

## Recensions / Book Reviews

Leonidas T. Chrysanthopoulos, *Caucasus Chronicles: Nation-building and Diplomacy in Armenia, 1993-1994*, Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute Books, 2002, 180 pages.

It is evident that the collapse and dissolution of the USSR had not been without dire consequences — political, economic, social and military — for the constituent Soviet Socialist Republics which, more or less suddenly, had become independent states and, obviously, most of them had been caught completely unprepared for such an eventuality in the early 90s. Civil or inter-state wars, for either territorial or ideological reasons — an almost constant consequence in any effort of State-building — enhanced and aggravated those already grave problems that followed most, if not all, the newly independent states.

One of those former members of the Soviet Union was the Armenian SSR, which, after a referendum two days earlier, declared independence on September 23, 1991. A year later, in September 1992, the Greek government, which had recognized the Armenian independence two months after its declaration (December 31, 1991), established a Greek embassy, which was opened in July 1993. The first Ambassador of Greece appointed to Armenia was Leonidas T. Chrysanthopoulos (Mr. Chrysanthopoulos was also the representative of the Belgian government and of the European Community; *cf.* p. 23).

Mr. Chrysanthopoulos, nine years after his departure (when the politicians who were in power at that time in Armenia ceased to play an active role in political life) decided to publish the weekly notes he kept in his agenda. Thus, in his book *Caucasus Chronicles: Nation-building and Diplomacy in Armenia, 1993-1994*, he gives an account of the opening and the activities of the first Greek embassy in Armenia covering, precisely, the seven-month period, from 17 July 1993 to 20 February 1994 during which he stayed in Yerevan and presenting, vividly, his experiences from his perspective as the ambassador of Greece and also... as a human being (p. 1).

Obviously, it is not easy to put together and present, almost in one and the same flash, topics as diverse and irreconcilable as are, for instance, the personal, e.g. living conditions, the uncompromising, e.g. diplomatic confidentiality, the technical, e.g. military operations, the painful, e.g. the tragedy and misery of people, the emotional, e.g. humanitarian assistance. And yet the author succeeds in presenting them all well with skill and spice. This book is not only for future historians as the author hopes (p. 2), not only for the present political and social scientists nor even mainly for the career diplomats and public relations officers. This book is, indeed, excellent reading for any one who feels close to anything Armenian: the people, the landscape, the history, the culture, etc. It is not a dry scientific book, political and historical as it may be; it is an excellent narrative, at the same time autobiographical and literary, which one would read with ease and pleasure, even when it is referring to technicalities, like the UN resolutions (821, 823 and 853) or to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and its meeting in Minsk (Minsk Group) on the recurrent hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The serious and the witty, the scientific and the literary, the detached and the passionate are constantly alternating and overlapping.

Indeed, the author provides us, in a chronological way, with a clear picture of the tragic situation in Armenia during its first and difficult steps towards Statehood. In a well-written first person narrative that is lucid and pleasant, flowing and easy to follow, emotional yet fair, the author describes the agony of Armenia with the extreme poverty and misery of its people (*cf.* pp. 19, 45, 69, 110, 113-115, 176), the conflicts and the hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the difficulties of the government over the shortage of goods and services, over the introduction of the new currency (the *dram*) or over the energy crisis. At the same time, he gives his own experiences day-by-day, often, hour-by hour, describing in great and provocative detail his own hardships and tribulations in adverse living and working conditions or, simply, the risks in his travelling to and from Armenia or around the country (*cf.* pp. 48, 113, 129, 131); He relates his adventures (pp. 104-109), his frailties (pp.

104-105: stupid decision) and his surprises (*cf.* pp. 121ff, Little did we know then what the following day had in store), his pride (p. 31: the Greek flag, on his car, which could be seen at the Turkish border), his emotions (p. 71: became very angry and frustrated), his views (p. 23, 110, 111: on communism and capitalism, on art, etc), his frustrations (pp. 67, 71, 84: difficult meeting, unreliable, etc) and, also, his occasional pleasures (*cf.* all the interludes with the parties, the concerts, the visits to Museums). Yet, the author succeeds in presenting even a painful incident or circumstance in such a witty way that, knowing the happy ending, the reader finds it amusing (*cf.* the flabbergasting remark of the flight attendant in pp. 19-20 or the brainstorming of the pilot pp. 129-131).

It is interesting to note that the book had been praised in advance (*cf.* back cover) by, amongst others, Gerard J. Libaridian, the then first deputy foreign minister of Armenia and author of *The Challenge of Statehood* and by Atom Egoyan, the famous Armenian-Canadian filmmaker (producer and director) whose latest film *Ararat* (on the Armenian Genocide of 1915, a 2002 production) is currently making headlines.

One may find a few errors, minor or secondary in most of the cases, which, do not alter the subject or the value of the book. Thus, one may notice, for instance, that Ejmiatzin is not east of Yerevan (p. 89) but west (*cf.* the map given at the beginning of the book); that Saint Sophia was not built around 325 (p. 90) but in 537 (*cf.* Justinian and Theodora); that Kurou Anabasis did not take place in 450 B.C. (p. 145) but in 400-399 (*cf.* Xenophon was born in 434); that the first (main) Alexandrian Library (Broucheion) was not destroyed in 272 A.D. (p. 157) but (and this is, at least, the most generally accepted view) in 47 B.C. (*cf.* Julius Caesar). One may also remark that it cannot be an atheist religion when worshiped [are]the sun and fire (p. 145) but, rather, a polytheistic one. Of course, one may notice, in addition, that in the case of Armenia it was not a case of Nation-building (*cf.* sub-title; an Anglo-Saxon notion of Nation), but of State-building: Armenians would, perhaps, argue that, as a Nation; i.e. as an ethnic entity, they have been strong all along in history; it was, however, as a State (i.e. as

a political entity), that they were rebuilding themselves after 1991 (*cf.* Libaridianís *The Challenge of Statehood*, above).

Mr. Chrysanthopoulos spent only seven months in Armenia while he has spent many more in other missions. Yet, despite all the adversities he suffered in the span of those seven months, he loved the people, liked the place and enjoyed his work in Armenia so much that, as he admits, he really did not want to leave and that he felt as if [he] had left his heart there (p. 166). It is noticeable, however, to a Greek Canadian that Mr. Chrysanthopoulos seems to have enjoyed, earlier in his diplomatic career as a Consul General of Greece, the magnificent Canadian winters so much that not only he mentions it twice in the book (pp. 126, 138) but he returned to Canada as the Ambassador of Greece where he will again enjoy the blanket of beautiful white snow.

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