



Russia and the USSR in the Caucasus

An Interview with Janri Kachia

EI *The current events which are shaking the Caucasus, have revealed and underlined the persistence of the "National Problem" in the Soviet Union after more than seventy years of communism, the communism which had promised the withering away of nations and nationalisms. Why this awakening of the Caucasus ?*

Janri KACHIA - I think that this region has always represented a crucial point for all the powerful empires that have tried to conquer and dominate it, from the most ancient times. Strategically important because able to affect the balance between East and West; in the past economically central with the trade routes transiting on its territory; seen from the West as a roadway to the Orient and the forefront of the Christian World; this region has not been used to long periods of peace. Thus the nations which constitute the Caucasus have a long history of trying to preserve their national identity and territorial integrity. In a not so distant past the famous Russian general, Ermolov, also known as the "conquistador" of the Caucasus, confirmed that for Russia the conquest of the whole of the Caucasus was the indispensable key to the Orient, which had become the strategical aim of the czarist Empire. Thus it launched the expedition against the Caucasus that took sixty years to be completed, ending with the surrender of Chamil in 1861. While identifying the Caucasus problem, Ermolov pointed out: "As long as Georgia exists, there will remain a Caucasus problem". The paradox of today's situation lies in the fact that contrary to such a long tradition, the national question of the Caucasus has not unfolded itself, at least in its first stage, as one of resistance against the dominating power, as a fight for national identity and defending its specificity versus the centre, but as

fratricide violence. In this sense, it has been a very atypical situation which we are not accustomed to seeing in the history of this region.

EI *Some observers have compared the Caucasus today with the Balkans at the beginning of the century, implying that they both present an explosive intertwining of races, religions and languages. Do you see any truth in that comparison and how explosive is this situation in your view?*

Janri KACHIA - Well, that is exactly the paradox I was just emphasising: from time immemorial this region has certainly been a meeting point - though not a melting pot - of different groups, and an area of conflicts and wars. But that being said, the various groups involved have also been differentiated to the extreme, in many cases competitively, and have never opposed each other with the type of violence that has erupted recently among two of these peoples. The endless wars that the Caucasian peoples have had to fight were, for most part, directed against outside interference and invasions.

There has been a lot of feuding and fighting between the different mountain tribes in the border areas, but for most of their common history of some twenty-five centuries, the states have been at peace with each other. For example, Armenia and Georgia had not known a war for more than eight centuries until the one which started incidentally between the independent Armenian and Georgian states in 1919, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Over the centuries, in fact, the intensity of intra-regional conflict has been surprisingly low - given outside incitations to divide this rebellious region in order to dominate it better, and given also the extreme ethnic and cultural differentiation in such a small territory.

EI *Could you briefly draw for us the historical background of the present situation: where do the Caucasian people come from and what are their conflicts and traditional rivalries?*

Janri KACHIA - The Caucasus has been used both as a geographical term and as an ethno-linguistic definition, which is part of the confusion. Ethno-linguistically, the word "Caucasian" applies only to those indigenous peoples living in the mountains and valleys of the Caucasus as far back as the seventeenth or sixteenth centuries B.C., and who used the "Ibero-Caucasian" or Kartvelian language. These were the ancestors of the Georgians, the Abkhazes, the Daghestani, and the Chechen Ingush. This group which was already

organised by the fifteenth century B.C., in the kingdoms of Colchis and of Iberia, was later joined in that area by Indo-Europeans moving toward the Caucasus under the pressure of the vast population transfers of early times. Thus Armenians in the south and Ossetians in the north came to settle on both edges of the region and became known as Caucasian peoples, although not being ethnically Caucasian.

This coexistence continued over some twenty-five centuries (the first Armenian state dating back to the seventh century B.C.). The history of the relations among the Caucasian states and peoples is not marked by intense internal rivalry, since it was dominated by the much bigger threats from external empires. Conflict among Caucasians States was also rare due to the succession in time of their respective powers: they never had to share pre-eminence in the region. For instance, the emergence and strengthening of Georgia took place when Armenia withered away and finally disappeared as a state integrated into the Byzantine empire; vice-versa, Armenia was strong when Georgia was divided into small kingdoms and principalities; finally, the Georgian Renaissance of the twelfth century coincided with the absorption of Armenia into the Persian empire. As for Azerbaijan, as a nation state it has appeared rather recently on the Caucasian scene, as also its predecessor, the Gandja emirate, although under the Persian protectorate, Persia did ally with the Georgian kingdom of King Irakli II in the eighteenth century.

