

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

People and Places

A Visit to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Gains of Seven Decades Still Survive

by Arshad-uz Zaman

AN 18-member Bangladesh delegation led by Maj (Retd) Abdul Mannan, Minister of State for Textiles, made a three-week visit recently to eight republics of the former Soviet Union. This was the first such delegation from Bangladesh and I was fortunate to be a member of it. I had an opportunity to watch first hand this largest federation of the world after its collapse and indeed the fate of Communism as an universal doctrine.

When our Aeroflot flight took off from Dhaka International airport one sunny afternoon of February the temperature was 17 degrees Celsius and on our arrival in Moscow the following morning at 3 am it was 17 degrees minus, and it was snow everywhere. We were lodged in the Ukraina hotel, one of those gigantic buildings, large in size but small in efficiency. The security system in the hotel, especially at the entrance, reminded us that nothing much had really changed in spite of the talk of liberalisation. Ukraina hotel is right in the heart of Moscow and across our hotel stood the now famous "White House" from where Mr Boris Yeltsin faced the army tanks in August 1991, in the Army's inept, unsuccessful bid for power in the collapsing Soviet Union.

The target before our goodwill delegation was to sign diplomatic protocol with the newly independent states, sign agreements on trade and economic cooperation and establish trade links in the rapidly emerging private sector. Our visit to Moscow, therefore, was a simple one since it involved merely in reaffirming our on-going relations with Russia. One very significant change was that our trade relations were governed by annual barter, which had been discarded in 1991 and we had to explore new types of relations in the changed circumstances. Due to the discontinuance of barter our trade volume with the former USSR had decreased by 58%. We found the Russians eager to continue relations and if possible strengthen them. It was evident, however, that the magnitude of the events in the former Soviet Union were such that in Moscow they were still trying to digest them.

From Moscow to Minsk, the capital of Belarus, it is an hour and a half's flight. Belarus is largely covered by forest and at this time, snow. We got a warm welcome and were specially delighted to find at the airport the former Soviet Ambassador to Dhaka Mr Vitaly Smirnov and his wife. Ambassador Smirnov is a hunter and hates alcohol. He has taken up hunting and fortunately has not carried out his threat of shooting all who take alcohol! He was involved in all official discussions and the Belarus authorities told us that he was the unofficial Ambassador between Belarus and Bangladesh. Belarus was a founder member of the UN, back in 1945. We found, however, that the newly found sovereignty of Belarus was heady stuff for them and they were determined to exert it to the fullest. In all the discussions with the Belarus officials, the thread that ran strongest was the Chernobyl disaster. We were told that damage to Belarus was 70%, Ukraine 20% and Russia 10%. We got different figures in Ukraine. What was remarkable was the anti-militarist posture of Belarus people, who were in a hurry to get rid of the nuclear weapons, remove Soviet troops from their soil and very seriously enquired about the modalities for joining the Non-Aligned group. Leaders in Belarus told us that the cost of Chernobyl was 100 billion roubles and Belarus was the only country to suffer nuclear attack in peacetime. In Minsk as in Moscow we found huge statues of Lenin in the main square in front of government buildings. In Minsk we visited three textile factories. The largest state owned has 814 looms, 5500 workers and was fast trying to switch to western markets. The second factory specialising in undergarments for women, was also eager to find western partners. On the premises the lady director staged a rather attractive fashion show. In the third factory 94% workers were women and had already progressed along the road to privatisation.

It is a short hop from Minsk to Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. Ambassador Stepanov and his wife came to our hotel to say good-bye. Mrs Stepanov complained about the wild ways of the youth in the name of democracy. After a half an hour flight, we saw beautiful Kiev spreading before us. This city, built on seven hills like Rome, is divided by the river Dnieper

and is dominated by the statue of Mother Russia, spreading her arms in a gesture of welcome. We were lucky to do a bit of tourism in this 1500-year old city, since our arrival coincided with a weekend. We visited St Sophia, a Cathedral built in the eleventh century by Prince Jaroslav the Wise. Our guide told us that St Sophia was alive and dynamic. We

