool – speaking Azeri – became now the sign of true patriotism. Meanwhile, to no one’s surprise, most of the Communist apparatchiks and even the elite national intelligentsia of Baku failed the test miserably. They proved in public their inability to speak the native language! (In Georgia and Armenia it was slightly different because high cultures existed in the native languages, with their ancient literary traditions and scripts. Nonetheless, the low-status radicals there simply used other symbols of native-ness and rurality – for instance, the Mingrel dialect in Georgia, associated with Zviad Gamsakhurdia.)

In Baku things got completely out of hand in the late autumn of 1989, as the Azeri revolutionaries saw on Soviet television – and even more, heard on foreign radio stations – what was happening in Eastern Europe. A group of Azeri insurgents from villages along the Iranian border led ecstatic crowds to demolish the Soviet border installations, apparently emulating the breaking down of the Berlin Wall. The revolutionary opposition was notionally united under an umbrella organization, the Azerbaijan Popular Front. The Popular Front was originally designed by the Vostfak elite intellectuals on the Estonian model, but in fact it became an assortment of very disparate groups spontaneously emerging all over Azerbaijan. It seems that in most districts the self-proclaimed cells of the Popular Front represented either big local families who were out of power at the moment, or teachers and other low-status rural intellectuals who finally saw a possibility of waging a class war against the corrupt local hierarchies. In any event,
each district had its own version of the Popular Front with its own social composi-
tion and political agenda. In some places the local Party committee offices were
sacked and burnt by peasant crowds, in other districts there emerged a sort of
anarchistic local militias that rapidly evolved into warlord gangs, while in yet
other districts ‘alien’ elements were expelled – but we have no information about
who was expelling whom. By January 1990 Baku seemed on the verge of being
taken over by the rural refugees and unenlightened crowds from suburbia. The
Armenian population, nearly 120,000 people, were violently driven out of town,
although according to all the evidence groups of Azeri intellectuals, the original
core of Popular Front in Baku, seem to have done their best to calm the crowds
and save the Armenians.

It was widely suggested that the pogroms in Baku were organized by Moscow
to obtain a pretext for imposing martial law. Whether this was so remains
anyone’s guess, but in any case Moscow finally resolved to impose martial law
and send the army into Baku. The Soviet troops, mostly ethnic Russian recruits
who only vaguely knew that ‘Muslim fanatics were on a killing spree’, entered
the city at night, shooting in all directions. The Azeris unanimously allege that
this was a deliberate show of force, though it is much more likely to have been
the opposite – that soldiers and officers were disoriented and scared out of their
wits on entering the big unfamiliar town whose darkened streets were lit by
burning tires.

The imposition of martial law in 1990 for two years introduced a weak regime
of restoration. The ‘new’ old regime looked inept and pathetic, and ended when
the USSR disintegrated. With the Soviet army gone, the conflict over Karabagh
escalated into a full-scale war, which the shaky Azerbaijani state lost. Armenian
forces not only took Karabagh but also occupied a buffer zone around it which
they are still holding today as bargaining chip for a future settlement of the
conflict. In Azerbaijan, in 1992-93, the Popular Front of Azerbaijan held power
for a year. President Elchibey, a former dissident and a specialist in Arabic poetry,
was by all accounts a decent man with lofty intentions who hoped to turn
Azerbaijan into a secular and democratic state and to finance reforms with the
country’s oil revenues. But he had neither political leverage nor cadres capable
of imposing his government on the country’s feuding ‘big families’. His short-
lived regime barely controlled Baku, let alone the countryside. One of the rural
rebellions (probably helped by the Russian military, worried at Azerbaijan’s drift
to the West) eventually forced Elchibey out of power. The period of ‘revolu-
tionary’ rule ended ignominiously.

The epilogue followed the general lines of post-Soviet authoritarian stabi-
lizations. The provincial warlord who ousted the Popular Front himself failed to
hold onto the reins of power. Out from self-imposed exile re-emerged the grand
old ruler, the seventy-five year old but still very vigorous Heydar Aliev, First
Secretary of Azerbaijan in 1969-82 and a member of Andropov’s Politburo. Like
Shevardnadze in Georgia, Aliev allowed the border wars to continue. He could
not stop them, so he allowed the dangerous warlords to confront the Armenian
forces and get ground into pulp one after another. The rest of his potentially threatening opponents, and even over-powerful subordinates, were either forced into exile or imprisoned on charges of embezzlement (which was never implausible) or attempted coups (which looked less plausible.) The new/old ruler consolidated a tightly authoritarian regime, monopolized the oil industry by appointing his son as director of the State Oil Company, and placed his relatives and clients in other key positions. By 1995 a degree of peace had been re-established and a great many people, worn out by the traumatic events of the previous seven years, sincerely welcomed the restoration of minimal (for it was and is minimal) normality.

But the great communist padishahs of yesteryear, like Aliev and his colleague Shevardnadze, are very old, and the world around them is different now. They are superb Byzantine intriguers and benevolent despots, but how long will they hold power? Will they be able to create dynasties? Heydar Aliev certainly is grooming his son to become his successor. The web of corrupt patronage that he has woven is so complex yet at the same time so tenuous that Aliev and his closest courtiers simply cannot risk open elections and the possible transfer of power to a rival set of families. Yet it is impossible to avoid elections altogether because Azerbaijan is under too much Western pressure to follow that procedure in order to be recognized. Which is why today, as Aliev is aging, Azerbaijan witnesses a rise in oppositional sentiment among the intelligentsia that tasted politics in 1988–93. It is a typical dilemma of weak authoritarianism that can be observed equally in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, or Russia itself. On the one hand, the rulers are constrained by the West from institutionalizing overt dictatorships. On the other hand, their power arrangements are too fragile to risk genuine elections and the regimes lack the resources to buy off all the opposition with comfortable sinecures in business, embassies, universities and parliaments. And so it goes on, low-level repression and harassment along with mostly symbolic acts of opposition – for the oppositions are even weaker and less confident than the ruling regimes.

