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# SOVIET AZERBAIJAN TODAY: THE PROBLEMS OF GROUP IDENTITY

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Azerbaijanis are a Turkic-speaking Muslim group that inhabits the borderland of the Soviet Union and Iran. They are one of the Soviet "divided peoples," split between the two states by the Russian conquest of the lands beyond the Caucasus in the early 19th century. The majority of the Azerbaijani population, estimated at between 8 and 13 million, lives in Iran, with the remaining 5.5 million living in the USSR.[1] Throughout most of their history, the Azerbaijanis have lived under Iranian sovereignty and have not had the experience of independent statehood, except during the short-lived Azerbaijani Republic of 1918-1920. Under the Soviet system, Azerbaijan has been granted the status of a union republic of the USSR.

Since the time of the Russian conquest, one of the central issues involved in examining the Azerbaijani group identity has been the process of Russification in its diverse manifestations. The term "Russification" needs to be clearly defined, as its meaning has changed with the passage of time. In the past, notably before 1914, this term referred to the physical presence of ethnic Russians in Azerbaijan--the influx of settlers from Russia mainly to the Baku oil belt and the rural countryside. At that time, Russification also meant the domination by Russians of the local bureaucracy, and that most school lessons, except for the religious-Islamic, were taught in the Russian language.[2] Today this historical meaning of Russification is not nearly so relevant. The proportion of ethnic Russians who reside in Azerbaijan has slowly but steadily declined--from 9.5 percent in 1926 to 7.9 percent in 1976.[3] Under the status of a union republic the natives have entrenched themselves in the structure of the bureaucracy and successfully kept outsiders from holding offices. Few Azerbaijanis emigrate to other parts of the USSR, where they are likely to be absorbed by the Russian environment; instead they

prefer to suffer underemployment at home. Also, mixed marriages in their community of closely knit families are rare. They account for 6.7 percent of the total, and are concluded almost exclusively between Azerbaijani men and non-native women.[4]

Nonetheless, a specific form of Russification is of growing concern among Azerbaijanis today. A seemingly insignificant incident will illustrate the nature of the problem. As an Azerbaijani scholar proudly recited to a foreign visitor statistics on Azerbaijani language educational institutions for the purpose of showing that their numbers are greater than ever before, his little grandson entered the room and spoke only Russian. In the next moment, his grown up son had to switch to Russian because he could not express himself in Azerbaijani on the given topic. Similar situations can be observed rather frequently in Azerbaijan. Thus a more basic meaning of Russification today is *linguistic assimilation, with likely cultural consequences following in the long run.* There is a feeling in Azerbaijan that this form of Russification will turn out to be more invidious than any influx of settlers or government officials in the past.

The Soviet regime has been spending impressive amounts of money on Azerbaijani cultural institutions and activities. However, while folk and classical music and dance and the restoration of historical monuments are flourishing, the language-based elements of the native culture are facing slow erosion. Furthermore, this process is to some extent voluntary, spontaneous, and with a momentum of its own, not driven in every respect by the regime's policies. It might even be unrelated to the personal attitudes of the Azerbaijanis themselves. For example, an Azerbaijani who deplored the effects of linguistic assimilation was nonetheless anxious that his children learn the

Russian language. He never fully mastered Russian, a deficiency that has made his life more difficult and left him with the desire to spare his sons this predicament.

It appears that the degree of linguistic assimilation is closely linked to urbanization, education, and age group. People living in towns and cities, who account for 53 percent of the population, are far more subject to assimilation than inhabitants of villages.[5] The larger a city, the stronger the impact of the assimilation on its inhabitants. Close to one sixth of Azerbaijan's population inhabits the metropolitan area of Baku, where Russian is widely spoken.[6]

Secondly, the higher the level of education, the higher the degree of assimilation. In practice, it is hardly feasible to obtain an education above the equivalent of junior high school without a solid command of Russian. At the university level most textbooks and reading assignments are in Russian. At the Baku University about 30 percent of all instruction is in Russian.[7]

