

Soviets' multicultural pot boils over

Having just read a survey confirming that many North Americans are geographical illiterates, I tremble to again bring up the subject of Nagorno-Karabakh. But I will, since seething unrest in this Armenian enclave located in the Soviet Caucasian republic of Azerbaijan is a dangerous challenge to Mikhail Gorbachev and the stability of the Soviet Union.

Think of the Caucasus as the Soviet Union's Mideast. This mountainous region between the Black and Caspian Seas links Turkey and Iran to the Southern Soviet Union. More than 40 nationalities live in this strategic and much fought-over land. There are five million Georgians, three million Armenians, six million Muslim Azerbaijanis and numbers of Tatars and Jews.

Add to this ethnic stew peoples completely unknown in the West — like Dagestanis, Lezghines, Chechens, Ingushes, Balkars and Karachais.

Czarist Russia took over the Caucasus during the 19th century around the time the European powers were moving into the Mideast. Unlike the European imperial powers, the USSR has never relinquished its colonial empire. During the 1950s and '60s, the fires of nationalism swept the Mideast. Now they have begun to burn in the Caucasus — which, after all, was always part of the Mideast until annexed by the czars.

It was the proud Armenians living in the largely ethnic Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, smack in the middle of Azerbaijan, who lit the fire by demanding unification with the republic of Armenia. This would be like English-speaking Westmount trying to secede from Quebec and join Ontario. Angry Armenians have been rioting and striking for months. Equally angry Azeris have been rioting back. Deaths have occurred and the Red Army has moved in to restore order.

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Such goings-on are unheard of in the USSR. To make things worse, the Armenian Communist party has voted to absorb Nagorno-Karabakh — and the Azeri party has voted just the opposite. Uneasily watching this mounting turmoil are the Georgians, who have fought a good number of wars with the Armenians — the last only sixty years ago. Clearly, what we have here is the potential of another Lebanon in the making.

Gorbachev and the party leadership in Moscow have been burning the midnight oil trying to find a solution to this mess. While they scratched their heads and argued, other ethnic groups inside the vast USSR were watching closely. Peoples like the Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Khazaks, Tatars and Turkomens. If the Armenians could demand and get changes in the Soviet system, why not other peoples?

Most Russians are quite horrified by this affair. Until the Caucasus blew up, they had prided themselves on "solving" the nationalities issue and living in multicultural bliss. No longer. The Baltic states are steaming with separatist passions and there are even tremors of pan-Turkism across Soviet Central Asia. Incredibly, recent U.S. intelligence reports say that in another 12 years, 75% of the Red Army's ground troops will be

Moslems. In other words, the USSR will have the world's largest Moslem army.

With such sobering thoughts in mind, Gorbachev made a hard decision and cracked down on the Armenians. The strike was broken and the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, who now want to be called Artsakhis, told they would have to stay part of Azerbaijan. There are historical and legal precedents for making territorial changes in the USSR, such as the transfer of the city of Orenburg from Khazakstan to the Russian SSR. One day Nagorno-Artsakh, or whatever it's called, may be put under the control of Armenia.

But from a Russian viewpoint, Gorbachev was absolutely right in refusing to agree to any change while a gun was being put to his head. To have given in to Armenian demands under the threat of more strikes and rioting would have obviously emboldened other nationalities to follow the same route.

What is a nasty local squabble in the Caucasus could turn into a monstrous national problem in the western part of the USSR where White Russians, Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, Balts, Romanians and Tatars are all jumbled up in a heap. This is, after all, the land of bad neighbors and worse historical memories.

So Gorbachev must walk on eggs lest the Caucasus go Lebanese by turning into a madhouse of warring ethnic and religious factions — or become the USSR's very own West Bank. Moscow must get the angry Armenians to simmer down before the nation's far more numerous and equally hot-tempered Moslems get even angrier. The last thing Moscow needs in its Caucasian slice of the Mideast is to see a local Khomeini declaring holy war on the Armenian infidels.