

AUA

American University of Armenia

A Promise for the Future



In Armenia, an American University Takes Root Amid Hardship and Rubble

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U.S. scholars with ancestral links to the country are helping meet its educational needs.



BY PETER MONAGHAN

The 1988 earthquake in Armenia that wreaked massive destruction and took thousands of lives also gave birth to an idea.

It was during a visit to the country to inspect earthquake damage that two U.S. academics of Armenian heritage first considered the possibility of an American-style university there, one that could provide advanced training in what they considered essential fields—like engineering.

The two visitors, Mihran S. Agbabian of the University of Southern California and Armen Der Kiureghian of the University of California at Berkeley, were professors of civil engineering with a special awareness of earthquakes. They had gone to Armenia under the auspices of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences to determine what role American science could play in helping rebuild the Soviet republic. While there, they also began to think about what role Armenian-American academics could play in helping their ancestral homeland.

SHEDDING DECADES OF DOCTRINE

Together with several other U.S. colleagues of Armenian descent, they took advantage of the dissolution of the Soviet Union to organize and open the American University of Armenia, which is an affiliate of the University of California system. The institution, its founders say, fea-

tures American-style programs, operations, governance, and attitudes.

Speaking to students at the university, the President of the Republic of Armenia, Levon Ter Petrossian, said: "Forget what you have learned during the Marxist-Leninist indoctrination years and start afresh to study in a free and open environment."

In addition to the legacy of its earthquake, Armenia is now experiencing many other problems, most of them the product of conflicts with its neighboring states, especially Azerbaijan, with which it is fighting over territory. But despite extremely difficult conditions in the capital city of Yerevan and throughout Armenia (see accompanying story), the university managed to get through its second year of operations without interruption.

"Things are under control," says Mr. Agbabian. "We are moving along."

TRADITION AND HERITAGE

Mr. Agbabian now serves as the university's president; Mr. Der Kiureghian is dean of engineering. Both men still hold their posts in California and visit Armenia a few times a year. Like other top officials who are dedicated to getting the university up and running, they work for nominal pay and, when possible, take a leave of absence or a sabbatical from their home institutions to spend extra time in Yerevan.

Mr. Agbabian typifies the university's founding administrators. Born in Cyprus to parents who had fled persecution in Armenia, he came to the United States 40 years ago as a student. He no longer has relatives in Armenia. "My ties are a common tradition and heritage," he says.

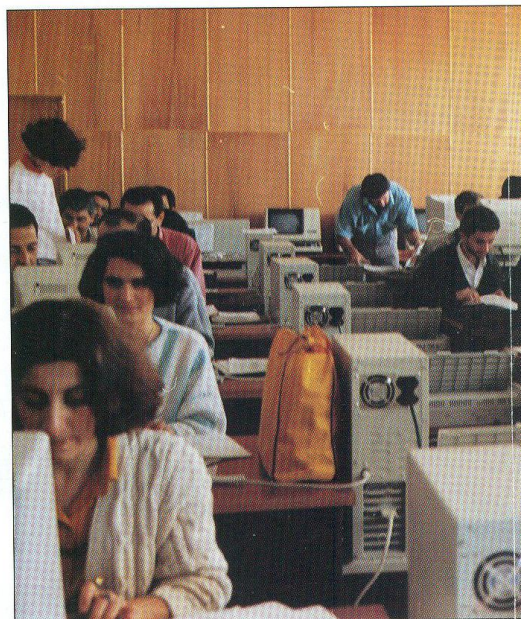
Mr. Agbabian and his colleagues hope to help Armenians tackle the enormous challenge of rebuilding their state after 70 years of Moscow's rule.

The university has an unusual combination of backers. The University of California has chartered the institution and is giving its leaders advice and technical assistance. The Armenian government, aware that Western expertise and business ventures are essential to rebuilding the country, made available what university officials call "the best building" in Yerevan. The Armenian General

Benevolent Union, based in New York City, is providing financial support, as is the U.S. Agency for International Development, which has made grants of \$950,000 under its American Schools and Hospitals Abroad program.

