

Analysis

A Short Sketch of One Century of Azerbaijani Historical Writing

By Zaur Gasimov, Mainz

Abstract

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijani historians gained the opportunity to take a new perspective on their country's past, before, during, and after the Communist era. The history of Azerbaijan's short-lived independence during 1918–1920 was, and remains, among the favorite research topics. Also, the subject of Karabakh and the history of Southern Azerbaijan figure prominently on the research agenda of historians. Obstacles for their work include the fact that many Azerbaijani historians have limited facility with foreign languages, problems created by the authoritarian conditions imposed by the Aliev regime, and corruption in the country's science and educational system.

Writing History in Soviet Times

During the Soviet era, Azerbaijani historiography developed within the paradigms of Marxist theories, which regarded historical development to be the result of a permanent struggle among the classes. Most Soviet Azerbaijani historians (e.g. Pista Ezizbeyova) viewed Russia and the Soviet Union as progressive forces. They glorified Russia's "progressive proletariat" and intelligentsia for having a positive impact on the modernization of Azerbaijan from the time of colonization in the early 19th century and after the beginning of Sovietization in the early 1920s. The view of history as a permanent class struggle at times took absurd turns, such as when Azeri historians described the 8th century anti-Arab rebel Babek as a "pre-Communist leader" simply because he used red banners.

Soviet historiography and school history textbooks issued during the Soviet occupation described almost all personalities in Azerbaijan's past who criticized Islam and had any affiliation to Russia as particularly enlightened. Soviet-Azerbaijani historians condemned the period of the short-lived independence of Azerbaijan in 1918–1920 as anti-national. To mark the anniversaries of the October Revolution or the beginning of the Sovietization campaign in Azerbaijan, the authorities produced a huge number of publications praising the "eternal friendship" between Azeris and Russians.

"Perestroika" in Azerbaijani Historiography

These trends dominated until the Perestroika years, 1988–1989, when a number of young Azeri historians began to publish articles presenting an alternative view of history. In this period, it became fashionable to examine topics which were previously considered taboo. Historians such as Nesib Nasibli, Nesiman Yaqublu, Shirmemmed Hüseyinov and Cemil Hesenli published several articles and booklets on the foreign policy of the Azerbaijani government in 1918–1920 and on its leader Mammad-

amin Rasulzade (1884–1955). These authors completely revised the historical role of Russia. They portrayed the role of the Soviet Union in annexing Azerbaijani territory and eliminating its independent statehood as negatively as the Tsarist Empire's colonial war against the Azeri Khanates in the first quarter of the 19th century.

Challenged by the liberalization brought on by Gorbachev's Glasnost and the conflict with Armenia over Karabakh, the Institute of History's main journal became a forum for Azerbaijani historians who sought to revise the national version of history. The Karabakh issue became a point of conflict for historians on both sides. The young historian Isa Gambar and one of the patriarchs of the Soviet Azerbaijani historiography Ziya Bunyadov were particularly active in the disputes with their Armenian counterparts. They challenged the artificially propagated myths of the "eternal friendship of all Soviet nationalities" and thereby proved the existence of nationalism among the non-Russian nations in the USSR.

During this period, the History Faculty at Baku State University (BSU) became the second most important history-writing institution after the Bakykhanov Institute.¹ The History Faculty is the oldest center for historical research in Azerbaijan; it opened when the national government founded the university in the fall of 1919. By staying in the shadow of the Bakykhanov Institute, the faculty gained more freedom to evaluate Azerbaijan's past.

¹ The Baku noble Abbasqulu Aga Bakykhanov (1794–1847) founded Azerbaijani historiography (tarixshünasliq) by writing a booklet about the history of Azerbaijan and Dagestan entitled "Gülüstani-Irem" in Farsi. Bakykhanov was engaged as a translator by the Tsarist authorities in Tiflis. He translated the peace negotiations between the Persians and Russians in 1828, which resulted in the division of the territory settled by the ethnic Azerbaijanis. The Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan was named after Bakykhanov and can be considered since its foundation in 1945 as the main history writing institution in the republic.