among the Asian republics. It is a nearly three hour flight and is altogether another world. This ancient oil capital of the former Soviet Union sits prettily on the banks of the Caspian. In Baku we received a warm Eastern style welcome at the airport, less businesslike but more heart-warming with bouquets and bear hugs. We stayed at the large Intourist

buried martyrs from Nagorny Karabakh. In Azerbaijan one can sense the competition that has been raging between Turkey and Iran. The seven million Azeris are mostly Shiites like in Iran but speak Turkish. It is worth noting that Azerbaijan used the Latin

mainly horse meat, yoghurt and numerous milk based products. Like Azerbaijan, Turkmenia is also a cotton producing country. The country is largely pastoral and looks like one of the forgotten corners of the former Soviet Empire. The Foreign Minister

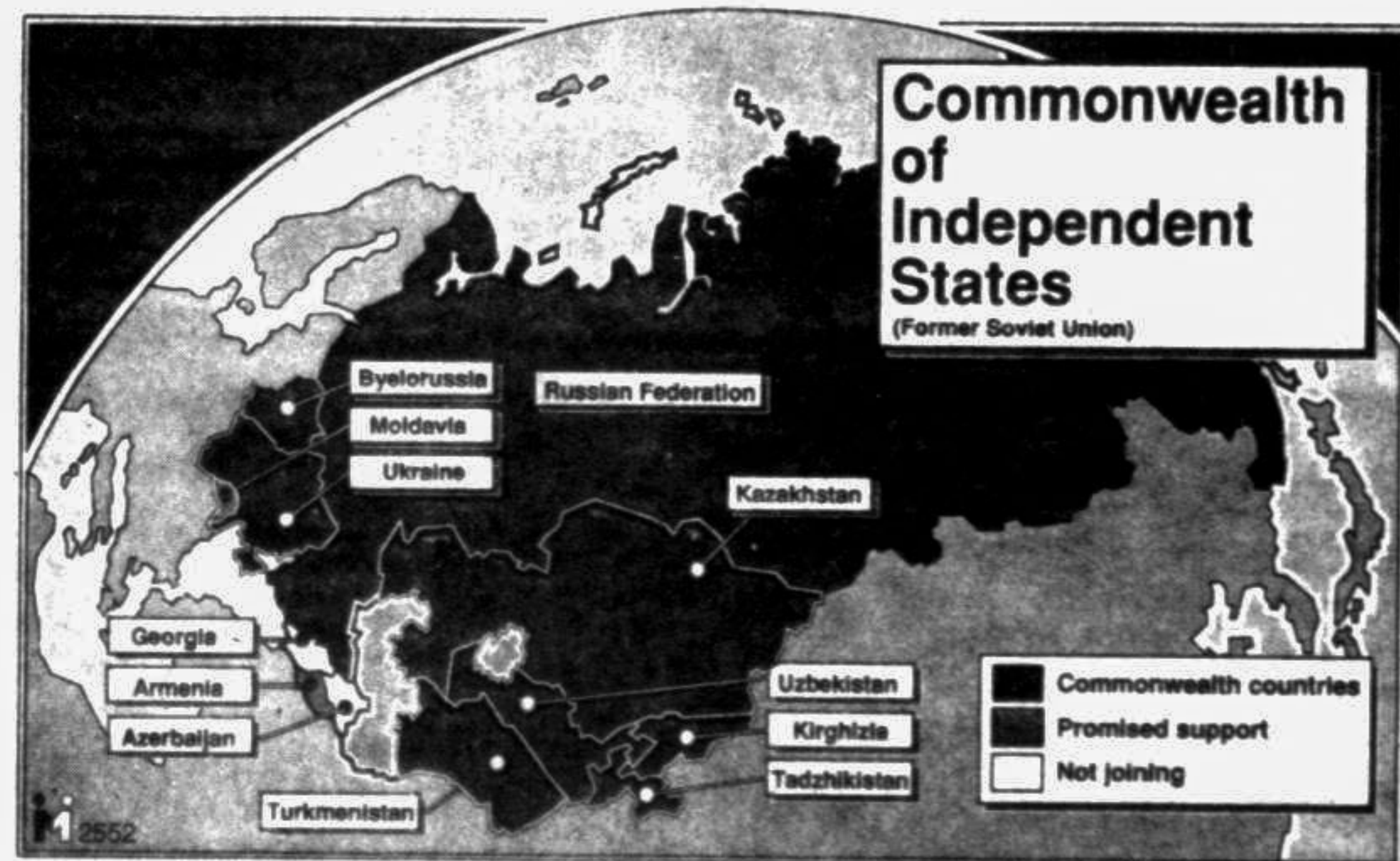
help them in their drive for development.

Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, is an hour's flight from Ashkhabad. There was snow everywhere, in the hills, on the tarmac and freshly fallen snow hanging from branches of trees lining the large boulevards. I got the impression that the Soviet authorities had taken special

of Afghanistan and the Pushtoo speakers of the East. Tajiks looked very much like the Pathans across the border and their food habits are very similar. Only vodka, wine and champagne, all locally made, had become a part of the official entertainment in all the Asian republics. Tajik 'nan' and the Pathan 'nan' are the same enormous in size. In my hotel

tire stretch was full of planes of all descriptions, civil and military alike. In fact in all airports we found very large number of Aeroflot planes idling on the vast field. Bishkek (formerly Frunze) trains airforce officers from many parts of the world and I was told that our present airforce chief was trained there. We signed our usual diplomatic protocol with the Foreign Minister, who was a charming shy lady. The Turks had caught up with us here as well. As we were waiting to see the President, I heard on the loud-speaker the speech of the Turkish Foreign Minister in Turkish in the parliament. I was told later that it was a historic occasion for this was the first time that a Turkish leader was addressing the parliament. I could hear the prolonged applause. The Kirghizstan President received us with great warmth and friendship and sincerely offered cooperation in all fields.

It was less than an hour's flight from Bishkek to Alma Ata, the capital of the largest Asian republic, Kazakhstan. With an area of 2.7 million km and a population of 17 million, Kazakhstan was the second largest republic that we visited. Alma Ata was the farthest point from Moscow that we reached, the flying time being four hours. It has a border with China and the Kazakhs look very Mongol indeed. It is a very important Space Centre of the former Soviet Union and the only Muslim majority state with a nuclear capability. The President of Kazakhstan Mr Nursultan Nazarbaev has emerged on the international scene as a forceful personality. I noticed that farther we moved from Turkey more quaint became the Turkish language and here in Kazakhstan my Istanbul Turkish and the language of Kazakhstan had really drifted apart. Alma Ata was buried deep under snow when we arrived in the evening and snow was steadily falling. Our huge black Chaika cars, overheated, waded through waist-deep snow. One remarkable thing about every place we visited in the former Soviet Union was that they were really 'overheated'. Of all the Asian republics we visited, Kazakhstan undoubtedly appeared best organized, administratively and in every other aspect. We had high level contacts and we were told that the country was very rich in oil and gas and minerals. What they lacked was technology and equipment. More importantly they were brimming with self-confidence. We were told that Kazakhstan was already recognised by 80 states. High officials told us that they wanted direct contact with the outside world and not via Moscow, without any bitterness. Statues of Lenin had remained untouched and his presence in all the offices, factories and public places was overwhelming. A fashion parade was staged for us in a textile factory, where slanted eyed, long legged Kazakh youth, male and female, were very attractive. We were told that they had sent a fashion show in Paris and received enthusiastic reviews. We were told that Kazakhstan produced 23 million pieces of raw leather annually and 1.2 million sq m of carpet. We made a visit to a garment factory re-named 'Hope'. The lady director, who had risen from the ranks, was full of vitality and informed us of steps taken in the direction of privatisation. She had signed a joint venture deal with the Italians and she said that Europeans found the labour in her country much cheaper. She told us that she had only 5% male workers and "we take very good care of them". Of all the republics we visited we found that Kazakhs drank our black tea and with milk. Their annual import of tea is 20000 tons. Privatisation had progressed fast in Kazakhstan. We found well stocked stores, including attractive items for tourists. With the rate of exchange those items became very attractive indeed like fur hats, camel hair coats etc, all literally selling for a song. Race for establishing diplomatic missions in Kazakhstan was on. The Turks had just left and in our guest house I met a French delegation, who were making a second visit. At the airport I saw the American Ambassador descending from a Volvo car and not the usual bullet proof American car. At the Alma Ata airport we had a vivid taste of the inter-republic quarrels. Kazakhstan claimed that Aeroflot Moscow owed them money and they would not allow our plane to take off if they were not paid. They were charging an exorbitant price