For now, the institution's focus is on graduate instruction in a limited number of specialized fields—business administration, earthquake engineering, and industrial engineering—in which it offers master's degrees. Graduate degrees in agricultural science, environmental engineering, international affairs, public health, and public policy will be added next, followed by undergraduate degrees in arts and sciences.

The university's immediate goals are to meet the most urgent of Armenia's many educational and training needs and train a nucleus of experts and leaders who will help chart a steady course for the country during its early years of independence. The university awarded 64 master's degrees this year; the entering class has 120 students, selected from a large and well-qualified pool of applicants, says Mr. Agbabian.



"Forget what you have learned during the Marxist-Leninist indoctrination years and start afresh to study in a free and open environment."

Levon Ter Petrossian, President of Armenia, speaking to students at the American University of Armenia.

"The American University of Armenia sounds precisely what is needed and I want to see it succeed."

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U.S. Scholars Help Provide Higher Education in Their Ancestral Homeland.

PURPOSE AND DIRECTION

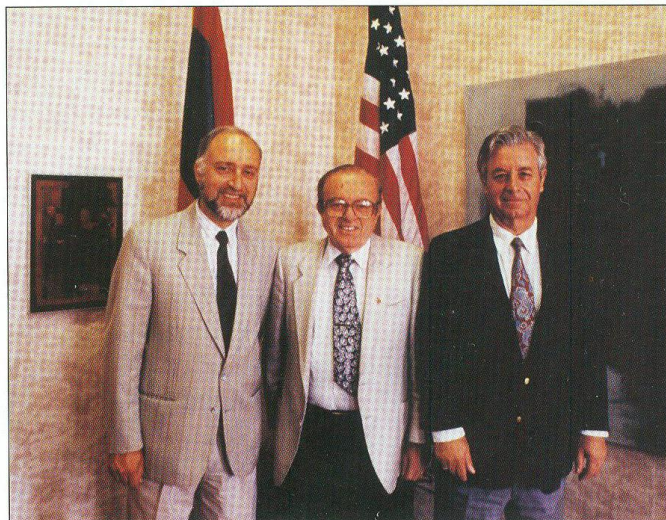
The university also has established an extension program through which it offers intensive, three-week courses in business, economics, and planning. As at many new colleges in former Soviet states, English is the language of instruction.

Mr. Agbabian says the students seem to have abundant theoretical knowledge, but many lacked purpose and direction in their careers before independence. Many feel that the university "will give them a new opportunity to do something more constructive," he says.

Mindful of Armenia's history of domination by outsiders, university officials say they have taken pains to demonstrate that they are not the vanguard of a new invasion. They have entered into cooperative agreements with several local universities, as well as with the Council of Local Governments and other civic organizations.

The university is helping the State Engineering University of Armenia to set up modern laboratories and computer facilities, for example. It also has established research centers where faculty members and students work with scientists recruited from local institutions and the Armenian Academy of Sciences.

"I've been accused of moving too fast, and been asked, 'Can you really do all



AUA Dean of Engineering Dr. Armen Der Kiureghian; President Dr. Mihran Agbabian; Dean of Business Management Dr. Stepan Karamardian. (left to right)

these things?" says Mr. Agbabian. "My answer is that the urgency of the need is there, and we will do our best."

The 1988 earthquake, says Mr. Der Kiureghian, underscored Armenia's dire need of expertise in earthquake-resistant construction. As many as a million Armenians lost their homes in the earthquake, he says, and hundreds of thousands remain homeless today. Major rebuilding must take place, he adds, if Armenia is to advance. Its economy, he adds, is faltering because factories are outdated and ill-managed. That is why, he says, industrial engineering is one of the university's priority disciplines.

U.S. backers are trying to convince corporations that the university could be an ideal incubator for banking, small-business, and other enterprises that do not yet exist in any number in Armenia.

STAMP OF APPROVAL

One of the university's most promising projects, says Grant Beglarian, a senior advisor for institutional development, is the establishment of a high-technology information center. It would generate and maintain data on all the former Soviet republics. "Many U.S. and European scholarly and industrial organizations don't know who to deal with," Mr. Beglarian says. The proposed center also would serve as a national and regional clearinghouse for data bases from the United States and elsewhere.