Lastly, the younger an Azerbaijani today, the greater the likelihood of linguist assimilation. Those least affected by this process are people above the age of 50. Those in their 30s and 40s are most apt to be truly at home in both Russian and Azerbaijani, representing an approximation of the official goal--Soviet bilingualism (*dvuiazichie*).[8] The urban youth seems to be more fluent in Russian. In the universities the students talk amongst themselves in a form of "macaronism"--a jumbled combination of Russian and frequent Azerbaijani phrases, terms, and expressions--resembling the Levantine Franco-Arabic. Such linguistic behavior is perfunctorily disapproved of in the press and called ridiculous by purists, but is otherwise accepted as a sign of sophistication and urbanity. Still, the children on the streets of Baku talk

to each other in pure Russian. One Russian admitted that in the case of the younger generations the results exceeded the goals of bilingualism, but saw no reason for regret. Also, a distinguished educator who had devoted her life to teaching the natives Russian spoke with gratification about visiting a small town where the children knew Russian better than Azerbaijani.

The three factors affecting the process of Russification signify a growing trend. The Azerbaijanis are increasingly more urbanized. Between 1920 and 1976, the population of Baku grew 4.5 times while that of Azerbaijan as a whole grew only 2.9 times.[9] They are younger--the proportion of people under the age of 19 increased from 45 percent in 1959 to 53.2 percent in 1976[10] and they are also better educated. These statistics portend further progress in linguistic assimilation.

An additional agent for the increasing use of Russian is the powerful impact of television, but again, the role of television as an instrument of Russification is not necessarily intentional. The law, which is observed, states that as much time must be given to airing programs in the native language as to airing them in Russian. The problem, however, is not the number of hours, but the quality and the attractiveness of the programs. A rather typical fare on the Baku television is a series of unending performances of monotonous Middle Eastern music, or lengthy interviews with Stakhanovite workers. Meanwhile, many Russian programs retransmitted in Baku offer a variety of attractive, sometimes excellent spectacles, and one can see foreign imports dubbed in Russian. Some cite the professional weaknesses of local television personnel as the reason why the quality of Azerbaijani programming lags so far behind Russian programming. Others offer the more thoughtful theory that the Azerbaijani cultural heritage, lacking a long

tradition of dramatic art, cannot compete with Russian culture, which is better suited to modern mass media. The result is that equal time is allowed for very unequal competition. Even if native musical productions enjoy popularity, the fact remains that such an effective means as television for defending the native language is not properly utilized. Music should be broadcast over the radio in order for television to make full use of its potential by combining words with images.

The argument can be made that linguistic assimilation does not have to lead to the loss of group identity. Language is merely one attribute of group identity. Soviet publications, as if responding to this growing concern, remind their readers that throughout history the idioms of literary expression in Azerbaijan have often been foreign--Persian, Arabic, and even Ottoman. One well-known case-in-point is that of the Irish who, having accepted English, successfully retained their national identity. They were decisively helped in this task by their distinct religion--it was Catholicism that kept them Irish.

By its nature, Islam is not merely a religion but also a way of life. The Azerbaijanis do not eat pork, drink very little liquor, do their best to keep women in seclusion, have their marriages arranged, and maintain strong kinship loyalties. Islam as a set of prohibitions, customs, and traditions is surviving. The erosion of Islamic traditions is not much more advanced than in developing Muslim societies elsewhere. Therefore, those Azerbaijanis who increasingly use Russian are a case of assimilation without a significant degree of acculturation.

As for Islam as a religion, no simple answers are forthcoming. Baku is in many ways a Middle Eastern city. Yet its sky-line is not dotted by minarets; there are few working mosques; and one does not hear the chanting of

muezzins or see Muslim clerical garb on the streets. An Azerbaijani at first will try to assure a foreign visitor that all Azerbaijanis are atheists, the only exception being some older people in remote villages. After a time, some might admit in confidence that they believe in God; they might even say that those who do not are not good people and should not be fully trusted. Rarely will one dispute the fact that Islam is a fundamental part of the Azerbaijani heritage. Most observers of the local scene agree that a reawakening of religious feelings is under way--a problem that the Soviet press also obliquely acknowledges. A different question is the extent of this religious revival.