CHECHNYA

One last observation regarding the exceptional case of Chechnya. This small republic within the Russian Federation was not too different from Azerbaijan structurally. It too was a typically colonial combination of one big and cosmopolitan town, Grozny, that had also grown on oil, and the ethnic countryside. Although the Chechens, unlike the Azeris, had waged a fierce resistance against the advancing empire in the nineteenth century, and again during the Stalinist collectivization and the purges, a loyal Soviet-made national intelligentsia developed in the late 1950s-1980s and dominated local politics during perestroika, pretty much like everywhere else. In 1988–91 the revolutionary sequence looked almost exactly the same as elsewhere.

But Chechnya was different in one crucial point – within the general sequence, the rural crowds succeeded in overpowering urban society and putting
their idol, General Djohar Dudayev, on the throne. I have deliberately avoided using the word ‘leader’, for Dudayev did not lead; rather he symbolized the popular movement of the uneducated rural masses. In his endless pronouncements Dudayev expressed their deeply-felt grievances and confused aspirations — adding, of course, his own rather idiosyncratic twist. Yet despite the famous idiosyncrasies of Gen. Dudayev (much ridiculed by educated Chechens) he proved an adequate mobilizer of his warrior-peasant people. In a significant deviation from the general pattern, the embodiment of the Chechen revolution was not a ‘soft’ intellectual from the humanities like Elchibey. He was a military officer to the core, which his compatriots evidently found appealing. No less significantly, the second president of Chechnya, Colonel Aslan Maskhadov, was also a professional officer.

Unlike Azerbaijan or Georgia, Chechnya did not experience an authoritarian restoration with the return to power of the last Communist boss. Yeltsin’s Moscow decided to correct history and obtain in Chechnya a more pliable counterpart, just as in Azerbaijan or Georgia where the Russian special forces almost certainly helped to organize the coups that took place there too. The Russian subversive operation against Dudayev in the summer of 1994 sought to facilitate precisely the same turn of events: to topple the perestroika-vintage ‘demagogue’ Dudayev and install a more predictable ruler, even if not entirely a puppet (yes, Moscow would have accepted someone like Azerbaijan’s Aliyev, a tough partner but still a partner). But the Russian plotters proved to have insufficient resources and were simply inept. The operation’s cover was blown when Dudayev’s forces captured Russian servicemen fighting on the side of the anti-Dudayev opposition. Yeltsin now faced the choice of apologizing, or sanctioning an all-out invasion. Counting on silent approval from Washington, Yeltsin chose war, hoping that it would be a brief blitzkrieg and thus a good boost for his fortunes in the forthcoming elections. (Yeltsin and his circle, being admirers of Margaret Thatcher, were keenly aware of the role played in British politics by the Falklands war.)

Yeltsin’s generals misjudged the degree of decay in Russia’s own army, and the fighting spirit of the Chechens. The former is today well-known, the latter is over-mythologized and needs a brief clarification. The Chechen fighting spirit is not mythical, it is a collective protective reaction on the part of a people who, like the Armenians, live with the traumatic memory of recent genocide. From the popular Chechen standpoint, the Russian invasion was not a political game between Yeltsin and Dudayev but a threat to their very existence. The slow-moving and indecisive Russian military allowed the Chechen militias enough time to recover their wits, distribute the weapons that Dudayev had been stockpiling, and prepare the defences of Grozny under the able leadership of Col. Maskhadov. The rest was and, alas, remains an almost purely military dynamic.

The war destroyed Grozny, with its cosmopolitan culture and modern politics, and scattered its population as refugees. The remaining Chechen population were the resilient peasants and their village militias who sought political inspira-
tion in a crude wartime form of nationalism, and actually won the first war on this wave. But the resulting national state, the second Chechen Republic of 1997–99, fell apart even faster than Dudayev’s pre-war state. Most of the disappointed fighters, and a sizable minority in the civilian Chechen population, subsequently turned their hopes towards radical Islam. The origins of the second Chechen war are shrouded in dirty secrets. It began in August 1999 with the inexplicable Chechen invasion of Daghestan, ostensibly to defend the Muslims of that neighbouring country from Russian oppression.4

This Islamist attack played the same role as Bin Laden’s provocation against America two years later: it mightily consolidated the existing regimes on the platforms of military patriotism. First the unknown Vladimir Putin became the great president, then George W. Bush obtained his historic opportunity. The great game so far seems to go in their favour. But Afghanistan and Chechnya may soon be joined by Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Allah knows what other states that are teetering on the brink of collapse. Their state structures are eroded by corruption of previously unheard-of proportions, their societies are demoralized by neo-sultanist regimes like the one Heydar Aliyev has built in Azerbaijan, and their impoverished populations, both rural and urban, are seething with hatred. Whatever the future holds, one thing is clear. History did not end in 1989; it took a deep dive into the unknown.

NOTES