The tradition has thus been one of diversity allied to a deep sense of community, rather than one of violent confrontation. The best proof of this peaceful coexistence is to be found in the preservation of ethnic, cultural, linguistic diversity over the centuries. If it had not been for reciprocal tolerance, one of the groups would have dominated and gradually assimilated the others. Yet this has not happened between the ethnically differentiated groups: Indo-Europeans and Caucasians have lived side by side while keeping their respective traditions and structures. Moreover, even within the same

Janri Kachia is director of the Georgian-European Institute in Paris.

**A graduate in History, he was Professor of Philosophy
and Dean of the History Faculty at the Georgian Academy
of Fine Arts. He left the USSR in 1982.**

ethnic group, one can find the rare example of survival of earlier layers of a language, not submerged by latter forms of its development. For instance, Mingrelian and Svane are not dialects or cousin languages of Georgian, but merely their ancestor languages, still preserved in certain parts of Georgia. In Daghestan, there are to this day some thirty linguistic groups, almost one per village, none of them taking primacy over the others...

Aspirations of individuality and tolerance of diversity are probably one of the oldest and most constant traits of the Caucasian peoples. It is thought that this specificity has to do with the fact that in the very ancient past, the indigenous inhabitants of the Caucasus might have been small communities devoted to the preservation of religious centres and thus respectful of their identities, practicing tolerance, and reluctant to fight except when their survival itself is threatened.

E *If there were few ethnical confrontations, what about religious wars and religious violence?*

Janri KACHIA - It is again a very strange paradox: the history of the Caucasus can be described as a permanent war of religion in the sense that it has always played the role of outpost and stronghold of Christianity confronting the Persian, Mongol, Arab and Ottoman empires. Despite the very active role that religion and religious convictions have played in political developments, these have never been translated into internal fratricidal religious wars between local Moslem minorities and Christian populations. There has also never been anything that could be compared to the practices of the Inquisition.

The reciprocal tolerance I mentioned earlier regarding respective customs and traditions is even more apparent in the case of religion. For instance, Georgia was first converted to Christianity by its King Mirian, who was of Persian origin. It is well known that this region is one of the very few that has had no example of pogroms or anti-semitism despite the existence of a very important and ancient Jewish minority in Georgia, dating back to the first diasporah. The same is true of the relations among the other communities. It is very rare to witness coexistence within a few thousand square miles of all the major religions (Christian with its Catholic, Orthodox, and Gregorian variants, Islam with Shiites and Sunnites, and Jews) which does not degenerate into religious fanaticism, discrimination or exterminations of all kinds. Against all odds this

has been miraculously avoided in the Caucasus. For example, although Georgia was actively taking part in the crusades and while King David IV was defeating the Islamic coalition in the battle of Didgori (1121), the Moslems in Georgia were enjoying full rights. Another example in the eighteenth century testifies to the permanence of this trait: the historical Annals recall that fighting was going on in the suburbs of the capital of Tbilisi between the Georgian and the Persian armies, while at the same time Persian merchants went ahead unhindered in their daily business on the markets of Tbilisi. Finally, the best demonstration of this perennial coexistence is to be found in its most concrete form: if you visit the old town of Tbilisi, you can see by yourself almost next to each other a mosque, a synagogue and Orthodox churches!

It is clear that both Georgia and Armenia have repeatedly preferred their appartenance to Christianity to their neighbouring solidarity with Islam and thus to their own tranquillity. The first choice was the conversion of both Kingdoms to Christianity in the fourth century, first Armenia, then Georgia, which in both cases was a clear political act. Then the alliance with the Crusaders against the Islamic coalition confirmed that choice, and finally the alliance with Russia in the nineteenth century was part of the same logic of siding with the Christian and European world against the Oriental and Islamic one. But that choice remained one of foreign policy and has never been translated into a policy of denying rights to the Islamic minorities within the Caucasus, minorities which in fact have flourished over the centuries.