compared notes with the sixth century St Sophia of Istanbul, which after many vicissitudes has become a museum. A recurrent theme in Kiev was the sacking of Ukraine by Tartars and Mongols in the 12th century and it was only in the nineteenth century that Ukraine resumed its march towards modernism. During our stay we also got an earful of Ukraine's current difficulties with Russia especially on the question of the Black Sea fleet and return of beautiful Crimea to Russia. Like Belarus Ukraine also appeared in a hurry to get rid of nuclear weapons from her soil. In the big hotels of Minsk as well as Kiev, there was a great deal of bustle of new Western Embassies arriving. In Kiev a large statue of Lenin was removed forcefully but another large one stood in front of the government building as did Lenin museum. In fact Lenin is still everywhere, in factories, on desks, little statues on the walls. Virtually Lenin's physical presence appeared as all-pervading that it must be a gigantic operation if someone undertook the task of de-Leninising the former

hotel called Azerbaijan, where the dining hall with its stingers and dancers reminded me of cheap Istanbul Gazinos. In the evening I visited my old friend, Ambassador Altan Karamanoglu of Turkey, who is the first Ambassador in Azerbaijan and his country, the first to recognise the newly independent republic. I learnt from my friend that a 155-member delegation was about to visit all the republics of the former Soviet Union and he had to leave his hospital bed in Ankara, where he was convalescing following a fall on the snowy street of Ankara. My friend was leaning heavily on a cane. Ambassador Karamanoglu explained to me that things were in a state of chaos and the authorities were trying to put some order following the snapping of links with Moscow. He also informed me that Azerbaijan produced 13 million tons of petroleum annually and was capable of doubling production with improved technology. There was a rush of embassies to Baku and the city was bustling with life. Of all the republics that we visited, Azerbaijan was the only

script in the early twenties even before Atatürk introduced it in Turkey itself. Lenin introduced the Cyrillic script and the Russian language throughout the Soviet Union. Now once again Azerbaijan has taken to Latin script, thereby establishing her link with Turkey. Thus when we met the Prime Minister, I found myself on home ground with my knowledge of Turkish. The Prime Minister asked if my wife was from Istanbul (she is), because the Azeris speak Turkish with a slightly different accent. The Prime Minister of Azerbaijan gave our delegation a very warm and friendly welcome and it was established that there existed large possibilities for mutually beneficial exchanges. The hospitality of the Azeris continued in the evening when the Deputy Prime Minister (a Russian) hosted a dinner in a huge restaurant-cum-entertainment hall, where professional entertainers were followed by local people dancing in gay abandon. During our stay in Azerbaijan the Iranian Foreign Minister made quick trips to Nagorny Karabakh in

