

## AZERI ORIENTALISTS AS MIRROR OF THE POSTSOVIET REVOLUTION

*Georgi Derluguian*<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the first Russian revolution of 1905 Lenin famously called Leo Tolstoy the mirror of its contradictions [1]. The great words and personal example of Tolstoy, the model public intellectual of his time, indeed provided a good summary of liberal intelligentsia politics in the contemporary Russia: the urge for popular education and moral improvement, the intense patriotic love of native culture mixed with embarrassment and disdain for its "Asiatic backwardness" (*aziatchina*), and moreover the glaring political ineffectiveness of sermonizing literary and academic intelligentsia in the leadership of revolutionary contention. A century later another intelligentsia emerged in the leadership of democratic revolutions of 1989-1991. This intelligentsia was numerically much larger and largely new in its social composition and positioning. It has been created in the 1930s-1960s by the Soviet effort to modernize the backward sprawling empire including its ethnically non-Russian peripheries. Yet there seemed to be an odd continuity in the moralistic political discourse of new and old intelligentsia, their profoundly split Westernizing/nativist attitudes, and the ineffectiveness of intelligentsia's political leadership that in many instances ended in disastrous nationalist conflicts, the self-destruction of democratic movements, followed by the imposition of barely disguised and extremely corrupt authoritarianisms in the newly independent states. The aspirations, political programs, and the course of events in 1989 did seem a replay of the contention in 1905 and during spring and summer of 1917. The key difference was the lack of revolutionary outcome. In 1989 there were no Bolsheviks, no restoration of centralized state, and subsequently no

---

<sup>1</sup> Georgi Derluguian is Associate Professor at the Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois). His areas of interest include historical sociology, ethnic wars, and world-systems analysis. His monograph *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-Systems Biography* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) was awarded an honorable mentioning by the Political Sociology Section of the ASA and listed among Books of the Year by the Times Literary Supplement (1 December 2006). Derluguian's recent theoretical work focused on the synthetic understanding of capitalism and the dynamics of state socialism.

Some statements and approaches in the presented article somewhat differ from the ones used in Armenian academic literature; few comments are added to clarify such cases (ed.).

developmentalist surge conducted by revolutionary dictatorship. The USSR just fell apart and remained a collection of weak national states.

More than a decade after the implosion of Soviet Union it remains a very emotional issue whether the events of 1989-1991 at all amounted to revolution. The source of confusion is the persistent imagery of classical revolutions embedded in the nineteenth century political canon. For the traditional Marxists the ultimate measure of revolution is the outcome construed as the emancipation of previously oppressed classes and nationalities. On this count the end of East European socialist regimes was just a disaster. By all indicators social inequality grew dramatically and very explicitly, especially when we bring gender into the equation. The social bases and political organizations of the Left were undone across the board. In this sense it might indeed appear that history has ended. Yet it did not become a glorious victory for the neo-liberal cause either. The current political mainstream avoids the word revolution not simply because of inherent distaste – after all, the neo-liberal propaganda hailed Reaganism as revolution. The prevalent characterizations for the post-Soviet situations are stalled transformation or failed transition which also points to the teleology of the nineteenth century canon. The outcome of 1989 fell far short of the projected goals, the market-driven economic growth and the institutionalization of liberal political practices. Once again the measure is revolutionary outcome informed by the nineteenth-century imagery, albeit of bourgeois revolution. The liberalization of the former USSR was a disaster, with the partial exception of the Baltic states that are small and proximate enough to the European Union to expect an invitation. The disappointing outcome needed an extraneous explanation beside the logic of global neo-liberalism. Therefore something had to be wrong with the people who misunderstood liberalism and corrupted the market transitions. The explanation was easily found in blaming the deep flaws of local ethnic cultures or even at more grandiose scale, in the clash of civilizations, the chasm between East and West. The ethnic explanation looked compelling given the massive evidence of ethnically-channeled corruption, the ethnically organized crime, and the widespread incidence of ethnic wars in the former USSR as well as the former Yugoslavia. Ethnic culture thus became the key factor in accounting for the economic and political morass. Many East European intellectuals themselves promoted the ethnic explanation which was neither too surprising nor anything new. Since the nineteenth century there existed a formidable literary-moralizing tradition of venting the historical frustrations felt by the East European intellectuals through (forgive the pun) inventing various kinds of negative nationalist cliches, all those well-familiar musings on the theme of what is so wrong with us and our corner of

the world. These days the same, only slightly refurbished intellectual feelings and stereotypes are recycled in the panoply of academic conferences and journals devoted to the discussion of ethnic problems and the missionary non-governmental organizations dedicated to the resolution of ethnic conflicts. The result today, like a century earlier, is the analytical and political cul-de-sac.

My central point is the insistence that the concept of revolution provides a robust framework for interpreting the events of last decade in the former Soviet bloc. It is, however, not the romantic imagery of classical social revolutions epitomized by the Jacobin or the Bolshevik examples. The 1989-1991 revolutions were distinct in the gaping disjuncture between revolutionary situations and the expected revolutionary outcomes, informed by whether the bourgeois imagery or else, which in fact has been a fairly common situation in modern history [2]. A complete revolutionary sequence is a very rare occurrence. The anti-Soviet democratic revolutions sought an antithesis to the bureaucratic stagnation of advanced state socialism. In the bi-polarity of Cold War, the anti-thesis was readily obtained in the highly idealized picture of its opposite, the Western liberal democracy and capitalist markets. If state socialism ended in economic stagnation and moral bankruptcy, then the Western model must be true. This simple logic called for the absolute reversal of symbolic markers and therefore the revolutionary attempts of 1989 became emulative movements for the creation of national bourgeois societies in the absence of capitalist class and capitalist resources. No less logically, the social group who by their vocation were the custodians of the ideal, *i.e.* the literary intellectuals, for the duration of revolutionary situations assumed the role of surrogate insurgent bourgeoisie. I shall show why (largely by default) the literary intellectuals became the vanguard of political contention and what institutions of state socialism rendered these intellectuals explicitly national.

It would be, however, too simplistic to dismiss these intellectuals as merely naive. First of all, I urge you to give due respect to the activist intellectuals of 1989 no less than Lenin gave to Leo Tolstoy and his cohort back in 1905. The events of 1989-1991 were a tremendous historical drama when, for a moment, genuine emancipation seemed so close for the millions of people. Secondly, if we are serious about the analysis of contemporary history, we need to answer the following questions: what processes created these revolutionary situations, who were the leaders, why they uniformly chose the same strategy of national democratic reform, and what conditions and constraints drove these movements to often bloody failure? Answering these questions, in my opinion, requires us to conduct the analysis simultaneously at three different planes: the micro-level of actual events and personages of 1989; the dimension of national histories, especially

the past formative moments in 1905 and 1917, from which the revolutionaries of 1989 drew their symbols and scripts; finally, the global level of modern world-system which provided the main reference point for all nationalist movements in the former USSR.

