

FORGING THE PROGRESSIVE PATH: LITERARY ASSEMBLIES AND
ENLIGHTENMENT SOCIETIES IN AZERBAIJAN, 1850-1928

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For LeRoi and Eleanor Rice

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ABSTRACT

FORGING THE PROGRESSIVE PATH: LITERARY ASSEMBLIES AND ENLIGHTENMENT SOCIETIES IN AZERBAIJAN, 1850-1928

Kelsey Rice

Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet

This dissertation examines the role ethnic Azeri enlightenment societies in the Southeastern Caucasus played in the broader movement of secular modernist reform throughout the Muslim world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. These societies, which published literature and periodicals, founded schools, built reading rooms, and sponsored musical and dramatic performances, were the primary means through which intellectuals in Azerbaijan mobilized projects of cultural reform. Starting in the mid-nineteenth-century almost every significant Azeri artist and intellectual was involved in these societies to some degree, either as active members or through benefiting from society patronage. Azeri reformist intellectuals were ambitious in their scope, and through the circulation of their periodicals, touring theater troupes, and the involvement of several leading Azeri figures in the constitutional movements in both Iran and the Ottoman Empire, they enjoyed influence well beyond the Turkic south Caucasus, reaching throughout the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and Central Asia. Analyzing a unique body of sources that include literary works, handwritten manuscripts, unpublished memoirs, periodicals, society account books, and correspondences, I illustrate the value of looking to so-called peripheries for more acute insights into the nineteenth and early twentieth-century logics of modernist reform and transformation in the Middle East. I also consider Azeri cultural reform movements in a global context of urbanization and cosmopolitanization, which lead to the creation of ethnic cultural spaces and aided in the rise of national identities. This dissertation also reconsiders the relationship between religious and secular intellectuals in Muslim societies, arguing that it was characterized not only by contention, but also negotiation, compromise, and intellectual exchange.

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Archival Abbreviations Used

Azərbaycan Dövlət Tarix Arxivi (Azerbaijan State History Archive)	ADTA
Azərbaycan Dövlət Ədəbiyyat və İncəsənət Arxivi (Azerbaijan State Literature and Art Archive)	ADİƏA
Məhəmməd Füzuli adına Əlyazmalar İnstitutu (Institute of Manuscripts named for Mehemed Fuzuli)	MFƏİ
Mirzə Fətəli Axundzadə adına Azərbaycan Milli Kitabxanası (Azerbaijan National Library named for Mirza Fatali Akhundzade)	AMK

Introduction

In 1848, the Tiflis-based Azeri writer, intellectual, and Russian imperial bureaucrat Mirza Fatali Akhundov wrote the first secular play produced by a Muslim writer. Sixty years later, in 1908, the young schoolteacher Uzeyir Hajibeyov, also an ethnic Azeri, debuted the Muslim world's first indigenously-composed opera in Baku. Between these two watershed years in Muslim cultural development, a growing class of secularly-educated Azeris living in the Southeastern Caucasus began to articulate a program of progressive cultural reform that they attempted to implement through various educational, cultural, and political projects. Following the Russian Revolution of 1905, the primary means through which they mobilized these projects was the enlightenment societies and benevolent societies they had begun to organize themselves into. These societies were founded starting in 1906 by leading figures within the primarily Baku-based community of reformist Azeris and represented a diverse array of interests and ideologies. This dissertation investigates the history of associational life among Caucasian Azeris, seeking to explain why this peripheral population proved so prolific in their production of radical new forms of culture during a period that saw discourses on progress and modernity animating imperial populations throughout the world.

If, as Clifford Geertz, building upon Max Weber, has posited, “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” and those webs are in fact culture, Azeris were suspended in a complex web indeed.¹ The cultural geography in which they existed in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century was one that fostered

¹ Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretations of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*. 1973, Basic Books. 5.

interconnected and overlapping identities. Living in a zone of Iranian, Ottoman, and Russian encounter that was home to a diverse local population, Azeris' lived reality has been largely lost to modern times. They spoke their own vernacular Turkic tongue as well as Persian and increasingly Russian. They were also likely to be conversant in Armenian and sometimes Georgian. In addition to Azeris, Muslims populations of Lezghis, Talysh, Daghestanis, Tats, and more inhabited the region, and intermarriage was common. Azeris, Armenians, and Georgians shared common musical and poetic traditions, with the Persianate classical *mugham* music a shared medium of expression. Living at a crossroad of Christian and Muslim societies, Azeris in the Caucasus were able to absorb European influences that they then reproduced in synthesis with their own indigenous cultural and intellectual traditions. The resultant vibrant, at times violent, discourses on cultural and society which played out in the Azeri-language press and in a newly emergent public life in reading rooms, classrooms, on the stage, and in the streets, offers acute insights into the logics of reform in the nineteenth-century Muslim world.

I locate the cultural milieu of late nineteenth-early-twentieth-century Azerbaijan in a global move towards urbanism. Through this lens, I reveal how the expansion of urban sensibilities permanently altered artistic landscapes and directed the trajectory of literary-cultural programs, even as nationalistic priorities shifted. The cities of Tiflis, Ganja, and Shusha play a role in the development of associational life among Azeris, but the history charted in this dissertation is largely one of urban Baku. The oil boom of the 1870s transformed Baku from a relative cultural backwater, notable mainly for being one of the few ports on the western coast of the Caspian Sea, into a bustling metropolis home to large populations of Azeris, Armenians, Russians, and Iranian labor migrants, along

with smaller populations of Jews, Georgians, and other Caucasians. Enterprising young men from throughout the Caucasus, many from old elite families steeped in Persianate literary and musical traditions, earned educations in Russian-Tatar Schools and moved to Baku seeking work. Even traditional Azeri cultural figures such as *mugham* musicians, *ashiqs* (bards), and poets, were drawn to the city that produced millionaire Muslim industrialists and offered exciting new opportunities.

The growth of an urbanized Azeri community in Baku shaped Azeri identity in the late nineteenth century. Azeris moving to the city were cut off from traditional social networks and began to build new ones within the context of urbanization. The cosmopolitanization of life in imperial cities was a global phenomenon that led to the politicization of ethnic identity.² Azeris in late nineteenth-century Baku were living in a city that was formerly ethnically and confessionally homogenous but was now majority-Christian and home to a large population of Russians and Armenians who were economically outpacing the formerly dominant Muslims. In addition to the perceived economic dispossession that characterized Baku's growth for Muslims, the massive influx of unskilled laborers brought new levels of poverty and crime. Baku became a city of extremes. Wealthy central districts boasted electric street lights, handsome mansions, and well-groomed parks, while in the slums in the outer rings close to the oil fields, poor laborers lived under billowing dark clouds and alongside oil lakes. The magnificence of the oil wealth and thousands of exploited laborers drew social democrats of various stripes to Baku, and many a Bolshevik agitator cut their teeth organizing in Baku's oil fields, most notably Joseph Stalin. The violence of Baku is important to keep in mind

² I have been particularly influenced in my thinking on this issue by Scott Ury's 2012 book *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry* (Stanford University Press.)

when writing a cultural history, where discussion of educational efforts, theater, and opera, can risk presenting a sanitized picture of life there. Alongside the press announcements for opera performances, theater reviews, and ruminations on language that are cited in this dissertation were daily crime reports that described murders, unidentified bodies found in the streets, abandoned children discovered in dangerous districts, daring prison escapes by radicals secreting themselves away in trash bins, and regular attacks on travelers and caravans by bandits. Baku was an incredibly dynamic city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also an incredibly dangerous one. As Audrey Altstadt put it, “It was as if the industry of Pittsburgh and the frontier lawlessness of Dodge City had been superimposed on Baghdad.”³

It was in this context that the first Azeri voluntary associations were formed. They served as a way for young Azeri transplants to form new communities, and a way for them to assert Azeri interests in a city that no longer only served an Azeri population. The reforms they advocated advanced a vernacularized Azeri mode of cultural production, separating them from the broader Persianate context in which they had formerly participated. At the same time that Azeris were developing ethnic theater and literature, they were organizing politically, into *Hummet*, the Azeri branch of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party, and, later, into *Musavat*, the political party that would rule the brief-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic from 1918-1920. These processes went hand-in-hand and fit within a global narrative of the impact of urbanization and industrialization on culture and identity.⁴

³ Audrey Altstadt. “Baku: Transformation of a Muslim Town” in Hamm, Michael F., *The City in Late Imperial Russia*. Arts and Politics of the Every, 1986.

⁴ For more on urban history in multiethnic empires see: Scott Ury. *Barricades and banners: the Revolution of 1905 and the transformation of Warsaw Jewry*. Stanford University Press, 2012.; Tarik Cyril Amar. *The*

The Azeris engaged in the pursuit of programs of cultural reform began to articulate a self-definition and sense of difference that separated them from other Muslim populations in Russia, from Ottoman Turks, and from Iranians, including their Azeri co-ethnics across the border. What developed was not an expressed nationalism, and this dissertation is not a history of nationality. The history of “Azerbaijani” as a nationality can primarily be traced to Soviet policies. The cultural nationalism developed in Soviet Azerbaijan, however, built upon a foundation that had been laid by late-imperial reformist activities. The Azeri press of the early twentieth century was animated by debates about the native language, particularly whether it should be standardized with Ottoman Turkish or developed as a specific Caucasian Turkic language. The press also celebrated Azeri accomplishments in a manner that elevated their own society as more progressive than other Muslim societies. When Hajibeyov’s opera *Leyli and Majnun* debuted in 1908, reviewers were quick to point out that it was the first native opera ever produced in the Muslim world. Even while struggling to gain social and political acceptance of their activities at home, Azeri societies deployed representatives to promote the Azeri model of progress in other regions of the Muslim world, with Azeri theater troupes touring widely. Azeri literary figures regularly bemoaned the backwardness of Central Asians and Iranians while aligning themselves with the Ottomans, especially after the success of the Young Turk revolution in 1908. The rhetoric of Azeris in the late imperial era was not one asserting the existence of a territorially and

Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv: A Borderland City between Stalinists, Nazis, and Nationalists. Cornell University Press, 2015.; Joseph Ben Prestel. *Emotional Cities: Debates on Urban Change in Berlin and Cairo, 1860-1910.* Oxford University Press, 2017.

For more on oil and urbanization in Baku see Sara Brinegar. “Baku at All Costs: The Politics of Oil in the New Soviet State.” PhD diss. The University of Wisconsin - Madison. 2014, and for a useful comparative study on oil see Alison Fleig Frank. *Oil Empire: Visions of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia.* Vol. 149. Harvard University Press, 2009.

historically defined nation, however. Instead, they articulated a view of themselves as a cohesive population with rights to cultural autonomy as proven by their steady progressive trajectory. Essential to this identity was their assertion of their place within the Russian Empire, and their claim of a right to play a role in the empire's development. Through their place in the Russian Empire, they also claimed a leadership role within the broader Islamic world, something their membership within a European empire supported rather than diminished.

By eschewing a history of nationality and nationalism, I depart from the two major English-language works on Caucasian Azeri history during this era: Tadeusz Swietochowski's *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (1985) and Aurey Altstadt's *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (1992.) Both Swietochowski and Altstadt chart largely political histories of Azerbaijani identity and nationhood, accepting it as a foregone conclusion. Swietochowski offers an excellent history of the political movements of *Hummet* and *Musavat*, but by bookending his history with the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the collapse of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, starts his narrative with the period when the first seeds of Azerbaijani nationalism were planted and concludes with the collapse of a never truly functional nation-state. In doing so, Swietochowski escapes the need of considering the history of Azeris in the Southeastern Caucasus prior to the development of any strong politicized ethnic identity as well as their history in the Soviet Union, when Azerbaijani national identity as we know it today truly began to form.

Altstadt's work assumes the existence of a timeless Azerbaijani identity, separate from that of Azeris in Iran and uncomplicated by the diversity of the Southeastern

Caucasus and the historical reality of a region where identity was extremely slippery. As A. Holly Shissler pointed out in her intellectual biography of Ahmet Agaoglu, *Between Two Empires: Ahmet Agaoglu and the New Turkey*, Azeris of the Russian Empire moved easily between Russian, Tran-Shia, Turkic, and Persian identities without seeing any conflict in doing so, with many never settling on an expressed Azerbaijani identity.⁵ Following the Bolshevik revolution, many Azeris opted instead to become avowed Turks in the newly formed Turkish Republic or to migrate to Iran and become fully integrated Iranian citizens, with only vague family lore about their past in the Russian Empire. Altstadt's work elides the complexity of Azeri identity, instead offering a linear narrative that privileges secular intellectuals. In tracing the discourse on Azeri identity, Altstadt allows the same intellectuals featured throughout this dissertation to become the voice of the nation, passing over the reformist ulama, moderate reformists, and the opponents to reform as active participants in the early formations of Azeri identity.

Both Swietochowski and Altstadt make ample and impressive use of the Azeri press in their works but were writing during a time of limited-to-non-existent archival access. Both scholars also do not make use of Persian-language sources, which are particularly useful in complicating scholarship on Azeri identity. Close readings of the extensive literary production of the era, such as plays, essays, novels, and poetry, are also absent from these works. For almost three decades, the works of these two scholars have borne an immense burden as some of the only English-language sources on late nineteenth-early twentieth-century Azerbaijan.⁶ This dissertation seeks to contribute to

⁵ A. Holly Shissler. *Between Two Empires: Ahmet Agaoglu and the New Turkey*. IB Tauris, 2002. 84.

⁶ Firouzeh Mostashari's 2006 work *On the religious frontier: Tsarist Russia and Islam in the Caucasus* is one of few additions since Altstadt's book came out.

the historiography, taking advantage of now-open archives and my own willingness to sacrifice my eyesight to the many hand-written manuscripts that have continued to be neglected in scholarship on Azerbaijan. In making ample use of literary sources, I offer an important cultural history approach to a period and region that is often reduced to geopolitics.

With these considerations in mind, I do use the term “Azerbaijan” throughout this dissertation to refer to the regions of the Southeastern Caucasus inhabited by the ethnic Azeris within the Russian Empire. In doing so, I do not wish to imply the existence of an Azerbaijani nation before the 1917 rupture from which the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic emerged. Azeris in the nineteenth century understood their localities in terms of their specific settlements, of former khanates, and of the Baku and Elizavetpol (Ganja) *Guberniias* (Governorates), but until 1918 “Azerbaijan” was definitively a region in northern Iran and the Azeri-dominated regions of the Southeastern Caucasus was, at best, the frontier zone of this region. My use of “Azerbaijan” for the region throughout the dissertation is a pragmatic choice that I hope does not impart any primordial origins to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The Specter of Jadidism

Recent scholarly debate within Central Eurasian studies has challenged the value of studying groups known variously as “Jadids” and “Islamic modernists” in the late 19th-early 20th centuries. Some scholars have warned that “Islamic modernism” has elicited an unbalanced amount of scholarly attention, indicating scholars’ anachronistic preference for the secular to the detriment of necessary scholarship on other forms of Islamic

intellectualism of the era.⁷ As this debate continues to animate the field, we must therefore answer in any work on modernist reform in Muslim Central Eurasia, what is the value of studying the people involved in these reform movements, and the cultural productions born of them?

It is certainly true that reformist Azeris were a minority group who never enjoyed broad popular support for their projects. It is also true, however, that despite these obstacles, they enjoyed an outsized influence on Azeri society following 1905, shaping the trajectory of Azeri culture and national identity into today. The petroleum industry produced a small number of immensely wealthy Azeri men in Baku in the late nineteenth century. These men, influenced by both their engagement with Baku's cosmopolitan elite society and their own wealth being rooted in industry and a global market, supported Azeri reformist efforts. Industrialists such as Zeynalabdin Taghiev, Musa Naghiev, Murtuza Mukhtarov, and Isa bey Ashurbeyli, funded journals, theaters, and schools, and became honored members of Baku's enlightenment societies. Taghiev in particular served as the leader of Baku's Muslim society, giving generously to charitable causes, constructing the city's first theater, which bore his name, and bankrolling the construction of the city's first opera house. He was famously illiterate yet had newspapers in multiple languages read to him by aides every day. Tatar reformers enjoyed similar patronage, giving them greater social reach than they would have otherwise had.⁸ With the support

⁷ Jeff Eden, Paolo Sartori, and Devin Deweese sparked this debate in 2014 with a conference hosted by Harvard entitled "Beyond Islamic Modernism: Reassessing Cultural Change Among the Muslim Communities of Central Asia, Russia and Western China, 19th-20th Centuries." The papers from the conference were collected in a special issue of *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*. 59 (2016.)

⁸ For the role of wealthy Tatars in modernist reform see Mustafa Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire, and European Modernity, 1788-1914* (2015) and James Meyer, *Turks Across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856-1914* (2014.)

of Baku's Muslim industrialists, Azeri reformists were able to reach into *madrasahs* and install new method teachers, open reading rooms in oil districts, and stage public jubilees celebrating their accomplishments. This was, of course, a largely urban project; villages and rural spaces remained largely outside the influence of Azeri reformists until after Sovietization.

With Sovietization, many reformist Azeris, like their contemporaries in the Volga-Ural region, Crimea, and Central Asia, embraced Bolshevism and its revolutionary ideology as the means they had so long sought to fully mobilize social and cultural reform.⁹ In the early years of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, political and cultural leaders both came largely from the ranks of late-imperial reformists, most of whom had been involved in Baku's enlightenment societies. It would not be until the late 1920s that a new generation of Bolshevized intellectuals would depose their predecessors and take over the shaping of the new Azerbaijani state. When the Soviet Union collapsed and the independent Republic of Azerbaijan emerged, however, it was late imperial Baku and the men and women who shaped its cultural life that truly captured the national imagination. Parks and streets were renamed in their honor, monuments were erected in their memory, and institutes renamed for them. Today the late imperial era in Baku is viewed as a period of Azeri cultural renaissance, and the ideas that a minority group of men and women had espoused about theater, education, and women's emancipation, is often cited as evidence of the historically progressive and modern outlook of the people of Azerbaijan.

⁹ Adeeb Khalid. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*. Cornell University Press, 2015.