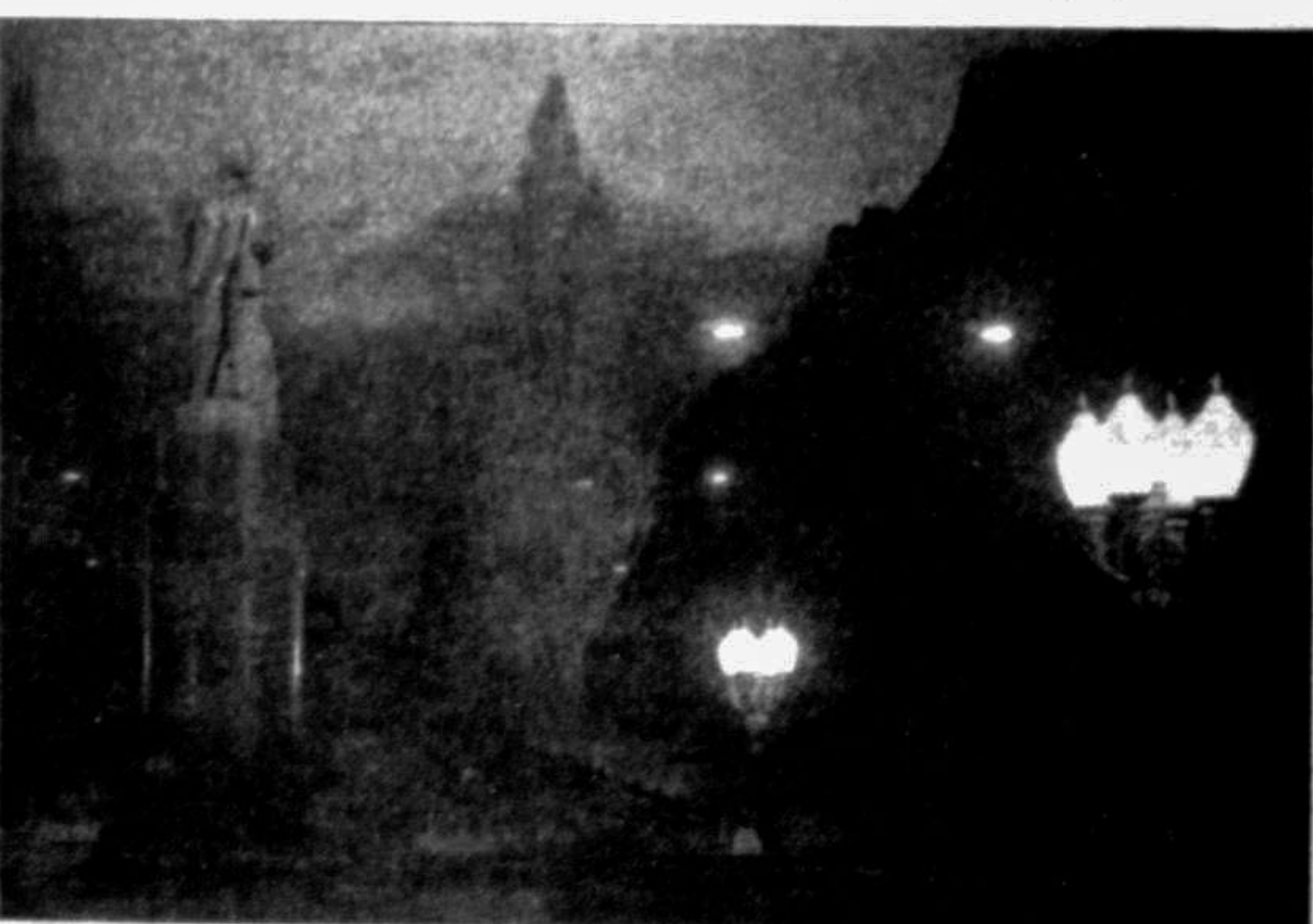


Monument of the Motherland, Memorial Complex, Ukrainian State Museum of History of the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945

Mr Kuliev Avdi is a career diplomat and describes the Turkmen as hospitable, tolerant, tradition and music loving. We are introduced to his colleague, who represents Turkmenistan in Moscow and is an avid player of the instrument 'duta' (dotara). Turkmen carpets are world famous and we are told that every Turkmen lady must learn to weave carpets in their home. We visited a museum of carpets and saw some splendid example of old carpets. I also discovered that Turkmen hang pieces of carpet at the entrance door which they call 'kapilik' (door piece) like in old Turkish homes. Turkmenistan has been slow to adapt to the change and we were told that they will adopt a new flag soon dropping the hammer and sickle. If the food has changed since we left Moscow, so has the features of people. The President of the republic, who received us with

care to develop this republic, neighbour of Afghanistan. Compared to the bleak look of Afghanistan and Kabul in particular, the impression was overwhelming that an effort had been made to make Dushanbe a show window. There are beautiful avenues, pretty parks, large stores and a beautiful opera building and even a philharmonic orchestra. The large hotel in Dushanbe was modern and well managed and local youngsters were eager to make a fast buck by exchanging currency. Many of these youngsters are from the sub-continent including Bangladesh. We visited a well maintained textile factory, where 10,000 workers were producing a large variety of materials. The machinery was mostly of French origin like elsewhere. We learnt also that throughout the former Soviet Union including the Asian republics it has 100% literacy — men and women — and we also

