

Azeri Customs Officials Seize Tourists' Armenia Travel Guides Books Contained 'Pro-Armenian' Content

By Bedros Safarian

The sharp eye of customs officials in Azerbaijan prevented a group of American tourists from bringing items perceived to be contraband propaganda into the country.

The prohibited materials were their personal copies of the travel guidebook "Armenia and Karabagh: The Stone Garden Guide," by Matthew Karanian and Robert Kurkjian and published by Stone Garden Productions.

"They knew it (the book), and as soon as they saw it (in one traveler's luggage) they took it out and confiscated it," said the tour leader.

The startled tourists were part of a 14-person group that was visiting the south Caucasus countries of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. They had flown in November to Yerevan, Armenia's capital, and had then traveled by land to Georgia before continuing on to Azerbaijan.

This was a cultural enrichment tour by a group of ordinary Americans traveling on US passports, none of whom was of Armenian descent. But upon their arrival in Azerbaijan the tourists found that their choice of reading material was subject to scrutiny.

Azeri customs officials were apparently already familiar with the book, according to tour leader Roger Williams of Berkeley, Calif.

"They took seven or eight copies," he said.

The officials didn't explain why the books were treated as contraband. Williams said, however, that he believed that "anything that shows Karabagh" is apparently subject to seizure. Another six copies went unnoticed by the officials.

Whether the prohibition of the book is official law, or is merely one that is routinely enforced, is not clear.

A representative of the Azerbaijan Embassy in Washington, DC, said during a recent telephone call that he was uncertain whether books that mention Armenia or Karabagh are contraband. Ali Garayev, the embassy's Consul, thought about the issue a moment, however, and concluded that if a tourist was carrying such a book, then "because you are a traveler, it is no problem."

The website of the State Customs Committee of the Azerbaijan Republic does not mention consumer reading materials such as travel guides or books about Armenia or Karabakh on its list of prohibited items. The site says that prohibited items include “Materials advertising low morale, violence and terrorism,” along with items such as explosives, narcotics, and radioactive materials.

Some privately operated tourism websites apparently recognize the threat of confiscation of books based on their content, however, and at least two internet sites warn that “printed material directed against Azerbaijan” are “prohibited imports.”

Armenia does not restrict the import of printed materials that might be considered to be “directed against Armenia,” according to Armella Shakaryan, Consul of the Armenian Embassy in Washington, DC. And, she says, there are certainly no restrictions on the type of travel guidebooks that tourists may bring into the country.

A spokesman for authors Matthew Karanian and Robert Kurkjian said that the authors regretted that Azeri authorities had stooped to censoring information about Armenia and Karabakh in an apparent attempt to prevent Azeri people from inadvertently learning more about the two countries. He said the authors were pleased to learn, however, that the travelers did not lose their books until after they had completed the Armenia and Karabakh legs of their tour.