The appropriate terminology for discussing the figures who populate this dissertation is something I have grappled with from the very beginning. “Jadidists” is not an appropriate label for the figures involved in Azeri reform. While they were certainly in conversation with Tatar advocates of the *usul-i jadid* and referenced it in their works and in their petitions to reform schools, the term “jadid” appears relatively infrequently in Azeri reformist discourse. They did not refer to themselves as *jadidchiler* as Tatars did. Much more often, they referred to the *tereqqi yolu*, or the “progressive path,” and contrasted *qaranliq* with *ishiq*, darkness versus light, though they did not adopt a single label for themselves. To apply “jadid” to the figures of this dissertation would be to efface the diverse ideologies and backgrounds they represented. Indeed, Adeeb Khalid, doyen of Jadidist history, made a bid for scholars to apply a rigorous definition of Jadidism in a 2006 piece written for *Central Eurasian Studies Review*. In it, he wrote:

A definition that pays attention to details and defines the Jadids as they might have themselves, would limit the label to those who participated in *debates about the reform of Muslim cultural life*, who established schools or newspapers, who presented plays in the theater, and over the permissibility and necessity of thoroughgoing reform. They appropriated aspects of other discourses, but ultimately they were part of an Islamic discourse. In the absence of a rigorous definition, it is quite easy to conflate Jadidism with other modern discourses or actors among Muslims of the Russian Empire: Tatar or Bashkir nobles or university-educated intellectuals active in politics were seldom directly involved with the cultural reform embodied in new method schools, and cannot be considered Jadids in any sense of the word.¹⁰

Khalid goes on to limit the geographical confines of Jadidism to the Volga-Ural region, Crimea, Siberia, and Turkestan, excluding Azerbaijan because, he argues “the trajectories of Azerbaijani modernism are more fruitfully traced to local reform currents of the 1830s

¹⁰ Adeeb Khalid. “What Jadidism Was, and What it Wasn’t: The Historiographical Adventures of a Term.” *Central Eurasian Studies Review*. Vol. 5 No. 2, 2006.

than to Gasparinskii's *Tercuman*." Khalid is correct that the Azeri reform movement, while both concurrent and conversant with his definition of Jadidism, was something different. The social divides he identifies, between Jadids, university-educated intellectuals, and nobles, did not exist in the Azeri reform movement. Largely devoid of nobles, as the Khans had been dispossessed of their lands and titles (and often lives) by the 1830s, the elite social leaders of Azeri society were industrialists, and, as previously stated, these men were actively involved in cultural reform. The university-educated intellectuals who were involved in politics, such as Alimardan Topchubashov, Mammed Amin Rasulzade, and Nariman Narimanov, were also leaders within enlightenment societies, volunteer teachers for adult education classes, and, in the case of the latter two, occasional playwrights. As part of this dissertation's focus on the institutional history of Azeri voluntary associations, the diversity of the full population engaged with these societies also defies easy labeling. The many men who populated the membership rolls of enlightenment and benevolent societies were not themselves actively staging plays and publishing newspapers but were more modestly involved through their payment of dues and engagement in a new urban public life. Part of this public life was supporting a movement to reform Azeri society in the realms of education cultural production, charity, and recreation.

Taking all this into consideration, I refer to the actors involved in enlightenment societies and their reform activities as "reform-minded Azeris" or simply "reformists." I have chosen to do so because this diverse group of individuals were united in their interest in mobilizing projects of social and cultural reform, and through that interest interacted with each other and each other's ideas. There was not, however, a common

sensibility about degree to which culture should be reformed, and the acceptable forms of cultural expression. For this reason, I have also made a point of avoiding “modernist” as a label unless it meets a critical definition of modernism. I find Leyla Amzi-Erdogdular’s explanation of her use of modernity in her recent article “Alternative Muslim Modernities: Bosnian Intellectuals in the Ottoman and Hapsburg Empires” useful in how to critically apply the concept of modernity. In it, Amzi-Erdogdular explains her use of “modernist,” noting the group she is referring to as such was,

not a unified or formally organized group, these actors singled out similar problems and struggles in Bosnian society, offered comparable solutions to them, and tapped into related cultural and religious imagery. In analyzing them here, I have adopted Paul Rabinow’s perspective that, rather than attempting the impossible task of defining modernity, one must explore how it has been understood and used by self-proclaimed modernists.¹¹

Following this model, there were aspects of the Azeri project of cultural reform that were modernist. Theater and opera, the most controversial aspect of this project, were self-consciously modernist projects. As a whole, however, labeling the work of Azeri enlightenment societies and their members “modernist” would be to lose specificity to the point of diluting the term’s meaning. There were reform-minded mollahs who encouraged new method reforms in *madrasahs* and assisted in enrollments at new schools on one end of the reformist project and radical members of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party helping organize adult literacy programs in the oil districts on the other, and neither members of these groups would have self-identified themselves or their work as modernizing. For this reason, I will most often refer to the various actors in this

¹¹ Leyla Amzi-Erdogdular. “Alternative Muslim Modernities: Bosnian Intellectuals in the Ottoman and Hapsburg Empires.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, no. 4 (2017).

dissertation as “reform-minded” or “reformist,” only applying “modernist” when it meets a rigorous standard for the term.

Theoretical Considerations

As a history of Azeri associational life and the emergence of an Azeri public, this dissertation considers to what extent theories about the public sphere can be applied. Naturally, Jürgen Habermas’s groundbreaking work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* has shaped these considerations. As scholars such as Mustafa Tuna have pointed out, however, applying Habermas’s model of the public sphere to populations within the Russian Empire is problematic. In his 2015 book *Imperial Russia’s Muslims: Islam, Empire, and European Modernity, 1788-1914*, Tuna eschews the use of the term “public sphere” and instead posits the idea of an “imperial domain,” writing

We will refer to this extraspatial marketplace of ideas and influence as the “imperial domain.” Different from Jürgen Habermas’ idea of the “public sphere,” which is largely based on a democratic nation-state model where the societal structure can be neatly categorized into the private and public spheres along with the sphere of public authority, Russia’s “imperial domain” grew in a multilayered and somewhat cacophonous imperial situation that defies easy dissection.¹²

In this dissertation, I have found Tuna’s use of the imperial domain useful as an alternative to the public sphere as a model that takes into consideration the imperial nature of Azeri society, where there was linguistic and confessional diversity, multiple legal systems, and structured inequalities. I have not completely disposed of the concept of a public sphere, however, because the trajectory of the social and cultural programs advocated by Azeri reformists were consciously based on European models that did fit

¹² Tuna. *Imperial Russia’s Muslims*. 60.

Habermas's definition of the public sphere. The reading rooms, public lectures, theater events, and fundraising soirees organized by Azeri voluntary associations mimicked those that existed in European society, and while the result was not a public sphere in the Habermasian sense, there was an emergent Azeri public and a limited, but undeniably extant, Azeri civil society by the late imperial era. This was an empire-wide phenomenon developing among educated and urbanized populations. As Laura Engelstein has argued, through the very act of trying to reproduce European civil society, Russians created the possibility for it, though within the limitations of Russian Autocracy.¹³

Reformist-minded Azeris adopted European models of modernity and engaged with Russification in complex ways. Azeri intellectuals did not simply create lesser facsimiles of European cultural forms, but instead were able to absorb European influences that they then reproduced in synthesis with their own indigenous cultural and intellectual traditions. The operas they produced relied heavily upon the modal structures of *mugham*, Azeri classical music, while their plays and literature built upon the tradition established by Mirza Fatali Akhundov when he wrote the first Azeri play in 1848 and adhered to a literary realism that expressed a specifically Azeri experience.¹⁴ As Azeris were developing new forms of cultural production that synthesized the European and the indigenous, they were also responding to an empire-wide push for Russification within

¹³ For more on Russian civil society see Bermeo, Nancy, and Philip Nord, eds. *Civil Society Before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000., especially Laura Englestein's essay "The Dream of Civil Society in Tsarist Russia: Law, State, and Religion"; Russian Studies in History vol. 51, no. 3, Winter 2012, special issue on civil society in Russia guest edited by Anna Tumanova; Joseph Bradley. *Voluntary associations in Tsarist Russia: Science, Patriotism, and Civil Society*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

¹⁴ For more on the development of Azeri musical traditions see Inna Naroditskaya. *Song from the land of fire: continuity and change in Azerbaijanian mugham*. Vol. 6. Psychology Press, 2002.; Aida Huseynova. *Music of Azerbaijan: From Mugham to Opera*. Indiana University Press, 2016.; Anna Oldfield. *Azerbaijani Women Poet-Minstrels: Women Ashiqs from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Lewiston, The Edwin Mellen Press. 2008.

the bureaucracy and state educational system. Russification in the late nineteenth century was not a colonial civilizing project, but rather an attempt by the autocracy to impose uniformity upon an expansive and diverse empire. The resultant threat to local customs and cultures was enough to inspire opposition in the imperial peripheries that began to take the form of nationalism, however. The way some Azeris engaged with European cultural forms and bureaucratic Russification and used it to advance their interests makes Homi Bhabha's theory on mimicry as developed in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" useful to analyzing this chapter of Azeri history. Bhabha's discussion of the "ironic compromise" that is mimicry, that attempts to negotiate both the colonial demand for stasis and change, can be adapted to the Russian colonial context. The Russian relationship with the "east" was complicated; it was both intimate and other, and, as Robert Geraci has shown, there was a spectrum of attitudes toward how and to what extent non-Russian minorities in the empire should be integrated.¹⁵ Tsarist educational policy toward Muslims was torn between promoting Russification and avoiding empowering Muslim populations through improved education.¹⁶ The Russified Azeri was a disconcerting figure, dressed in European clothes and possessing the same educational accomplishments as educated Russians and yet still professedly Muslim, an example of Bhabha's "double vision" produced through colonialism which "in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority."¹⁷ As local actors reacted to Russification through more assertive expressions of national difference, some Azeri intellectuals deployed Russification as a means of

¹⁵ Robert P. Geraci. *Window on the East: national and imperial identities in late tsarist Russia*. Cornell University Press, 2001.

¹⁶ Tuna. *Imperial Russia's Muslims*. 67.

¹⁷ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994. 126.

declaring own progress and rights, and scolded other Azeris who uncritically or ineffectively mimicked Russianness for acting as buffoons.

Beyond Bhabha, I am hesitant to apply postcolonial theory to the Russian Empire. The field is deeply rooted in the legacy of British and French colonialism, an imperfect fit for large land empires such as the Russian, Ottoman, and Hapsburg Empires. Certain concepts can be adapted to work within these contexts; Adeb Khalid and Ussama Makdisi have made persuasive cases for the application of Said's *Orientalism* to Russian and Ottoman history.¹⁸ Other concepts within the field do not work as well, however. Particularly, some scholars have proposed the application of the theory of the subaltern to the history of Muslims in the Russian Empire that risks a broadening of the definition of the subaltern to the point of it losing analytical utility. There certainly were subalterns in Muslim society in the Russian Empire; were this a dissertation on Azeri peasants or Iranian labor migrants, I might make use of the theory.¹⁹ There seems to be an impulse, however, to broaden the term to include almost any Muslim by right of their identity as Muslim. In her 2009 dissertation on Tatar theater, historian Madina Goldberg defines the primary actors in her dissertation as "subaltern voices."²⁰ Edward Lazzerini, meanwhile, critiques the Subaltern Studies Group because they "implicitly reject the likelihood that subalterns can be found within the elites" and proposes a conceptualization of subalterns that is relational, of "nesting subalterns" within Russian society that allows for the

¹⁸ Adeb Khalid. "Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism," *Kritika*, n.s. 1 (2000): 691-699.; Ussama Makdisi. "Ottoman Orientalism." *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 768-796.

¹⁹ Touraj Atabaki makes effective use of the idea of the subaltern in his article on Iranian oil workers . "Disgruntled Guests: Iranian Subaltern on the Margins of the Tsarist Empire." *International Review of Social History* 48, no. 3 (2003)

²⁰ Madina Goldberg. "Russian Empire—Tatar Theater: the Politics of Culture in Late Imperial Kazan." PhD diss. University of Michigan. 2009.

application of subaltern studies to Tatar intellectuals.²¹ If we are to accept a relational definition of the subaltern, however, there are few populations within the Russian Empire other than the tsar himself who would not potentially fall within the category of subaltern. Douglas Northrop also proposes a relational definition of the subaltern for the Soviet context in *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*, describing the Soviet Union as home to “a dizzyingly complex web of multiple context-dependent subalternities.”²² This definition allows him to not only define the women experiencing the brunt of the Soviet *hucum*, the campaign to unveil Central Asian women, as subalterns, but also the Central Asian men who reacted to unveiled women with violent attacks. Should the men who were on the losing end of a battle of competing patriarchies wear the mantle of subaltern? These context-dependent arguments water down the theoretical use of the concept. If we are to consider reformist Muslims in the late Russian Empire subalterns, then the answer to Gayatri Spivak’s question “can the subaltern speak?” transforms from one of the most perplexing questions posed to the academy in the past fifty years to a very simple “yes.” Indeed, in the case of the actors I study in this dissertation, their voices can be overwhelming. I would propose, therefore, that we leave subaltern studies to those scholars studying historical populations who have not left behind thousands of pages of archival documents, newspapers, and published literature in which they make their views abundantly clear.

²¹ Edward J. Lazzerini. "Local accommodation and resistance to colonialism in nineteenth-century Crimea." *Russia's Orient. Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917* (1997): 169-187.

²² Douglas Northrop. *Veiled empire: gender and power in Stalinist Central Asia*. Cornell University Press, 2004.

Outline

This dissertation is divided into five chapters that are thematic rather than chronological. The first and final chapters contend with Azerbaijan's complex history with both the Persianate Sphere and Iran, while the middle three look at the foundation of enlightenment societies and their mobilization of cultural reform projects in the realms of the press and the reading public, education, and theater and opera, respectively.

Chapter One, "Literary Assemblies and Empire: Cultural Organization in Azerbaijan Before the Oil Boom" looks at the cultural landscape of Azerbaijan prior to Baku's urbanization. This chapter attempts to address a historiographical gap in work on the nature of cultural production and intellectual organization among Russia's Muslims before Gasparinkii's *usul-i jadid* sparked the reform movements of the late nineteenth century. I look at the semi-autonomous khanates that ruled the South Caucasus prior to Russian conquest and the literary assemblies (*adabi mejlisleri*) based in their former capitals. At these assemblies, local intellectual elites (clerics, beys, educated merchants, etc.) gathered to declaim original poetry in both Persian and Azeri, recite classical Persian poetry, and perform music. The most influential of these assemblies, the *Majlis-i Uns*, or "Assembly of Friends," was based in Shusha and headed by a woman, the poet and last heir of the Qarabagh Khanate, Khurshidbanu Natavan. Assembly members were in conversation with their counterparts in other cities and would visit other assemblies while traveling and compose laudatory poetry for other assemblies. Musicians in particular served as messengers between the various assemblies, as they traveled and performed throughout the Caucasus. Using *tazkiras*, or poetic memoirs/biographies, manuscripts documenting the memories of assembly members, and the works of some

members, this chapter investigates how Azeri intellectuals organized themselves prior to the emergence of voluntary associations, and charts direct connections between these old, Persianate networks and the new organizations of enlightenment societies. Assemblies served as venues for discussion of cultural and education reform well before the *usul-i jadid*, some younger members became elder statesmen of the Baku-based reformist community in their later years, and, when Azeri cultural reformers began to construct an Azeri literary canon, it was the works of these men and women they looked to as the foundation. The chapter reveals a great deal of continuity over time, making an argument for the continued importance of Persianate intellectual tradition in Azeri reformist projects, but also traces the turn of Azeri cultural production away from Persian and toward a vernacularized Azeri.

Chapter Two, “The Revolution of 1905 and the Birth of Azeri Enlightenment Societies,” deals with how Azeris experienced the Russian Revolution of 1905, particularly through the violent ethnic clashes known as the “Armeno-Tatar War” of 1905-1906, and how this shaped the Azeri push to organize into societies. I look at the process of the foundation of the first societies and explore the diversity of society founders and how they reflected the many backgrounds and viewpoints of reform-minded Azeris. They ranged from the young actors, musicians, and journalists who founded *Salvation Enlightenment Society* with radical visions of cultural experimentation and social reform, to the mollahs who founded the *Happiness Religious Society* with the express goal of promoting the *usul-i jadid* but maintained a rule that at least half of all membership should be members of the ulama and kept studiously away from any theater-related projects. I then look at that emergence of an Azeri reading public as expressed in

a dynamic press culture and the creation of numerous reading rooms, run by enlightenment societies, that offered a new type of social space based around reading, both privately and out loud. I also consider the obstacles societies faced, including financial struggles, infighting, corruption, political opposition, and difficulties bridging class divides in the bid to reach out to laborers.

In my third chapter, “Bringing Progress to the *Millet*: Educational Reform Efforts by Enlightenment Societies,” I investigate the most well-known vector of the reform project undertaken by Imperial Russia’s Muslim populations in the nineteenth century. Looking at how Azeris engaged with Gasparinskii’s new method, I show how the Azeri educational reform project diverged from that of their Tatar counterparts, as they focused on installing new method teachers in preexisting *madrasahs* and were careful to advance their reforms with explicit government permission. I also consider the role of schoolteachers in the reformist project, as one of the largest groups within the educated class in Baku, and how societies encouraged the growth of this group through founding teacher training courses to answer the shortage of teachers for the growing number of schools. Educational reform was also the area in which Azeri women were most involved, allowing me to analyze the debates around women’s role in society, how a small group of educated women ran the first new method girls’ schools, and how elite wives helped mobilize charitable efforts to fund these educational initiatives. I also argue that more important than the children’s schools that societies founded were the adult educational programs they created, an aspect of the educational project that has been neglected by the literature. The evening classes and Friday schools that societies opened for adult learners expanded the reading public and injected social democratic rhetoric into

the Azeri press, as laborers who had engaged with these ideologies in the oil fields were empowered through literacy to voice opinions in the press. It also challenged the educational reformist program of elite Azeris who wanted to promote Azeri-language literacy; while adult learners did not object to native language lessons, they more eagerly demanded Russian language education as a route to economic mobility. Finally, I look at the language debates sparked by educational reform, as the teaching of the *ana dili* necessitated its standardization.

The penultimate chapter, “Staging Reform: Creating an Azeri Opera and Theater Culture,” engages with the most radical and ambitious form of new cultural production that enlightenment societies facilitated. To theater-supporting reformists, Azeri advancements in theater and opera was a point of pride, proof of Azeri progress and the right of Azeris to claim their place among modern societies. Theater was also viewed as a valuable didactic tool in a largely illiterate society, and Azeri plays lay out the reformist case for progress in the realms of gender relations, marriage practices, and education. Theater was one of the primary exports of Azeri reformists, and Azeri theater troupes toured the Volga-Ural region, Turkestan, and southward into Iran.

The dissertation concludes with the chapter “Intimate and Contentious: the Caucasian Azeri Relationship with Iran,” on the complicated nature of the relationship between Azeris in the Russian Empire and Iran during this period of reform and into the Soviet era. As former subjects of the Qajar state and co-ethnics with the largest minority population in Iran, Azeris claimed a stake in its destiny. This chapter charts the complicated relationship they had with Iran. During the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, Russian Azeris traveled across the border to participate, Azeri societies

secretly funneled money to support revolutionaries, and the press covered events extensively. Azeris claimed an identity as superior revolutionaries to Iranians, and, when the revolution ultimately failed, offered harsh critiques of Iranian society in reaction, investing their hopes instead in the Ottoman Young Turk Revolution. In Baku, meanwhile, Azeri societies and political organizations tried to engage with the thousands of labor migrants, but as Touraj Atabaki has shown, they struggled to find common ground. Intellectuals found more of a common language, however, and Persian and Azeri literature of the era was transmitted through translation and the circulation of texts, influencing literary developments in both societies. When Azerbaijan suddenly found itself thrust into independence by the collapse of the Russian Empire, their vernacularized identity suddenly demanded territorial and historical claims as well to fully embody their new claims to nationality. The resultant Iranian ire over their claim of the name “Azerbaijan” for the nation, and the idea of a greater Azerbaijan that might one day extend into the Iranian region of Azerbaijan, created a fraught relationship between the two states that persists to this day.