Several Azerbaijanis, when asked whether they were Shiites or members of the large Sunni minority (about one third of the population before 1920), gave the answer, "I have heard these terms, but I do not really know what they mean." The response sounds similar to that of people who might consider themselves Christian but are unable to tell if they are Protestant or Catholic. Others, when asked if they pray or go to the mosque, said, "No, we cannot afford it. The mullah would report us, and our lives would get even more difficult."

Clearly, a heavy blow has been dealt to the established religion by undermining trust between the faithful and the clerics. Yet in the long history of Islam such a situation is neither new nor unique. In the past, when the established religion has been disgraced in the eyes of a Muslim or has lost its vitality, the traditional alternative has been a popular religion rooted in Islamic mysticism--*sufism*. In Azerbaijan it is possible to meet people who say or imply that they are sufis. They are all city-dwellers, for the most part educated, including artists and intellectuals--the kinds of

persons who seem to be part of the reaction to the worldwide age of materialism and rationalism. The fact that sufis exist still does not amount to the existence of sufism as a structured movement, organized into brotherhoods, with spiritual guides and teachers. It is significant, though, that the sufis with whom one can talk emphasize that they are acting alone, as individuals, that they are strictly apolitical, and that they all seem to be anxious to avoid a collision with the law because of their religious beliefs.

While sufism is a time-honored response to the crisis in the religious situation in Azerbaijani, *takiya*, also known as *ketman*, is another response. Takiya is the primarily Shiite practice of dissimulation, including apostasy under compulsion or threat. A Koranic commentary notes, "If anyone is compelled and professes unbelief with his tongue, while his heart contradicts him, to escape his enemies, no blame falls upon him, because God takes His servants as their hearts believe."[11] The heartland of the takiya tradition is in Northern Iran and Azerbaijan, the historic battle ground between Shiite and Sunni Islam--a hotbed of heresies and sectarian upheavals where rulers frequently changed religious allegiance and subjects were forced to develop the art of adaptation through dissimulation. A passage from a book by a classical Azerbaijani writer, M. F. Akhundzada, describes a hallowed historical hero as the master of takiya. "Reluctantly, out of fear of his royal father, Ala Zikrihi al-Salam made an about-face, resorted to takiya, and began to write epistles in support of his father's views. In the end, Muhammad Buzorg Umid wiped anger from his heart and handed over to him the succession to the throne. As soon as his father passed away, Ala Zikrihi al-Salam began his wise reign that opened the new age and his reformation was accepted in all parts of the kingdom."[12] Also, on the day of the *Ashura*, the

Shiite holiday commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husain, several teenagers in Baku wore black wristbands prudently concealed under their cuffs. One father scolded his son for wearing the wristband, saying, "Keep religion in your heart." Such words can be heard often in Azerbaijan, as if they are a motto guiding conduct in religious matters, clearly alluding to ingrained impulses toward takiya. Conceivably, takiya might prove far more effective than sufism in preserving religious beliefs. However, if dissimulation lasts too long and its practitioners become too accomplished the results will be self-defeating.

Although there is no reliable way to gauge the strength of religiosity among the Azerbaijanis, it appears that Islam remains the chief determinant of their group identity, just as their way of life has remains basically Islamic. Characteristically, when questioned about his identity, an Azerbaijani's answer will depend on who is asking the question; the responses might reflect various layers of one's identity. There is the Soviet identity, which manifests itself vis-à-vis Westerners, on occasion in forms that are a combination of Russian and Muslim distrust of the West. Generally, there is a dichotomy in this view--the world is Muslim, or otherwise. If the question comes from a non-Muslim, the answer is usually given in terms best understood by such a person--in terms of nationality. "I am Azerbaijani." The answer given to those recognized as belonging to one's world is in terms of what constitutes an Azerbaijani's ultimate identity--"I am a Muslim."

