

Moscow's Red herring

Reports from Moscow are now lending support to what this column has recently been saying about events in Azerbaijan. Namely, that the intervention there by the Red Army and KGB was not, as Moscow claimed, a peace-keeping mission designed to separate warring Azeris and Armenians but, rather, the brutal suppression of anti-communist nationalists seeking independence from Soviet rule.

Western journalists have been barred from the Trans-Caucasus region. As a result, all news of the January uprising in Azerbaijan come from Moscow. Stories put out by the Soviets about the need to "rescue" Armenians from Azeri-led pogroms were avidly and unquestioningly echoed by the western media.

While there was serious ethnic unrest and some fighting, Soviet reports about massive pogroms turned out to be a Red herring designed to mislead the western media.

Last week, the same thing happened again. Violent, anti-Russian demonstrations broke out in the Central Asian republic of Tadjikistan. Out came the Red herring, Soviet troops and KGB forces, Moscow claimed, went into action in the capital, Dushanbe, killing scores of Tadjiks, to stop attacks on Armenians. And, once more, the West bought the story and sympathized with Moscow's quick defence of helpless Christians against Moslem fundamentalist mobs.

Now the western media in Moscow is reporting what this column has been hearing for the past month: That the Communist party and KGB actually stirred up ethnic violence in Azerbaijan as a pretext for crushing nationalist sentiment.

Moscow is clearly trying to raise the spectre of Islamic fundamentalism as a bogeyman to scare the West and justify its continued repression of the Soviet Union's Moslems.

This week Soviet spokesmen claimed that anti-communist Afghan mujahedin were crossing the

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border into neighboring Tadjikistan to stir up their fellow Moslems. In this case, Moscow is probably telling the truth.

The most effective of the mujahedin leaders in Afghanistan, Ahmed Shah Massoud, is an ethnic Tadjik. He has long promised to help liberate the Tadjiks of the USSR.

Moscow also put out reports last week of demonstrations in Samarkand, Tamarlane's imperial city and capital of Uzbekistan. Once again the Armenian story was trotted out. Then, a few days ago, Moscow denied the entire story.

Very curious, this. It means the Soviet Central Asian Republics are seething with unrest. Ironically, the Islamic nationalism Moscow ignited in its 1979 invasion of Afghanistan has now come to haunt the Soviet Union. Such is the revenge of the 1.5 million Afghans killed by Soviet forces.

Moscow's strategy in dealing with this emerging crisis by now seems fairly clear, drawing in large part from experience in the Afghan war:

- ✓ Keep all western journalists out of the area.
- ✓ Spread disinformation from Moscow.
- ✓ Keep raising the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and "junior Khomeinis" with the credulous Americans.
- ✓ Mount a maximum effort to infiltrate nationalist groups, turning them against one another by means of agents provocateurs, a KGB speciality.

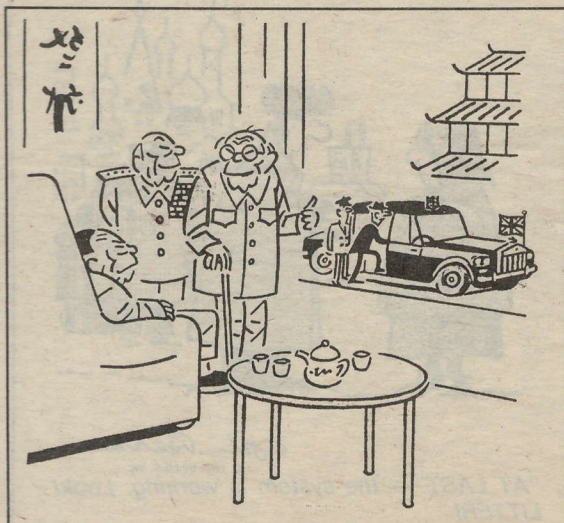
A key to this strategy is maintaining the communist regime in Kabul. There may be potato rationing in Moscow, but money is still being found to airlift \$350 million a month in arms and supplies to the besieged Najibullah regime. Intense diplomatic pressure is being put on the U.S. to end its support of the Afghan resistance, sweetened by such enticements as offers to cut Soviet support for Cuba and Nicaragua.

If the Afghan communists collapse, Moscow fears — and probably with good reason — that all of Soviet Central Asia will erupt in Islamic-nationalist fervor. The Soviets claim there are only 40 million Moslems in the USSR, but reliable estimates suggest the real number is 60 million, or 20% of the total population of the USSR. Close to 40% of Red Army conscripts are Moslems.

Obviously, any major upsurge in nationalism in Central Asia could shake the USSR to its foundations. We should also remember that the Moslem republics of Central Asia were independent states or *khanates* until conquered, after fierce resistance, by czarist armies during the 19th century. In the 1920s, they fought bitterly against the communists.

The claim of the USSR's Moslem republics to self-determination is as good, if not better, than that of the Baltic peoples who have, so far, monopolized the West's attention and sympathy.

Punch



"Beats me why they never ask themselves how many of us will even be around in 1997 . . ."