The events of January 1990, when Soviet troops intervened in Baku and killed many people, marked the beginning of a new period for Azerbaijani historians. From that time, the works of émigré and Western historians began to appear in the major historical journals in Baku. In particular, translations from the work of Polish-American historian Tadeusz Swietochowski about “Russian Azerbaijan” in 1905–1920, were published and had a strong impact on Azerbaijani historiography. His work had originally been published in the USA and was based on detailed research in the archives of Europe and Baku. Swietochowski visited Soviet Baku in the 1980s and was well known at the Academy of Sciences. As his field of research was devoted to the period of Azerbaijani independence in 1918–1920, his works became very popular once the Soviet Union disintegrated and critical research into this former taboo-area became possible.

Almost revolutionary were the publications about the Azerbaijani legions, soldiers serving on the side of the German Wehrmacht against the Soviet Army. Questioning the meaning of the “Great Patriotic War” was nothing less than breaking with probably the most important legacy of Soviet history. Other topics that Azerbaijani historians no longer feared to broach were the Stalinist repressions against the Azerbaijani intelligentsia in the 1930s and the activities of the Azerbaijani émigrés in interwar Europe. Articles written by Mammadamin Rasulzade and other émigrés (Cahangir Zeynaloglu, Mirzabala, Hilal Münshi) during their stays in Poland, Germany and Turkey were for the first time published in Azerbaijan and Azeri historians wrote introductory texts for these publications.

Yet the period 1989–1991 for Azeri historiography was also an ambivalent one: On one hand, this period witnessed the publication of books and historical essays, such as those by Manaf Suleymanov and Fazil Rahmanzade, which criticized the Stalinist regime and described the policy of Russification in frank detail. On the other, Soviet ideology did not disappear overnight; the military historian Rizvan Zeynalov in 1991 published his dissertation on the development of the Azerbaijani army in 1920–1941 in a manner that completely corresponded with the Marxist-Leninist approach.

Orientation Towards Azerbaijan’s Ancient Roots

In 1992, when the Popular Front Movement with the orientalist Abulfaz Elchibey at its head came to office, Azerbaijani historiography focused on the Turkic-speaking world. The philosophical book-length essay of the Kazakh writer Olzhas Suleymenov “AziYa” was trans-

lated into Azerbaijani and Dede-Qorqud explorations were dominant in historical and literary research. Elchibey saw Azerbaijan as a crown of the Turkish world and was known for his anti-Russian and anti-Persian position. For Azerbaijani historians who were members of the National Liberation Movement in the 1980s and the first political parties of Müsavat and the Popular Front that meant a revolt against “indo-European domination.”

Some historians began to concentrate on the pre-history of the Turkish settlements in the region of the Caucasus and revised the Soviet approach represented in Azerbaijan by the historian Iqrar Aliyev (1924–2004). Since 1960, Iqrar Aliyev published several works on the history of Media (1960), Albania (1962) and Atropathene (1989). The last one was translated into Persian and published in Tehran. The Median state, which is considered a proto-Azerbaijani state formation, was settled by an Iranian-speaking population, according to Aliyev. The opinion that Media and the more ancient state formation Manna were settled by Turkic tribes became dominant under Elchibey. The key representative of this school was Professor Yusif Yusifov of the Pedagogical Higher School in Baku and Aliyev’s attacks against it failed. Yusifov, an ancient history specialist, published with Moscow historians (Dyakonov and Yankovskaya) a broad monograph on the history of Elam in 1968. In 1987 he co-authored with Serraf Kerimov a manual of toponymy, explaining the semantic origins of historical names for cities in the Caucasus.

In 1994, Yusifov together with Bünyadov published the “History of Azerbaijan from ancient times until the beginning of the 20th century”, which was accepted at the universities of Azerbaijan as a manual on Azerbaijani history. It continues to serve as the dominant historical narrative in Azerbaijan. Some historians concentrated intensively on Turkish and Central Asian history. Similar to the period at the beginning of the twentieth century, Baku became the second most important center of Turanism after Istanbul. The books of the Turkish thinker Ziya Gökalp were translated into Azerbaijani and published in Baku and school history books discussed his life work. Additionally, the books on Azerbaijani and Central Asian history written by Azeri and Turkish historians in Turkey were brought to Azerbaijan.