Although this split religious-national identity might easily coexist within one person, at times the two are mutually exclusive and not necessarily the result of official indoctrination. The Azerbaijanis also display a current of secularism that is non-Soviet in inspiration. Some say that they

are atheists and reject religion for the same reasons that Kemal Ataturk, president of the Turkish republic in the 1920s and 1930s, rejected Islam in Turkey. He molded the Turks into a *millat* (nation) by severing their links to the *umma*, the community of believers. As long as they were primarily Muslim they could not be Turks. The best thing about Soviet rule, these atheists say, is that it has greatly accelerated the transition from the umma to the millat conscience. They are willing, all the same, to admit that this transition is thus far not complete.

This way of thinking reflects another form of group identity, the ethnic-secular. It is less widespread among the population, still predominantly Muslim, and appears to be most pronounced among the intelligentsia. Its Islam-oriented critics argue that the Azerbaijanis as Muslims are now part of a vibrant world civilization possessed with a great heritage. However, the Azerbaijanis as a national group, one of many millats, are merely a small people in a remote corner of the Soviet Union, of little concern to anyone else.

The counterargument to this assertion is that the ethnic-secular position of the Azerbaijani is not in favor of parochialism and isolation. "We do see ourselves as part of a larger whole, but the affinities that matter for us are ethnic rather than religious." Here sound the echoes of early 20th century pan-Turkism, the movement for the unity of the Turkic-speaking peoples.[13] The fact that pan-Turkism had Turkey's support accounts for the popularity of Ataturk among the Azerbaijanis, despite his repudiation of it as a dangerous dream.

In the Azerbaijani vision of the world, apparently Turkey is in a category alone, enjoying a special role in the minds of many natives. There

is a remarkable curiosity and demand for information about Turkey, a desire to travel there rather than anywhere else, and a general eagerness for cultural exchange with the Turks. Turkish radio enjoys a wide audience, and it appears that most Azerbaijanis believe that they speak Turkish, resembling Italians who think that they speak French. Any remark hinting at the idea that Azerbaijani-Turkish relations have not always been completely cordial, or that many ill feelings accumulated between the two peoples in the years 1918-1920, invariably produces an indignant reaction.

Psychologically, such attitudes are understandable. At their base is the anxiety of the Azerbaijanis about the long-range prospects for their identity. In the eyes of the Azerbaijani, Turkey enjoys the status of the largest Turkic nation where the native language and traditional ways of life flourish, free from outside pressures. Even if they are reminded that secularism in Turkey under the Republic was harshly enforceed and that Westernization has affected many Turkish values and traditions, the Azerbaijanis believe that in essence Turkey has remained unchanged. Indeed, the prestige of Turkey is further enhanced by its close links to other Islamic countries.

In contrast, the Azerbaijanis who do not conceal their interest in Turkey are surprisingly reticent about their closest neighbor, Iran. The standard explanation for this is that Iran, a backward, fanatic, and friendless country, does not deserve much sympathetic attention. Yet, such studious indifference could also be linked to some other considerations. At present Iran is not on good terms with Moscow, a circumstance that dictates keeping a proper distance. Moreover, the Azerbaijani assumption is that Iran will face a new period of crisis. This expectation stimulates the revival of pan-Azerbaijani sentiments. A loosely defined and not often-used term, pan-

Azerbaijanism refers to the aspirations and occasional efforts to unify the two parts of the divided lands of Iran and Soviet Azerbaijan. In some circles, pan-Azerbaijanism assumes a remarkable intensity.