Here we take as example the trajectory of Azerbaijan (pronounced Azer-bye-DJAN) in the last couple decades. It provides, however, a good empirical summary of post-Soviet contention leading to ethnic conflict, state breakdown, and the apparent return to Third World backwardness – the depressing trends registered in a larger set of countries from the Balkans to the Caucasus and Central Asia. The focus of our empirical investigation is on the ethnic Azeri<sup>1</sup> intellectuals who were orientalists not in Edward Said's metaphorical meaning but quite literally by their professional training received from the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Azerbaijan State University. Foreign journalists and other observers noticed how puzzlingly numerous were the specialists in classical Arabic or Persian among the post-Soviet Azeri political elite [3]. The Azeri intellectuals took this fact for granted with an occasional chuckle: being native, they surely knew the reason. For us this structural accident will serve the key to unlocking the social environment of Azerbaijan on the eve of 1989 revolution. Moreover this revolution, intertwined with the ethnic Armenian uprising in Nagorno Karabagh, an autonomous province inside Azerbaijan SSR, became the signal crisis of Soviet power. The manifest inability of Gorbachev's administration in the face of escalating violence in the Caucasus started the chain reaction of other national uprisings that in 1991 resulted in the disintegration of the USSR. But if we focus on Azerbaijan alone, we may succumb to the usual pitfall of attributing the Soviet disintegration to nationalism. Therefore let us first perform a compressed analytical description which should allow us see clearer the position of national intelligentsias under state socialism.

### ***1. Socialist Bureaucratic Fordism***

The preeminence of intellectuals in East European politics in 1989-1991 seems universal. The observation holds for the entire region and thus the usual explanation in terms of national tradition obviously does not hold. Take the roster of the top post-communist leaders: in Lithuania it was a musicologist (Vytautas Landsbergis), in Estonia a visual anthropologist and documentary film-maker (Edgar Savisaar), in Czechoslovakia a playwright (Havel), in Poland a whole host of phi-

---

<sup>1</sup>The author uses the *Azeri* term following the modern Western academic and journalist tradition. This is the abbreviated form of *Azerbaijani* term constructed from the name of the country (Azerbaijan), while in this abridged form it is often mistaken for an original ethnonym (ed.).

lologists, medievalist historians, and social scientists. In the former Yugoslavia we find educators, historians, novelists (Serbia's Vuk Draskovic is just one example), and a former psychologist turned poet and then a warlord (Bosnia's Radovan Karadzic). In a totally different region, the predominantly Muslim Central Asia, we encounter a physicist (Askar Akayev) turned the president of Kyrgyzstan, an extremely gifted poet in the leadership of Uzbekistan's democratic opposition (Muhammed Salih), and a young film director (Dovlat Hudonazarov) inspiring the rebellious masses in Tajikistan. In the immediate neighborhood of Azerbaijan, in the Caucasus, the same trend seems even more pronounced. In 1990-1997 not just the political but even the military elite of Armenia were composed of former historians, musicians, school teachers, journalists, computer scientists and nuclear physicists. The vile chief of Armenia's police after 1990, Vano Siradeghian, previously earned a living by writing short stories for children, and the first President of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosian at the height of Karabagh war proudly continued his work on the Biblical translations from the medieval Syriac sources which he considered imperative for national spiritual revival. In Georgia of the early 1990s the typically bitter joke ran like this: God, save us from another civil war between the Shakespearean scholar (*i.e.* President Zviad Gamsakhurdia), the sculptor, and the professor of cinema history (respectively the rogue commander of Georgia's National Guards Tenghiz Kitovani and the self-styled warlord Prof. Djaba Ioseliani).

From Estonia to Tajikistan, these are historically very different countries and, between the places like Bosnia and Poland, they registered quite different political outcomes. What could they have in common to produce such impressive leadership uniformity at the peak of their revolutions? The immediate reason for the unusual political role of artistic intellectuals is the commonality of social structure created by state socialism across the board. Intelligentsia, as promises the title of this article, provides the mirror of 1989 revolutions, and the explanation of its peculiar role and contradictions therefore would reflect the whole big picture created by the Leninist model.

In the initial phases of Bolshevik state-building the old social structures were drastically reduced and simplified. In the continuous upheavals starting with the civil war and continuing through the great purges, the old inchoate multiplicity of social statuses, ranks, class and religious identities was uprooted and purposively destroyed. The destruction was initially spontaneous but very soon, indeed before Stalin gave his name to the political strategy, the destruction of the actual and potential sources of political opposition became the common practice of the Bolsheviks in power. From the Red Terror of August 1918 and Trotsky's

infamous campaign of "de-Cossackization" in the course of Russia's Civil War the strategy was pursued through the collectivization of peasantry and its lesser-known analogy in Central Asia, the brutal sedentarization of nomadic tribes, until the culmination in the purges of 1936-38 and the ethnic deportations of the 1940s. In the result of all this violence the social groups that elsewhere could participate in political contention were simply not there: no landowners, no bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie, no liberal professions, no autonomous clergy, indeed no peasants. The social hierarchy, at least in theory, was reduced to the semi-closed caste of cadre bureaucrats (*nomenklatura*) and the newly created mass of proletarians in the most fundamental sense: the social class whose livelihood is rigidly tied to wage employment in the absence of alternative income. It does not matter whether it was urban industrial proletariat, manual workers and skilled technicians, or the rural proletariat at state farms who must be allowed to cultivate tiny plots in lieu of woefully insufficient wages. Within a generation the whole Soviet Union was recast into a gigantic industrial enterprise which was a self-conscious emulation of Fordist factory, the symbol of technological and organizational progress for its age. The extremely rapid proletarianization conducted by despotic methods was indeed the biggest tragedy and the biggest achievement of Soviet development.

The Soviet proletarians faced formidable barriers to collective action. Some barriers, especially under Stalinism, were overtly coercive. The secret police and volunteer sycophants were omnipresent and strikes were put down with machine guns. Later the Soviet rulers switched to the less evident means of taming the workers. It relied mostly on the official ritualistic dissimulation of the "unanimous popular politics" to prevent any actual politics and, at the level of socioeconomic structures, the cultivation of paternalistic dependency. The distribution of goods and welfare benefits was tied to workplace and controlled by factory administrators and the official trade unions. In this situation the workers were left with what James Scott famously called weapons of the weak: subterfuge, evasion, indirect negotiating, or the famous East European jokes [4]. The infamously shoddy quality of Soviet-made goods was not a manifestation of cultural inferiority of East Europeans who presumably cannot work with the diligence and productivity of their Western counterparts. The shoddy quality was in fact the collective triumph of perverted class struggle waged by Soviet proletarians. Faced with the impossibility of regular bargaining for higher wages, the workers tacitly engaged in decreasing their labor effort. As the wry joke put it, they pretend to pay and we pretend to work. After 1956 the Soviet rulers reigned in the dreaded secret police which they did primarily to safeguard themselves from the

nightmarish pressures of Stalinist regime. Subsequently the workers exploited the opportunity to elicit the ever larger concessions. In the aftermath of Stalinism the workers actually won a far better deal though it remained unevenly shared between various economic sectors and regions of the country. The overall effect was to disperse and tame the potential industrial protests. They still occurred and sometimes reached spectacular proportions, like the 1962 strike of the locomotive-builders in Novocherkassk (it was put down with extreme brutality but it was in the wake of Novocherkassk that Moscow resolved to begin importing food from America). But notice how rapidly Poland's Solidarity of 1980 was transformed from trade union into essentially national movement led by Polish intellectuals, or that the Russian coalminers' strikes in 1989 remained the isolated expression of class protest amidst the wave of nationalist strikes in the non-Russian republics. The Soviet ruling elite could afford the unspoken compact with their workers insofar the huge industrial investments of previous generation began to pay off in the 1950s-1960s. Later in the 1970s, as the smokestack heavy industries matured while the consumer expectations continued to rise, the mass consumption could be subsidized with the proceeds from the export of oil and other minerals. It is, in bare bones, the mechanism of Soviet prosperity and internal peace under Khrushchev and Brezhnev.

