

An Irish Diplomat Reports from Armenia, 1983

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In May 1983, Pdraig Murphy, Irish ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1981-1985, travelled through the Soviet Republics of Georgia and Armenia on official visits. These trips were undertaken almost a decade after the Irish Minister of Foreign Affairs Garret Fitzgerald and his Soviet counterpart Andrei Gromyko agreed to exchange embassies between Dublin and Moscow in September 1973 – making the Republic of Ireland the last Western European nation to establish diplomatic relations with the USSR (Quinn 2014, 87). Murphy was the second Irish ambassador to Moscow, succeeding Ambassador Ned Brennan. Yet Irish-Soviet contacts have a longer history stretching back before the establishment of the Irish Free State itself (see, for example: *ibidem*; O'Connor 2004; Casey 2016a). Indeed, Murphy's trip to Armenia was not even the first journey by an Irish emissary to a periphery republic of the Soviet Union. By comparing Murphy's 1983 journey with an unusual precedent, the 1930 visit of Irish Republican David Fitzgerald to the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, we can establish a wide historical backdrop for the full report.

In August 1930, David Fitzgerald, a veteran of the anti-Treaty side of the Irish Civil War, set out from London for Leningrad as a delegate of the Irish Friends of Soviet Russia¹. During a six week journey, Fitzgerald and comrades such as the veteran suffragette Charlotte Despard and the artist Harry Kernoff, visited several Soviet cities including Baku in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. Like Armenia, Azerbaijan was one of the original Soviet Republics which had the Red Flag raised above it as soon as Bolshevik victory in the Russian Civil War allowed them to take the Tsarist banner down. Fitzgerald certainly saw himself as an emissary of a government in the same mould as Murphy, though Fitzgerald's government, the Second Dáil of the post-Treaty Republican tradition, was a continuation of the revolutionary Republican parliament of the self-proclaimed Irish Republic of 1921-1922 rather than an internationally recognised state.

¹ For an analysis of the Irish Friends of Soviet Russia see Casey 2016b.

Yet despite these parallels, Fitzgerald's visit to Azerbaijan in 1930 and Murphy's Armenian trip of 1983 provide a stark contrast. When Fitzgerald visited the USSR in the early years of Stalin's "revolution from above", the Soviet nationalities policy was still in effect. This policy, as Terry Martin has demonstrated, was designed to "confront the rising tide of nationalism" in the post-Revolutionary period by "promoting the national consciousness of its ethnic minorities" (2001, 1). The promotion of minority languages and culture appealed to a Republican like Fitzgerald, whose socialist and republican politics sought to unite the working classes from both sides of Ireland's divided religious communities. In an interview with a Baku-based publication *Dawn of the East*, he praised the nationalities policy effusively and commented: "We have seen these races (Turks, Armenians, etc.) living now peacefully side by side" (1930). Yet, by the end of the 1930s, the Great Terror had shattered the fragile foundations upon which the nationalities policy was built. The chauvinistic tone Murphy described in this 1983 meeting with the Armenian Foreign Minister proved that the ethnically harmonious society which Fitzgerald spotted on the Soviet horizon was a mirage.

David Fitzgerald set out hoping to find a model socialist society and accepted all information that confirmed this vision. By contrast, Ambassador Murphy, and other Irish diplomats operating in the country decades after Fitzgerald, had little desire to transplant the political lessons of their Soviet experiences to their homeland. Fitzgerald's guides emphasised the revolutionary potential of the Soviet system, while Murphy's Armenian companion both underlined and emblemised its terminal condition. Although Murphy's trip was undertaken two years before Mikhail Gorbachev stepped into the role of General Secretary of the Communist Party, an event which heralded the period of reform which resulted in the ultimate collapse of the Soviet system, Murphy's report reveals that cracks in the structure were already beginning to show. He writes in clear and detailed prose grounded in the historical context of the country itself. Therefore, his account provides a curious glimpse into the measured analysis of an Irish diplomat casting his eye over a country that had several parallels with his own. Nonetheless, if such similarities were recognised by either Murphy or his interlocutor in the contemporary moment they appear to have gone unmentioned. We print the account of the journey here in full so that the reader can draw their own parallels:

Report by Ambassador Padraig Murphy, "Visits to Georgia and Armenia", 18 May 1983, National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs, 2013/36/9²

4. Armenia too is an old civilisation having been Christianised even before Georgia, at the beginning of the fourth century. The present republic occupies only a part of historically Armenian lands. These, in Armenian presentation, covered a wide area of present-day north-east Turkey and north-west Iran. Such landmarks as Lake Van, Mount Ararat and the cities of Kars and Ardahan play an important role in Armenian history. Like Georgia, it found in association with the Russian Empire a means of protecting its Christian identity against threats from surrounding Muslim powers; in Armenia's case, principally Ottoman Turkey. Eastern Armenia, essentially the present Soviet Republic, was joined to Russia in 1828. The present republic assumed its current status in 1920.

5. Armenia today has a population of just over three million which is much more homogeneous than that of Georgia: almost 90% are Armenian by nationality and only 2.3% are Russians. It is also more industrialised than Georgia – necessarily so, because the land is for the most part very poor. 13-14% of domestic product is basic agricultural production. The republic is a major supplier of electro-technical goods, synthetic rubber and chemical fertilizers. However, the most notable element during my visit was the manifestation of Armenian chauvinism, with a strong anti-Turkish coloration. The Foreign Minister acted in effect as a spokesman for the Armenian community world-wide. At the same time, without the question being raised, he expressed his understanding for the activities of Armenian terrorists killing Turkish diplomats, and not, for instance, Mongolian diplomats that were being killed. He had readily at his command the figures for the Armenian diaspora: 2.5 million in all abroad, of which 800,000 still in Turkey, 800,000 in the U.S., 300,000 in France, 260,000 in Lebanon, 10,000 in Cyprus. He returned again and again to the Turkish genocide of Armenians in 1915, according to him, 2 million Armenians lost their lives on this occasion. He took his promotion of the Armenian cause so far as to hand to me pamphlets published in France in the earlier part of the century which said explicitly that Bolshevik Russia had betrayed Armenia. An element in Armenian irredentism which kept recurring during the visit concerned Mount Ararat, which has a central place in Armenian historical memory. Although it is now in Turkey, it can be seen clearly from Yerevan, the capital of Soviet Armenia, and is constantly pointed out to visitors.

6. It is quite clear, of course, that the Foreign Minister of Armenia, in so expressing himself to visiting Ambassadors, is not conveying the foreign policy of the USSR. This is conveyed in Moscow and the Armenian element normally plays no role in it. At the time I was in Yerevan, for instance; Turkey was being praised in a *Pravda* leader for refusing to allow the U.S. boosting stations for Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe in Turkey; this in the interest of good Turkish relations with

² Murphy's account of his Armenian journey is preceded by a three paragraph description of a trip to Georgia. For the sake of accuracy, the original numbering has been preserved.

the USSR. At the same time, it is interesting to observe the room for manoeuvre which the Armenians are able to avail themselves of. An unspoken implication in the presentation of the Foreign Minister was that Armenia was associated with the USSR only because it had no other choice. As I have mentioned some of the literature he handed out accused the Bolsheviks (and the Russian Empire before them) of betraying the Armenians. There seems also to be a fairly lively influx of ethnic tourists into Armenia from the U.S. and France. It was striking that the country has a much greater consciousness of the external world than, for instance, Georgia. The Gullbenkian Foundation has provided much money for the restoration of historical, principally ecclesiastical monuments. An Irish connection is with the Matenadaran Manuscript Repository in Yerevan, which contains some 13,000 Armenian manuscripts going back to the 7th century. This corresponds with the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. The Armenian Apostolic Church plays a very central role in Armenia and I had the impression that it operates much more freely than the Russian Orthodox Church does in Russia. The ecclesiastical capital (and also one of the former historical capitals) Echmiadzin, was included in the itinerary arranged for by the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and this is normally the case in Armenia. It is also normal for visiting Ambassadors to call on the Catholicos (Patriarch), said to be an impressive personality, who was born in Budapest. Unfortunately on the occasion of my visit he was visiting London.

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