Pan-Azerbaijanism, as much as pan-Turkism, has a history reaching back to the turn of the century. It was the ultimate goal of the national movement and its leading party, the Musavat, before the advent of Soviet power. It was revived during World War II when Soviet forces occupied northern Iran, and grew even stronger immediately after the war when the shortlived autonomous Republic of (Iranian) Azerbaijan was created with Soviet aid in 1946.[14] Pan-Azerbaijanism has not only been a constant if subdued thread in Azerbaijani political thought, but also a prominent literary theme. Indeed, there has been a strong movement in the Azerbaijani literature known as the "literature of longing," devoted to the subject of separation between the two Azerbaijans.[15] This movement involves many leading Azerbaijani writers, and its spirit is expressed in the following lines of a poem:

> The Araxes, nurturing us with sorrow,
> Flows on, cutting like lightning.
> True, the Araxes divides a nation,
> But the earth underneath is one ...[16]

In the Azerbaijani view, the unification of the divided sectors of the country would be more than just a fulfillment of the supreme national aspiration; it would also be a means of reinforcing the Azerbaijani national identity.

Meanwhile, from Moscow's standpoint, Pan-Azerbaijanism has been merely a variable of the Soviet-Iranian relationship. Depending on the state of these relations, the "on" and "off" signals have been flashed without an open endorsement of pan-Azerbaijanism. Various answers are given to the question, "How is it possible that in Azerbaijan calls are being made loudly and publicly for what amounts to detaching a part of Iran, while this is not an

official Soviet policy?" For example, "The union republics enjoy a considerable freedom of action extending at times even to foreign affairs, and their actions do not necessarily commit the central government in Moscow;" or, "The center allows the republics to preach the ideas of Azerbaijani unity across state frontiers as a concession to their national sentiments." But these ideas are being expressed only in Azerbaijani publications, especially literary reviews, and never in the Russian language media, which carries more official weight.

In most cases, the answers uncover the realization that the issue is primarily Moscow's means of exerting pressure on Iran. One day, all mention of the Azerbaijani unification might be banned again should relations with Tehran improve. Meanwhile, the Azerbaijanis should make the best of existing opportunities and work to implant in the minds of the people the idea of a united homeland.

Thus literary magazines continue to print the "literature of longing," with its notions of a bleeding wound in the people's heart, the Araxes river separating brothers, and the hero figure, Sattar Khan, of the freedom-loving city of Tabriz. Also, history books make reference to the hateful Iranian yoke and to the injustice of the 1828 Turkmanchai treaty that split the fatherland.

Quite understandably, pan-Azerbaijanism seems to be most widespread among Baku intellectuals, whose numbers include a contingent of refugees from Iranian Azerbaijan, mainly of 1946 vintage. They all view themselves as a possible group of power and influence in a united Azerbaijan. Such a leading role, they believe, would fall into their hands because the native intelligentsia in Iranian Azerbaijan is weak and numerically insignificant as

a result of an Iranization policy. The official center for research and study of the other part of the country is the Section of Southern Azerbaijan at the Oriental Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijani SSR.

The intelligentsia's vision of a united Azerbaijan of the future invariably includes the caveat that, at present, prospects for unification are not realistic. Having said this, they sometimes let loose the reins of their imagination and talk about a large Azerbaijani state encircling both sides of the Araxes. Its population would reach some 15 million and would enjoy the benefits of Baku's oil wealth.

As for its relationship with the Soviet Union, many admit that a united Azerbaijan would amount to an extension of the USSR by an absorption of Iranian Azerbaijan. Still, it would signify the attainment of national unification, the goal that the Ukrainians and Byelorussians have already achieved through the agency of the Soviet Union. There seems to be little concern in Baku about the fact that Iranian Azerbaijanis show few signs of willingness to be reunified by these measures. A comparatively backward and impoverished population with even less of a developed national consciousness, their attitudes can be regarded as contrary to their own best interest.

Others have talked about a solution that might come with the eventual restructuring of Iran based on a pattern of autonomous-territorial units for its ethnic minorities, such as Azerbaijanis, Turkmens, Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs. Under such a system--reminiscent of the Soviet-backed experiment with the autonomous Azerbaijani and Kurdish republics at the end of World War II and during the Soviet occupation of Iran--close relations could develop between the two Azerbaijans. The Araxes river frontier might fade into a merely administrative line rather than remain a psychological barrier. Some

who also preferred to talk about an undefinable future of state frontiers loosing there meaning envisaged a confederacy of the two Azerbaijans and Turkey. All of these ideas, as is being emphasized, are fantasies. Yet they are widespread enough to constitute a social concept symptomatic of the uneasy state of the Azerbaijani group identity.

