

Armenian aftershocks

LOS ANGELES — This might seem an odd place from which to comment on the growing troubles in Soviet Armenia. In fact, Los Angeles and Beirut are the most important foreign nerve centres of the Armenian diaspora. California's large and influential Armenian community — and that includes popular Gov. George Deukmejian — is watching the unfolding drama in the Caucasus with fascination and rising emotions.

Inside Soviet Armenia, the largest public protest demonstrations and strikes since the communist revolution have erupted, shaking the Soviet Union and its leaders in Moscow. The protesters have been demanding that the largely ethnic Armenian mountain enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, now part of the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, be handed over to Armenia. The Azeris of Azerbaijan are ethnic Moslems, hereditary enemies of the Christian Armenians.

To outsiders, this Caucasian border dispute may sound trivial. To Armenians, however, it evokes the deepest of cultural and historical passions. For Moscow and the many ethnic groups that make up about 45% of the Soviet population, unrest in Armenia is clearly a storm warning.

Armenia's history goes back more than 2,000 years. Unfortunately for the Armenians, they occupied a strategic gateway and transit route in the Caucasus. As a result, the Armenians had to fight for their lives through their long, war-torn history. After the rise of Islam, Armenia became the chief bulwark against the spread of Moslem rule in the Caucasus. Armenia's fierce mountain warriors fought for centuries against Arabs, Persians, Mamelukes, and Turks.

During World War I, the Allied powers tried to stir up an Armenian rising against the Ottoman rulers of Armenia. The Turks reacted with ferocity. Millions of Armenians were deported in forced marches to the Mideast. According to the Armenians, more than 2 million of their people died and great numbers of Armenian women were raped.

**ERIC
MARGOLIS**



The Turks say such figures are vastly inflated. Whatever the truth, these events seared the sensibilities of the Armenians in the same way that the Holocaust affected generations of Jews. In fact, the histories of both long-suffering peoples bear many similarities.

When Russia captured Armenia from the Ottoman Empire, Armenians felt they had been delivered. Until the recent disturbances, there were no signs that Armenians were unhappy at being part of the Soviet Union. Under Russian rule, Armenia seems to have had more ethnic and cultural freedom than in the previous eight hundred years. Even the Armenian terrorist groups that staged attacks on Turkish targets did not call for an independent Armenian state.

Who knows what will happen next, now that Armenian nationalism is flexing its muscles. And will the pugnacious Armenians ignite a backlash among the Soviet Union's 50 million Moslems?

So far, Armenian protests have shown no signs of being anti-Moscow, only anti-Azeri (which means Turk to the Armenians). But such a dangerous release of nationalist energy could easily assume an anti-Soviet character. An unchecked uprising in Armenia might produce similar quakes among other restive Soviet minorities like Ukrainians, Baltic peoples and Moslems.

Mikhail Gorbachev's critics blame him for the Armenian trouble, saying we told you so. Glasnost may be okay for well-behaved Russians but not for obstreperous ethnics in faraway places. They, say conservatives, understand only the knout.

But, answers Gorbachev, you can't go on ruling Mother Russia's 100-plus nationalities in the year 2000 using methods that worked under Czar Alexander II. Glasnost and perestroika must be for all the republics. Soon, Russians will be in a minority. The USSR's non-Russian peoples must be brought into the mainstream.

Noble and sensible ambitions, to be sure. But can the vast, creaky 19th-century colonial empire that is the Soviet Union be tugged into the 20th century without fragmenting into squabbling ethnic bits and pieces? Recent open demonstrations by Tatars, Estonians and Kazaks are not a happy portent.

Gorbachev's reforms must inevitably cause long-suppressed ethnic pressure to vent. The trick will be allow such pressure to vent into the air, and not at Moscow. So far, this has been happening in Armenia. There does not now seem any threat of ethnic unrest blowing apart the Soviet Union. The real danger for Moscow is being caught up and endlessly distracted by having to mediate or just cope with growing infighting among the nation's not-so-friendly peoples.