The Nationalization of History

Under Elchibey, a further de-Sovietization of Azerbaijani historiography took place. This movement dropped a number of terms, which were commonly used in Soviet historiography. For example, the war between the Soviet Union and Germany was not called the “Great Patriotic

War” anymore but simply referred to as World War II. The Sovietization of Azerbaijan beginning in 1920 was now called the “April occupation” (Aprel istilasy).

At the same time, the main principles of Azerbaijani historiography survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. Azerbaijani historians saw the past of their country in the context of a five thousand year old civilization and Azerbaijan as an heir of Media, Atropatene, Caucasian Albania, and the state formations that existed under Arab rule and afterwards on the territory of modern Azerbaijan, for example, the state of Atabegs (Bünyadov), Shirvan-Shahs (Ashurbeyli) and the medieval states Ag and Qara Qoyunlu (Mahmudov), which are assumed to have had relations with European states.

Currently, Baku historians are actively exploring both the religious traditions of the monotheist Caucasian Albania (Farida Mammadova and Rashid Göyüşev), where Christianity is as old as the Armenian and Georgian Churches and there was strong resistance to Islamization under the Arabs, and Islamic traditions, particularly those under Shah Ismayil Khatai.

In 1993 a monument for Khatai was opened in one of the districts of Baku. Being an ethnic Azerbaijani from the Safavid dynasty, he ruled the Persian Empire and is considered as one of the founders of Azerbaijani classical literature, since he wrote several poems in Azeri. Khatai remains a favorite subject of research for many historians of literature as well. While many acknowledge Azerbaijan’s ancient history, most historians concentrate their research on the period of the late 18th, 19th and 20th century.

Main Trends in Modern Historical Writing

One should differentiate several currents in modern Azerbaijani historiography:

Karabakh: Beyond a doubt, the history of Karabakh and its political, economic and social development has been the key topic for Azerbaijani historiography. This issue is omnipresent since the beginning of the conflict over Karabakh in the 1980s. Prominent historians like Ziya Bünyadov and Iqrar Aliyev and the historian-geographers Budaq Budagov and Giyaseddin Geybullayev wrote about the Karabakh issue in the 1990s, although neither regional history nor contemporary history was their main field of specialization.

In the last decade, a new generation of Karabakh-historians emerged in Azerbaijan. Zemfira Hacıyeva published in 2004 her analysis of the Tsarist description of the Karabakh province of 1823. The historian and ethnographer Arif Yunusov published a book on the past and present of Karabakh in English in 2005. A year later,

Ilqar Mammadov published in Tula a monograph on the history of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Karabakh. In 2004, the Füzuli-Institute on Manuscripts at the Academy of Sciences in Baku prepared an almost 400 page long bibliography of Karabakh’s history. In the context of Karabakh, Azeri historians (Solmaz Rüstəmova-Tohidi) concentrated intensively on the ethnic clashes between Armenians and Azeris, which took place in Baku in March 1918. The main trend in the writing on Karabakh is the aspiration to prove its historical bond with Azerbaijani khanates, state, the Azeri speaking population and its meaning for Azerbaijani culture with Shusha as its center.

Regional history: Regional and local history has gained in importance in present Azerbaijan. Historians write about the provinces of Nakhichevan, Zangezur, Shusha and Jerevan, which had in the 19th century an ethnically mixed population (mostly Armenians, Muslim and Yezidi Kurds and Azeris). “Local history” has also become an attractive topic. Baku is still the favorite subject of explorations, but the book of the historian Sara Ashurbeyli (1906–2001) remains the fundamental research on the city’s history. More publications about the history of the villages around Baku, like the city of Mashtaga, emerged recently. Research on the local history of Nakhichevan has a clear political context, since the president’s family is of Nakhichevani descent and this region was of paramount importance in Heydar Aliyev’s political career after 1990–1991. The explorations of the other cities and cultural centers, like Gandja and Shamakhy, spring from the initiatives mostly of the young historians.