For all the impact of militant secularism, the Azerbaijani identity still remains more religious than ethnic-national. Most people consider themselves first Muslims, and second Azerbaijanis. But secularism has succeeded in reducing the role of Islam largely to the sphere of manners, morals, customs, and prohibitions. By far the greatest and the most immediate challenge to the Azerbaijani identity today comes from the process of linguistic assimilation. This process is progressing apace and is likely to gain even more momentum with each coming year. The crucial question is: will the assimilation lead to acculturation. Will the Russian-speaking Azerbaijanis, who already know Russian literature better than their own, eventually become dark-eyed Russians who retain an aversion to eating pork? The possibility of such developments is always present in the Azerbaijani mind. The response to this singular challenge are signs of an Islamic revival, pan-Turkism, and pan-Azerbaijanism--all visible but of indeterminable depth, durability, and strength. While there is a growing assertiveness of the Azerbaijani identity, its manifestations might well reflect the fear of being endangered from within.

As to the final outcome, the trend is still unclear, yet the Azerbaijanis' concerns are compounded by their feeling of isolation from the larger outside world. Their desire is to be better known and understood by other peoples, though even this is mitigated by the fear of becoming the

subject of dark political intrigues and strategic interests.

NOTES

1. *The USSR in Figures for 1980. Statistical Handbook* (Moscow: 1981, USSR Central Statistical Board), p. 14. For the statistics on Azerbaijanis in Iran, see "Iran," *Azarbaijan Sovet Ensiklopedisi* (Baku, 1981).

2. See *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana*, 3 vols. (Baku: Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijani SSR, 1958-63). On the Azerbaijani Republic and the establishment of the Soviet power, see T. Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan 1905-1920. The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge, 1985).

3. G. Simon, "Russen und Nichtrussen in der USSR. Zu den Ergebnissen der Volkszahlung von 1979," *Berichte des Bundesinstitut fur ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien*, 1981, no. 11.

4. Dzhafarov, I. B., *Russkii iazyk--iazyk druzhby i bratstva* (Baku, 1982), p. 161. For the figures on mixed marriages, see p. 162.

5. V. I. Kozlov, *Natsional'nosti SSSR. Etnodemograficheskii obzor*, (Moscow, 1982), p. 80.

6. *The USSR in Figures*, p. 12. The population of Baku is about 30 percent Russian.

7. G. A. Aliev, *Sovetskii Azerbaidzhan* (Moscow, 1981), p. 109. For detailed figures on the Azerbaijanis attending Russian schools, see Dzhafarov, *Russkii iazyk*, p. 169.

8. Dzhafarov, *Russkii iazyk*, pp. 123-147. See also, Simon, *Berichte des Bundesinstitut*, pp. 23-26.

9. "Baku," *Azarbaijan Sovet Ensiklopedisi* (Baku, 1986).

10. I. V. Kaliniuk, *Vozrastnaia Struktura Naseleniia SSSR* (Moscow, 1975), p. 49.

11. As quoted from "Takiya," *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

12. M. F. Akhundov, *Asarlari* (Baku, 1961), vol. 2, p. 92; trans. by T. Swietochowski.

13. For a recent monograph on the topic, see J. M. Landau, *Pan-Turkism in Turkey. A Study in Irredentism* (London, 1981).

14. P. Homayounpour, *L'Affaire d'Azerbaidjan* (Lausannes, 1967).

15. For a monograph on Pan-Azerbaijanism as a theme in the contemporary Azerbaijani literature, see D. Nissman, "The origins and development of the literature of 'longing' in Azerbaijan," *Journal of Turkish Studies* 8 (1984), pp. 199-207.

16. Kamran Mahdi, "Tasalli;" trans. by Nissman, *Journal of Turkish Studies*, p. 199.