in Dushanbe I had a chance meeting with a young Georgian. When he discovered that I spoke Turkish, he was overwhelmed with joy and told me all about his family and life in his little town. When I asked him if he was a Georgian, he said vehemently "No, no, I am a Turk". In Dushanbe there are beautiful official buildings and a very large square in front of the main government building, which was called the Lenin Square and a huge statue of Lenin dominated the square. Like elsewhere Lenin's statue had been removed and the square re-named Ferdousi Square. We were told that the famous poet Ferdousi was a Tajik. In Dushanbe the 155-member Turkish delegation which had been pursuing us, finally caught up with us. The team led by the Foreign Minister had cabinet ministers, members of parliament, ambassadors designate to all the newly independent re-

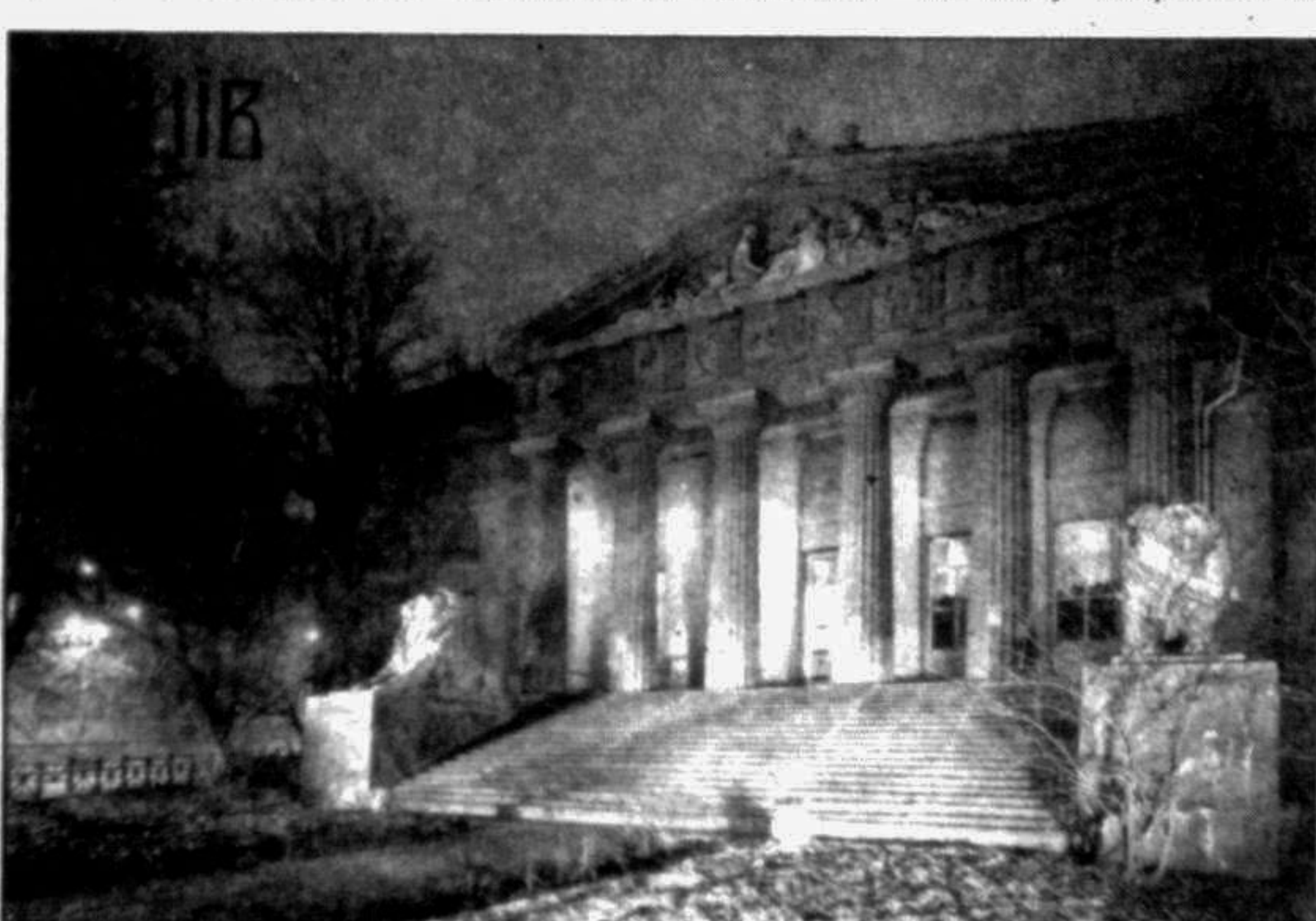


Monument to V.I. Lenin

Soviet Union. In Kiev we also saw a beautiful play of Pushkin — Evgeny Anigin — at the State Opera. The stage, the superb costumes, the richly decorated hall and most of all the reaction of a very culture-conscious audience made it a memorable evening. The cost of the ticket — only a little over four and a half US cents! Of all the former republics, Ukraine is the first to snap monetary links with Moscow and has introduced a parallel currency called coupons. Market economy seemed to have made deep inroads as I found that in a very large toy shop, brisk business was going outside the store where well-dressed people were selling all kinds of consumer goods. Baku was our first halt

one saddled with a bloody political problem. A war was going on in Nagorny Karabakh. The tiny Armenian enclave within the territory of Azerbaijan. Turco Armenian blood feud is as old as the hills and by a queer twist of fate Turkey has no more a border with her longtime foe — the Soviet Union — following its breakup but now shares a border with the newly independent republic of Armenia. Appropriately the Azeri authorities started our programme with a visit in the morning to the Shahidiari Mezar (the Mazar of the Shahids). An eternal flame greets you as you reach the hillock where rows upon rows of tombs are laid. An icy cold wind whipped past as we were shown freshly