Economists rightly point to the self-defeating inefficiency of such industrial regime but they neglect its staggering social costs. The struggle to work less while essentially stealing to consume more, the pervasive corruption and subterfuge, the manifest hypocrisy and uselessness of public life, the lack of faith in collective action joined to produce a massive demoralization of society. The ethnicizing explanations are unwarranted. The Lutheran Estonians, Catholic Lithuanians, Orthodox Russians or Georgians, the Sunni Muslim Uzbeks and the Shia Muslim Azerbaijanis or, for that matter, the Buddhist Mongols and Buriats come from very different cultural and historical traditions. One can easily find among these peoples the examples of enterprising spirit, artisanal or peasant work ethic, the commitment to collective values and the ability to act jointly when the collective action is supported by the traditional ethnic solidarities. It is in the *modern* non-ethnic industrial and quasi-civic spaces that all these peoples register their common failures and then we might ask, could it be rather that something went badly wrong with the Soviet variety of despotic modernization? Or, perhaps, not only the Soviet variety since we can find similar problems of civic apathy and corruption in so many rapidly modernized countries that were never socialist?

Between the socialist workers and the nomenklatura bureaucrats there still remained the technical intelligentsia which caused a bit of uneasiness to the So-

viet sociologists. According to the normative schemes of the Soviet academic discipline called scientific communism, the fully developed socialist society had only two "non-antagonistic" and increasingly merging classes, the industrial workers and the collective farmers, which left no place for any other class or elite. The bureaucratic officeholders were presumed meritocratic cadre of able and professionally competent managers advancing from the ranks of the people. This fuzzy and rosy picture of ruling elite (surely reminiscent of the Western propagandistic concept of "industrial society") could be extended to the highly educated technicians without administrative powers like engineers or medical doctors. The notion of technical intelligentsia in the Soviet propaganda schemes served to dilute the class content of nomenklatura bureaucrats which was not entirely false. Many Soviet bosses had been engineers or agronomers at earlier point in their careers. Once again not unlike the admission process to the American schools of business, for Party schools admissions the shop-floor experience of 3-5 years was a required rite of passage on the way into the managerial class. The bureaucratic ladder of social mobility continued to operate throughout the Soviet history though at a rapidly decreasing rate. Once the political turmoil ended and there arrived the famed Brezhnevite "stability of cadres", the managerial openings in the top echelon grew scarce and careers slowed down considerably. A typical personage of late socialism is the disenchanted low-paid engineer stranded at the lower echelons of sprawling bureaucratic organizations or in the unenviable positions of shop-floor petty managers who were hard pressed between the demanding bosses and the half-heartedly compliant workers. The social frustrations of technically educated intelligentsia, however, rarely found any political expression. The technicians were part of the same industrial compact, well-policed and at least satisfactorily fed by state subsidies. In addition, unlike the common workers the technicians remained the reserve recruitment pool for industrial management. The prospect of career advancement offered a safer hope in individual life. Moreover the technicians lacked the key basis for collective action in the late socialist society – their social positions were not ethnically defined.

The modern industrial environment in general exerts a mighty homogenizing effect on labor force. Many of the socializing features of modern capitalist society that the Western modernization theorists attributed to the disparate and quite nebulous concepts of urbanization, modern education and literate idioms, social individualization and consumer lifestyle, in fact boil down to the single causal mechanism – proletarianization. Peasants become workers through the required concentration of labor force in big towns, the obligatory formal training,



the patterns of wage employment, by learning the social skills of time-keeping and life-cycle planning. In the process former peasants and artisans shed their traditional identities and local social affiliations. Not too rarely they actively seek to learn the new languages of dominant urban environments which would be wrong to describe as imposed assimilation. The proletarians are not hapless victims of industrial regime, they actively seek to acquire the skills and education credentials promising them a better position in new life. Ernest Gellner famously attributed the status of theory to his observations of Central European historical pattern where proletarianization indeed has contributed to nationalist mobilizations. Yet the lands of former Austro-Hungarian empire remain just a particular set of empirical instances [5<sup>1</sup>]. At the same time America was a melting pot: the former peasants from all sorts of Europe's Ruritania, whether Polish or Sicilian, sought to come to America because it promised more advantageous terms of proletarianization than their native peripheral locales. And when coming to America they actively sought to learn English obviously not because they wanted to become Anglicized or British but because the immigrants seeking a better proletarianization wanted at least their children to acquire the cultural skills required in the American society.

It is commonly neglected that the national dynamics in the Soviet Union, the gigantic example of bureaucratically-built Fordism under socialist banners, resembled more the contemporary America than the old tsarist empire. The old empire was the infamous "prison-house of the nations". The Soviet Union was a melting pot. More precisely the USSR's big industrial towns, the all-Union bureaucracies, the military forces and, incidentally, the GULAG, too, were the melting pots fuelled by rapid proletarianization. Azerbaijan was not exempt from the trend. As we shall see, the only big industrial town in this republic, its capital city of Baku, evolved such an ethnic homogeneity that it stood a deep cultural gap apart from the rustic and native hinterland. It then seems a historical irony that the Soviet developmentalism, having produced the tens of millions of ethnically homogenized proletarians, ended in the concerted series of nationalist revolutions. The USSR put much effort into making its proletarians, but no less effort was put into preventing these proletarians from any collective action. Both efforts must be judged successful.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Gellner was aware of such criticisms and offered his counter-arguments in the small but very large in its focus essay [6.]

## 2. National artistic intelligentsias

Finally, by the necessary process of analytical exclusion, we arrived at the social group that in 1989 led the revolutionary assaults against state socialism –the national artistic intelligentsia. The connection between national and artistic is not incidental. Technological skills are not national. It would look ridiculous to suggest the existence of Azeri engineering or Ukrainian mathematics (not that such attempts are entirely unknown but still they are considered extreme even by the majority of nationalists). But history, humanities, artistic expression draw their material from the cultures that are often defined in ethnic terms. In the Soviet Union this relationship was officially recognized and institutionalized in the bureaucratically isomorphic forms: each republic (with the notable exception of Russia) had its own academy of sciences, university, teachers training colleges, the national museums and art galleries, publishing house, national theaters, film studio, national dance companies, etc.<sup>1</sup>

The policy of promoting, indeed creating almost from scratch the ethnic cultures has no precedent in classical Marxism. It seems not only redundant but contrary to the core tenets of the Soviet ideological program. The explicitly developmentalist program called for the supreme concentration of material assets and labor resources under the presumably rational control of central bureaucratic agency. Besides, the industrial development required the social homogenization of newly made proletarians, therefore the nationality policy looks superfluous and has to be explained. The nationality policy was a set of complicated and mostly *ad hoc* compromises dating back to the very beginning of Soviet state, to the Russian Civil War that the Bolsheviks won in large part by gaining the active support or at least dividing and placating various nationalist forces. The social composition of the 1917-1920 nationalists betrayed the agrarian-bureaucratic nature of the old Russian empire. There existed precious few consolidated national bourgeoisies. The people who came to create and govern the putative national states of the period were overwhelmingly the local intelligentsias, the teachers and journalists above all. Their ideas were a mixture of socialist populism and enlightenment directed towards the idealized co-national peasants: a community of egalitarian but somewhat backward rustics whom the national enlighteners intended to educate in order to join the world of progressive Western nations.