In my conclusion I look at how the nature of Azeri cultural reform in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century shaped the early Soviet era and has reemerged in the Azeri national memory today. By focusing on a region at the intersection of the Russian, Ottoman, and Iranian empires, this dissertation makes a case for looking to so-called peripheries for more acute insights into the logics of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century logics of Islamic cultural reform and challenges the traditional geographic constraints of Middle Eastern studies. The circulation of the texts, ideas, and bodies of reform-minded Azeris in this era reveals the extensive networks fostered through the

spread of urbanization and technological and infrastructural development, allowing this Baku-based community to serve as a lens through which to look at a global moment in Islamic reform.

Chapter 1

Literary Assemblies and Empire: Cultural Organization in Azerbaijan Before the Oil Boom

In the mid-nineteenth century, the cultural geography of Azerbaijan differed greatly from that of the turn of the century, and cultural production hewed much more closely to Persianate traditions than it would in the period discussed in the following chapters. Intellectuals organized themselves into poetry-based literary assemblies, and had done so for at least two centuries by the turn of the century, with some literary assemblies lasting up to the Bolshevik Revolution, although in diminished form. The story of early twentieth-century Azeri culture is not simply one of rupture with the past, however, and this chapter will show that a great deal of continuity and connectedness existed between the older generations of Azeri intellectuals, based in literary assemblies located in cultural centers outside Baku, and their successors, who largely converged in the new industrial and economic center of Baku and who introduced a new form of organization to Azeri culture in the form of the institution of the enlightenment society. These societies were modeled after similar institutions functioning throughout the Russian Empire and Europe and were consciously ethnicized, unlike the literary assemblies that required knowledge of Persian for participation but expressed no articulated ethnic identity.

Extant literature on Turkic modernists in the Russian Empire treats the emergence of progressive Muslims as watershed, a moment of fundamental change in the intellectual and cultural history of Turkic Central Eurasia. Adeeb Khalid has discussed the methodology of madrasa education in the nineteenth century before the Crimean Tatar Ismail Gasprinski began advocating his new method educational reform, and Mustafa

Tuna has given an excellent history of how Tatars in the Volga-Ural region responded to an increasingly outward-looking Russian Empire by expanded their own understanding of the world and the type of education they needed to succeed in it.²³ Absent from this work is any indication that the increasingly energetic activity in the realms of education, literature, theater, and the press that characterize the late nineteenth century had precedent in the discourse of intellectuals from earlier in the century. I do not seek to discount European influence on Turkic modernism. Russian social reform efforts, increased access to the work of European intellectuals via Russian translations, and influence from Ottoman intellectuals who were similarly looking to Europe certainly played an important role in the development of intellectual and cultural trends among Russia's Turkic population in the early twentieth century. However, in addition to these influences there had long existed native networks of cultural production and exchange that had direct links to the next generation of intellectuals who would found enlightenment societies, whose participants provided these intellectuals with works they would draw upon to begin building a nascent Azeri literary canon, and who themselves were articulating social concerns and interests in reaction to the Russian Empire and Azeri society that were similar to those that preoccupied Azeri reformists. By investigating the role Azerbaijan's historic place in the Persianate world played in the development of early twentieth-century Azeri culture this chapter works to recover the

²³ In *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* Adeb Khalid discusses the methodology of madrasa education in the nineteenth century and the political history of the region prior to Russian conquest but does not look at cultural production and connections between this period on the early twentieth century. His discussion of Jadidism starts in the year 1899. James Meyer's *Turks Across Empire*, essentially an intellectual biography of Yusif Akcura, and Holly Schissler's *Between Two Empires: Ahmet Agaoglu and the New Turkey*, both focus on individual modernist intellectuals and thus are constrained by their lifespans. Mustafa Tuna's *Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire, and European Modernity, 1788-1914* is the most expansive recent contribution to the historiography and certainly considers the entirety of the nineteenth century, but once again focuses little on culture.

Persianate in the history of Turkic reform, and to highlight the newness of an articulated Azeri identity. It will discuss the nature of intellectual life in Azerbaijan from the 1850s to the end of the century and demonstrate how the Persianate literary society served as an antecedent to the enlightenment society. Doing so will reveal both the longevity of certain intellectual traditions and influences in Azeri society, as well as show the truly extraordinary nature of some of the cultural innovations of Azeri intellectuals who consciously broke from tradition in their efforts to modernize Azeri culture.

Khanates and Political Power in Nineteenth-Century Azerbaijan

Baku became a major economic and cultural center of the Southeastern Caucasus, second only to Tiflis, by the late nineteenth century. Before then, although Baku was an important port and trade center, cities in the northern and western mountainous regions served as the major cultural, political, and economic centers for the Turkic populations of the Southeast Caucasus. When the oil boom began in the 1870s it spurred a dramatic population shift and turned Baku into an influential city in which local wealth was consolidated. Baku had established itself as the unrivaled center of Turkic culture and wealth in the region when, following the 1905 revolution, Azeri voluntary associations, cultural institutions, and the press proliferated, with the most influential work coming out of Baku. The Azeri reformists involved in these activities, however, hailed from all over the Southeastern Caucasus, and many were only recent arrivals in the city, having grown up in such cities as Shamakha to the north or Shusha and Ganja to the northwest. They brought with them the histories and cultural legacies of these other regions. In order to understand the particular Azeri brand of Turkic reform that thrived in Baku in the early 1900s, the influence of the previous generation of intellectual elites, dispersed throughout

the region that is today occupied by the nations of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, and centered in the former capitals of the semi-autonomous khanates that ruled the region from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, must be considered.

Historian Muriel Atkin divides the late eighteenth century Southeastern Caucasus into three regions; Georgia, Iranian Armenia (which included the khanates of Ganja, Qarabagh, Yerevan, and Nakhchivan), and the Shirvani successor states (the khanates of Shirvan, Sheki, Derbant-Quba, and Baku.)²⁴ Of these three regions, both Iranian Armenia and the Shirvani successor states came to be ruled by semi-autonomous Muslim khanates following the collapse of the Safavid Empire (1722.) During this chaotic period, preexisting khanates were joined by new ones and the region mostly functioned outside the reach of Persian imperial authority, though the frequent warfare among the khans and with would-be conquerors, both Persian and Russian, significantly depopulated the region and deprived it of healthy agricultural production. The Safavid borders were temporarily restored by Nader Shah in the 1730's but following his assassination in 1747 the region reverted to a disorganized semi-autonomy. By the end of the nineteenth century Aqa Muhammad Shah Qajar, founder of the Qajar Dynasty, began a campaign to reconquer the Caucasus, gaining fealty from the Baku and Ganja khanates, battling others such as Qarabagh into submission, and finally sacking Tiflis.²⁵ Aqa Muhammad Qajar's bid to regain control of the region was ill-fated, however, as the shah was assassinated by his own servants in the fort of Shusha in Qarabagh in 1797.²⁶ It was during Aqa Muhammad's press to rebuild the Persian Empire that the khanates of the Southeastern

²⁴ Muriel Atkin, *Russia and Iran, 1780-1828*. University of Minnesota Press, 1980, 10.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 19-20.

²⁶ George Bournoutian (2016): Prelude to War: The Russian Siege and Storming of the Fortress of Ganjeh, 1803-4, *Iranian Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00210862.2016.1159779. 3.

Caucasus began to look to the rapidly expanding Russian Empire as a potential check on the imposition of Qajar authority. The khans of the late eighteenth century exploited the liminal nature of the Southeast Caucasus, always at the edge of empires, to maintain a certain level of independence. Atkin writes

For generations they [local leaders] had profited from the weaknesses of neighboring empires by asserting their own autonomy. They continued to pursue their traditional objective, then including Russia and Iran in their maneuverings. Thus, a khan might side with Russia if an Iranian threat seemed more pressing or the reverse if Russia seemed bent on controlling the khanate's affairs. For some khans, this strategy degenerated into a frantic struggle to appease both sides. Except for Mostafa Khan of Shirvan, every khan who submitted to Russia abjured that submission.²⁷

By the early nineteenth century, however, Russia began its conquest of the Southeastern Caucasus in earnest, with the Russo-Persian War of 1804-1813 ending in a definitive Russian victory. The Treaty of Gulistan, which ended the conflict, established much of the border that exists to this day between Azerbaijan and Iran. Thirteen years later in the Russo-Persian War of 1826-1828 the Qajar Empire ceded the only two khanates remaining outside Russian dominion, Yerevan and Nakhchivan, to Russia in the Treaty of Turkmenchay. Under Russian rule many of the khanates were subsumed into the Russian imperial structure and allowed to continue into the 1820s.²⁸ The two exceptions were the Ganja Khanate, which was abolished in 1805 after General Pavel Tsitsianov, a Georgian nobleman who led Russian conquest of the Caucasus, had most of the ruling family executed, and the Baku Khanate, which was abolished in 1806 in retaliation to the Baku khan's assassination of Tsitsianov.

²⁷ Atkin, *Russia and Iran*, 66.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 85.

The Russian Empire was not in the business of eliminating local elites, and many members of the ruling families of the khanates became high-ranking members of the Russian imperial government and military. Abbasqulu Bakikhanov, nephew of Huseyn Qoli Khan, the last Khan of the Baku Khanate, was a Russian military officer who participated in the Russo-Persian War of 1826-1828 and in the negotiations that resulted in the Treaty of Turkmenchay. He was also, like many of the elite members of the families of khans and their functionaries, a significant cultural figure in mid-nineteenth-century Azerbaijan who wrote a history of Shirvan and Daghestan, *Gulistan-Iram*, and was an occasional member of the Ganja-based literary assembly *Divan-i Hikmet*.²⁹ The ruling Javanshir family of the Qarabagh Khanate also produced a number of important regional members of the Russian imperial government. Mehdiqulu Khan Vefa Javanshir, the son of Khurshidbanu Natavan, last heir of the Qarabagh Khanate, was a lieutenant colonel in the Russian army.³⁰ Mirza Jamal Javanshir, the author of an important history of Qarabagh published in 1846 and a member of the same tribe as the khans of Qarabagh, worked in the service of the khans before Russian conquest and transitioned into the service of the Russian Empire after. In describing himself in the introduction to his *History of Qarabagh* he wrote, “I had been in the service of the khans of Qarabagh, where for many years I performed the duties of *mirza* and *vazir* of Qarabagh. After their rule, I continued as an employee and official of the Exalted and Mighty Russian State, performing all duties assigned to me.”³¹ These elites had historical political, familial, and cultural ties to the Qajar Dynasty. A daughter of Ibrahim Khalil Khan, second khan of the

²⁹ Nasreddin Qarayev. *XIX Əsr Azərbaycan Ədəbi Məclisləri*. Baku, Elm və Tehsil, 2012. 35.

³⁰ AMK. Mir-Mohsun Navvab. *Tazkira Navvab*. Baku, Orujov Qardashlar Metbeesi, 1913. 102.

³¹ Jamāl Javānshīr Qarābāghī and George A. Bournoutian. *A History of Qarabagh: An Annotated Translation of Mirza Jamal Javanshir Qarabaghi's Tarikh-e Qarabagh*. Mazda Publishers, 1994. 31.

Qarabagh Khanate, was a wife of Fath Ali Shah Qajar, the second Qajar Shah. All Caucasian khanates had at some point pledged fealty to the Qajar Dynasty, some willingly and others following military conquest. Although Azeri Turkish was the vernacular language of the region, the political and literary language of the khanates was Persian, and as Shia Muslims, the region's population looked south for religious leadership. Yet with Russian conquest most of the khanates' elites adapted to Russian rule and took their place within this new empire's structure. As hereditary elites, their children were some of the first to learn Russian, to relate with the Russian Empire, and to pledge loyalty to the Tsar. They helped guide Azerbaijan into its new identity as a region separate from Persia. This new political boundary permanently altered Azeri identity, and over time, despite the existence of millions of co-ethnics just across the border, Russian rule led to an increasing ethnicization and vernacularization of Azeri identity that set the region on a path that took it farther and farther from its Persianate imperial history. This process started as soon as Russians redrew the political map, and it was the khanate elites who served as bridges between the old Azerbaijan, which was really just the far northern region of the heartland of Azerbaijan in northern Iran, and its new Russian imperial reality. These elites formed and participated in the literary assemblies that anchored intellectual exchange and production in the mid nineteenth century.

Although elites increasingly sought to learn Russian as a means of advancing their careers, the culture of mid-nineteenth-century Azerbaijan under Russian rule was still primarily shaped by the khanates. The cities of Shamakha, former capital of the Shirvan Khanate, Shusha, former capital of the Qarabagh Khanate, and Ganja, former capital of the Ganja Khanate, served as home to some of the most prominent cultural institutions in

the region. The prominence of these three cities in Azeri cultural history can be attributed to a number of causes, foremost being that they were the capitals of three of the most powerful khanates. Before Shirvan was a khanate it was a minor dynasty in its own right, with the Shirvanshahs ruling large swaths of eastern Azerbaijan from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries, at which point the region was conquered by the Safavids. In his history of Shirvan and Daghestan, *Gulistan-Iram*, Abbasqulu Bakikhanov describes the region of Shirvan as having a centuries-old tradition of producing scholars and poets, occasionally disrupted by warfare but robust in times of peace. Bakikhanov identified the height of the Safavid Empire under Shah Abbas (r. 1588-1629) as a period in which learning prospered but noted that the region's reputation for rich cultural production long predated that time.³² The longevity of the dynasty, its historic patronage of the arts, and the continuation of Shirvan in diminished form as a khanate, secured its place as a historic home to poets and musicians. Following Russian conquest, Shamakha was initially selected as the capital of the new governorate, incentivizing local elites to stay in the region. Following a devastating earthquake in 1859, the governorate's capital was relocated to Baku, starting the process of that formerly more marginal city's rise in prominence. However even after the relocation of the capital, Shamakha retained some of its elite population and position as a historically powerful city.³³

The Ganja Khanate formerly ruled the regions Qarabagh and Yerevan before the ambitious Javanshir family took advantage of the chaos following the death of Nader

³²Abbas-Kuli-gha Bakikhanov, trans. Willem Floor, and Hasan Javadi, *The Heavenly Rose-garden: A History of Shirvan & Daghestan*. Washington, Mage Publishers. 2009. 170.

³³ When Hasan bey Zardabi, founder of the first Azeri-language periodical *Ekinchi* and leading intellectual of the late 1800s wrote an article recounting his attempt to found a charitable society in 1876, he notes that Shamakha was one of the cities he traveled to in search of patrons because, despite the destruction of the earthquake, there remained a wealthy population in the city.

Shah Afshar (1747) and allied with King Erekle of Georgia to subjugate the khanate and transform it into a virtual vassal of the Qarabagh Khanate.³⁴ Located near Tiflis, the city historically enjoyed a great deal of cultural exchange with the Southeastern Caucasus's largest city, which would be made the capital of Russian Transcaucasia. In addition to this khanate's former power, it was, under its new name of Elizavetpol (in honor of Empress Elizabeth Alekseevna), named capital of the Elizavetpol governorate. Although its khanate was abolished earlier than any others in the region, as capital of the governorate Ganja remained a city that was home to a large literate population.

Shusha rose to prominence later than Shamakha and Ganja, with its rich cultural life fostered by the Javanshirs, the ruling family of the Qarabagh Khanate. The founder of the Qarabagh Khanate, Panah Ali Khan (r. 1748-1760), consolidated power in the 1740s during the rise of Nader Shah. His rise to power and abilities as a military commander were threatening enough to Nader Shah that he was exiled to Khorasan in 1735, only returning to Qarabagh in 1747 after Nader Shah's death.³⁵ Panah Ali Khan was then officially recognized as Khan of Qarabagh by Nader Shah's heir, Adil Shah, one of his few actions before being overthrown in 1748.³⁶ The Khanate survived the upheaval following Nader Shah's death and the overthrow of his heir and rose to become the most powerful khanate in eastern Azerbaijan. While it was hardly unique for the Qarabagh khans to serve as patrons to the arts, the Javanshir family seemed particularly involved in and supportive of culture and learning, with many members of the ruling family

³⁴ Atkin, *Russia & Iran*. 19.

³⁵ George A. Bournoutian. *The 1823 Survey of the Karabagh Province: A Primary Source on the Demography and Economy of Karabakh in the Early 19th Century*. Costa Mesa, CA. Mazda Publishers. 2011. 7.

³⁶ Atkin, *Russia & Iran*

themselves prominent poets and scholars. Mir Mohsun Navvab wrote that Jafar Qoli Khan Javanshir (d. 1866), the grandson of Ibrahim Khalil Khan (r. 1760-1806), the second Khan of Qarabagh, wrote poetry under the penname Aref and also performed music on the saz, tar, harp, chagna, and would sing at mejlises (assemblies).³⁷ The last heir of the khanate, Khurshidbanu Natavan, was head of Shusha's literary assembly the *Mejlis-i Uns* and is considered one of the greatest composers of ghazels in the Azeri language. Both of her sons, Mehdiqulu khan and Mir Hasan Agha, were also poets, and Mehdiqulu Khan wrote a treatise on music theory.³⁸ Although never a seat of government in the Russian Empire, Shusha remained a wealthy city that produced many of Azerbaijan's prominent writers and musicians.

Literary Assemblies and Elite Networks

The associational life that emerged around these assemblies was one of the earliest forms of public life in Azeri culture, and the evolution from literary assemblies based in the capitals of khanates to enlightenment assemblies centered in an urbanized Baku tracks well with Habermas's discussion of the public sphere's linkages to the princely courts of Europe in the late seventeenth century. Habermas notes that,

The public sphere in the world of letters was not, of course, autochthonously bourgeois: it preserved a certain continuity with the publicity involved in the representation enacted at the prince's court. The bourgeois avant-garde of the educated middle class learned the art of critical-rational public debate through its contact with the 'elegant world.'³⁹

In Azeri culture there were no salons, as Habermas identifies in France as precursors to a bourgeois public sphere, but the literary assembly served a similar social

³⁷ AMK. Navvab, *Tazkira Navvab*, 42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁹ Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. MIT Press, 1991. 29.

function. They forged an early link between “court” and “town,” bringing together both the khans and their family and associates with the economic elites of the town. As the khanates were systematically abolished in the early nineteenth century, their legacy continued to shape where cultural production took place in Azerbaijan and the literary assemblies continued to be comprised primarily of those whose status was derived from the old khanate system. When the possibility of a more public and associational life in the Russian Empire developed in the late nineteenth century, the Azeri bourgeoisie who began to partake in it carried with them the legacies of the intellectual exchange and debate fostered by a system of literary assemblies that endured through mid-late nineteenth century.

The elite literate populations that rose up around the households of the khans organized themselves into musical and literary assemblies, which served as venues for writers and musicians to present their work as well as social spaces where elites were able to maintain ties and build relationships. Azerbaijani literary scholar Nasreddin Qarayev notes that musical assemblies and literary assemblies tended to function separately from each other, however some *ashiqs* (bards) and mugham *khanandas* (singers) moved between the two institutions as they were both poets and singers.⁴⁰ Literary assembly membership tended to be made up of members of the ruling families, beys (petty nobles, typically in the employ of the khan), wealthy merchants, religious scholars, teachers, *khanadas* and *ashiqs* and, increasingly, employees of the governorate (who in many cases came from families formerly employed by the khanate.)

