
THE CURIOUS CASPIAN

W. O. BLANCHARD

University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois

Although more than twice as large as all of our five Great Lakes together, the Caspian Sea shows little of the active commercial life which is associated with those North American waters. Inland lakes are usually a great boon to a country but evidently Mother Nature, in adding the Caspian Sea to the Soviet landscape, tied a couple of "jokers" to her gift. Locating that water in a vast desert region was bad enough; neglecting to provide a water outlet to the ocean made matters still worse! In fact this last was an almost unforgivable oversight. As a consequence, this sea lies far off the world's great commercial routes. On a map showing the commercially active portions of the earth, the Caspian is almost a blank—a sort of "blind spot" in a busy world.

Yet, in many respects, it is an interesting, even curious sheet of water.

First, to impress one, is its great size, for it really is an *immense* lake. It is larger than either the Black or Baltic Seas and one could put 70 of our Great Salt Lakes on its surface and have room to spare. It is by all odds the *world's largest inland lake!*

Yet, geologists tell us that it is but a tiny remnant of its former self. At one

time it included the Black and Aral Seas and extended northward connecting with the Arctic. Crustal movement and climatic change shrunk it so that now the sea actually occupies only the deepest part of that former great depression. The surface waters at present stand some 80 feet below sea level.

Still more unusual are the contrasts between different parts of the lake itself. Thus, in the northern part which receives the waters of the great Volga and Ural Rivers, the shores are flat and marshy, the waters shallow, usually less than 75 feet deep, and quite fresh—in fact, drinkable. Too shallow to retain much of the summer's heat, this portion is ice bound for three or four months each winter.

Being far inland and in middle latitudes its climate is continental. The temperature range, both seasonally and geographically, over this region are remarkably large. The average January temperature over the central part of the Sea is as cold as southern Iceland some 2,000 miles farther north, and the temperature range from the north to the south shore in that month is greater than that from Gibraltar to Iceland, a distance about three times as great. On the steps of the lower Volga winter tempera-

tures of -20°F . are not infrequent. Unfortunately, the rainfall over the bordering lands is both scant and irregular. As a result, complete crop failures sometimes lead to terrible famines. This section of European Russia is a land of nomads and sheep, of Cossacks and camels. Cossack horsemen have contributed a hardy contingent to Soviet cavalry units just as Brittany fishermen have furnished many recruits for the French navy.

The southern part of the sea, in contrast to those on the north, is closely rimmed by mountains, especially the Caucasus and Elburz ranges. Only a narrow coastal plain margins the water, but on this plain are located the chief cities. Baku, one of the world's great oil centers is the largest. Much of the petroleum moves via pipeline overland to Batum on the Black Sea, where tankers can load for export. Some moves up the Volga to the Moscow industrial district.

The sea bottom in this south portion is marked by two deep pits over 3,000 feet deep. In this south portion the waters are decidedly salty and quite free of winter ice. Contrary to general opinion the average salinity of the whole Caspian is less than $\frac{1}{2}$ that of the ocean.

One of the difficulties of life along the southern coastal land is the scarcity of fresh water either as surface or ground water. Recourse is had in part to condenser ships which distill the sea water and pipe it ashore. Tanks then distribute it and peddlers carry it about the streets of the cities.

On the east coast is a shallow bay, almost cut off from the Sea. On the bottom of this bay is a layer of some seven feet of Epsom salts (sulphate of magnesium). The deposit is estimated to total a billion tons.

With this great variety in depth, salinity and temperature, it is not surprising to find this area the most richly stocked with fish of any inland water of the world. Here especially, in the northern section, is the home of the famous Russian caviar industry. The sturgeon upon which this industry is based are the largest fresh water fish in existence.

Some of them measure 25 feet in length and weigh 3,000 pounds! The roe (eggs) from which the caviar is prepared may form as much as $\frac{1}{3}$ of the entire weight of the female fish. Of the several millions of pounds of caviar marketed annually some goes to the United States, netting the Russian exporters about \$1.00 per pound. Astrakhan on the lower Volga is the caviar capital of the world, as well as a center for lamb skins, the Astrakhan fur of commerce.

Aside from these features of interest to the scientist and to the fishermen, recent developments promise to put the Caspian on the map as a commercial route as well.

We have spoken of the Caspian as a "blind spot". All too frequently, however, these "waste places" are transformed into highly desirable pieces of real estate. The discovery of valuable mineral deposits changed the frozen Klondike and the arid Gadsen Purchase into busy mining camps. The development of wireless and air transport made many little-known Pacific islands, such as Midway and Wake, highly prized as landing fields and wireless stations. Irrigation waters have turned the Imperial Valley from a desert waste into a luxuriant garden. A ship canal transformed a Panama jungle into one of the world's busiest highways. And so one might continue indefinitely. As geographers, then, in a rapidly changing world it behooves us to use the labels "waste areas" and "useless regions" with caution. In many cases man is not using these regions because *he has not yet learned how he can turn them to his account.*

In the case of this area extensive irrigation works are transforming the trans-Caspian desert into vast cotton plantations. Moscow has been recently joined by canal to the Volga and a ship canal is planned between the Don and Volga. These will give the Caspian direct access to the Soviet industrial region and a water route to the Mediterranean. We may shortly expect another of the world's "blind spots" will both "see" and "be seen".