In reality the peasant masses proved far less idyllic. The defunct empire exploded in a series of agrarian revolts that were fuelled by the juxtaposition of tremendous demographic growth (between the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and

---

<sup>1</sup> On the Soviet bureaucratic isomorphism, see 7.

the revolution of 1917 the population of empire nearly trebled), the conservative pattern of land tenure resulting in miserable land shortages, and by the spread of guns and military skills among the peasants recruited as soldiers for the First world war. Much of the ground-level violence during the period, especially in the Caucasus but also in Ukraine or Central Asia, appeared ethnically motivated as the different ethnic communities of peasants engaged in a myriad of local revolts and fights. But at a closer look we discover confrontations over the land rights all over the place. The fledgling national governments faced the choice between being swept by the spontaneous agrarian violence or trying to direct it in the defense of their peasant masses. The additional catalyst, which is often forgotten today, was the liberal conditions dictated by the Great Powers gathered in Versailles. In 1919 the new states emerging from the Russian empire were given twelve months to meet the three requirements for diplomatic recognition: the historical and cultural rights to the territory, the will of local population to be decided in plebiscites, and what the international law of the colonial epoch called the right of effective occupation. Sure enough, the committees of national scholars immediately got busy discovering the historical and cultural "facts" regarding the territorial rights; the rudimentary national militaries and armed volunteers were sent into the problematic borderlands to suppress or expel the separatist populations; and since these forces were insufficient, they often recruited and armed the local militias of their ethnic kind against the neighboring communities now considered alien. The expression ethnic cleansing was not yet known but the extent of those massacres by far exceeded anything we have witnessed in the last decade: if in the Karabagh war of 1990-1994 the casualties on both Azeri and Armenian sides are estimated at 10-15 thousand, back in 1919 just in one episode lasting three days and nights nearly 20 thousand people were slaughtered in the same Karabagh<sup>1</sup>. This helps to understand why in 1920 the advance of the victorious Red Army in so many places was hailed as the return of order or taken with resignation.

The Bolsheviks promptly shut down the ethnic and agrarian violence by using the dictatorial means forged in the Russian civil war. But Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin were also realist and very inventive politicians. They tried to remove the immediate causes of conflicts by forcefully resolving the territorial disputes, conducting the land reform and then the collectivization, by inviting the acceptable among the nationalists, which was mostly the artists and educators, to pursue their projects in the framework of Soviet multi-national state, and, most inven-

---

<sup>1</sup>The author evidently refers to the massacres in Shushi in April 1920 which resulted in about 30 000 Armenian victims (ed.).

tively of all, by not abolishing the national states. This tactical shift was against the expectations of both nationalists and the orthodox Marxists but it worked. Strategically the Leninists hoped, not wholly unreasonably, that with the looming industrialization the nationality question would evaporate. Later in the 1930s Stalin decided to speed up the extinction of the nationalists with the help of police terror. The remnants of old intelligentsia were eliminated wholesale. It is a matter of historical debate why in 1936-1937 Stalin did not abolish the republics altogether. He probably did not have to go at such lengths. The destruction of old intelligentsia removed even the potential danger of national rebellions, while the new entirely Soviet-made national intelligentsia was perfectly docile and, having been produced in the paranoid isolationism of Stalinist regime, possessed a very limited world-view.

The Stalinist nationality institutions were often dismissed for their being artificial, intrinsically provincial, and merely ornamental on the Soviet imperial facade. To some extent they were indeed. In the state as rigidly centralized as the USSR the big Academy conducting "real" scientific research was the mighty Soviet Academy of Sciences, the leading film studios and publishing houses were in Moscow and Leningrad. But as time passes by, all institutions tend to acquire the life of their own. Even if the quality of research, education, and arts in the national republics might often seem mediocre (though marvelous exceptions happened especially in the film-making or literature), in sum the institutions of national culture created the numerous professional positions for the national intelligentsias. The jobs were respectable, relatively well-paid, and not too demanding which made them enviable. Moreover the institutions catering to national cultures fostered the tightly-knit professional communities of the educated men and women who normally lived their entire lives in the same town, the capital of their republic. This was so because their credentials did not travel beyond the republic's borders. An engineer with the diploma from Siberia or Kazakhstan could find a job anywhere where there existed a factory, but a specialist in Azerbaijani poetry would hardly be transferable to Estonia or Russia. Yet the Soviet centralization and the festivals of nationality cultures regularly brought together the artistic intelligentsias from different republics. Moscow's intent was to foster internationalism, but unofficially this allowed the putative nationalists to exchange their ideas and dreams. Little wonder then that in 1989 the Azeri nationalist documents appear literally a copy of the more advanced Estonian nationalist programs—they were in fact copies widely circulated through the networks of national intelligencias. The common dream was independence from Moscow which promised to make the lesser national academies, universities, museums

into the institutions of sovereign states with direct access to world arena. As long as the power of the Soviet Union looked rock-solid, these remained pipe dreams. But things changed in 1988 with the events in Nagorno Karabagh. And here, let us go into the empirical example of Azeri Orientalists.

### ***3. Modernizing Intelligentsia and Rebellious Crowds in Azerbaijan***

Because of its easily accessible and rich deposits of oil Azerbaijan became an early site of industrial growth already in the late nineteenth century. The industrialization, however, was hugely concentrated around Baku, the town on the coast of Caspian sea which allowed for the bulk export of Azerbaijan's main commodity. Fed by the oil boom of the 1880s-1900s, Baku rapidly evolved into the cosmopolitan town with a picturesque blend of cultures brought by the Western European investors like the prominent Russo-Swedish family of the Nobels, the Russian colonial administrators and skilled professionals (among the latter a majority perhaps were the Russian subjects of other nationalities: Poles, Jews, Germans), and to a very large extent the Armenians who were native to the area while enjoying the cultural advantage of being Christian and thus favored by the foreign employers. The Muslim natives (which is how they were perceived at the time – just Muslims) occupied a typically ambiguous position. At the top of Baku's society one could encounter quite a few Muslim merchants and landowners who had invested their wealth and social skills into the new oil business with great success. At the bottom of social hierarchy were the numerous non-skilled Muslim laborers and urban lumpens who recently came to town. There were some Muslim intellectuals in the middle but they were vastly outnumbered by the Russians, Armenians, Jews, and Poles. This ethnic mosaic persisted in Baku through the entire Soviet period. The Western nationals were gone, the native bourgeoisie was undone, the old intelligentsia perished almost wholesale in the purges of 1936-38, and the Soviet nationality policies promoted many Azeris into the top official positions in the top. But the town remained a prosperous cosmopolitan enclave centered on its oil industry and the administrative functions over the hinterland.

Outside Baku the hinterland remained another country altogether. The main native group of the region were the Azeris whose ethnic identity was diffuse and inchoate to an even higher degree than elsewhere in the Middle East. Linguistically they were Turks but this territory before the arrival of Russians in the early 1800s for many centuries had been a province of Iran and therefore the dominant culture was Persian and the prevalent religion was the Shiite brand of Islam practiced in Iran. The very terms Azeri and Azerbaijan were invented by the nationalizing native intelligentsia only in the early 1900s-1910s and became