⁴⁰ Qarayev. *XIX Əsr Azərbaycan Ədəbi Məclisləri*. 115.

The *ashiqs* and *khanandas* who participated in literary assemblies were the least economically elite members but served an important function of forging links between the literary assemblies of various cities. As travelling musicians, they performed at assemblies throughout the region, carrying with them news and poetry from their previous travels.⁴¹ The Azeri literary elites of the Southeastern Caucasus often used poetry to maintain ties of friendship and mutual respect across cities, writing poems addressed directly to members of other literary assemblies or poems about other cities. When the *Mejlis-i Uns* was first established in Shusha, the poet Bikhud, a member of the older *Beytus-Sefa* literary assembly in Shamakha, sent a congratulatory poem to the founders.⁴² Sayyid Azim Shirvani, the leader of *Beytus-Sefa* and a famed poet, often used poetry to praise the literary work of others. In his poem “On Baku’s Poets” he addressed the poetry coming from Baku, comparing the quality of the poetry to the quality of goods that came north from the port city. “Many gifts come to Shirvan from Baku/The Egyptian caravan opens, sugar comes.”⁴³ He also wrote odes to Mirza Fena, founder of the *Mejlis-i Uns*, Abudllah bey Asi, a Shusha poet, Mehemmed Sefa, a fellow member of *Beytus-Sefa*, and Hasan bey Zardabi, founder of the first ever Azeri-language gazette, *Ekinchi*. Such poems reveal the wide networks of Azerbaijan’s poets and indicate that literary assemblies served not only to foster the arts, but also strengthen ties among the economic and political elites whose declaimed regard for each other indicated a mutual belonging that could be called upon for favors. This is revealed in one of Shirvani’s letters to Zardabi, in which he requests assistance with the publication of a book, and in Zardabi’s travels to

⁴¹ Anna Oldfield. *Azerbaijani Women Poet-Minstrels: Women Ashiqs from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Lewiston, The Edwin Mellen Press. 2008. 37.

⁴² Qarayev. *XIX Əsr Azərbaycan Ədəbi Məclisləri.*, 122-3.

⁴³ Sayyid Azim Shirvani, *Seçilmiş Əsərləri*, II Cild. Baku, Avrasiya Press, 2005. 70.

Baku, Shamakha, Shusha, and Ganja, where he visited the elites of each city, on his mission to raise money for the foundation of a Muslim benevolent society. Zardabi's comical account of his failed quest to found this society takes him through the same elite networks that can be traced through literary assemblies. This account, it should be noted, lampoons the elites he encounters for their intractable greed and lack of interest in this new, civic-minded organization of the charitable society, revealing a growing discontent with the traditional elites. Zardabi's account and the increasingly negative connotations around the title "bey" will be investigated further in Chapter Two.⁴⁴

The poetic works produced by the members of these nineteenth-century literary assemblies serve as some of the most important sources of information about the membership and activities of the assemblies. In addition to the poems addressed to specific figures, many prominent poets also compiled their own *tazkiras*, a form of poetic memoir that collected both the poetry and memoirs of the compiler, along with the poetry of other figures known to the author, either in person or by reputation, with the author including short biographies of each poet. One of the region's most famous *tazkiras* from the mid-nineteenth century, that of the Qarabaghi poet Mir Mohsun Navvab (1833-1918), contains information on almost two hundred Qarabaghi poets. Written in 1891, this *tazkira* is an invaluable source of information on cultural and intellectual life in Qarabagh in the nineteenth century. Navvab, who died in 1918, was one of the last great Azeri scholars trained in the classical Persianate tradition. He was a member of Khurshidbanu Natavan's *Mejlis-i Uns* and the founder of Shusha's other literary assembly, the *Mejlis-i Faramushan* ("Assembly of the Forgotten.") His *tazkira* contains poems originally

⁴⁴ Hasan bey Zardabi, "2" *Heyat* No 115, December 8, 1905.

presented at the two assemblies as well as biographical notes on many of their other members. Navvab's recorded memories of other poets in Qarabagh reveal a rich literary life that depended on the institution of the literary assembly to forge connections and provide a venue for poets to present their work. In the era before there was any real press culture among the Azeri population, it was only through these public readings that works could be disseminated. As will be discussed later, when a nascent press culture first began to develop in Azerbaijan, many members of literary assemblies took to it enthusiastically. It is hardly surprising that the cultural actors who sought to connect literary worlds and disseminate their own works and the works of others would be greatly interested in the possibilities presented by such modern innovations as the printing press, the newspaper, and educational reform.

Literary assemblies were fertile ground for ideas about culture and reform to spread, and there was at least one assembly in every significant population center in Azerbaijan. The *Divan-i Hikmet*, a literary assembly founded in Ganja in the 1820s, was the earliest assembly that would form Azerbaijan's literary network.⁴⁵ The assembly was founded by Mirza Shafi Vazeh, a poet and madrasa teacher who taught Mirza Fatali Akhundov, the founder of Azeri literary modernism, in his youth. Indeed, it is Vazeh who is credited with convincing Akhundov to abandon his religious education and seek a secular career, spurring Akhundov along the path that would lead him to write the first secular plays produced by a Muslim writer of any culture and engage in literary criticism and debates about nationalism and progress in both Iran and his native Caucasus.⁴⁶ The

⁴⁵ Qarayev, *XIX Əsr Azərbaycan Ədəbi Məclisləri*. 31.

⁴⁶ Iraj Parsinejad *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran, 1866-1951: Literary Criticism in the Works of Enlightened Thinkers of Iran--Akhundzadeh, Kermani, Malkom, Talebof, Maraghe'i, Kasravi, and Hedayat*. Ibex Publishers, Inc., 2003.

Divan-i Hikmet occasionally operated in Tiflis as Vazeh frequented the city and included such Tiflis-based intellectuals as Akhundov and Abbasqulu Bakikhanov as occasional participants.⁴⁷ When in Tiflis the assembly also attracted participation from several Russian and Georgian orientalist.⁴⁸ The *Divan-i Hikmet* was followed by the creation of *Anjumanus-Shuera* in Ordubad in 1830, *Gulustan* in Quba in 1835, *Fovjul-Fusaha* in Lankaran in the 1850s, *Beytus-Sefa* in Shamakha in the 1850s, the *Mejlis-i Uns* in Shusha in 1864, the *Mejlis-i Faramushan* also in Shusha in 1872, and the *Majmuesh-Shuera* in Baku in the 1860s.⁴⁹

The *Mejlis-i Uns* was perhaps the most influential of the Azeri literary assemblies. The late literary scholar Nasreddin Qarayev notes that it was known not only throughout the Southeast Caucasus, but also in Iran and as far east into Central Asia as Ashgabat.⁵⁰ The assembly was founded in 1864 by Mirza Rahim Fena, who would have been in his early-mid twenties at the time, in the home of his friend and fellow poet Hajji Abbas Aga.⁵¹ From 1864-1872 the society comprised of young poets who met regularly at Hajji Abbas Aga's apartment under Fena's leadership. Navvab reserves particular praise for Fena in his *tazkira*, referring to him as "educated and gentlemanly" and "the most wise" among his peers.⁵² Fena's father was the accountant for Khurshidbanu Natavan, daughter of the khan, and when Fena's father died he took over the position. Sometime shortly after taking his position in Natavan's household, she learned of his literary circle, and

⁴⁷ Qarayev *XIX Əsr Azərbaycan Ədəbi Məclisləri*. 35.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 36-37.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵¹ MFƏİ. F13 S.V.25. Mirza Rahim Fena, "Mejlis-i Uns."

⁵² AMK. Navvab, *Tazkira*, 110.

invited it to relocate to her residence. From 1872 on the *Mejlis-i Uns* met at Natavan's estate, and with her patronage it grew considerably in renown.⁵³

Khurshidbanu Natavan (1832-1897) was a unique figure in nineteenth-century Azeri society. The daughter of Mehdiqulu Khan Javanshir, she was the last living heir in the line of khans that started with Panah Ali Khan in 1747. The khanate was abolished in 1822 when Mehdiqulu Khan fled to Iran during the tumultuous years in between the Russo-Persian War of 1804-1813 and the Russo-Persian War of 1826-1828.

Khurshidbanu Natavan remained in Shusha, married to Khasay khan Usmiyev, a Daghestani nobleman and general in the Russian military. Although the khanate was abolished, Natavan remained an important figure in Shusha, with the population referring to her as "*khan qizi*" ("khan's daughter.") She dedicated much of her time and resources to philanthropic projects, and was particularly remembered for the series of public fountains she built throughout Qarabagh to increase access to clean water and for the recreational parks she had built.⁵⁴ Navvab notes her diverse artistic talent, "In the work of painting she was skilled and in the art of poetry her words and poetry were distinctive, though she did not have a divan."⁵⁵ In addition to her charitable works and abilities as a poet and artist, Natavan maintained a notably progressive household. While most literary assemblies were almost entirely male institutions, with only the occasional participation of female poets, Khurshidbanu Natavan became the leader of the *Mejlis-i Uns* when it relocated to her home. According to the memoirs of her grandson, Akbar khan Nachivinski, Natavan habitually hosted the assembly meetings unveiled, a radical move

⁵³ MFƏİ. F13 S.V.25.

⁵⁴ AMK. Navvab, *Tazkira* 98.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 99.

for a Muslim woman in nineteenth-century Azerbaijan.⁵⁶ Natavan encouraged the literary careers of other women in Qarabagh. She fostered the work of the younger poet Fatma Khanim Kamine and invited her to present her work at assembly gatherings.⁵⁷ She also supported the literary and musical efforts of Shirin Khanim Aliverdibeyova, the wife of her secretary and mother of Uzeyir Hajibeyov, who would go on to be one of the most influential Azeri modernist intellectuals in the early twentieth century, almost singlehandedly creating Azeri opera culture. Like Fatma Khanim Kamine, Natavan encouraged Aliverdibeyova to present at the assembly.⁵⁸ According to some accounts another favorite artist of Natavan's was Ashiq Peri, a female poet of considerable fame who seems to have participated in the *Mejlis-i Uns* when she was in Shusha. As Anna Oldfield notes, however, the historic Ashiq Peri can be particularly hard to pinpoint, and may not have even been an *ashiq*, but a literate woman from an elite family who was known for her poetry but misidentified as an *ashiq* by a Russian folklorist who encountered her in 1829. There is conflicting evidence as to whether she played the saz, the traditional instrument of Azeri bards, as well as some reports that she died well before she could have participated in the *Mejlis-i Uns*.⁵⁹ Whether she had truly been acquainted with Khurshidbanu or not, the fact that she is often connected to her and the *Mejlis-i Uns* in historical narratives demonstrates the association between Shusha and female cultural contribution, born of Khurshidbanu's influence, that existed in the minds of many intellectuals from the nineteenth century on.

⁵⁶ MFÖİ. F6 S.V. 457 Akbar khan Nachivinski, "Khurshidbanu Natavan haqqında khatiralar." It should be noted this likely means with her face uncovered, she likely still wore a scarf over her hair.

⁵⁷ Qarayev, *XIX Əsr Azərbaycan Ədəbi Məclisləri*. 155.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 156.

⁵⁹ Oldfield. *Azerbaijani Women Poet-Minstrels*. 84.



Figure 1 Khurshidbanu Natavan with two of her children

Other members of the assembly included Mir Mohsun Navvab himself, who included three poems that he originally read at *Mejlis-i Uns* gatherings in his *Tazkira*, the poet Mamo bey Mamay, and the poet Mirza Huseyn bin Ali Yuzbash, who Navvab notes as having been particularly prolific and to have been known as a talented reciter of Rumi's *Masnavi*.⁶⁰ Nachavinski's memoir about Natavan highlights the important role the *Mejlis-i Uns* played in Shusha's cultural life and the continuous presence of poetry in Natavan's household, including couplets of poetry recalled from his childhood interspersed throughout his narrative.⁶¹ A remarkable number of leading cultural figures

⁶⁰ Navvab, *Tazkira*, 118.

⁶¹ MFÖİ. F6 S.V. 457.

in Baku in the early twentieth century hailed originally from Shusha, and the city is to this day thought of as the cultural heartland of Azerbaijan, an often ignored contributing factor to the bitterness of today's continuing conflict over Qarabagh between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In the same year that the *Mejlis-i Uns* relocated to Natavan's residence, Mir Mohsun Navvab founded a new literary assembly made up of younger poets from less elite backgrounds.⁶² Called the *Mejlis-i Faramushan*, "The society of the forgotten," its very name seemed to express its status as an assembly of those not born into the elite Persianate literary world that was the natural inheritance of the children of khans and beys, although Navvab himself seems to have been. Fatma Khanim Kamine, though occasionally presenting at the *Mejlis-i Uns* with the encouragement of Natavan, was an active member of the *Mejlis-i Faramushan*. In his *Tazkira*, Navvab reveals a deep respect for Kamine, always referring to her with the title "Mirza," typically a title reserved for educated men, and estimating that her poems, in both Persian and Turkish, approached 400 in number.⁶³ Navvab described her as living "in the condition of incorruptible innocence" and would reference Kamine by name in his own poetry on occasion.⁶⁴ Other members included Mirza Ali Esker Naurus, who wrote in Persian and Russian but not Turkish, which demonstrates both that fluency in the native spoken language of Azeri was not yet a requirement for participation in the cultural institutions of Azerbaijan, and that Russian language and culture was beginning to have a presence in Azeri cultural

⁶² Qarayev, *XIX Əsr Azərbaycan Ədəbi Məclisləri*. 199.

⁶³ Navvab, *Tazkira*, 106. Navvab did not typically include the volume of work of the poets he describes in his *Tazkira*, indicating both a familiarity with the work of Kamine and that he was impressed by her prodigious poetic output.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

circles. Naurus's death in 1911 prompted Navvab to include in the 1913 published version of his *Tazkira* (originally written in 1891) a poem in his honor presented at the *Mejlis-i Faramushan*, indicating that the assembly existed well into the twentieth century.⁶⁵ Navvab noted that Naurus was around fifty-five years old at the time of the writing of his *Tazkira* in 1891, while another member singled out for particular praise, the young Meshedi Ayub Baki, was only twenty-five. The diversity in ages in the *Mejlis-i Faramushan* points to an environment of mentorship within the assembly, and that it was likely through participation in these societies that younger poets gained access to the more established literary community and exposure to influential audiences.

Despite the fact that the *Mejlis-i Faramushan* appears to have survived almost up until the Bolshevik Revolution, Navvab and his fellow members located themselves firmly in the Persianate world. In a poem by Navvab presented to the assembly in 1892, Navvab lists the Persian poets and literary figures Shams (al-Tabrizi), Attar, Saadi, al-Sakkaki, Anvari, Unsuri, and Aflaki,⁶⁶ following this list of vaunted figures of Persianate literary history with a list of *Mejlis-i Faramushan* members Hasanqoli Agha Khan Qaradaghi, Mirza Aligar Naurus, Meshedi Ayub Baki, Abdullah Bey Aabsh, Molla Jalil Shaki, and Mirza Fatma Kemina.

Shams and Attar and Saadi, Sakkaki
 Anvari, Unsuri and Aflaki
 Khan Qaradaghi, Aabsh and Baki
 Naurus and also Kamina and Shaki
 The sum of your poetry was emblematic
 there is nothing in the house of my heart but the beloved.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid. 116.

⁶⁶ The reasoning behind this particular selection of writers escapes me, beyond that their names fit within the meter and rhyme scheme while rhyming with the names of *Mejlis-i Faramushan* members.

⁶⁷ Navvab, *Tazkira*, 142.

This, the poem shows, was the tradition that assembly members were following, and the work that inspired them. Navvab honored his friends in a poem that placed them alongside prominent figures of the Persianate literary tradition and elevated the works of the *Mejlis-i Faramushan* to join the canon. Though the notable poets and intellectuals of Azerbaijan's literary assemblies provided the works that early-twentieth-century Azeri intellectuals deployed as the foundation of an Azeri-language literary canon, there remained a tension between the efforts of the new generation of Azeri intellectuals and the older one. The assembly members who lived to write into the early twentieth century themselves were the last vestiges of the old Persianate world to which Azerbaijan formerly belonged but was increasingly drifting away from, and, though they wrote in literary Azeri on occasion, saw their Persian-language works as their greatest. Their successors, however, largely lost access to their greatest works, as Persian-language education was not included in the *usul-i jadid* (new method.) In the Akhundov National Library archive section's copy of Navvab's *Tazkira*, someone with access to the book (likely an on-staff scholar, this type of marginalia is common in almost all works in the collection) at some point went through and marked a small "x" by each of his Azeri-language poems, a distinct minority of the works he chose to include to represent himself in his exhaustive cataloging of the poets of Qarabagh. This was to be his work that would enter the Azeri literary canon; something Navvab is unlikely to have imagined when he compiled his *Tazkira*.

Urbanization and Shifting Cultural Geographies

While the literary assemblies of Shusha, Ganja, and Shamakha functioned mostly as networks for local elites, the members of Baku's literary society tended to be literate

non-elites who aspired to occupy a similar cultural space to the traditional elites. Baku had not historically been as powerful or wealthy as the khanates in the west or the Shirvan Khanate to the north, which had often ruled over Baku directly or as a vassal throughout the centuries. In addition to its history as a politically marginal khanate, the city's experience in the first Russo-Iranian war further reduced and marginalized its elites. Russia's conquest of the Caucasus was violent and protracted, and one of its bloodier episodes occurred outside the gates of Baku in 1806. General Pavel Tsitsianov arrived in Baku in February of that year prepared to either accept the city's surrender or settle in for a siege. By 1806 Tsitsianov had a well-earned reputation for brutality. It had been two years since Tsitsianov had executed the entire ruling family of the Ganja Khanate when he arrived at the gates of Baku. Huseyn Qoli Khan, Khan of Baku, arranged to meet Tsitsianov outside the city under the pretense that he was ready to surrender control of his city peacefully. Instead, the khan rode out to meet Tsitsianov accompanied by his cousin, a skilled marksman, who proceeded to assassinate the general, a move that scattered the Russian forces amassed outside the city. Keeping with the long tradition of shifting political alliances to whichever imperial power best suited the khanate's interest, Huseyn Qoli Khan marked his victory by sending Tsitsianov's head to Fath'ali Shah Qajar, Shah of Iran, as tribute.⁶⁸ The alarmed Shah, already losing a war against Russia and not seeking to exacerbate the situation, promptly returned the head to the Russians, but Baku's fate was sealed. After the temporary disorder caused by Tsitsianov's death, the Russian army returned to Baku and Huseyn Qoli Khan fled to

⁶⁸ Maziar Behrooz. "From Confidence to Apprehension; Early Iranian Interaction With Russia." In *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolution since 1800*. Ed. Stephanie Cronin. New York, Routledge, 2013. 56.

Iran. The city was conquered in June 1906 and the khanate promptly dissolved. While the Shirvan, Quba, and Qarabagh khanates survived into the early 1820s before being abolished, Baku, like Ganja, lost its khanate immediately upon conquest, with much of the khan's family fleeing to Iran. Thus for most of the nineteenth-century Baku had a considerably weakened elite, and until 1859 was not, like Ganja, the capital of a governorate. The city held little attraction to educated elites.