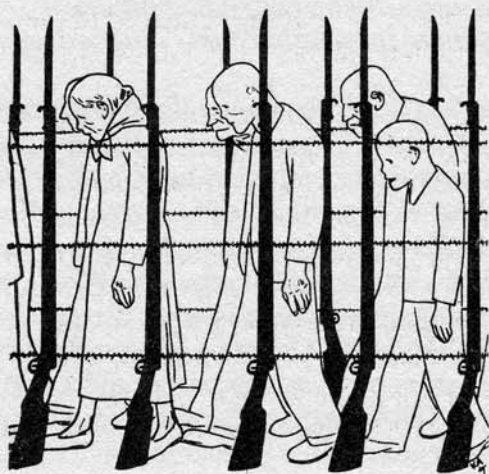
E *How then did the Russian factor come into play in this region and what influence did it exert on the national consciousness of these Caucasian peoples? Did it help unite them against this latter common Islamic enemy?*

Janri KACHIA - In fact conflicts among these three communities have gradually emerged as a direct consequence of Russian policy toward the region. Russian strategy, which started as early as Peter the Great, consisted of differentiated treatment of Armenians and Georgians. Encouraging Armenian national feelings, which were not seen as a threat in the absence of an Armenian independent state, was easier than providing real military support to Georgian armies fighting the common Islamic enemy, (with the risk of consolidating the strength of the Georgian independent kingdoms). On the contrary, a gradual erosion of Georgian power under that constant fighting was seen as rather positive development as long as it did not entail a total breakdown that would leave Russia unguarded on its southern border.

In the nineteenth century, along with the actual conquest of the whole of the Caucasus, the Russians continued this policy of division between the Islamic mountain tribes and the Christian populations on the one hand, and between Georgians and Armenians on the other, by promoting a policy of demographic change. The latter favoured trusted Armenian settlements throughout the region, in order to undermine the ethnic cohesion of the less docile Georgian population, whose search for a Christian ally had been repeatedly disappointed by Russia, thus raising the level of resentment against the northern neighbour.

As a direct consequence of that policy of demographic change, the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, saw its Armenian population increase up to 80 per cent. And as could have been expected, it led to the emergence of a conflictual situation. But despite these rising tensions among Caucasian populations, no precedents of ethnic violence are to be seen until the end of the century.

This is the period when two major traumas were inflicted on the Caucasian consciousness. The first was the Armenian genocide by Turkey and the related violence between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. The second trauma, in no way comparable to the first, was the breaking out in 1919 of the first war ever, (in



some eight centuries) between the newly born and neighbouring nation-states of Georgia and Armenia, even though both were governed by social-democratic parties. For a long time these two events marked the end to any hope for a viable Transcaucasian federation and shattered the long-lasting tradition of coexistence between the national groups living in the Caucasus. In the following years the Stalinist policy of territorial redistribution among the three republics, (of which the Karabakh, Nakhichevan, and Saingulo are only three examples), was a continuation of the demographic changes introduced under the czarist regime. By introducing mutual territorial claims, this policy had the very direct effect of increasing the level of resentment between the three republics. But that resentment had no chance to express itself publicly or officially because of the overall repressive apparatus of terror and because it ran counter to the official ideology of internationalism and peaceful relations among the "fraternal nations of the Soviet Union".

EI *Do you then consider that glasnost' and reform under Gorbachev have contributed to the explosion of nationalism?*

Janri KACHIA - This is a well known phenomenon in the Soviet system, as well as in most totalitarian empires. Any relaxation of the grip is translated into a reawakening of centrifugal forces. That was the case when the czarist empire collapsed during the World War I, and thus could not resist the emancipation of the non-Russian peoples. It was again the case in 1956, when the Khrushchevian thaw was interpreted in Georgia as an opportunity to express defiance and national specificity, leading to the March 1956 student uprising of Tbilisi. It is therefore evident that the central leadership cannot ignore the fact that when it chooses a policy of relaxation instead of one of terror, it runs the risk of reactivating national feelings and claims. The problem is not how to repress those movements, but how to manage them.