official under the Soviet regime after 1936. The rural populations lacked the national level of identity altogether. They knew well that they belonged to the larger community of Shiite Muslims and this identity was regularly practiced in the prescribed religious rituals and codes of behavior. They also belonged to the local networks of extended families and village communities centered on the rural market towns that were politically controlled by the quasi-feudal "counties": the khanates of Nuha, Shemaha, Gyandja, etc. These were small and fairly closed societies that hardly ever intersected with each other and maintained contact with Baku only at the level of export trade and administration. The traditional fragmentation into "counties" was de facto perpetuated by the Russian colonial administration and later even by the Soviet state under the rubric of districts. The main reason was purely administrative. On the one hand, the pre-existing territorial networks centered on small towns offered the logical seat for local government. On the other hand, there was no political need to disband the traditional "counties" because they never served base for any organized resistance. The usual explanation is ethnic character –presumably the Azeri peasants were particularly docile or devoid of civic spirit –and, as usual, it is a deceptively superficial stereotype. The political history of the region in the centuries before the Russian conquest has been extremely volatile and violent. The Iranian shahs never firmly controlled this borderland area. The tiny khanates offered feeding grounds to various mobile racketeers, predominantly the Turkic nomadic chieftains and in the mountainous Karabagh the last surviving dynasties of Armenian Christian lords, who competed fiercely among themselves for the rights to exact rents from the peasants and urban artisans. These petty despots used to come and go, unseating each other in the violent perennial feuds, while the Iranian shahs only cared that they supply the auxiliary troops and supplies for the endless imperial campaigns against the Ottoman Turkey. In this environment the defenseless peasants developed aloof resignation from political power only hoping that the next local ruler would not be too predatory. From this perspective the Russian colonial administrators, though infidels, seemed acceptable because they prevented runaway violence and did not exact very much in taxes since the revenue was largely provided by the oil industry of Baku.

The same traditional attitude continued throughout the Soviet period. The local administrators became native Azeri and ostensibly communist but the rural districts remained regarded the source of revenue and private enrichment. We have no reliable data whatsoever on the actual operations of local power in the Soviet Azerbaijan or any republic of Soviet Transcaucasia and Central Asia, but the massive amounts of anecdotal evidence suggest that the positions of district

party secretaries were *as a rule* sold to the prospective office holders. We even know the pricetags –around 100 thousand rubles during the Brezhnev period which could go higher in the particularly lucrative districts. Generically described, it worked in the following way. First, a locally prominent family accumulated the money that was lent to the ambitious career-oriented relative seeking office. By itself money was not enough; one needed the connections in Baku and the opportunity to present the bribe. Those who had been educated in the big town thus had a better chance, while the proper education credentials were themselves obtained with the obligatory bribes paid to the professors during admissions and all the successive examinations up to receiving the university diploma. Ironically, on the face of Soviet statistics by the mid-1960s the Azerbaijani nomenklatura appeared exceptionally well-educated –nearly half of them had various doctorates –which was, of course, a fictitious overstatement acquired for bribes in the course of credentials competition. The higher education and subsequent career was the way to develop the necessary contacts and the opportunity to join the patronage networks of bigger bosses, all the way up to the First Secretary of the republic. Once the desired position in party apparatus was purchased, the new office holder would begin to repay the debts by appointing his relatives and clients to the locally lucrative subordinate positions: chief of financial inspection, head of local police, manager of cooperative shops, chairman of collective farm, director of building materials factory, etc. In turn these lesser officials would establish various illicit operations under their control to skim the funds with which they enriched themselves and paid regular bribes to the superiors for the patronage and protection.

This system looks thoroughly corrupt and deviant from the normative standpoint of rational bureaucracy. It overall looks an astonishing inner failure of the Soviet state that remained disguised and ignored by outsiders. Yet soberly speaking, the patterns of social power in Azerbaijan's countryside was not substantially different from the situations in other republics of Transcaucasia and Central Asia. The Soviet state simply failed to penetrate there and Moscow eventually contended itself with the formal compliance dutifully exhibited by the national nomenklatura. It was essentially the continuation of ancient prebendal system that worked like a siphon taxing the local economy and funneling the proceeds to higher echelons, all the way up to Baku which in turn paid off the inspectors from Moscow and lobbied in the Soviet central planning agencies for the higher level of investments in the economy of Azerbaijan. The systematic corruption was unstable in its elements because the internecine bureaucratic feuding over the coveted positions was inherent and Moscow periodically lashed out by

removing the upper echelons of the officials in national republics. In this way in 1969 with the help of the KGB chief Yuri Andropov the entire government of Azerbaijan was sacked while the reputedly honest and capable young chief of Azerbaijan's KGB, Gen. Heidar Aliev, was appointed to lead the purge. Incidentally, four years later in a similar move the KGB brought to power in the neighboring Georgia another police general, Eduard Shevardnadze. Both young leaders conducted massive purges of corrupt officials and appointed their own clients who proved even more corrupt. The problem was institutional and cultural, not in the wicked personalities. Both Aliev and Shevardnadze, arguably excellent politicians in the Machiavellian mold, clearly realized that their key role was to placate Moscow while consolidating the local power base by appointing the loyal clients who in order to rule and deliver would have to indulge in the deeply entrenched practice of corruption. The official who denied appointments to his relatives would lose social support of their families and thus would be eaten alive by the competing families. Besides, the ethnic cultures of the region, not unlike the Mediterranean, dictated conspicuous consumption as proof of social status. The officeholder who could not provide for his relatives and guests the "proper" level of entertainment and gifts would be judged a miserable failure.

It must be noted, however, that though the peasants had no hope of ever changing the corrupt system, they did not resign entirely from earning a better life for themselves and their families. The industrialization of the Soviet Union and its growing prosperity in the 1960s-1970s translated into the two major opportunities: labor migrations and long-distance market trade. Many thousands of Azeri oilmen could be found as far away from home as in the Soviet Arctic where they assiduously accumulated the hefty "northern bonuses" before returning to their villages to get married and build sometimes ostentatious houses. Meantime many more Azeri peasant traders appeared in the markets of large Russian towns where they specialized in selling the produce from their sub-tropical native republics, mostly fruits and fresh flowers. Once again we can know precious little about the actual organization of these market networks because from the standpoint of Soviet law code they bordered on machination. Yet it is clear that the peasants alone could not have managed the massive takeover of the arable land ostensibly under the control of collective farms subsequently switching the main crops to the lucrative fruits and flowers from the industrial raw-materials like cotton whose cultivation was dictated by Moscow's central planners. The local officials in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and the other predominantly agrarian republics in the southern tier of the USSR actively connived in this tacit de-collectivization and marketization in which they obviously had a pecuniary inter-



est –as peasants grew richer they could afford bigger bribes while their semi-legal enterprise continued to critically depend on the official cover-up.

The economy of Soviet Azerbaijan thus depended on its advantageous integration into the overall economy of the USSR. The main sources of Azerbaijan's relative wealth were the extractive industry oriented for export to other parts of the USSR and beyond the Soviet borders. The other increasingly important source of wealth was the illicitly commercialized agrarian economy also oriented to the internal exports of fruits and flowers to the industrial core regions of the USSR. The economic autarchy practiced by the Soviet government, that excluded the frivolous expenditure of hard currency for the imports of fresh produce, in effect ensured a steady monopolistic rent enjoyed by the internal suppliers like Azerbaijan. The profits, of course, were redistributed by the highly inegalitarian networks of the endemic corruption. The tremendous social inequalities and the attendant pervasive servility were the glaring features of Soviet Azerbaijan's society but they remained mostly unnoticed by outsiders even those who had visited just Baku. The city preserved its composite Oriental-Westernized charm and the oddities of local social patterns were presumed the exoticisms of the East.

