

Chronicle

Protests in Armenia

Earlier this year the Western press was full of reports about demonstrations in the Soviet Caucasus. Video film smuggled out of the region revealed hundreds of thousands of protestors on the streets of Yerevan and the town of Stepanakert. They were not only marching quite openly and making demands on the Soviet regime, but booing Politburo members sent in to calm the situation. A few days later reports began to filter out of bloody massacres in the Azerbaidzhani town of Sumgait.

The first reaction of most foreign commentators was to reach for their atlases, closely followed by their history books. The first protests had taken place in Stepanakert. It turned out that this town was the capital of a region in the republic of Azerbaidzhan called Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian demonstrators were asking that this region be returned to the Soviet republic of Armenia.

The roots of the problem go back to the years after the revolution if not earlier. The three Caucasian republics of Georgia, Azerbaidzhan and Armenia were incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1920-21. Some historians suggest that under the conditions prevailing at that time independence was not a viable option for the Armenians who, with the memories of the 1915 Turkish massacres vividly in mind, chose

Moscow's rule in preference to that of Istanbul.

When the boundaries of the Soviet Caucasian republics were determined in the early 1920s the predominantly Armenian region of Nagorno-Karabakh, situated to the east of Armenia, was incorporated into the Azerbaidzhan SSR. As in recent decades ethnic Armenians have made up some eighty per cent of the population, it is hardly surprising that there have been demands for the return of the area to Armenian jurisdiction. During the 1970s a number of petitions were sent to Brezhnev expressing dissatisfaction with the current situation, and in 1986 over 100,000 signatures were collected on a petition to Gorbachev. Among the complaints made was the lament that not one Armenian Apostolic church was open for worship in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The first Western interest in this problem was aroused in October last year when over 1,000 people demonstrated in the streets of Yerevan. In part protesting at the pollution of the Armenian environment, they also called for the return to Armenia of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous *Oblast*, and of the Nakhichevan ASSR, another disputed region. Although this doubtless alerted political leaders to a potential problem, little was done to meet the demands of

the Armenians. On 11 February Armenians in Stepanakert began to put up posters and distribute open letters. Two days later a number of local soviets passed resolutions calling for the incorporation of Nagorno-Karabakh into the Armenian SSR. Within a week the protests had spilled over into Armenia, and within another week the hundreds of demonstrators on the streets of Yerevan had become hundreds of thousands.

Almost immediately a Politburo trouble-shooting team was sent down to the region and on 26 February an appeal for calm from Gorbachev was read over the radio and television in Yerevan and the Azerbaidzhani capital Baku. By the end of February the organisers of events in Armenia had decided to suspend their protest activities for a month, but meanwhile tension had been raised by reports from Sumgait which suggested that there had been a pogrom directed against Armenians. According to official figures 32 people (26 Armenians) were murdered here, though many Armenians believe the figure to be much higher.

On 21 March *Pravda* made it clear that territorial revision was out of the question. Three days later troops were sent into Yerevan while helicopter gunships flew constantly over the city. A number of the more militant and nationalistic activists — notably Paruir Airikyan — were arrested. In Nagorno-Karabakh virtually the whole Armenian population went on strike, but in Yerevan a degree of uneasy “normalisation” had been achieved by early April. By then the major headache facing the authorities was what to do with the thousands of refugees from Azerbaidzhan who refused to go back. Though this degree of calm had been achieved by the threat of force, some concessions were made to the demands of the protestors — more

Armenian cultural facilities were to be provided in Nagorno-Karabakh and formal permission was given to open two Armenian churches in the region.

What role did religion play in this conflict? In the Western media the conflict was frequently spoken of in terms of Christian Armenians fighting Muslim Azeris. Certainly both nationalities are more religiously inclined than many other groups in the USSR. The oldest churches in the Soviet Union are to be found in Armenia which accepted Christianity in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Even today some seventy per cent of Armenian children are baptised, and the vast majority of Armenians speak of “our church” and refer to the leader of that Church, Vazgen I, as “father of the people”. Similarly, Islam has a long tradition in Azerbaidzhan, though arguably religion is less strongly entrenched here than in other traditionally Islamic parts of the Soviet Union.

The continuing influence of religion in both republics was clearly recognised by the political authorities during the recent events. Thus on 25 February Vazgen I appeared on Armenian television supporting the Armenian demands, but calling for the people to be calm and to await a decision from the responsible authorities. Nine days later Sheikh ul-Islam Allashukur Pashayev made a similar appeal for calm on Radio Baku. In early May *Izvestiya* reported that Christian and Islamic leaders from Transcaucasia had met in Rostov-on-Don to discuss recent events, and called for a restoration of the “historical friendship” of the Armenian and Azerbaidzhani peoples.

The situation in the Caucasus remains tense. More demonstrations took place in May and June, and the party leaders of Armenia and Azerbaidzhan were replaced. Azerbaidzhanis feel bitter that they have

been portrayed as the villain of the piece and as instigators of pogroms against Armenians. The latter feel resentment that their rather naive claim — which, if it had been accepted, would surely have opened a floodgate to similar demands — was not simply accepted by Moscow. Though the issue is essentially national rather than religious, the

two cannot be easily separated. Indeed the Kremlin seems to have recognised this in using the opening of churches in Nagorno-Karabakh as one of the means of assuaging the Armenian population of the region. Whether this will be sufficient remains to be seen.

JOHN ANDERSON

Refugees from Romania in Hungary

The social work of the churches of Hungary has taken on a new dimension in 1988 in response to the problems caused by the growing number of refugees from Romania seeking asylum in Hungary. According to official Hungarian sources 8,700 refugees from Romania were granted permission to remain in Hungary in 1987, and a further 4,200 in the first five months of this year. The government believes this may be only the tip of the iceberg. Though no precise figures are known, thousands more are thought not to have made contact with the authorities. The policy of the Hungarian government is not to repatriate the refugees. To do otherwise would offend public opinion in Hungary, which has been deeply moved by the plight of the asylum seekers.

The vast majority of the refugees are ethnic Hungarians from the region of Transylvania, which was absorbed into Romania after the dismemberment of the Hungarian state following the First World War. There are about two million Hungarians living in Romania, making them the largest national minority in Europe. About ten per cent of the refugees are ethnic Romanians. Two of the most frequently given reasons for leaving Romania are the

country's grinding poverty and the militantly anti-religious policies of the Ceausescu regime. Among the ethnic Hungarians, however, the anti-Hungarian policies of the Romanian authorities are the reason most often cited for emigrating.

The refugees bring many problems with them. They require food, housing and employment — commodities that the economically hard pressed Hungarian government cannot easily afford. Until the beginning of this year there were no government or church programmes designed to help the refugees. Some unofficial religious groups, however, have been providing assistance since the trickle of refugees became a flood last year. The Community of Reconciliation — an ecumenical group of young people headed by the Rev. Géza Németh — has been in the forefront of this unofficial activity. The Community had already gained a reputation for its social work amongst the wayward youth of Budapest. The group, in Németh's words, has also had a long-standing interest in the "persecuted Christians and national minorities in Romania". It organises the sending of food, Christian literature and medical supplies to needy brethren there. In the autumn of 1986 the Community circulated a petition,