EI *Do you think that the Moscow leadership can manage the national question in such a way as to avoid both explosions and disintegration?*

Janri KACHIA - In fact with the latest events, we see the emergence of two distinct national problems in the Caucasus. The first is both surprising and atypical in the region: the fratricidal violence erupting between two of the Caucasian peoples. The second is the continuation of past traditions of resistance to foreign assimilation and testifies to a real reawakening of the national consciousness and the desire of this region to take its own destiny into

its hands. Now these two movements are contradictory, in fact. The first tends towards division, instability, irresponsibility and will ultimately entice the central authorities to intervene in the name of public law and order. The latter necessitates solidarity and hence maturity, a sense of common destiny, and reflection about the common economic goals of the region similar to the thinking that is going on about Baltic integration. To schematise: the first aspect is playing ultimately in the hands of the centre, even though it might appear at first, and superficially, as destabilising or threatening to the leadership. The latter form is ineluctably leading toward serious decentralisation, without any other alternative than redistribution of political power and of the economic resources between the different republics and regions that compose the federation.

To answer your question, then, it is probably easier for Moscow to manage the Azerbaijani-Armenian problem, where it can ultimately resort to force, the use of which would then be seen as legitimate by both the rest of the population and by the outside world. On the other hand, the management of pacific claims for increased autonomy, especially if presented as a cohesive position of the Transcaucasian republics, is certainly much more difficult, and cannot be dealt with by resorting to force in any manner, any use of force having only counter-productive effects. It presupposes assuming many risks in order to stop the populations on their slippery ascent towards claiming full-fledged independence. I am sure that some nights the Kremlin leadership has nightmares of being surrounded by a Baltic entity to the north and a Transcaucasian one to the south. This is in some ways more dreadful, even if it remains at all times pacific and non-violent, than the revival of extremist nationalisms which lead nowhere, end up discrediting themselves, and counterbalance one another, as is already the case between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. And it could be the case tomorrow between the Pamiat Russian extremists and certain Georgian or Ukrainian ultras.

EI *How can you describe the Georgian national movement in this context and its relationship to its neighbouring republics?*

Janri KACHIA - I think Georgians have a very clear historical perspective when it comes to the strategy of a national movement -when to fight, and what to fight. It is very revealing to see how silent the Georgians have been when confronted with the violence erupting on their borders. Despite Armenian resentment over the fact that the Georgians have not actively supported them

against the Azerbaijani Moslems, the general feeling in Georgia has been that such violence would ultimately play into the hands of the Russians, and that there was nothing to be gained from provoking reactions from the Moslems. In the Saingulo province, Georgia has exactly the same problem with Azerbaijan, as Armenia has with Karabakh. But, as a repetition of past history, the Georgians have a tendency to discard any chance that the Russian centre might help them to increase national strength and cohesion, even at the expense of Moslem rights. On the contrary, the Armenians have acted under the same illusion in the Ottoman empire, which led to the cruel genocide of 1915, and despite the lesson, they seem not to have lost any such hopes. There is also widespread feeling in Georgia that, despite the advantages that it might itself get from territorial redistribution, not only from Azerbaijan but from the RSFSR, such a policy would inflict a lasting trauma on intra-Caucasian relations and raise for a long time the spectre of irredentism, very dangerous for a region whose borders have been redrawn in a typical colonial fashion.

Clearly Georgian passivity during the first part of the year and during the Karabakh crisis was not a sign of national passivity, as is shown by the extent of the intellectual debate going on today in Georgia over history, over the rationality of certain economic decisions, (opposition to the gigantic project of the Transcaucasian railway), and more generally over the national future and over the very concepts of autonomy vs. independence. This debate started, in fact, before Gorbachev's time, as early as 1978, when Georgians massively demonstrated in order to retain their national language in the constitution. Today's demonstrations, although much larger in size, and for the first time in coordination with other republics, namely the Estonians, appear in that sense more as a repetition than as improvisation. The very large demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people in Tbilisi and the hunger strikes against the planned constitutionnal change, (viewed as detrimental to future options), seem to show that the Georgian strategy is at this stage a long term one. Not betting on easy, tangible and immediate results, not claiming the right to secession or to immediate independence, it is aimed - if I read it correctly - at preserving as well as possible all the options for the future, all the attributes of nationhood: language, national consciousness, viable economy, and last but not least, it tries to preserve non-antagonistic relations with its immediate neighbours - Armenia but also Azerbaijan. For it is clear to most Georgians that a situation of inter-ethnic violence would continue to warrant the presence of an outside pacifying force, the ultimate justification for Russian presence that might otherwise witness a gradual but constant erosion of the legitimacy of this presence.