On the eve of 1989 revolution the Soviet Azerbaijan indeed looked like a lesser version of the latter day Ottoman empire. The big, prosperous, and cosmopolitan Baku dominated over the rural districts populated by the unwashed ethnic peasants and petty despots. Like Constantinople of yesteryear, ethnically and socially the mixed population of Baku was distinct from the countryside. The difference was very noticeable and strictly enforced by the urbanites. The latter were neither Azeris nor Armenians nor properly Russians or Germans any longer. They evolved into the composite pan-ethnic urban population who preferred to call themselves "Bakinty", i.e. the urbanized Azeris and Armenians, the locally rooted Russians and Germans, also the Jews, Persians, a myriad of lesser minorities like Tat, Lezgi, Talysh. Their common *lingua franca* and was Russian spoken with the colorful local Baku accent. Just like the dwellers of Ottoman Istanbul, the Stambuli, did not regard themselves Turks and used the appellation "Turks" only to call pejoratively those unwashed semi-nomadic people from the interior deserts of Eastern Anatolia, the Bakinty invented a variety of pejoratives for the countryside Azeris. But the worst ridicule was reserved for the recent arrivals to town who had to stay outside the gates and settle in the dusty and overcrowded suburbs.

Baku in itself was an explicitly hierarchical historical formation, with the recent arrivals from native villages relegated to the much-ridiculed Mashtaga and other exploding slums situated outside the town proper, in the former villages of

the Apsheron peninsula. All jokes about homosexuals, gullible husbands, or fat stupid greedy wives were about the dwellers of those indeed fabulously corny places, the middle ground between village and town that already lost the traditional norms of village but has not acquired the cosmopolitan urban norms and codes of behavior. Those jokes kept Mashtagintsy and the ilk in their 'proper' place. For the same reason in 1990-1993 the semi-rural suburbs of Baku registered a brief, as it turned out, but probably not the last outburst of Islamist fervor whose seeds were supplied from Iran. Fundamentalism emerges in the marginal spaces, in the urban margins that lack a proper name in English (especially in American English where suburbs are firmly associated with the middle class lifestyle). The traditional peasants are comfortable with their religious rituals, they need not prove to anyone, least of all to the themselves, that they are true Muslims. Meantime the urbanites scorn religion for which they have little use except on such purely ritual occasions like the funeral of old grandma who used to pray. Mashtaga in its own clumsy way yearned to fill the gaping void in its culture with something huge and respectable, like the newly assertive Islam.

The language of Baku was a colonial Russian and therefore the immediately obvious measure of social stature was the degree of one's accent. It varied from the thicker sweet Persianized vernacular of the Baku bazaris to the impeccable aristocratic smoothness cultivated in the "good families". It must be appreciated that the Russian spoken by Heidar Aliev, the only Muslim ever to become member of the Politburo, was by far more elegant and grammatically correct than those of Brezhnev or Gorbachev who spoke with bluntly southern Russo-Ukrainian peasant accents.

As anyone who has been to the places like Oxbridge knows, you either acquire the right accent in your family, or you send the children to the right school –and better do both. Thus a meeting of two Bakintsy in the corridors of Moscow State University (where I observed them at length) always started with the Masonic-sounding cryptic exchanges:

- Twenty-fourth. And you?
- Seventeenth.
- In Armenikent?
- And you, not by any chance on Darwin Street?

The numbers are the schools, the "good schools", and good city streets like Hagani St., right behind the Government building, was a tell-tale address of several among my old friends in Baku.

But what happens after the good high school? Each hierarchical society engenders its own patterns of elite formations. In many countries it used to be the

elite military academies, later in France it has to be one of the grandes Écoles training the bureaucrats, the US ruling elite comes from the law schools. The ruling elite of Soviet Azerbaijan, to nobody's surprise, came mostly from the State Oil Polytechnical Institute. Its diploma served not to become a grimy *neftchi* (oilman) from the platform out in the Caspian sea. It provided the best credentials to become a Party apparatchik who was to have been once, mostly on paper, an oilman, the "true vanguard of Baku and the whole Transcaucasia's working class". Under the Soviet system of affirmative action, the party nomenklatura in the national republics was to be native which made the Oil Institute a preserve of ethnic Azeris from Baku. In the social environment dominated by bureaucratic patronage and bribes the admission process, of course, was largely a charade yet the competition was genuinely acute since the elite families had more sons than there were coveted freshman slots. In a celebre scandal from the late 1970s, a young applicant was caught cheating: he stated on the admission papers that his father was a simple oil driller, a true Azeri proletarian, while in fact his parent was a prominent lawyer. But even such a lucrative position, when coming in clash with the interests of other elite clans, could not guarantee admission.

Slightly below on the scale of prestige came the Medical Institute. Brecht's famous line from the *Caucasus Chalk Circle* about the merchant who sent his sons to medical school to teach them how to earn money sounded eminently true of Baku's medical establishment. The nickname of its Rector in the late 1980s was tale-telling: Comrade Dollar. Few nomenklatura officials ever came from among the medical graduates but its diploma promised a comfortable and well-supplied life. For the relative political unimportance and profitability, the profession was accessible and indeed favored by Baku's ethnic Armenians, Jews, and Russians as well as not a few Azeris. The medical profession is respectable and profitable in almost any country at all times. In the bribes-riddled society of Azerbaijan it was profitable because the patients themselves automatically expected to pay the medical doctors extra hoping in return to get a better and faster treatments. But best of all the medical profession was the safest. The doctors, after all, were not running a restaurant or a shop where the state auditors were the unavoidable risk. The best doctors could not help receiving "gifts" from the grateful patients and other tokens of respect for the preferential treatment.

Still what about those refined scions of the high-status Azeri intelligentsia families who neither had the guts and nerves to become an apparatchik nor desired the medical career? Their choice was the Azerbaijan State University. Inside the university there existed its own scale of departmental prestige directly translatable into the relative difficulty of admission. Chemistry and physics

were considered relatively easy to get into because the curriculum was challenging and the job prospects not that great: half of the graduates would end up teaching science in schools. The disjuncture between the genuine scientific credentials and low pay (or the jobs where bribes could be only sporadic) caused the feelings of injustice and there we register a few scientists among the revolutionaries of 1989. Law, by contrast, was the status quo department. In the Soviet system court litigation was not very important, the lawyers were few and by default disproportionately Jewish. The best career with the degree in law was in the state prosecutorial agencies, KGB, and the police entrusted with fighting crime and corruption and thus wielding a powerful tool for eliciting bribes. The Soviet jurists tended to be politically conservative. The radicals were found in the departments of history and philology. They were the custodians of nation's past, the national language and culture. Albeit this was a local past and a local culture preserved in the museums and academic research institutes – respectable but low-paying institutions. The young custodians vaguely yearned for a better appreciation of their symbolic value but as long as nationalism remained a political taboo those remained merely dreams.

Nonetheless there remained one relatively small and exclusive department that combined high cultural prestige with the prospect of diplomatic career. It was the Faculty of Oriental Studies, or Vostfak in its Russian abbreviation. Since Azerbaijan was historically an Islamic country, a limited training of native specialists was traditionally conducted mostly in view of placing a few Muslim non-Russians in the Soviet embassies in the Middle East. Vostfak offered training in real foreign languages like Arabic and Persian and, most importantly, the foreign service assignments paid very hefty salaries in hard currency. All perfectly legal, very prestigious, very diplomatic. Moreover this was as close to the professional political training as one could get, not to count the KGB academy. In reality only the chosen few among the graduates of Vostfak, primarily those who had been recruited into the KGB, would ever get the permanent jobs abroad. The Soviet foreign service was controlled from Moscow and even the best of Baku families could not help their children. The majority of Vostfak graduates ended up in the academic research institutes and in the museums spending, at a leisurely pace, their careers over the old Oriental manuscripts. If only Azerbaijan had had its own ministry of foreign affairs!