Baku's literary assembly, the *Majmuesh-Shuera*, was founded in the 1860s. According to Qarayev, members belonged to considerably more humble occupations than their counterparts in other cities, and tended to be petty traders, builders, ship workers, and the like.⁶⁹ They represented the modest increase in literacy that was occurring in the late nineteenth century as Russo-Tatar schools opened and some reformist approaches to madrasa education began to develop. The *Majmuesh-Shuera* was created by this new class of literate men and was in many ways an aspirational organization. Founded at the dawn of the oil boom, the assembly and its members were exposed much sooner than their counterparts outside Baku to the dramatic social, economic, and cultural shifts that accompanied industrialization. With the oil boom, Baku transformed from a regional center of modest size to a crowded chaotic city the likes of which the region had never seen. The petroleum industry attracted a massive influx of low-skill laborers to work in the oil fields while affording the opportunity for enterprising young men to find financial success as industrialists and engineers.

Baku's industrialization dramatically shifted the cultural geography of Azerbaijan. Where once culture and population were concentrated in the mountainous

⁶⁹ Qarayev, *XIX Əsr Azərbaycan Ədəbi Məclisləri*. 265.

west, the career opportunities in Baku began to draw educated Azeris from all over to the region. Patronage changed with Azerbaijan's changing economy, and the patronage of the families of khans and beys was largely replaced by that of a handful of millionaire industrialists in Baku who amassed a wealth previously unheard of in Azeri society. These men took an active interest in investing in the cultural endeavors of the young educated Azeris who were building networks in Baku and were as likely to come from the impoverished villages that dotted the Absheron Peninsula outside Baku as from the old cultural centers that were home to established intellectual circles and traditional elites. They had no place in the Persianate literary world and in their philanthropy steered Azeri culture away from it.

The nature of life in an industrial city also transformed Azeri cultural life. Baku in the late nineteenth century was neither pleasant nor safe. The oil boom led to a rapid increase in the population of Baku, as well as a dramatic shift in the city's ethnic make-up. In 1806, on the eve of Russian conquest, Baku's population was somewhere between 3,000-5,000, and almost entirely comprised of Turkic and Persian Muslims. In the 1860s, after Baku had replaced Shamakha as the capital of the governorate, the population more than doubled to 13,000, a number that still hardly earned the label of "city."⁷⁰ A decade later, in the 1870s, Russian and European investors began streaming into Baku, attracted by the rich reserves of oil in the Absheron Peninsula, where it was so plentiful that it literally oozed out of the earth. Baku had long traded in oil, with traders harvesting it from hand wells and selling it as lubricant and for medicinal purpose.⁷¹ By the 1870s,

⁷⁰ Audrey Altstadt-Mirhadi. "Baku: Transformation of a Muslim Town" in Michael F. Hamm, ed. *The City in Late Imperial Russia*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press. 1986. 285.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 286.

however, the peninsula's riches caught the attention of Russian industrialists, who began constructing modern oil derricks and were rewarded for their efforts with explosive fountains of oil. As the Russian Empire loosened its restrictions on landownership in the peninsula, prospectors from throughout the empire and Europe poured into Baku and its surroundings to seek their fortune. Formerly sleepy villages suddenly found themselves in the middle of an industrial gold rush, swallowed by Baku as the city rapidly expanded to accommodate the newcomers. By 1897, when Russia conducted its first empire-wide census, the population of Baku was 111,904, by 1913 it had nearly doubled again, to 214,672. The formerly homogenous city of Turks and Persians who shared a confession had transformed into a cosmopolitan boomtown with a population of Russians, Azeris (from both the Caucasus and Iran), Armenians, and smaller populations of Germans, Jews, and Georgians.⁷² Russians replaced Azeris as the largest population, comprising 38 percent of the city's population, compared to the latter group's 33 percent.⁷³ With the addition of a large Armenian population, Baku went from a majority-Muslim city to majority-Christian. Such a massive population growth hardly occurred in an orderly fashion, and the majority of the population increase came from the arrival of unskilled workers from throughout the Caucasus and Iran. The role of labor migration in increasing the city's population gave it a dramatically uneven gender ratio, and in 1913 Baku's population was 55-60 percent male. Baku was a place where men went to become millionaires, and some succeeded, but many more toiled in abject poverty and perished in industrial accidents. With a large population of single young men, a dramatically uneven

⁷² Ibid. 289.

⁷³ Ibid.

distribution of wealth, and a new cosmopolitanism that stoked simmering ethnic tension, Baku was a dynamic city with a constant undertone of violence threatening to surface.

In 1885 the Iranian pilgrim Muhammad Husayn Husayni Farahani spent several days in Baku early into his journey to complete the hajj, which he recounted in a published travel narrative. What he saw did nothing to ingratiate the city to him. Farahani wrote in his narrative, “It can be said that it is utterly without order, and no one is secure in life, property, or his own affairs. One cannot spend a tranquil night in one’s own home. There are many criminals, and few nights go by that there are not robberies in homes and [on] the streets or two or three people are not killed.”⁷⁴ He observed that the city was characterized by loose morals, a place where men were not “in control of their honor” as young men and women engaged freely in prostitution. He was particularly offended by the city’s Russian population, which he described as “wild, uncivilized animals who consider the things of the world all the property and possession of their fathers...”⁷⁵ Historian Audrey Altstadt, meanwhile, notes that while the expanding peripheries of the city where indeed unplanned, impoverished, and violent, the city’s center, where the majority of Russians lived, was quite modern and orderly, with gas lamps, wide streets, and parks.⁷⁶ This aspect of the city, however, was not the city in which the majority of Baku’s residents resided, and as future chapters will show, even the most elite spaces of Baku could quickly fall victim to violent mobs in certain circumstances of ethnic strife or moral outrage. As the historian Scott Ury writes of Warsaw in the same period, the chaos,

⁷⁴ Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ḥusaynī Farāhānī, Hafez Farmayan, and Elton L. Daniel. *A Shi'ite Pilgrimage to Mecca, 1885-1886: The Safarnāmeḥ of Mirzā Moḥammad Ḥosayn Farāhānī*. University of Texas Press, 1990, 65.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 66.

⁷⁶ Altstadt-Mirhadi. “Baku: Transformation of a Muslim Town.”

uncertainty, and violence of newly industrialized cities drove members of the same ethnic groups to seek stability and community from each other through the creation of ethnicized political organizations and cultural and social spaces.⁷⁷ The many young and educated Azeris who arrived in Baku from smaller population centers in the late nineteenth century were confronted with a new kind of cosmopolitanism, where they lived among not just Armenians, Georgians, and Persians, as they had for centuries, but also Russians, Germans, Jews from the Pale, and similarly displaced Armenians, Georgians, and Iranians who were suddenly in competition for economic status and political influence in a manner that had previously not existed. It was in this context that Azeris increasingly began to articulate an ethnicized view of themselves, with their confessional and linguistic identity becoming more significant among so many different and competing populations. Thus as the new class of bourgeois Azeris began to organize in Baku, they brought with them the legacies of the past literary assemblies and court-based culture of their homes, but sought a new, different kind of institution that fit within the dynamic urban reality in which they lived.

Continuity and Rupture from the Literary Assembly to the Enlightenment Society

With the Russian Revolution of 1905, civil society opened up in the Russian Empire and Azeri intellectuals were able to organize enlightenment societies that functioned within Russian Imperial society, sanctioned and monitored by the new laws that emerged following the revolution. Literary assemblies had historically functioned

⁷⁷ Scott Ury. *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

outside the imperial structure, and rarely engaged in issues that would attract the attention of imperial authorities. By the late nineteenth century, however, many members of Azerbaijan's literary assemblies increasingly were interested in issues of education and social reform. As an institution, the literary assembly was poorly equipped to address such issues beyond providing a venue to discuss them. Functioning outside the legal structures of the state, mostly outside the center of Baku, and without account books and membership fees, the purpose of these assemblies had always been first and foremost cultural and class-based, a place for elites to offer patronage networks and reproduce their cultural heritage. For members of the elite that began to take on a more populist view of the function of literacy and cultural consumption in Azeri society, the enlightenment society offered an alternative model for organization.

Many of the social concerns expressed in the founding charters of enlightenment societies were concerns shared by the older generation of literate Azeris who had participated in literary assemblies, albeit in smaller number and with lesser urgency. Concern over education in particular reveals the continuity in social concerns from the mid-nineteenth-century elites to their turn-of-the-century successors. Many of the members of literary assemblies were themselves teachers of children, although more often tutors to the children of the wealthy than teachers at Russo-Tatar schools. Sayyid Azim Shirvani, founder of *Beytus-Sefa*, had himself eschewed a career as a religious scholar in order to undertake a career as an educator, founding a school in Shamakha in 1867 that sought to offer a more modern and secular model of education. This was years before the Crimean Tatar Ismail Gaspirali began advocating the *usul-i jadid*, or "new

method” that would be the defining ideology ascribed to Turkic modernists in the Russian Empire.⁷⁸

Of all the prominent figures of the literary assembly network in mid-nineteenth-century Azerbaijan, Shirvani was the most concerned with education and language reform. Although a poet talented in the Persianate tradition, he also often wrote his poetry in accessible vernacular Azeri and, when Hasan bey Zardabi founded the first Azeri-language periodical, *Ekinchi*, in 1875, became an active contributor of poems to be published in its pages. In 1877 Shirvani wrote a letter to Zardabi requesting his help in publishing an educational book he had written. Explaining that there were no Turkic language books for schoolchildren on the topic of Sharia, he wrote that he had written a “God’s Law” book to send to the director of public schools (a Russian official in charge of Russo-Tatar schools) for consideration for inclusion in the curriculum. Shirvani hoped Zardabi would allow him to use his printing press to print a copy of the book so that “the lines might be read clearly.”⁷⁹ Another member of Shirvani’s *Beytus-Sefa*, Mirza Nasrullah Dide, was similarly occupied with producing a new educational text, the *Kitabun-Nesayeh*, or “Book of Advice.” Dide wrote this book as a *qiraet kitabi*, a book meant to be read out loud by school children learning the Azeri language. Thus, he wrote the book employing a simple prose that was markedly different from the writing style that characterized the works presented at literary assemblies, aimed at introducing children to literacy in their mother tongue. Previously Bakikhanov had written a Persian-language instructional book for schoolchildren, but Dide’s was the first of its kind in Azeri,

⁷⁸ Kheyrolla Mammadov, “Köhnə Dünyanın Sonuncu, Yeni Dünyanın Birinci Şairi” in Sayyid Azim Shirvani, *Səçilmiş Əsərləri*, I Cild. Baku, Avrasiya Press, 2005. 7

⁷⁹ Shirvani. “Hasanbey Melikova” in *Səçilmiş Əsərləri*, II Cild. 125.

revealing that the increased vernacularization of Azeri literature in the early twentieth century had roots in earlier decades.⁸⁰ The book consisted of two chapters of twelve sections each. The first chapter expounded upon good qualities a child should develop, such as intelligence, patience, and bravery, while the second chapter offered twelve poor qualities to be avoided, such as lying, greed, and laziness.⁸¹ It is not clear if either Shirvani's religious textbook or Dide's instructional book were ever actually adopted by any schools, but the exercise of producing them is a significant indication of the concerns developing among the literate classes of Azerbaijan by the 1870s.

Concern over education and literacy was not the only issue that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century that would develop into one of the dominant concerns of turn-of-the-century intellectuals. Although less pronounced than the interest in improving education, critiques of the status of women in Azeri society are present in the works and actions of some of the members of Azerbaijan's literary assemblies. The most obvious example is Khurshidbanu Natavan, a woman who acted as head of a literary assembly and who used that role to foster the work of other female poets. Natavan's poetry consists of traditional ghazels, she did not use her writing as a tool for advocacy, but it is only Shusha's two literary assemblies, the *Mejlis-i Uns* and the *Mejlis-i Faramushan*, that have record of female membership and participation. The dominant role of Natavan in the cultural life of Qarabagh undoubtedly contributed to this fact. Indeed, no other Azeri woman would come near Natavan's stature as a cultural leader and canonical literary figure until the Soviet period.

⁸⁰ Möhsün Nağısoylu, "Ön Söz" in Mirze Nəsrulla Didə. *Kitabün-nəsayeh*. Bakı: Nurlan, 2008. 5.

⁸¹ Didə. *Kitabün-nəsayeh*. Bakı: Nurlan, 2008

There were also male members of literary assemblies that displayed an interest in educating women and increasing their rights to a role in public life. Aghazali bey Naseh was a merchant and member of *Beytus-Sefa* who later learned Russian and began working as a secretary in the Russian provincial court in Shamakha. Inspired by his experience with the judicial system, near the end of his life he began to work on a book entitled *Nakam* (“Unfortunate”) that addressed the issue of ignorance and lack of rights among women.⁸² The text was never completed, however Naseh, through the unique insight afforded by his role in the courts, was ahead of his time in recognizing and promoting a critical look at the circumstances of Azeri women as a social ill.

The extension of Russian legal authority into the Muslim family likely played an important role in increasing concern among Azeri intellectuals over the status of women. According to Robert Crews, in 1826 Prince Alexander Golitsyn, the minister of religious affairs and education, conducted an investigation into various complaints and reports of disorder in the Muslim ecclesiastical courts over Muslim marriage. He determined that in the case of general marital discord it was within a molla’s authority to seek a reconciliation, however, he wrote “when a husband subjects her to beatings and this is proven by other people, then the mullah is to send the husband directly away to the provincial administration for restraint,” thus asserting the authority of the tsarist criminal code over some marital disputes.⁸³ As Crews demonstrates, many Muslim women in the Russian Empire embraced the creation of a court system to arbitrate disputes over Islamic law, as well as their rights within the tsarist criminal code. Women would turn to the

⁸² Qarayev, *XIX Əsr Azərbaycan Ədəbi Məclisləri*. 139.

⁸³ Robert D. Crews. *For prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia*. Harvard University Press, 2009. 156.

Russian-backed religious courts (in Crews's study, administered through the Orenburg Assembly, in the case of Shiite Azeris, through the Sheikh ul-Islam of the Caucasus) or even go so far as to petition the tsar to assert their rights as protected by Islam against abusive husbands who they wanted either curtailed or to divorce.⁸⁴ Working in the provincial court of Shamakha, Naseh likely witnessed many cases of women seeking reprieve from abuse, and the difficulty the Russian courts had in grappling with what was permissible under Islamic law in considering these women's complaints. As a member of *Beytus-Sefa*, he would have brought this interest to assembly meetings to be discussed and debated, further fueling a growing conversation among Azerbaijan's intellectual class.

Abdulvahab Hajji Aghazade, who wrote under the pen name Sayyid Zerger ("Sayyid Goldsmith,") was a young member of *Majmuesh-Shuera* with an interest in women's education whose experiences further reveal changing attitudes about women among Azeri intellectuals. Zerger reveals this interest in his brief autobiography, never published but held in the Institute of Manuscripts in Baku. In it Zerger recounts his loving relationship with his third wife, Meshedi Khanim, who he comes to call Leyli. Upon their marriage Zerger discovered that she had received a traditional education at her home as a child and was a "natural poet."⁸⁵ Zerger undertook to further her education and improve her writing abilities. Throughout their marriage whenever Zerger traveled for work the two exchanged ghazels lamenting each other's absence.⁸⁶ Zerger's desire for a literate wife who could appreciate his cultural activities was not unique by the turn of the

⁸⁴ Ibid., 169-170

⁸⁵ MFƏİ. Inventory b-1453. Abdulvahab Sayyid Zerger, "Tercume-hal."

⁸⁶ Ibid.

century. The Azeri rhetoric around women's education followed the same course it did in most societies; in order to be good wives and mothers to a newly educated and enlightened Azeri male population, women needed to be literate and educated themselves.

The introduction of prosaic writing as the preferred literary genre is one of the most significant developments of early twentieth-century Azeri cultural activity. Before the turn of the century, Azeri literature was almost exclusively poetic, with the exception of the works of Mirza Fatali Akhundov, who never saw his plays performed in his lifetime, and whose essays were most often written in Persian, and some historical chronicles written by Abbasqulu Bakikhanov and others. The dominant intellectual figures of the mid-nineteenth century were poets, and skill in poetry was the primary means for a young man to establish himself in the cultural circles of Azerbaijan. The new generation of intellectuals in the early twentieth century, however, were increasingly less interested in writing poetry than in writing essays, newspaper articles, plays, and novels. Through increasing Russian literacy, young, educated Azeris gained access to the European literary canon and began to include these prosaic traditions into their own ideas of what constituted a modern and intellectually robust society. Poetry was never completely disposed of, Azeri-language periodicals and literary journals always included poems, but literary energies shifted and expanded to include a variety of new genres. The style of poetry changed in this period as well, with poets not simply shifting to writing in Azeri, but disposing of complicated literary Azeri in favor of a more accessible, vernacular language. Poems no longer tended to be odes and ghazels, and satirical poems became popular among readers and favored for publication by newspapers. Satire was not

new to Azeris or to the broader Persianate world, however the prominence satirical poetry took over other forms in the early twentieth century marked a clear shift in poetic practice.

Although almost none of the leading poets of Azerbaijan's literary assemblies moved into prose-writing themselves, the evolution in the style and content of the poetry of some of the more progressive figures tracks with the shift to vernacular and satirical. Zenger is exemplary of this. As a member of *Majmuesh-Shuera*, Zenger was involved in writing and reciting traditional poetry, and reveals his penchant for writing ghazels when he discusses his correspondence with his wife. In addition to ghazels, however, he writes in his autobiography that he went on to regularly contribute poetry to the leftist periodical *Irshad* as well as other humorous journals, writing on progressive themes.⁸⁷ Shirvani also increasingly wrote poetry in a vernacular Azeri and concerned himself with themes of progress in his later years. In his 1877 letter to Zardabi in which he requested assistance in making a printed copy of his religion textbook, he also included a poem to be printed in the pages of *Ekinchi*, noting the importance of the inclusion of poetry in the press "because words are words, but poetry has great influence."⁸⁸ His commitment to poetry as the most important literary form never wavered, however he did use his poems to advocate for the importance and use of new forms of prose writing. In his poem "Qezet Nedir?" ("What is a newspaper?") Shirvani writes a poem in the style of a conversation between him and an "ignorant person" asking him about the Zardabi's *Ekinchi*.

Yesterday an ignorant person asked me
that, what is a gazette to us at all?
What does this Hasanbey want from us

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Shirvani. "Hasanbey Melikova," *Səçilmiş Əsərləri*, II Cild. 125.

filling the world with dry words
he now says sowing
[and] agriculture is now machines, now from another industry⁸⁹

The poem mocks the resistance of ignorant peasants to the new information brought into their world by the birth of Azeri-language press, particularly in the form of their resistance to agricultural modernization. He goes on to describe reports on American agricultural technology and demand that people study this new science and stop resisting changing their approach to agriculture. Shirvani clearly values the developments in press culture and the access to science and technology that accompanied this new form of informative writing, but he remained certain that poetry was the most powerful literary form, employing it to convince backwards peasants that they should embrace these new venues of information. He even acknowledges the greater appeal of poetry over journalistic writing in the poem, as his ignorant interlocutor refers to Zardabi's "dry words." As Shirvni said, words were only words, but words made into poetry were powerful tools of persuasion.