Russian and Soviet colonization: Russian and Soviet colonization, settlement policy in Azerbaijan and the repressions against Azerbaijani cultural elites in the 1930s constitute one of the key trends in Azerbaijani historiography, particularly since the publication of the bibliography of sources on Azerbaijani history prepared by the historians Süleyman Eliyarov and Yaqub Mahmudov. This publication includes documents on the colonial policy in the 19th century and echoed strong feelings held in Azerbaijani society. In 1990, the same collection of documents was issued in a Russian translation. Three years later, in 1993, Ziya Bünyadov’s book “Qirmizi terror” (The Red Terror) appeared in Baku’s book stores. In 1998, the historian Mammad Djafarly published his work on the “Political Terror and the Destiny of Azerbaijan’s Germans”. More recently, the fundamental works of the contemporary historians Eldar Ismayilov and Cemil Hasanly on the Stalinist and post-Stalinist regime in Azerbaijan emerged.

Military history: Examining military history was one innovation that took place in Azerbaijani historiography before 1991. During the Soviet occupation and shortly after 1991, Azerbaijani historians published some books, including Steklov's 1927 polemical volume on the Musavat Army and Musa Qasimli's work on World War I and II. Once neglected, military history is now becoming more popular. Azerbaijani military traditions during the first period of independence are a particularly popular theme. The development of the army in 1918 and the biographies of Tsarist military leaders of Azerbaijani descent are the favorite topics. In 1991, Pervin Darabadi published his dissertation on the military aspects of Azerbaijani history at the beginning of the 20th century. Other key works on the military are devoted to the first Republic, its military ministers and World War II. Nesiman Yaqublu issued the biography of Fatalibey-Dudanginski, the Azerbaijani officer who served both in the German and Soviet Army during World War II, stayed in Europe after its end, and was eliminated by the Soviet KGB in the 1950s. In the same year, Yaqublu issued a book on the liberation of Baku by the Osman and Azeri troops from the Bolsheviks in September 1918. Qilman Ilkin wrote a book on the "Turkish troops in Baku" in 2003. Shamistan Nazirli and Naila Velikhanly are the most famous military historians of the republic. In 2004–2006 Nazirli published two books on the officer Yadiqarov and General Shikhliniski and issued a monograph on persecuted military figures. Nazirli has been writing short articles about military history in newspapers like "Ayna" and "525ci qezet". Velikhanly edited the catalogue "Azerbaijani generals", which was published by the Academy of Sciences in 2005. Alas, the attempts of the Azerbaijani historians to concentrate on military history are also a part of the post-communist search for identity, which was damaged by the defeats during the Armenian-Azerbaijani war for Karabakh.

Populist Historical Writing in the Aliyev Dynasty

Since the unstable democracy under Elchibey transformed itself into the stable authoritarianism under Aliyev senior (1993–2003) and junior (since 2003), Azerbaijani historiography obtained a new field which can hardly claim to be objective. Only in the last decade, Azeri historians wrote or edited a huge number of pseudo-scientific publications on Aliyev (Aliyeviana). Dozens of Aliyev biographers have described the life of the "Ulu önder" (Sacred Leader) of Azerbaijan. Among them one can find the publicist Elmira Akhundova, who has been working on a six-volume biography (!) of Heydar Aliyev and

regularly publishes short articles about his career in a variety of periodicals.

The head of the Bakykhanov Institute, Yaqub Mahmudov, stresses the role of Aliyev in Azerbaijani history in his publications, interviews and public lectures. A huge photo of Heydar Aliyev adorns not only the homepage of the BSU Department of History, but also the school history textbooks, which were published and edited by Mahmudov in the last decade.