This description does not exhaust the actual pyramid of higher education. Below the Oil and the Medical institute, below the National University there were the worthless pedagogical institutes (teachers colleges) that ranked very low because their diplomas assured postings in the least prestigious schools. In Azer-

baijan like in any Soviet republic the teachers training was further divided into the sections offering education in Russian and in the native languages. The latter was the lowest of the low. The native language schools were predominantly situated in villages. They commanded no prestige, the jobs were low paid, and there was little prospect of ever leaving this dead-end career. The students were drawn from villages, many of them could speak only some broken Russian, they were poor and felt deeply alienated by Baku's urban life. No urban girl would ever give them a look. These students produced the most radical nationalist fringe in 1989 when it suddenly turned that out that they actually spoke the native language of the angry masses.

The social dynamic of Armenian-Azeri conflict then begins to look more recognizable. Back in the 1920s the Bolsheviks had no escape but staffing the new state apparatus, including the dreaded secret police, with the better educated and more urbanite Armenians. Until the late 1930's there were almost none Azeri in the positions of leadership. But a generation later the ethnic Azeris, thanks to the Soviet nationality policies, began to catch up. After 1956 they were helped by the de-Stalinization which rotated the cadres and most of all by the tremendous expansion of the state apparatus in the prosperous and hopeful age of Khrushchev. By the mid-1960s a great many Azeris made it into the elite, but in the process they assimilated to the lifestyle and the norms of Baku and effectively ceased being like those Azeris from villages. The new elite assiduously prevented their children from ever learning the native vernacular so that they avoid the uncultured "bazari" accent and manners. The same, incidentally, happened with the Baku Armenians who detached themselves from both the Armenian church and the rustic brethren in the Karabagh backwaters. In fact the greatest era of Baku's melting pot fell on the period of 1956-1989. In the earlier period the town opened up to the new arrivals who transformed themselves into the new urban society and effectively prevented further social mobility by establishing among themselves a rigid hierarchy of official ranks, unofficial yet ever more important private networks, and overall cultural statuses. The gates of the town were shut again.

As long as the USSR continued, the rural populations were kept in their place, whether Azeris in the rural districts or the Armenians in the god-forsaken distant province of Karabagh. The structural tensions were great but so far they remained unevident. In February 1986, two years before the political eruption started, while traveling in Azerbaijan I got a few glimpses of astonishing social hatred. First in Baku the Azeri driver, after his boss left the car and entered the premises of Azerbaijan's Central Committee, spit in disgust and muttered in very

coarse Russian evidently learnt in the army barracks: Bloodsuckers! The damn Party bloodsuckers! Look at their fat butts, they all eat caviar while we have to pay bribes for everything and my children eat bread and tea. How can I support a family on what they are paying me?!

The other incident happened not far from Karabagh. On a rural road the bus with Baku's license plates was stoned by the crowd of angry children. They were Armenians, explained the Azeri man sitting next to me. He felt appalled by the act of "hooliganism" but least of all surprised since such attacks happened routinely. The conflict was waged between two neighboring villages, one Armenian another Azeri. The Armenians were thus protesting the arrest of the accountant at a local fruit-processing plant. The accountant, an Armenian, helped his boss, an Azeri, to cover up a usual embezzlement scheme. The accountant received the death sentence, the Azeri boss walked free because, it was widely assumed, he had bribed the entire police command and the court in Baku, all of them also Azeris.

As many revolutions before, the triggering event started as convoluted intrigue. In February 1988 a clique of provincial officials in the capital of Karabagh, Stepanakert (pop. 40 thousand) decided to gain an additional leverage against their corrupt bosses in Baku, and incidentally redistribute some local commodity flows then monopolized by the crafty bazaris and officials in nearby Azeri market town of Agdam<sup>1</sup>. The plan was to convince Moscow into allowing the administrative transfer of Azerbaijan's autonomous province of Karabagh under the jurisdiction of the neighboring Armenia. To the conspirators it seemed simple and straightforward: the population of Karabagh was predominantly Armenian, the Armenian homeland lied just a few kilometers away, Karabagh ended inside the borders of Azerbaijan because by mistake, because back in 1921 the "evil" Stalin had decided so, and besides two of Gorbachev's top advisors were the Armenians from Karabagh. It only remained, in the spirit of glasnost and perestroika, to organize a demonstration of popular will. The organizers of the campaign were the provincially-thinking bosses from a remote province. They presented Gorbachev with the potentially utterly disruptive precedent because the Soviet apportioning of national autonomies was no more logical than any colonial borders. In addition Gorbachev's opponents in the Politburo received a hefty counterargument against further democratization: look, what begins to happen once you allow the freedom of expression. Sensing Gorbachev's impasse, the leaders of Azerbaijan branded the

---

<sup>1</sup> The author seems to undervalue the nationalist factor in the situation described. Let us recall that the Karabagh issue was already raised in 1921, 1945, 1965-66, when there were no considerable market relations in the Soviet Union (ed.).

Karabagh campaign an affront to the republic's sovereignty. Although the majority of Azeris have been barely aware of Karabagh's existence (it was and still is an insignificant borderland province far removed from any economic centers), suddenly the Armenian demands provoked a massive emotional response. The rest is known very well. Agdam was seized in the ensuing war by the Armenian insurgents and now lies in ruins, Baku lost its power over Karabagh, and one of the original conspirators is now president of internationally recognized Republic of Armenia, so at least his bet paid off more than he ever expected.

The little provincial intrigue unexpectedly burst the dam. The first petition campaign and rallies conducted in Karabagh by the Armenians provoked wildly escalating counter-rallies in Azerbaijan. In the grimy industrial township of Sumgait the irate crowd of Azeri lumpens went on rampage killing the local Armenians on the pretext of vacating their apartments for the Azeri refugees from Armenia.<sup>1</sup> Despite the wildest rumors, the first pogrom was almost certainly spontaneous.<sup>2</sup> It is very hard to imagine how even the most corrupt Soviet-era officials would dare to play with street violence. The social environment of Sumgait was as bad as an inherently violent industrial suburb could be. The township was built around the oil-processing plants by prison labor. It became the reservoir for the Baku undesirables: all sorts of hoodlums, former convicts and drug addicts cleansed from the boulevards of Baku. Sumgait had the highest crime rate in the entire USSR and witnessed serious rioting even in Brezhnev era. Why wonder that the first pogrom (February 1988) occurred there? Several weeks after Sumgait – and after the whole country witnessed the confused response from Gorbachev – street rioting entered the repertoire of local collective action. Violence and counter-violence escalated,<sup>3</sup> in 1988-90 we see the spread of pre-emptive and retributory strikes (sometimes for the massacres committed generations before) with the attendant emergence of self-defense militias in every village helped by the volunteer detachments arriving respectively either Baku or Yerevan. On both sides the fighters were either romantic students, inspired by nationalist ideas, or just the city street "tough guys"

---

<sup>1</sup> As a cause of the Sumgait pogroms alleged Azerbaijani refugees from Kapan region of Armenia are often mentioned in Azerbaijani interpretations of the events. Azerbaijanis from Kapan really played a role of a trigger in the pogroms, a number of Azerbaijanis from this region were even reported among the participants of the pogroms, however, those were rather pseudo- than real refugees (ed.).

<sup>2</sup> Numerous evidences show that just the first pogroms seemed to be organized (witnesses don't specify the original pogrom), while some of the following ones could be considered as spontaneous: see, e.g. 8, pp. 22-25, 28, 31-32; 9; 10 (ed.).