order to arrange a ceasefire between the Azeris and the Armenians. It is worth noting that Azerbaijan has seven million people and we were told that there were 21 million Azeris in Iran. Our next stop was Ashkhabad, the capital of Turkmenistan. It is two hours time difference with Moscow and one hour behind Dhaka. With an area of 488,00 sq km it has a barely four million population. As we move east our welcome gets warmer. In Ashkhabad we are lodged in the presidential guest house with its large compound. We have by now become accustomed to very different kind of food. Chicken a la Kiev of the Slav republics has been replaced by kebabs and in Ashkhabad it is



Ukrainian Fine Arts Gallery

great warmth and courtesy, looked definitely very Mongol. In the carpet factory of Ashkhabad, we made another discovery — the penetration of Hindi films from Bombay including the catchy songs and the popularity of the actors and actresses. Girls weaving carpets had pictures of Amitabh Bachchan and others pasted in front of them. We were told that five tribes of Turkmenistan made five different types of carpets and were shown samples from them. We were also informed that the finest wool of the former Soviet Union was produced in Turkmenistan, hence the beauty of their carpets. At the airport the Foreign Minister told me that Turkey was coming in a big way to

found that many large industrial enterprises had women directors including Muslim women. In all the hotels that we stayed, rooms had TV and along with the flashy and sleek programme coming from Moscow, there were local programmes, which were no match. Turkey, I gathered, was going to beam her programmes to the Turkish speaking Asian republics through a satellite that she will launch in the near future. Tajikistan is largely Persian speaking — like many Afghans. Afghanistan has been ruled by the Pathans for more than two centuries. With the departure of the Soviet Union and, hopefully, the end of bloodshed, the tussle is on between the Persian speakers of the north

publics, journalists, TV crew etc. I met my old friend Ambassador Umud Arik (formerly Turkish Ambassador in Jeddah), who told me that in the Foreign Office they were opening a large office of Technical Assistance, whose head he was to become. Bishkek, the capital of Kirghizstan, is an hour's flight from Dushanbe. The clock at the lounge showed Moscow time which must have been the reason for our hosts not turning up on our arrival. The feature of our hosts were more Mongol now and one minister told us that in the past they looked more Caucasian but the Tartar-Mongol invasion changed their look! Bishkek airfield is a huge military one and the en-