Accompanying the shift from poetry to prose was the conscious choice of turn-of-the-century Azeri intellectuals to turn away from Persian as the primary literary language and instead to promote writing and literacy in Azeri. Although the poets of the literary assemblies did occasionally write their poems in Turkish, Persian was unquestionably the dominant language in literary circles in the mid nineteenth century. The Azeri poems included by Navvab in his *Tazkira* all invariably include "ghazel Turki" in their titles, accentuating the novelty of the language in which they were written. In contrast, in the majority of his poems, which were written in Persian, Navvab never felt compelled to

⁸⁹ Shirvani, "Qezet Nedir?," *Saçılmış Əsərləri*, II Cild, 57-59.

remark on the language in the title. Navvab, who died in 1918 at 85, was in many ways Azerbaijan's last participant in a vanishing intellectual tradition that connected the vast Persianate world. As Azerbaijan's cultural geography shifted and re-centered in Baku, fewer and fewer educated Azeris were trained in the Persian language and Persian poetry disappeared from the standard education of the elites. Instead, Azeris became literate in their own Turkic vernacular, and from there found Ottoman Turkish easy to access. Education in Russian also became an important route to economic opportunity, through working for the Baku governorate or answering the high demand for Russian language teachers. The nature of empire attracted Azeris to learning Russian, and the rise in Pan-Turkism drew them increasingly into the Ottoman Turkish literary and intellectual orbit. Where once Azeris often went to Iran or Ottoman Iraq to pursue religious education in Shia madrasas, now Azeri educational reformers dreamed of sending talented students to the *Dar-ul Funun* in Istanbul. Azeri reformist intellectuals never fully abandoned an interest in Iran's political and national future, but as it waned in power and influence and the borders of the 1813 Treaty of Gulistan and the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay solidified, the Azeri population of the Russian Empire set down an increasingly Turkic path that separated them definitively from their former empire.

Although turn-of-the-century intellectuals turned away from Persianate traditions, they did not flat out reject the work of their predecessors. Essential to the project of creating an Azeri literary culture was the establishment of a literary canon, and intellectuals looked to the Azeri-language writings of the mid-nineteenth century as a starting point. In particular, Mirza Fatali Akhundov was lionized as the forefather of modern Azeri literature. Both Salvation Enlightenment Society and Enjoyment Society,

the two enlightenment societies that maintained theater companies, regularly staged his plays, which until 1904 had never before been performed. In 1912, Salvation organized a jubilee marking 100 years since Akhundov's birth, staging his plays and debuting a new play based on his life. *Mekteb*, an educational journal aimed at adolescent readers, similarly marked the jubilee that year by dedicating its second issue to Akhundov, referring to him on the cover as "our great writer the late Mirza Fatali Akhundov."⁹⁰

While Akhundov was the most celebrated Azeri writer of the mid-nineteenth century, many of his contemporaries also had direct connections to the new generation of intellectuals. Sayyid Azim Shirvani's legacy lived on through his most famous student, Mirza Alakbar Sabir (1862-1911), who received his education at Shirvani's progressive school. With Shirvani's encouragement, Sabir began writing poetry, initially Persian ghazels in the classical style that he presented at assembly gatherings in Shamakha.⁹¹ Following the footsteps of his teacher, Sabir later began writing satirical poetry in Azeri, which he published in publications such as *Gunesh* and, most famously, *Molla Nasreddin*. Like most men of his generation, Sabir moved from his home of Shamakha to Baku in 1910 in search of a better livelihood, and worked as a schoolteacher. Poor health forced him to return to Shamakha, where he died a year later.⁹² Sabir's poetry collection, *Hophopname*, published posthumously in 1912, became one of the most popular publications of its day and was banned in Qajar Iran. Sabir, one of the most influential Azeri modernist poets of his generation, first found a venue for his poetic voice in Shamakha's *Beytus-Sefa*.

⁹⁰ *Mekteb*, No. 2. 1912. 1.

⁹¹ Hasan Javadi. "Ali Akbar Sabir, the Poet-Satirist of Azerbaijan." *Turkic Culture: Continuity and Change*. Sabri M. Akural, ed. Bloomington, Indiana University Turkish Studies. 1987. 160.

⁹² *Ibid*.

Shirvani's fellow assembly leader, Khurshidbanu Natavan, also left her mark on the culture of the early twentieth century. As previously mentioned, Uzeyir Hajibeyov, one of Azerbaijan's most important cultural innovators of the twentieth century, grew up in Natavan's household, where his father was secretary and his mother an amateur poet and musician encouraged in her endeavors by Natavan. Hajibeyov's fourth opera, *Shah Abbas and Khurshidbanu*, which premiered in 1912, features a young heroine by the name of Khurshidbanu, endowed with both beauty and intelligence, who wins the love of the Shah and reforms him into a benevolent ruler. Hajibeyov's decision to give his heroine the same name as his father's former employer and mother's former patron could not have been arbitrary. In doing so Hajibeyov paid homage to the last heir of the Qarabagh Khanate, known for her philanthropy and artistic abilities, by imbuing his heroine with the same qualities.

Khurshidbanu's stature in Azerbaijani history only increased with the birth of the Soviet Union, when the craftsmen of a Soviet Azerbaijani cultural identity were in search of a female figure to be celebrated as an icon. It was likely through the Soviet process of myth making that still-famous legends around Khurshidbanu first emerged. Most popular among these was that she had once met Alexandre Dumas and beaten him in a game of chess. While Dumas did indeed travel in the Caucasus, and wrote a travelogue recounting his experiences there, he encountered Khurshidbanu only as the wife of Khasay khan Usmiyev, whose French Dumas praised as equivalent to that of a Parisian. Dumas met Usmiyev, Khurshidbanu, her mother, and her children in Baku in 1858. He does not identify her by name in his travelogue, rather identifying her as "the daughter of Mehdiqulu Khan Javanshir, the last khan of Qarabagh" and praising both Khurshidbanu

and her mother as “ravishingly beautiful,” noting that she looked quite attractive in her native costume.⁹³ It is not clear, however, if he ever spoke directly to her. The only indication of any sort of exchange between the two occurred when Dumas gifted an expensive pistol to Usmiyev, who then sent him a note thanking him accompanied by a purse that Khurshidbanu had embroidered, noting that she had bid her husband to give it to him.⁹⁴ The origin of the story of the chess game, as well as additional details such as Dumas’s declaration of love Khurshidbanu, is unclear, but it is without historical evidence. A less whimsical historical fabrication attached to Khurshidbanu declares her the founder of Azerbaijan’s first literary assembly, the *Mejlis-i Uns*. As Nasreddin Qarayev has shown, however, *Mejlis-i Uns* was neither the first literary assembly of its ilk (Qarayev gives that distinction to the *Divan-i Hikmet*, however as the *Tazkira Navvab* shows, the tradition of the literary assembly predated those discussed here, and Navvab records several of Khurshidbanu’s ancestors as participating in assemblies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,) nor was Khurshidbanu the founder. Rather, she became its leader when its founder, Mirza Fena, entered her employ. Khurshidbanu as she exists in the historical record was an impressive figure, however her actual life and work has been almost completely obscured by the legends that rose up around her in her prolific literary afterlife.

Conclusion: Literary Assemblies and the Roots of Azeri Modernism

The various social, cultural, and political forces that created the necessary environment for the emergence of an energetic period of secular cultural production in the early twentieth century were coalescing much earlier in the nineteenth century than is

⁹³ Alexandre Dumas. *Le Caucase: Impressions de Voyage*. Montreal, Le Joyeux Roger. 2006. 255.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 262.

typically considered by historians. With definitive Russian conquest of the region in 1828, European influences began to flow into this largely Persianate world in greater volume than ever before. The leading cultural actors of the day absorbed and reacted to this new environment in ways that would lay the groundwork for the birth of an Azeri public sphere at the turn of the century. The traditional literary *mejlis*, which had existed in the region for centuries, had long anchored Azeri cultural networks and facilitated the exchange of ideas. They were at the epicenter of the new ideas and cultural shifts arising in the nineteenth century. With the birth of the petroleum industry in Baku in the 1870s, the demographics and economic life of Azerbaijan changed dramatically and the former centers of cultural production, dispersed throughout the north and west, became marginal as educated Azeris left the regions and concentrated in Baku. Despite the overwhelming dominance of Baku in Azeri cultural life at the turn of the century, the legacy of the literary assemblies of Shusha, Ganja, Shamakha, and other cities remained in the new generation of Azeri cultural elite, few of whom were actually from Baku. While the rise of a new bourgeois middle class in Baku born of the oil boom and new educational opportunities is certainly an important part of the story of the birth of an Azeri public sphere in Baku, a significant majority of the leaders among Azeri secular modernists hailed from the same class of traditional elites—beys, khans, religious scholars, and elite merchants—that made up the membership of Azerbaijan’s literary assemblies.⁹⁵ The cultural frames of reference that permeated their lives before arriving in Baku would have

⁹⁵ Adeeb Khalid discusses the class backgrounds of the Uzbek contemporaries of the Azeri intellectuals discussed in this dissertation, and the trouble this caused them with the rise of a new Bolshevik generation of intellectuals who were able to easily disavow their elders for their elite backgrounds, in *Making Uzbekistan*.

been those of the Persianate literary and musical traditions, and this emerges clearly in the work they produced.

Pointing out the important and overlooked influence of the cultural structures of pre-oil boom Azerbaijan is not to imply that there were no major shifts that accompanied Baku's rise as an industrial, cosmopolitan center for Azeri life. The innovation and exceptionality of the writings, productions, and ideologies advocated by Turkic reformists in the early twentieth century is what has attracted so much scholarly attention to them. It has inspired both claims of the watershed nature of the movement and ire from scholars who accuse contemporary historians of myopia in their love for the secular, causing them to imbue undue significance to what was a marginal and largely unsuccessful intellectual movement.⁹⁶ This dissertation contributes to the scholarship that supports the latter claim. However much the movement struggled, it is significant as a turning point in Azeri cultural life, represents one facet of the contest over the values and direction of Azeri society playing out between various social leaders in the early twentieth century, is essential to the foundation of Soviet Azerbaijani culture, and is regarded as the renaissance period of Azerbaijani culture in independent Azerbaijan today. As this chapter has revealed, however, many of the key concerns over issues of social reform and cultural reform discussed by Azeri modernists in the turn of the century, were already being debated in literary assemblies throughout the region well before most historians tend to commence their narratives of Turkic modernism in the Russian Empire.

⁹⁶ See Jeff Eden, Paolo Sartori, and Devin DeWeese. "Moving Beyond Modernism: Rethinking Cultural Change in Muslim Eurasia (19th-20th Centuries)." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59, no. 1-2 (2016): 1-36.

These early examples of the reformist impulse among Azeri intellectuals reveal a great deal of cultural hybridity. The model for intellectual exchange, the literary assembly, remained essentially Persian, but as the imperial borders changed, so did the content of the work produced within the assemblies, as well as the experiences of their members. Poets began to increasingly employ a more vernacular language and see poetry as a didactic tool that could be used to advocate social change. The region's recent conquest by the Russian Empire, and the new governing structures that arrived as a result, played a significant role in this. The Russian Empire's rapid, bloody, and definitive conquest of the South Caucasus forced the region's Azeri population, linked to the Qajar Empire by both religion and a shared Turkic tribal identity, to consider the causes behind Russia's supremacy over the Muslim Empire they had historically been part of. The conclusion that many Azeri intellectuals arrived at, and one that Muslim intellectuals throughout the world were similarly coming to, was that their society was in need of reform if it were ever to compete with Europe. As Azeri intellectuals pondered the changes necessary in their society, they also increasingly interacted with the Russian Empire, as the elites from before the conquest largely maintained their positions within their new imperial boundaries. Whether they were military officers like Abbasqulu Bakikhanov and Mehdiqulu khan Vefa Javanshir, interpreters like Mirza Fatali Akhundov, or worked for the governorate like Aghazali bey Naseh, many leading intellectuals of the mid-nineteenth century worked for the Russian Empire, and their work brought them into contact with new ideas and further integrated the Azeri elite into the empire.

These were the forces fomenting in Azeri cultural life when, in 1905, revolution brought new possibilities for associational life and ethnic organization within the Russian Empire. Azeri modernists seized upon the opportunities presented by the new freedoms that came following the revolution and founded a number of enlightenment societies designed specifically to be vehicles through which the many social and cultural reform projects they advocated could be executed. As voluntary associations with explicitly reformist agendas, these societies were better equipped to directly address the modernizing demands in the realms of education, literature, performance, and public life that intellectuals were identifying. Although the model of intellectual organization shifted away from that of the literary assembly, obscuring the role of Azerbaijan's Persianate traditions in the work of Azeri reformers, the influence continued to shape Azeri cultural production of the early twentieth century. This characteristic cultural hybridity is what lent to the great influence of Azeri reformists and contributed to the appeal their work held for intellectuals throughout the Muslim world. The trajectory of cultural production in this small region at the crossroads empires exemplifies the important role played by cultural and social reform programs in the articulation of ethnic identity and autonomy within late empires. The collapse of large land empires and the rise of nationalism in the early twentieth century can in part be explained by the ultimate failure of these efforts.

Chapter 2

The Revolution of 1905 and the Birth of Azeri Enlightenment Societies

In 1871 Hasan Bey Malikov Zardabi (1837-1907), Azerbaijan's most prominent secular intellectual of the late 1800s, embarked on a quest to form the region's first Muslim benevolent society. He recounted this ill-fated endeavor in two humorous articles published in the periodical *Heyat* in 1905, where he chastised Azeri society for failing to develop any sort of associational culture, thirty years on from his initial attempt. "Opening a benevolent society is not difficult," he wrote. In fact, Zardabi had written a charter for his own benevolent society and journeyed throughout the cities of Baku, Shamakha, Shusha, Tiflis, and Derbend, homes to the wealthiest Muslim populations of the region, to collect money for the project. What proceeded, by Zardabi's account, was a farcical level of resistance to parting with money on the part of the Azeri elite. In one case a prominent molla literally ran from the room, in another a bey in Shusha fainted as soon as Zardabi began speaking of charity, with his servants ushering him and his offending requests away. In the end, Zardabi returned to Baku in August with a humorously vague "5-19 promises" of support, but by September, had received no word from any of his pledged benefactors. Finally, Zardabi received some money from Derbend and Shamakha, along with an orphan child each accompanying the donations, with expectations that the new benevolent society would care for them. Zardabi set them up in schools and attempted to maintain their board, but received no further money, leading to the closure of Baku's first Muslim benevolent society two years after it had opened. Zardabi concluded his account with a sharp reprimand for the Azeri people: "To speak with *halva* you don't only need sugar. Flour, butter, and honey are necessary. In

order to see work done, money and men are necessary. A person's expenditure is not in the name of money, it is work for the nation."⁹⁷

Within a year of the article's publication, and just a year before his death, Zardabi's dream of a culture of social organization and charity among the Azeri elite would finally begin to be realized. Following the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the resultant liberalization of laws concerning organizational activities and press freedom, Azeri voluntary associations proliferated. By 1908 the major Azeri population centers of Baku, Ganja, and Tiflis, as well as many smaller towns and settlements, boasted their own Muslim benevolent societies, and Baku became home to a number of enlightenment societies, focused on educational reform and cultural work. Baku's experience paralleled events happening throughout the Russian Empire following 1905; between 1906 and 1909, 4,800 new associations and societies were founded throughout the empire.⁹⁸ For Azeris, these societies organized a new group of educated young men, many who had received higher educations in Russian institutions, and all who were interested in mobilizing to reform education and culture in Azeri society to varying degrees. Hailing from all corners of the Transcaucasus and living in a recently urbanized, cosmopolitan context, these men viewed their society in both an increasingly imperial and global context. Throughout the empire, advances in infrastructural and print technology opened denizens of the Russian Empire's eyes to the broader world in which they were living, and suddenly Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Istanbul, and all of Europe seemed more accessible. As Azeris became more conscious of their membership in a large, multiethnic,

⁹⁷ Hasabey Zardabi. "2." *Heyat* No. 115, 8 December, 1905.

⁹⁸ Lutz Haefner, "Associations and the Public Sphere in Provincial Russia. A Case Study of Saratov, 1800-1917." Jörg Hackmann, ed. *Associational Culture and Civil Society in North Eastern Europe: Regional Features and the European Context*. Böhlau Verlag Wien Köln Wiemar, 2012. p. 519.

empire, they sought ways to elevate their standing within it. Increasingly, modernization in education, print, and cultural production became imperatives in the minds of socially influential Azeris, be they wealthy industrialists, schoolteachers, journalists, or reform-minded mollas. Debates over the nature and extent of necessary social and cultural reform animated Azeri society in the late imperial era.

Society members were aided in their efforts by another class born of Baku's oil boom: a handful of Azeri millionaire industrialists who represented a new category of elite in Azeri society. Four of the richest Azeris of the era, Zeynalabdin Taghiev, Musa Naghiev, Isa bey Ashurbeyli, and Murtuza Mukhtarov, contributed significant funds to Baku's societies and held positions as "honored members" of many, with Taghiev, the richest of the four, serving as chairman of both the Salvation Enlightenment Society (*Nicat Maarif Cemiyyeti*) and the Publication-Enlightenment Society (*Neshri Maarif Cemiyyeti*). The financial and social support of industrialists enabled reformist-minded Azeris farther-reaching influence than they would otherwise have had, as many of the social and cultural programs they advocated were fiercely resisted by conservative sectors of society. This was particularly true of the work of societies toward building an Azeri theater culture and of their efforts to educate girls and women. The educated Azeris who joined enlightenment societies and engaged in social reform projects cannot be taken as a monolith, however; the men who formed this group were diverse in their opinions, politics, and religious lives, and ranged from members of the ulama to avowed communists. Not only were they forced to negotiate heated, often violent, resistance, they also engaged in contentious debates over the nature of modernity and progress amongst

each other, with members of one society just as likely to view the members of another as competitors as they were to see them as potential collaborators.

Associational life in Azerbaijan emerged as both part of a global wave of secular cultural innovation and in a specifically Russian imperial context. The establishment of a *duma* created new possibilities for imperial subjects to act more like citizens, and the proliferation of the press and an increasingly integrated imperial market made formerly isolated populations more aware of their place in a large, powerful empire.⁹⁹ Reform-minded Azeris expressed anxiety over their status within a multi-ethnic empire and enthusiasm for the new possibilities presented by the recent revolution. Almost every prominent Azeri intellectual and artist was engaged with enlightenment societies on some level, as was a large swath of the new middle class. The many cultural and social projects undertaken by societies reveal the priorities, aspirations, and challenges facing Azeri modernists following 1905.