<sup>3</sup> It has to be noted that during February – November of 1988 there was no explicit counter-violence displayed from the Armenian side, a circumstance creating a nine month-long asymmetry in violence manifestations [see 11, pp. 59-75] (ed.).

who suddenly acquired a cause.

Meantime in spring 1988, a bunch of local elite intellectuals concentrated in the capital cities and knowing each other perfectly well since the university days, decided it was the time to lead the Nation.<sup>1</sup> Do not forget that in the previous years of glasnost they have been avidly watching Moscow and the meteoric rise of the Russian top intellectuals to the status of media celebrities and custodians of national consciousness. The Azerbaijan's bureaucratic elite was at loss. On the one hand, they have been disgraced by their inability to contain the popular violence, on the other hand, they could no longer know who was their boss in Moscow nor how to deal with Gorbachev who talked endlessly without issuing any direct commands. Besides, the majority of party apparatchiks showed dismal qualities as public speakers, quite unlike those literary intellectuals who delivered public speeches with gleeful panache. It was the hour of big speeches and thus the hour of oppositional orators: the liberal, Westernizing, high-status, patriotic intelligencia.

And then the rioting worsens as the parading crowds get frustrated at their inability to achieve anything, as the local elite and the KGB learn how to use the street violence in their intrigues and expand their repertoire of dirty tricks. Unlike Sumgait, later pogroms and massacres seem pre-planned or at least channeled, although in the tumult it is impossible to determine by whom in particular. In this mayhem the new force appears – those third-rate students from the Azeri-language teachers college and equally appalling places (college of veterinarians, association of village poets, etc.) This force had to be recklessly radical for they had no social status to lose and everything to gain. The pyramid of social symbols was turned upside down. What previously was terribly uncool – speaking Azeri – became now the sign of true patriotism. Meanwhile, to little surprise the majority of Communist apparatchiks and even the elite national intelligencia of Baku fail the test miserably. They proved in public their inability to speak the native language!

(In Georgia and Armenia it was slightly different because the high cultures existed in the native languages with their ancient literary traditions and scripts. Nonetheless, the nativist low-status radicals simply used other symbols of nativeness and rurality – for instance, the Mingrel dialect in Georgia, associated with Zviad Gamsakhurdia.)

Things got completely out of hand in Baku in the late autumn of 1989 as

---

<sup>1</sup>The elitist constructivism here is a little oversimplified: in spring 1988 the Karabakh Committee and the Elders Council both formed of intellectuals were functioning only in Armenia, the autumn rallies in Baku were led both by the intellectualist National Front and the “non-intellectual” worker Panakhov. It has to be said also that the local elite intellectuals’ perfect knowledge of each other is more than exaggerated (ed.).



the Azeri revolutionaries watched on the Soviet television but even more so listened on the foreign radio stations what was happening in Eastern Europe. A group of Azeri insurgents from the villages along the Iranian border led the ecstatic crowds to demolish the Soviet border installations, apparently emulating the Berlin Wall. The revolutionary opposition was presumably united under the umbrella organization of Azerbaijan's Popular Front. Originally the Popular Front was designed by the Vostfak elite intellectuals after the Estonian model, but in fact it became the assortment of very disparate groups spontaneously emerging all over Azerbaijan. It seems that in most districts the self-proclaimed cells of Popular Front either represented the local big families who were out of power at the moment, or by the teachers and other low-status rural intellectuals who finally saw hope in waging the class war against local corrupt hierarchies. In any event, within each district there was its own version of Popular Front with its own social composition and political agenda. In some places the local Party committees were sacked and burnt by peasant crowds, in other districts there emerged sort of anarchistic local militia rapidly evolving into warlord gangs, from yet other districts the "alien" elements were expelled but we have no information regarding who was expelling whom. By January 1990 Baku seemed on the verge of being taken over by the rural refugees and the unenlightened crowds from suburbia. The Armenian population, nearly 120 thousand people, were violently driven out of town although the groups of Azeri intellectuals, the original core of Popular Front in Baku, by all evidence did their best to calm the crowds and save the Armenians. It was widely suggested that the pogroms in Baku were organized by Moscow to obtain a pretext for imposing martial law. Whether it was so remains anyone's guess. Yet anyhow Moscow finally resolved to impose martial law and send the army troops into Baku. The Soviet troops, mostly ethnic Russian recruits who only vaguely knew that the Muslim fanatics were on the killing spree, entered the city at night shooting in all directions. The Azeris unanimously allege that this was a purposeful show of force though much likelier it was the opposite – the soldiers and officers were disoriented and scared out of their wits entering the big unfamiliar town whose darkened streets were lit by the burning tires.

The imposition of martial law in 1990 for two years introduced the weak regime of restoration. The new old regime looked inapt and pathetic. Its leader Ayaz Mutalibov, a member of high-status intelligentsia family, went as far as to claim that his historical mission was to "prevent the tragedy of 1917 proportions" apparently oblivious to the fact that he was still formally a Communist leader himself. The restoration ended with the disintegration of the USSR. With the Soviet army gone, the conflict over Karabagh escalated into the full-scale war which

the shaky Azerbaijani state lost. The Armenian forces took not only Karabagh but occupied a buffer zone around it that they are still holding today as bargaining chip for a future settlement of the conflict. For a year, in 1992-1993, the Popular Front of Azerbaijan held the power. President Elchibey, former dissident and a specialist in Arabic poetry, by all accounts was a decent man with lofty intentions. He espoused a patriotic Westernizing ideology promising to turn Azerbaijan into the secular and democratic state and to finance the reforms with the country's oil. But Elchibey had no political levers nor the cadres to impose his government on the anarchy of feuding "big families". The short-lived regime of Popular Front, amidst the well-wishing proclamations regarding the nations' travails and the eventually bright future, barely controlled Baku let alone the countryside. One of the countryside rebellions (probably helped by the Russian military worried at Azerbaijan's drift to the West) eventually forced Elchibey out of power. The period of revolutionary rule ended ignominiously.

October, 2007

#### Reference Sources and Literature

1. *Lenin, V. I.* Lev Tolstói kak zerkalo russkoi revoliutsii. – Lenin, V. I. Izbrannye proizvedeniia. Volume I. Moskva: Politizdat, 1974 (in Russian).
2. *Tilly, Charles.* European Revolutions, 1492-1992. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
3. *Goltz, Thomas.* Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998.
4. *Scott, James.* Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.
5. *Gellner, Ernest.* Nations and Nationalism. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.
6. *Gellner, Ernest.* Nationalism. New York: NYU Press, 1997.
7. *Zaslavsky, Victor.* *The Neo-Stalinist State.* Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1982.
8. *Sumgait... Genotsid... Glasnost'?* Compiled by G.B. Ulubabyan, S.T. Zolyan, A.A. Arshakyan. Yerevan, 1989 (in Russian).
9. Sumgait'skaia tragediia v svidetel'stvakh ochevidtsev. Kniga pervaya. Sostavitel', otv. redactor – S.Shakhmuradyan. Yerevan, 1989 (in Russian).
10. *Shahmuratian, Samvel (compiler and editor).* The Sumgait Tragedy. Pogroms Against Armenians in Soviet Azerbaijan. Vol.1: Eyewitness Accounts. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Aristide D.Caratzas & Cambridge, Mass.: Zoryan Institute, 1990.
11. *Abrahamian, Levon.* Typology of Aggressiveness and National Violence in the Former USSR. – Divided Europeans: Understanding Ethnicities in Conflict. Ed. by Tim Allen and John Eade. The Hague, London, Boston: Kluwer Law International, 1999.