Mr. Agbabian and his colleagues persuaded University of California administrators that a new university could suc-

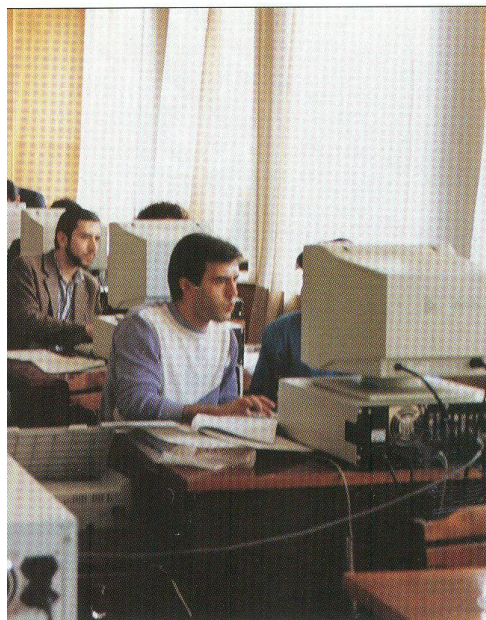
ceed in Armenia if it had the imprimatur of a prominent American institution. "We're doing our best to see it has the standards and customs of an American university," says William R. Frazer, chairman of the American University of Armenia's Board of Trustees. "In admissions, we make sure we have the rigor of a UC school, not the patronage typical of Soviet institutions."

Mr. Frazer retired this year as senior vice-president for academic affairs of the University of California system and is now a professor of physics at Berkeley. He points out that the California system does not provide funds to the university in Armenia. "But we do very gladly and eagerly lend our expertise to make this institution succeed," he says.

California is home to a large population of Armenian Americans, two of whom sit on the Board of Regents of the UC system.

Mr. Frazer recalls that when he brought the idea of the University of California affiliate in Armenia before the regents, "I got a round of applause. They were just so pleased to be associated with the project."

Adds Mr. Agbabian: "I don't want to blow our horn, but it really is a unique accomplishment that an American institution has found a place in the former Soviet Union, and that the local people have accepted it and are supporting it." ■



American University Beats the Odds to Stay Open During Blockade by Armenia's Hostile Neighbors

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BY CHARLES RECKNAGEL

YEREVAN, ARMENIA.

For most of the past year, Arthur Chilingarian had to walk an hour and a half each way through the lifeless streets of Yerevan to pursue his studies at the American University of Armenia.

Of his daily treks, Mr. Chilingarian recalls: "Most of the way was in complete darkness." The capital's streetlights, traffic signals, houses, and shops all were dark because of a lack of electricity. Public transportation was suspended, and most factories and schools had shut down. During the winter, Armenia made headlines as it suffered under an energy blockade imposed by its hostile neighbors. But Mr. Chilingarian says his arduous commute was worth it. "The university was almost the only place in Yerevan where life continued normally," he says.

FIGHTING OVER TERRITORY

The American University beat long odds to stay open all year, during which Armenia often was without power for weeks at a time. The country is now in its fourth year of an economic blockade imposed by neighboring Azerbaijan, with which it is fighting over territory, and Turkey, which has sided with Azerbaijan. The Armenian population of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan is fighting to become part of Armenia. The blockade escalated last winter to include sabotage of the sole gas pipeline supplying Armenia with most of its fuel for generating electricity.

"They were very tough months for us," says George Gibson, the university's provost and vice-president for administration. "From mid-December to mid-March we were able to keep the building heated to only about 40 degrees, and that was the warmest place in town. We held classes in overcoats and hats."

The university was able to maintain operations thanks to its Western sponsors, who provided funds for a diesel generator for electricity, and to the patience of its students and faculty members.

"When the city lost power, we turned on our generator, which gave us electricity but not enough to keep on the hall lights or run the elevator," Mr. Gibson says. The generator

worked in fits and starts. "Students often had to wait all day in the computer labs for the generator to keep going long enough to do their work. But we were grateful to be operating at all."