The Russian Revolution of 1905 in Azerbaijan

The emergent Azeri bourgeoisie were hardly unique in their struggles to develop an enriching associational life in the late Russian Empire. Throughout the empire, educated classes sought to foster a public life outside the state. As Laura Engelstein has noted, “In struggling to produce what they thought of as the civil society they lacked, Russians de facto enacted its possibility at home, while at the same time experiencing the limits imposed by their own situation.”¹⁰⁰ Engelstein argues that this was especially true

⁹⁹ Mustafa Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire and European Modernity, 1788–1914*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Laura Engelstein. “The Dream of Civil Society in Tsarist Russia: Law, State, and Religion” in Bermeo, Nancy, and Philip Nord, eds. *Civil Society Before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000. p. 24.

for intellectuals who were not bureaucrats and thus existed outside the regime. This would therefore apply to most Azeris, who were intermittently barred from bureaucratic careers and largely shut out of skilled work in the dominant petroleum industry in Baku. For educated Azeris, a public sphere and its concomitant potential for associational activity offered the only professional opportunities for many in their new social position. The tsarist state saw any sort of public organization outside their direct control as a potential threat, however, and leading up to the revolution prevented the institutionalization of public associations. Following the revolution, Article 38 of the Fundamental Laws of 1906 specifically outlined “the right of Russian subjects to form societies and associations for purposes which are not forbidden by the law.”¹⁰¹ With the establishment of the Fundamental Laws, Russian subjects embraced their new freedoms and 1906 marked a year of feverish activity among Azeri intellectuals seeking to organize themselves into activist societies aimed at the social and cultural advancement of the Azeri people. These newfound rights were precarious, however; despite their enshrinement in the constitution, none of the three dumas ever successfully legislated on those rights, leaving them largely undefined.¹⁰² Thus, Azeri intellectuals had to tread carefully with Russian authorities lest any whiff of nationalism or Pan-Islamic tendencies lead to the forced closure of their new societies.

The way Azeris experienced the 1905 Revolution was shaped by their place within the Russian Empire and their position as a population with deep cultural, religious, and ethnic ties outside the Russian Empire that connected them to both Iran and the

¹⁰¹ Walter Fairleigh Dodd. *Modern Constitutions - A Collection of the Fundamental Laws of Twenty-two of the Most Important Countries of the World, with Historical and Bibliographical Notes*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. pp. 187-188.

¹⁰² Victor Leontovitsch. *The History of Liberalism in Russia*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012. 272

Ottoman Empire. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, Azeri intellectuals and reformist mollahs began to advocate greater educational reform that emphasized education in the vernacular Azeri language, and also responded to the increasing demand for Russian language literacy. While before 1905 some intellectuals, such as Sayyid Azim Shirvani, opened their own schools practicing a sort of proto-new method, most of the Russian-literate Azeri intellectuals who populated the ranks of the Azeri reformists in 1905 had been educated at Russian-Tatar schools. Following completion of their education in these schools, many students went on to study in the Muslim sections of the pedagogical seminaries in Gori and Tiflis and, as newly minted teachers, arrived in Baku seeking work. These teachers were some of the most educated Azeris in the city and formed one of the largest professional groups within the newly emergent Azeri intelligentsia.¹⁰³ They were not exclusively interested in pedagogical pursuits, with many interested in journalism and literary production, but before 1905 found little opportunity to pursue these interests. During the revolution, Azeris expressed their desires in a petition addressed to Russian Prime Minister Witte and Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov, the newly appoint Governor General of the Transcaucasus, in a petition presented in April. The petitioners requested the introduction of the *zemstvo* system of local governance to the Transcaucasus, full access to civil service careers for Muslims, and native language study in all types of schools.¹⁰⁴ These requests reveal the essential desire of Azeri intellectuals to be better integrated into the Russian Empire and to enjoy all the benefits the educated elite of other population groups might expect within the imperial system.

¹⁰³ Tadeusz Swietochowski. *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: The Shaping of a National Identity in a Muslim Community*. Vol. 42. Cambridge University Press, 2004. p. 24.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

Vorontsov-Dashkov responded to this petition by initiating the establishment of the *zemstvo* system in July, but halted the process when violence erupted in the region. In the non-Georgian regions of the Transcaucasus, the dominant Azeri and Armenian populations experienced the Revolution of 1905 as a yearlong period of intense interethnic violence, directing government attention away from such reforms as *zemstvos* and education and toward the much more expedient demands of putting an end to the massacres that were being committed by armed bands from both groups. Indeed, Vorontsov-Dashkov had been appointed to the region, which the Tsar restored to a viceroyalty (thus endowing the Governor General with far more expansive powers than those in similar positions in European Russia) in response to the wave of violence between Armenians and Azeris, specifically to reestablish order.

The “Armeno-Tatar War,” as the conflict would come to be known, began in February 1905 in Baku with the murder of an Azeri man by a group of Armenians. Although acts of violence were hardly uncommon in the city, this act sparked a chain reaction, with mobs of Azeris rioting in the streets, looting Armenian shops, and setting Armenian homes and businesses ablaze, often killing the fleeing occupants. The Armenians of the city responded by forming their own armed groups and seeking out and shooting Azeris. The violence lasted four days, and soon spread throughout the countryside, resulting in the deaths of between 3,100-10,000 individuals. It would last into early 1906.¹⁰⁵ Vorontsov-Dashkov arrived in Tiflis to assume his post in May, not long after the initial Baku riots. Upon his arrival Vorontsov-Dashkov set about trying to identify the root of the hostilities between Azeris and Armenians that could have led to

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 41.

such chaos, referencing a “historical hatred” in his report and describing Armenians as naturally peaceful and industrious, with the exception of a few bad egg social democratic revolutionaries, while Tatars had an “instinct for brigandage.”¹⁰⁶

This dichotomy drawn by Vorontsov-Dashkov, between the practical Armenians and criminal Azeris, was one that would chafe at Azeri intellectuals as they strove to elevate their people’s position within the empire. Such rhetoric served only to deepen the emerging gulf between Azeris and Armenians. However much Vorontsov-Dashkov may have claimed that historic hatred underlay the clashes between Azeris and Armenians, no such history existed. Azeris and Armenians had populated the same region for centuries without endemic violence. This is not to imply there existed some form of ideal interethnic harmony prior to 1905, but to note that the violence that broke out that year, and intermittently through the remainder of the Russian Empire’s existence, was not a natural occurrence stemming from historic relations between Azeris and Armenians. Prior to the twentieth century, the two populations did not necessarily view each other in terms of competition and opposition. That the violence commenced in Baku was not happenstance; as discussed in the previous chapter, Baku transformed rapidly from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century from a homogenous Turkic city to a majority-Christian city. While some Azeris reaped the riches of the newly emergent petroleum industry, Armenians held greater representation in the categories of skilled workers and wealthy industrialists in Baku. Economic resentment felt by Azeris dispossessed of the oil wealth they felt was their right was likely directed at Armenians

¹⁰⁶ Leslie Sargent, "The 'Armeno-Tatar War' in the South Caucasus, 1905–1906: Multiple Causes, Interpreted Meanings," *Ab Imperio*. 2010, No. 4. p. 150.

more so than newer arrivals to the region such as Russians and Germans. Armenians were fellow native Caucasians, an intimate other who also lived wherever Azeris lived, but whose Christianity made them, in the eyes of many Azeris, privileged within the Christian Russian Empire. The fact that Armenians had experienced the closure of parish schools and confiscation of church lands, not dissimilarly to the seizure of *waqf* lands experienced by Muslims in the empire, did not enter Azeri thinking on the matter. When the violence did break out, most Azeris and Armenians desired a swift end, with the *Sheikh ul-Islam* (official religious leader of the Shia population) of the Transcaucasus and leaders of the Armenian clergy organizing a march in Baku following the riots in a bid to restore order.¹⁰⁷ The damage wrought by the fighting was permanent, however; even among leading Azeri intellectuals who had been involved in the process of establishing peace, a sense of anxiety over the place of Armenians in Russian society and in the local economy remained, as did a sense of victimhood at the hands of the *Dashnaks*, the Armenian Social Democrats who led the Armenian side of the violence. Ahmed Agaoglu, the Azeri journalist and politician who at the time was editor of *Heyat*, one of the few Azeri-language periodicals that existed prior to 1906, increased his publication's popularity and readership through its coverage of the 1905 conflicts. In the pages of *Heyat* Agaoglu and other contributors accused the imperial administration of favoring Armenians in the conflict, and argued that officials also favored their economic interests, which posed a direct threat to Muslim wellbeing.¹⁰⁸ While leading Azeris wanted the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 154.

¹⁰⁸ Alexandre Bennigsen, and Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay. *La Presse et le Mouvement National chez les Musulmans de Russie Avant 1920*. Vol. 2. Mouton, 1964. p. 107.

violence to end, they increasingly developed an identity that stood in opposition to Armenians.

The petroleum industry and the new economy of Baku drove the increasing ethnic acrimony between Azeris and Armenians. Where once Azeris had owned most of the land in and around Baku, with Russian rule and the oil boom, Azeris saw their dominance in the Absheron Peninsula, where Baku was located, dissipate. Historian Thomas C. Owen notes that Armenians were able to capitalize on the petroleum industry in a way few Azeris managed to:

In thirteen of the twenty-two petroleum drilling and refining companies founded in Baku between 1881 and 1900, all the founders belonged to a single ethnic group (Armenians in twelve and Russians in one). The need for a local financial institution led prominent Azeri and Armenian petroleum interests to cooperate in founding the lone joint-stock bank in that city: the Baku Merchant Bank (1899). However, in only one charter of the nine petroleum companies with a mixed ethnic composition did Armenian and Azeri names appear together.¹⁰⁹

While Armenians founded over half the drilling and refining companies in Baku, Azeris were much more likely to populate the ranks of unskilled laborers who toiled in the oil fields and lived in poverty. As a result, early efforts among Armenian intellectuals to carve out an ethnic space in the public sphere were better funded, better organized and, in the estimation of many Azeri intellectuals, faced less censorship by the government. As Azeri intellectuals struggled to foster a similar movement toward associational culture and public life among their own population, Armenians, the ethnic group with which they had the most intimate history, became both aspirational and a source of anxiety.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas C Owen. "Bourgeois Consciousness in Russia" in, Clowes, Edith W., Samuel D. Kassow, and James L. West, eds. *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia*. Princeton University Press, 1991. p. 83.

When Zardabi wrote of his attempt to found his Muslim benevolent society in 1871, he used the existence of similar Armenian societies as an example to shame the wealthy Muslims who refused to heed his rallying call. Why did Azeris fail where Armenians succeeded, even before Armenians enjoyed the economic advantages they possessed by the turn of the century? “Armenians in Baku have opened benevolent societies since 40 years ago. During that time, there were very few Armenians in Baku” he wrote, and yet they managed to organize a number of successful benevolent societies.¹¹⁰ Zardabi went on to describe how Armenians with means promptly rallied to gather the funds necessary to sustain benevolent societies, while funds that had been promised to Zardabi by Muslim elites had failed to materialize. As the ethnic group to which Azeris had the closest ties and greatest familiarity, Armenians were the natural example Zardabi would select for a comparison with Azeris. However, writing in 1904 when tensions between the two groups were mounting, he likely knew that the negative comparison would sting, and perhaps motivate Azeris in a way any similar comparisons to Georgians, Russians, or discussion of associational life in the Ottoman Empire, would not. Azeris were influenced by Armenians in their organizational activities, though less out of competition than the mere fact that Armenians were the population Azeris had the closest contact with, and despite the violent conflicts, many educated Azeris closely associated with their Armenian contemporaries.

Using Armenian successes in the public sphere as a weapon to shame Azeri elites continued to be a tactic after Zardabi deployed it in 1904. In 1908 in the pages of *Tereqqi*, a journal which like the since-closed *Heyat* was under the editorship of Ahmed

¹¹⁰ Hasan bey Zardabi. “Baki Kheyriyye Binasi.” *Həyat*.

Agaoglu, the Azeri politician and intellectual Mammed Amin Rasulzade replied to a letter in the previous issue of the journal in which a writer demanded to know what work was being accomplished by Azeri enlightenment societies compared to the considerable work done by their Armenian counterparts. Rasulzade, a founding member of Salvation Enlightenment Society, responded with a lengthy piece defending the work of Azeri societies, and with no small amount of affront. The letter, he notes, questioned “what work our societies do,” and that his article would answer this worthy question. “What do our benevolent societies and enlightenment workers do?!...” he demanded indignantly.¹¹¹ Azeri societies worked day-to-day to address the needs of enlightenment and culture. They did everything Armenian societies did, in the realms of education, publishing, theater, and charity.¹¹² Rasulzade dismissed out of hand the idea that Azeri societies were errant in achieving their purposes. Would the letter writer have inspired such a response had he not brought Armenians into his argument? It is difficult to say, as Rasulzade tended toward verbosity and confrontation in much of his journalistic production, but it would seem that the letter touched a nerve in its accusation that Azeri societies compared unfavorably with those organized by the Armenian community.

Founding the First Enlightenment Societies

The first Azeri enlightenment society, Salvation Enlightenment Society was founded on March 8, 1906 by leading Baku intellectuals including Mammed Amin

¹¹¹ I am translating *Kheriyye Cemiyeti* as “benevolent society” and *Maarif Cemiyeti* as “enlightenment society.” “*Kheriyye*” could be fairly translated as either “charitable” or “benevolent.” I have selected to translate it as “benevolent” to align my work with broader work on benevolence in global history. “*Maarif*” translates as both “education” and “enlightenment.” The goals of *maarif cemiyetleri* were broader than simple education, including the expansion of the reading public, reforming gender roles in society, and altering charitable practices. Because of the breadth of the program of reform undertaken by these societies, I believe “enlightenment society” is a more accurate translation than “educational society.”

¹¹² Mammed Amin Rasulzade. “Kheriyye ve Maarif Cemiyetlerimiz.” *Tereqqi*. No. 78, October 17, 1908.

Rasulzade, Uzeyir Hajibeyov, the actors Huseynqulu Sarabski and Huseyn Arablinski, and representatives of the free professions including publishers and doctors. Upon its founding Zeynalabdin Taghiev and Musa Naghiev, the two richest Azeri industrialists, each pledged 500 rubles to the society.¹¹³ Just five months later, the Publication Enlightenment Society emerged, followed by the Happiness Religious Society (*Seadat Ruhani Cemiyyeti*) in 1907 and the Enjoyment Society (*Safa Cemiyyeti*) in 1910. There was also, before any enlightenment societies, a Muslim Benevolent Society headquartered in Baku and active throughout the region. These are not the only societies founded by Azeris following 1905, nor was such activity exclusive to Baku, however these were the largest and most influential of the Azeri societies, and Baku remained the uncontested center of Azeri culture and wealth to the end of the Russia Empire, rivaled only by Tiflis, capital of the Transcaucasus.

The men who founded Azeri societies came from diverse backgrounds, and while the societies shared many of the same broad goals, their activities and membership reflect the varied interpretations of progress and reform held by Azeri public actors in the early twentieth century. While Salvation Society was founded by a group of young intellectuals whose experimentations in literature and art were fairly radical for the time, Publication Society's eight founding members, listed in its charter, were a more traditional group of men representing Baku's economically advantaged Muslim classes, comprising four merchants, two technical engineers, one sixth grade teacher, and one man of wealthy landed background.¹¹⁴ Happiness Society, meanwhile, was founded explicitly as a

¹¹³ Nasiman Yaqublu. *Azərbaycanın İlk Qəyri-Hökumət Təşkilatları*. Baku. Elm və Tehsil. 2013. p. 35.

¹¹⁴ ADTA. F46 S2 Q147. *Baku Musulman Nəşri-Maarif Cəmiyyətinin Nizamnamesi*. İsa Bey Ashurbeyovun Kaspîi Meətbəsi. 1912, p. 2.

religious society, and stipulated in its charter that at least half of its membership must be drawn from the ulama.¹¹⁵ Enjoyment Society was closest to Salvation in character and thus soon its greatest rival for the loyalties of the top secular cultural innovators of the Azeri community, with some actors such as Huseyn Arablinsky working with both societies, while others pledged themselves to a single society in opposition to the other.¹¹⁶ Enjoyment Society seemed to attract even younger and more radical members than Salvation Society, which soon became a bastion for Baku's secular elites. One notable member of Enjoyment Society, Dadash Bunyadzade, would go on to become the People's Commissar of Enlightenment in the Soviet Azerbaijani government.

Salvation Society claimed preeminence among Baku's societies as the oldest among them, despite Publication Society having arrived just months behind it. In its 1907-1908 account report, the society declared that "Salvation Enlightenment Society is the oldest of the societies in Baku. It deserves to be given the name of the most productive of all the remaining societies."¹¹⁷ Boastfulness aside, Salvation was involved in an impressive array of activities from its inception, quickly gaining permission to build both a library and a reading room, organizing night classes and Friday classes for adults, funding publications, and running a theater company that gave regular performances starting in 1908. Both Publication Society and Happiness Society, true to their charters, remained almost exclusively focused on educational activities. Enjoyment Society mirrored Salvation Society in many ways, but remained a smaller society with less

¹¹⁵ ADTA. F46 S2 Q456. *Baku Musulman Ruhanilerinin Seadat Cemiyetinin Nizamnamesidir*. Orujov Qardashlarinin Meetbesi. 1907. p. 10.

¹¹⁶ Yaqublu, *Azərbaycanın İlk Qəyri-Hökumət Təşkilatları*. 42.

¹¹⁷ AMK. "Bakıda Musulman Maarif Cemiyəti "Nicat"ın ikincisine devamisi (1907 ve 1908 sina)'nin hesabi." Baku. Orucov Qardashlarin Meetbesi. 1908.

money and less illustrious membership. Salvation Society engaged in the same traditional educational activities as other societies, but its theater company and frequent organization of public events such as jubilees and lectures made it the most prominent society in Azeri public life.

Salvation, Publication, Happiness, and Enjoyment Societies all shared the primary goal of promoting and improving Azeri-language education through the improvement of teaching methods in existing schools and the organization of new schools. Salvation listed two primary goals in its charter; to spread education among Muslims and aid students in higher, preparatory, and primary schools, and to work for the advancement of national language and national literature.¹¹⁸ This second goal is what set Salvation apart from other societies, as it was in service of it that the society organized a theater company, published the work of Azeri writers, and ultimately founded its own newspaper. Publication Society, true to its name, stated that its primary purpose was “to help in the publication of basic literacy texts on education and science in both Turkic and Russian among the Muslim population.”¹¹⁹ Although claiming publication as their primary focus, Publication Society would develop to be the most influential of all the societies in the realm of primary education. It founded schools, gave aid to existing ones, and ultimately formed its own teacher training school to address the shortage of qualified teachers. Publication Society’s leading role in education will be discussed further in the following chapter on the educational activities of Baku societies.

Remarkably, it was only Happiness Society, a religious society dominated by members of the ulama, that explicitly named the *usul-i jadid* in its charter. The society’s

¹¹⁸ ADTA. F46 S2 Q78. *Bakı Nicat Cemiyetinin Qerardadi*. Kaspıi Meetbesi. 1906. p 1.

