

CHARLES VAN DER LEEUW: *Storm over the Caucasus in the wake of independence*. xi, 212 pp. London: Curzon Press Caucasus World. 1999.

Imagine a journalist being assigned to a country whose very existence for the previous 70 years or so the world has largely ignored. Suddenly, that country and its neighbours emerge from the shadows and make headline-news for the wars fought on their territories and/or for the mineral resources either on which they sit or for which they provide a possible transit-route to the West. Eager to find a publisher for his description of these and associated matters (including potted histories), the journalist rushes a hastily composed manuscript, marked by many still-to-be-refined broad brush-stroke treatments of incidents and littered with both factual and technical errors, to a publishing-house in the hope of having it accepted and of receiving advice on necessary improvements. But, through a series of ghastly oversights the manuscript is printed, bound and marketed without any of the essential corrections being made. Anyone, familiar or not with the recent history of Transcaucasia (for it is primarily with the republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia plus Abkhazia that this book is concerned), might well conclude that something like the (presumably) fictitious calamity just adumbrated could be the most generous explanation for these 212 pages.

The bulk of the book is devoted to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabagh. The Georgian-Abkhazian dispute is then treated in the second half, in which Georgia's earlier little war in its province of South Ossetia also figures, with passing allusion to the Chechen maelstrom and the neighbouring dispute between the North Ossetians and the Ingush. The author was based in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, and his sympathies for his hosts over Nagorno-Karabagh are evident. Since the Azerbaijani case is perhaps under-represented in the West, this volume might have made a useful contribution to the debate over this thorny problem, had van der Leeuw restricted himself exclusively to this topic, supplemented by his to be welcomed pull-no-punch observations on (i) the insouciance towards the (immediate

post-Soviet) Caucasus by a West over-accustomed during the Soviet period to shedding (as it transpired) crocodile-tears over the rights of minorities, (ii) the involvement of the major oil-companies, (iii) the nature and extent of corruption and organised crime (including drug-trafficking) in the region. But a book has to be judged on what it is rather than on what it might have been, and, with reference to Nagorno-Karabagh, some space should surely have been devoted to a discussion of the constant attempt by the Baku authorities to repress Armenian language and culture in this area following the early-Soviet placement of Karabagh within Azerbaijani borders -- cp. the alleged parallel treatment meted out to the Georgian population of another region, Zakatala, placed under Azerbaijani control in the 1920s. Mistreatment of a minority created by the artificial demarcation of frontiers and subsequent repression of language and culture as an explanation (or part-explanation) for resentment towards the thus created majority felt by the local minority/minorities is equally relevant to an appreciation of Abkhazian attitudes to their Georgian neighbours (to restrict ourselves to the region described in this book).

Merely to list the technical (to say nothing of the much more crucial factual) mistakes occurring here would take up the space normally allotted to a whole review, and so all I can do is suggest a flavour of what is in store for the reader. There are mistakes in basic grammar ('..leading to thousands of them FLED [= fleeing] the area', p.124); words are both omitted ('..whether or not you'd [be] gunned down', p.156) and repeated ('..the area was [WAS] occupied by the Russians', p.167); sometimes the translator (from Dutch) selects slightly the wrong word ('HISTORIC [= historical] background', p.1 -- cf. p.100). Stylistically, the phrase 'both literally and figuratively' seems a favourite, though one cannot help but ponder the implications of a literal interpretation of the likes of: 'For their past stinks, both literally and figuratively speaking' (p.52)! Some readers might care to amuse themselves by attempting to reconstruct original (and correct) forms (VADSKHUADZE = ?Vachnadze, p.143; "'Lek" is an abusive word for RUSSIAN [= Daghestani]', p.153; GIORGIOLIANI = ?Zhorzholiani, p.185; 'Au pays

DU TOISSIN [= de la toison] d'or', p.204; PLOVNYE = polovine, p.204). Illustrative of the numerous factual deficiencies are: Anastas Mikoyan is described as coming to prominence along with Stalin (b.1879) in Baku in the years 1905-07 even though he was only 10-12 years old at the time (b.1895) -- later (p.99) the same Mikoyan appears as Soviet president on the eve of World War II, even though the actual holder of the office was Kalinin; the Stalinist secret police are named 'TseKa' (pp.97ff.), whereas this was the regular Russian abbreviation for 'tsestral'nyj komitet' (Central Committee -- sc. of the Communist Party), the Cheka being the designation of the secret police at this period; the young Stalin actually joined (and was not expelled from) the Georgian Marxist organisation known as the 'meotxe dasi' (4th group) in 1898 (pp.136 & 148) -- it was the Tiflis Seminary from which he was expelled (in 1899); though the ousted first post-Soviet president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was actually himself leading the march of his followers out of Mingrelia on Georgia's second city of Kutaisi in October 1993, van der Leeuw describes the Zviadists as being 'still fired by the memory still fresh of their founder, barely deceased less than a year'!

I think I have said enough to demonstrate that this is most certainly a work to be approached, if at all, with extreme caution. Anyone interested in the main war to have been fought in the post-Soviet Caucasus can do no better than consult Carlotta Gall and Tom de Waal's 'Chechnya: A Small Victorious War' (Pan Original, 1997), whilst full information on the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is now available in Curzon's 'The Abkhazians. A Handbook' (1998, edited by the present reviewer). And finally, since van der Leeuw refers readers to (*inter alia*) Mariam Lordkipanidze's 'Georgia in the 11th-12th centuries' (Ganatileba, 1987), perhaps I could take this opportunity to point out to anyone following this recommendation, that, though the editorship of the book is credited to one George Hewitt, all that was requested of the present reviewer by the Tbilisi publishing-house was that the manuscript of the English translation be checked for grammatical slips, which was the sum-total of the 'editorial' process!

George Hewitt