The Armenian economy has revived slightly this summer, with a respite in pipeline sabotage and the onset of longer and warmer days. But the government is still rationing electricity; the university gets only about six hours of city power a day. The country's continuing economic crisis is now the worst among former Soviet republics, with monthly inflation of between 30 and 35 percent.

The university's students and professors have developed a special attitude. They are working for the future, even though job prospects right now are bleak.

'OPTIMISTS BY NATURE'

"People who enroll in graduate school here are optimists by nature," says Mr. Gibson. "A lot of other people might say, What can I do with a master's degree in industrial engineering when there is not one new building under construction in Yerevan?" Still, the university is now receiving five applications for every place available.

Many of the students say their motivation has less to do with optimism than realism. Says Arsen Davidian, who worked for two years as a civil engineer before enrolling in

needs professionals with Western skills. Says Hasmik Gerendyan: "We need people who can create companies that will survive in a capitalist economy."

Few families can pay the full cost of educating their children, so the university provides financial assistance to most of its students. Many hold part-time jobs in the computer rooms and research centers.

Faculty members at the university, almost all of whom come from American institutions, find teaching in Armenia today full of peculiarities. Deirdre Bird, a professor of marketing who previously taught at Northeastern University, says many of her students are mature professionals. Yet, she says she often feels she must first present new material at an undergraduate level because of the gulf between the economies of Armenia and Western countries.

"Teaching advertising seems irrelevant to people who no longer watch television because the electricity isn't on," she says. "I talk about selling products that aren't manufactured here, and my students ask, What does that have to do with Armenia today?"

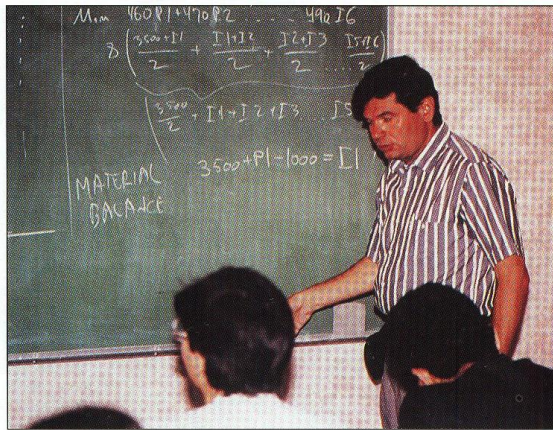
PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

Ms. Bird says that she and other business professors now try to teach problem-solving skills rather than specific techniques: "We try to train students to be independent thinkers and entrepreneurs who can begin building a new economy," she says.

Michael Kouchakjian came here to teach management after completing an MBA at the University of California at Los Angeles. He says he found conditions during the winter so harsh that he thought he was hallucinating.

"The hardest thing, psychologically, was that even indoors you could see your breath," he recalls. "My students were lethargic and depressed, and they couldn't prepare for lessons properly with just candlelight at home." Now, he says, there is still too little electricity at night, and no running hot water in the city, but the mood of the students has improved markedly.

Life in Yerevan, he says, "is like going camping." But his job, he has found, has rewards. "Here I know I am making a difference, at a very fundamental level, in a new country." ■



the business program: "I lost my job before I came here. It's a choice of doing nothing or coming here and keeping up in business."

Other business students say their studies are important because Armenia urgently

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AUA is sponsored by the AGBU and affiliated with the University of California.

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The AGBU is actively seeking endowment funds for the long term achievements of AUA. The 1993/94 annual budget is estimated at \$1,200,000. This sum includes scholarships, salaries, travel costs, staff housing, equipment, supplies, building maintenance and renovation, and textbook and library acquisitions.

Our first major gift endowments were \$1,000,000 from Nishan Papazian* for the AUA Library and \$500,000 from the Karakashian family** for Diplomacy Seminars. We hope others will join our donors in permanently funding the academic programs of the American University of Armenia. Major gifts to the endowment fund for excellence in education will be recognized by designating chairs of study and seminars in the name of each benefactor.

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