Since the period of Perestroika, the theme of the first Republic (1918–1920) and its leader Resulzade is still in fashion. In spite of this fact, the Bakykhanov Institute, BSU History Department and other institutions try to concentrate on the history of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic while neglecting to give prominent attention to Rasulzade, who is a potential rival of Heydar Aliyev as an "Azerbaijani Ataturk." Nevertheless, the historians close to the Musavat and Popular Front parties (Yaqublu, Balayev) continue to publish actively on this theme. After the main works of Rasulzade written in Turkish, Azeri and Russian from the time of his exile were reprinted in Baku at the beginning of the 1990s, historians began to analyze the different aspects of Rasulzade's thinking, including religion, language, and political orientations. The historian Müsteqil Agayev published a book on the philosophical views of Rasulzade in 2006.

Azeri historians during the Perestroika period devoted considerable attention to the topic of Turan since it had been taboo earlier. At the moment, it is still of interest but is no longer as popular as it once was. The basic works of the Turanist authors like Gökalp, Akchura (2006) and Hüseyinzade (2007) have been translated into Azeri and re-printed in Baku.

A variety of other topics garner considerable attention. "Ayriliq" is the title of one of the most famous songs in Azerbaijan and means "mourning because of partition". Initially performed by the singer Rubabe Muradova, "Ayriliq" remains in the repertoire of Azeri divas like Googoosh and Flora Kerimova. It refers to the partition of the Azerbaijani territories between Russia and Persia in 1813–1828. Both during the Soviet occupation and in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, this topic remains a key part of Azerbaijani historiography. The historian Shovket Tagiyeva published in 1990 a monograph on the Tabriz rebellion of 1920. The medievalist Kerim Shukurov issued the chronology of the Turkmenchay treaty of 1828. All history textbooks for secondary schools and universities have the map of the "United Azerbaijan", which includes the modern Republic of Azerbaijan and the so-called "Southern Azerbaijan", the territory of Iran

which has been settled by ethnic Azeris (including the cities of Tabriz, Ardabil, Urmiyya and Maraga).

Overall, Azerbaijani historiography changed considerably after the emancipation period of Perestroika and the restitution of state sovereignty in 1991. These changes are clearly visible not only in the themes of most dissertations and historical publications, but also in the way that history is taught at school and in the way that history books are written. Even the language is different: while most historical articles and books were written in Russian before 1991, the absolute majority of publications in modern Azerbaijan now appear in Azerbaijani.

Shortcomings in Modern Historiography

Despite these changes, Azerbaijani historiography continues to suffer from a vast number of problems:

First, Azeri historians, like their Russian colleagues, have to work in an authoritarian state, which limits the freedom of scientific expression. Azeri contemporary historians may not write objectively about the 1970–1980s

and the period after 1993, since Heydar Aliyev was in office during this time (eventually followed by his son) and one has to depict it in positive terms. In reality, this time was a period marked by total stagnation throughout the entire USSR, while the 1990s meant immense losses for Azerbaijan in the war with Armenia, and the crack-down on democracy.

Second, the knowledge of Western languages among the historians in Baku leaves much to be desired. An overwhelming majority of them are able to read only in Russian and Turkish. That is one of the reasons that most Azeri historians have quite poor contacts with other research institutions abroad. They do not have access to the publications on Azerbaijani history that emerged recently in Western countries.

Third, the problem of corruption is pervasive not only throughout the educational system at Azerbaijan's universities, but also in research institutes at the Academy of Sciences. Some students rely on bribes to complete their PhD and post-doctoral programs.

About the Author

Dr. Zaur Gasimov is a researcher at the Institute for European History (IEG) in Mainz (Germany).

Further Reading

- Volker Adam, "Umdeutung der Geschichte im Zeichen des Nationalismus seit dem Ende der Sowjetunion: Das Beispiel Aserbaidschan," in *Osmanismus, Nationalismus und der Kaukasus. Muslime und Christen, Türken und Armenier im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. B. Bonwetsch and F. Adanir. Wiesbaden 2005, pp. 21–41.
- Zaur Gasimov, "Azerbaijan's Lost Statehood: The Post-1980s Historiography of Occupation," *The Caucasus & Globalization* 1, 5 (2007): 144–149.
- Irina Morozova, "Contemporary Azerbaijani historiography on the problem of 'Southern Azerbaijan' after World War II," *Iran and the Caucasus* 9, 1 (2005): 85–120.