¹¹⁹ ADTA. F46 S2 Q147. p. 3.

two stated goals were to spread the new method of teaching to existing schools in Baku and, over time, to found new religious schools and teacher schools. Among the strategies the society planned to employ in its pursuit of these goals was the organization of readings and lecture events specifically for members of the ulama.¹²⁰ Much of the scholarship on Turkic modernism in the Russian Empire emphasizes the tension between the goals of the new class of intelligentsia and the traditional intellectual elite of the Muslim clergy, with this tension framed as a contestation of authority over knowledge and who can claim the right of moral guidance over the population. In his book *Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire and European Modernity, 1788–1914*, Mustafa Tuna argues that in analyzing the context of the conflict between traditionalists and modernists, even more important than this dynamic is “the progressive reformist cohort’s alienation from the broader Muslim population.”¹²¹ This is certainly true for some members of the Azeri intelligentsia; the members of Salvation and Enjoyment Societies in particular, in their controversial pursuit of fostering native Azeri theater and opera, in the socialist leanings of many of their members, and in their other writings and cultural projects, often found themselves utterly out of step with most of Azeri society and its values and bitterly frustrated with their failure to institute the reforms they thought vital for social progress.

Missing from the standard “traditionalist vs modernist” dichotomy that Tuna critiques in his work is not only the process of alienation he describes, but also the cohort of reformist ulama that, in Azerbaijan at least, played a key role in the discourses on modernity emerging in the Azeri public sphere. The members of Happiness Society were

¹²⁰ ADTA. F46 S2 Q456. p. 3.

¹²¹ Mustafa Tuna. *Imperial Russia's Muslims*. p. 173.

certainly never as radical as their counterparts in Salvation and Enjoyment Societies: theater is mentioned nowhere in their charter, and where theater ticket sales formed a major part of the income for the former two societies, Happiness Society stayed resolutely away. Aside from the theater, however, Happiness Society engaged in many of the same reformist activities as other enlightenment societies that did not identify explicitly as religious societies. It organized public lectures on the arts and sciences, hosted literary discussions, opened a library and a reading room, and founded a lodging house for students. The society's school, the *Seadat Mektebi*, was one of the best new method schools in the city, and from 1910-1916 was under the directorship of Ali bey Huseynzade, one of Azerbaijan's most important intellectuals and an outspoken advocate for the universalization of a standardized Ottoman Turkish as the new Turkic lingua franca.¹²² Through their organized readings on science targeted at members of the ulama, Happiness Society's reformist clergy sought to influence traditionalists and perhaps render the new method more amenable to them.

Happiness Society was not alone in its attempts to appeal to and appease the ulama. Publication Society, which forged a middle path between the more conservative Happiness and more radical Salvation and Enjoyment Societies, had no religious membership quota, but did count mollahs among its members. In the notes for its second ever leadership meeting, one of the points discussed related to the society's stated goal in the previous meeting of promoting the spread of the newspaper *Irshad*. *Irshad* was Agaoglu's latest journalistic endeavor, and tended toward a more reformist, secular tone. While in the previous meeting Publication's leadership had agreed in uncritical terms to

¹²² Yaqublu, *Azərbaycanın İlk Qəyri-Hökumət Təşkilatları*. p. 38.

support the journal, noting that society members should subscribe to it, it seems they received some pushback from religious members for the decision. In their second meeting, they amended their support of *Irshad* somewhat, noting that they had concluded that it was the responsibility of Muslim newspapers to publish any letter sent to them that was signed by a member of the ulama.¹²³ It seems unlikely that Agaoglu, if ever informed of this determination made by the society's membership, would have agreed to it. He was among the most radical young members of the Azeri intelligentsia, a friend and frequent collaborator with Hajibeyov, whose satirical contributions to both Agaoglu's newspapers and the infamous *Molla Nasreddin* regularly lampooned traditionalism and the clergy. Indeed, Agaoglu blamed the decrease in *Irshad*'s circulation numbers around Ramadan on the ulama for denouncing reading newspapers as immoral.¹²⁴ Whatever Agaoglu's response to Publication Society's resolution, the society's desire to simultaneously promote a secular, reformist journal and appease and respect the authority of the religious establishment is emblematic of the complicated landscape being navigated by Azeri modernists. Publication Society seemed to truly respect the leadership role of the ulama in society; in a later meeting the board agreed that a religious commission would be set up to review and discuss all petitions received from Baku students.¹²⁵ Their support of *Irshad* was equally sincere, however. While some members of the intelligentsia, including Agaoglu, became increasingly disaffected and alienated from Azeri society, many of the most influential institutions in the Azeri public sphere sought compromise between reformist goals and traditionalist hierarchies. Because these projects of social

¹²³ ADTA F312 S1 Q2

¹²⁴ James H. Meyer. *Turks Across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856-1914*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2014. p. 89.

¹²⁵ ADTA f312 s1 q2

reform were ongoing when the Russian Empire shattered with World War I, it is impossible to say what might have happened had such a rupture not occurred. Associations such as Happiness Society and Publication Society, however, show that there was more collaboration between the ulama and reformists than is often acknowledged.

Music Assemblies

In addition to organizing enlightenment and benevolent societies, Azeri cultural actors also began collecting into more informal groups in the interest of collaboration and exchange. In particular, Azeri actors created theater troupes, while musicians joined together into music assemblies. I will address Azeri theater organization further in chapter four, but here will address music assemblies as important organizations for connecting traditional and new artistic forms, and as examples of further continuity between the literary assemblies of the past and the associational activity of the early twentieth century.

Music assemblies predated societies by at least a decade. They were essentially social organizations; members did not pay dues, accounts were not kept, and the assemblies did not engage in any sort of political or social work. They thus did not require charters and bureaucratic permission to form. Members of these music assemblies were largely traditional Azeri musicians, both *mugham* musicians and *ashiqs*. The assemblies served as professional networks for musicians, who earned their livelihoods through performing at events such as weddings and banquets. They also provided musical innovators such as Uzeyir Hajibeyov and Muslim Magomayev (grandfather and namesake of the more famous Muslim Magomayev, beloved Soviet crooner), who began

composing music that synthesized *mugham* and European-style classical music, with important collaborators who could help legitimize their projects. While in other parts of the world middle class populations were rejecting folk music while embracing classical music as a sign of sophistication and learning, Azeris never ceased regarding *mugham* as high culture, and regarded Hajibeyov's early operas with some skepticism. His relationship with prominent *mugham* musicians, such as the beloved singer Jabbar Qaryaghdioğlu, granted him greater legitimacy as he pursued his projects.

Qaryaghdioğlu, (an adopted name that translates to "Son of Snow Has Fallen"), was a Shusha native who moved to Baku like many enterprising young men of his generation. He was joined in this migration by the *mugham* musicians Mammed Kechechi, Seyyid Sushinski, and his ensemble members, *tar* player Qurban Pirimov and *kamacha* player Sasha Oganezashvili.¹²⁶ Formerly a cultural backwater, Baku became home to some of the most promising musicians of their generation. These musicians became active participants in enlightenment societies, both through their theater activities and as performers at evening soirees that Azeri elites organized to benefit societies (further discussed in chapter 3.) Music assemblies functioned similarly to the literary assemblies of old. Musicians would gather to perform together, exchanging songs and poetry. There were assemblies in most major Azeri population centers in the early twentieth century, including Ganja and Shusha. Like the *Majlis-i Uns* of Shusha, which Hajibeyov had grown up associated with through his mother, Hajibeyov's music assembly also featured the participation of women, as seen in a photo of the group in 1918 featuring five women in European dress. Music assemblies are one of the best-

¹²⁶ Inna Naroditskaya. *Song From the Land of Fire: Continuity and Change in Azerbaijanian Mugham*. New York: Routledge, 2003. 93.

recorded examples of how traditional Azeri cultural figures engaged and collaborated with their reformist contemporaries, and the diverse ways in which associational life was developing.



Figure 2 Hajibeyov’s assembly. Seated in the second row between the women, from left to right: Huseynqulu Sarabski, Zulfuqar Hajibeyov, Uzeyir Hajai beyov, Muslim Magomayev¹²⁷

The Press and the Reading Public

The Fundamental Laws of 1906, ensuring the right “within the limits prescribed by law” for thoughts to be expressed in writing and disseminated via the press, paved the way for a dynamic press culture in Baku. With generous funding from Zeynalabdin Taghiev, millionaire engineer Murtuza Mukhtarov, wealthy landowner and printing entrepreneur Isa bey Ashurbeyov and his father Bashir, and later the Orujov Brothers, who ran a successful for-profit press, Azeri intellectuals who had long held an interest in journalistic careers embarked upon an energetic period of founding, editing, and

¹²⁷ ADİΘA F725 S1 Q252.

contributing to the dozens of newspapers that appeared following 1906. Newspapers were often short-lived; an organ could lose its funding, have its readership turn against it with the publication of an unpopular or controversial article, dissolve due to editorial infighting or, the most common death for an Azeri newspaper, be permanently shut down by the Tsarist authorities, for any number of infractions including promoting pan-Turkism, pan-Islam, or “dangerous tendencies.” Some, however, were long-lived. The famous satirical literary journal *Molla Nasreddin* was published continuously from 1906-1918. Despite the frenetic nature of the Azeri press, newspapers created a new space for public opinion to form, and the more successful papers enjoyed circulations of up to 3,000. Through their distribution in reading rooms, which served an essential function in the development of a reading public among a largely illiterate population, they reached much greater audiences than their circulation numbers would suggest.¹²⁸

Ahmed Agaoglu and his associates formed an early and powerful group of journalists in Baku, writing initially for *Heyat*. After Taghiev pulled his funding from *Heyat*, Agaoglu continued on to the organ of *Irshad* (*Guidance*, published 1905-8), funded by the wealthy landowner Bashir bey Ashurbeyov, father of influential Salvation Society member Isa bey Ashurbeyov, which was shut down following a satirical article by Uzeyir Hajibeyov under his penname *Filankes* (“so-and-so.”)¹²⁹ Proving that it would have been more effective for Tsarist authorities to ban certain people from journalism than to shut down newspapers, Agaoglu promptly started *Tereqqi* (*Progress*), with funding from Mukhtarov, following *Irshad*'s demise, though this paper only lasted a year

¹²⁸ Meyer, *Turks Across Empires*, 89.

¹²⁹ Bennigsen & Lemerrier-Quelquejay. *La Presse et le Mouvement National chez les Musulmans de Russie Avant 1920*. 108.

and was shut down in 1909. Agaoglu, along with Rasulzade and Hajibeyov, who both collaborated with him and served as editors of other papers, regularly clashed with traditionalists in the pages of their publications. The young men, three of the most dynamic minds of their generation, advocated secular education, greater participation of women in public life, increased understanding of and application of the sciences, and other issues they viewed as essential to progress. They were not the only voices in Baku's press, however, and faced competition from a more conservative set of journalists. Hashim bey Vezirov, Agaoglu's brother-in-law, became his chief rival as he undertook editorships of several more conservative newspapers that, while still advocating for native language literacy and Azeri advancement, took a much dimmer view of socialism, satire, and secularism than the newspapers under the stewardship of Agaoglu, Hajibeyov, and Rasulzade. Vezirov's first paper, *Taza Heyat* ("New Life"), was a resurrected version of *Heyat*. Once again funded by Taghiev, the paper failed to gain much of a readership and was quickly closed. His following two efforts, *Ittifaq* ("Union") and *Sada* ("Voice") were both closed down by the authorities in 1910 for promoting pan-Islam.¹³⁰

In addition to individual subscribers, the many new reading rooms (*qiraetkhanas*) that emerged following 1905 maintained subscriptions to dozens of newspapers. Reading rooms were at the heart of the emergent reading public in Baku. While enlightenment and benevolent societies diverged over whether spaces such as the theater were worthy of resources, all societies agreed on the vital role of reading rooms in their projects of promoting progress and social reform among the Azeri population. Publication,

¹³⁰ Ibid., 113.

Salvation, and Happiness Societies all list the founding and opening of both libraries and reading rooms as among the activities the society would undertake to advance its goals.

Azeri intellectuals drew from a diverse set of influences in constructing their ideas around progress and social reform, and the reading room was no exception. Azeris would have encountered various iterations of reading rooms in their travels before they could found any such institution of their own. The name they used for the spaces, *qiraetkhana* (“reading house”), came from the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman *kiraathane* first emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as hybrid between a coffee house and a typical library reading room. Such spaces were born both of a growing secular reading culture and increased rhetoric surrounding coffee houses and cafes as immoral spaces.¹³¹

Kiraathanes strived to be a new type of space, where educated men could gather to read, discuss the latest news and literature, and socialize. According to historian Benjamin Fortna, at their peak in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman *kiraathanes* “seem to have served as an important vehicle for intellectual and social life, a mix of the traditional café, a literary salon and a men’s social club.”¹³² The many Azeris who traveled between Istanbul and cities in the South Caucasus would have certainly participated in the reading culture fostered by these spaces, and sought to recreate them in their own societies upon return. They were not unique in this; Muslims throughout Eurasia reproduced Ottoman *kiraathanes* in their own cities. Historian Leyla Amzi-Erdogdular’s recent work on Bosnian intellectuals in the Hapsburg Empire reveals that *qiraetkhanas* (Bosnian:

¹³¹ Cengiz Kirli. “Coffeehouses: Leisure and Sociability in Ottoman Istanbul.” in Peter Borsay and Jan Hein Furnee, eds. *Leisure Cultures in Urban Europe, c. 1700-1870: A Transnational Perspective*. Manchester. Manchester University Press, 2016. p. 177.

¹³² Benjamin C. Fortna. *Learning to Read in the Ottoman Empire and the Early Turkish Republic*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. p. 162.

kiraethana) were critical spaces of intellectual exchange and the promotion of literacy.

She describes the Bosnian *kiraethana* thusly:

The reading room was a public space that offered its patrons newspapers, journals, and books and organized lectures and discussions. It served as a public forum, elevating public consciousness about issues relevant to Muslims, and it was the birthplace of the movement for educational and religious autonomy. Most importantly, the *kiraethana* was intended to combat illiteracy, and important material was often read aloud and discussed.¹³³

Amzi-Erdogdular's description of Bosnian reading rooms is strikingly similar to the function and purpose of Azeri reading rooms, indicating that these spaces were common throughout the Muslim world at the time, especially those within the Ottoman intellectual sphere. Amzi-Erdogdular identifies similar reading rooms as existing in other Bosnian cities as well as in Bulgaria.

The Ottoman desire to offer an alternative space to immoral café culture existed in Azerbaijan as well. In his memoir, the great Azeri actor and singer Huseynqulu Sarabski recalled his early career as an adolescent singing in tea houses and cafes, spaces he described as being constantly full of idle, unemployed youths and men.¹³⁴ In a 1906 issue of *Molla Nareddin*, a cartoon appeared depicting a bazaar in the Muslim district of Tiflis. Men were drawn sleeping, smoking, and eating melons outside a teahouse, while within more men smoked and played card games. A polemic against idleness and vice characterized Azeri intellectual condemnation of cafes as anti-progressive spaces in this period.¹³⁵ Reading rooms presented an alternative to loitering in tea houses, which offered little in the way of productive, enriching activity in the eyes of modernists. Azeri

¹³³ Leyla Amzi-Erdogdular. "Alternative Muslim Modernities: Bosnian Intellectuals in the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, no. 4 (2017). 929.

¹³⁴ Huseynqulu Sarabski, *Bir Aktyorun Xatirələri*, Baku, Azerneshr, 1930. p. 11.

¹³⁵ *Molla Nasreddin*. September 15, 1906. No. 24.

reading rooms were not direct translations of their Ottoman counterparts, however. The reading rooms founded by Azeri societies borrowed their vocabulary from the Ottomans but did not seem to be the same sort of hybrid spaces as the *kiraathanes*. These were not privately-owned businesses, but spaces founded and funded by societies, and thus directly associated with them. In this way, Azeri reading rooms mirrored those emerging throughout the Russian Empire. Society-run reading rooms were typical of the associations that were founded following 1905, with the Azeri versions following an empire-wide pattern of the creation of new social spaces built around reading. In his case study of associational life in Saratov, Lutz Haefner identified reading rooms, and the access they provided to literature and periodicals, as one of the deciding factors in the decision of individuals to join local associations.¹³⁶ Like the provincial Russian associations investigated by Haefner, Azeri societies prioritized their reading rooms as among the primary spaces for socializing among society members and other likeminded individuals.

¹³⁶ Haefner. "Associations and the Public Sphere in Provincial Russia." p. 525.



Figure 3 "'Satan's Bazaar' in Tiflis (Muslim quarter)"

Reading rooms may very well have been even more dominant to associational life for Azeris, as the other primary association activities identified by Haefner, such as gambling and the hosting of dances, were *haram* activities that even the most secularly-inclined societies would not condone. Interestingly, while Haefner identifies reading room access as contingent upon association membership, Azeri societies had no such rules for their own reading rooms. Considering their educationally activist mindset, it is likely Azeri societies wanted to encourage as much of the public as possible to frequent their reading rooms. Indeed, at the end of their 1907-1908 account report, Salvation Society included a table documenting the number of visitors to their reading room that year, accounting for 20,786 discrete visits. Visitors to the reading room were by no means exclusively Azeri, with the table listing 11,574 Muslim visitors, 8,581 Russians, 608 Georgians, 497 Jews, 458 Armenians, and 78 visitors of “other nationalities.”¹³⁷ Although Salvation Society, like all the other societies discussed in this dissertation, was

¹³⁷ AMK. “Bakida Musulman Maarif Cemiyeti “Nicat”in ikincisini devamesi (1907 ve 1908’sini)’nin hessabi.” Baku, Orujov Qardashlari Meetbesi. 1908. p. 16.

an ethnically-Azeri association, their reading room patronage appears to have expressed the cosmopolitan makeup of Baku.

The purpose of reading rooms was to serve as inclusive spaces that promoted literacy, however their success in this regard is difficult to measure. The statistics on Salvation Society's reading room visitors reveals significant Muslim patronage, but the heavy use of the reading room by non-Muslims, especially Russians, raises the question of whether reading room patrons represented a cross-section of Azeri society of both active members of the reading public and those looking to join it, or if reading rooms primarily served as spaces for educated Azeris who were members of a multi-ethnic intellectual class to interact with their Russian, Georgian, Jewish, and Armenian contemporaries. Audrey Altstadt notes that societies opened reading rooms in the oil districts, as "literacy went hand in hand with the growing politicization of the lower classes."¹³⁸ However, in 1908, *Molla Nasreddin* published a cartoon casting doubt upon just how much workers were using these reading rooms. The image shows a reading with the sign *Fabrika Qiraetkhanasi*—"Factory Reading Room"—and depicts two well-heeled Muslim men entering the room where a similar man can be seen through the window reading a newspaper. One of the men is looking at something in his hand, such as a note, while behind him a man beats away a group of laborers with a stick. The caption reads "they gave a password for permission to enter the reading room so that, laborers were not let into the reading room."¹³⁹ *Molla Nasreddin's* satire cannot, of course, be taken as fact, but Mammadguluzade and his cartoonists had a knack for laying bare the harsh truths of

¹³⁸ Audrey Altstadt. *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity Under Russian Rule*. Hoover Institution Press. 1992. 57.

¹³⁹ *Molla Nasreddin*. March 16, 1908, No. 11.

Azeri society. The caricatured factory reading room indicates at least a perception that these spaces were less than welcoming to the laboring classes.

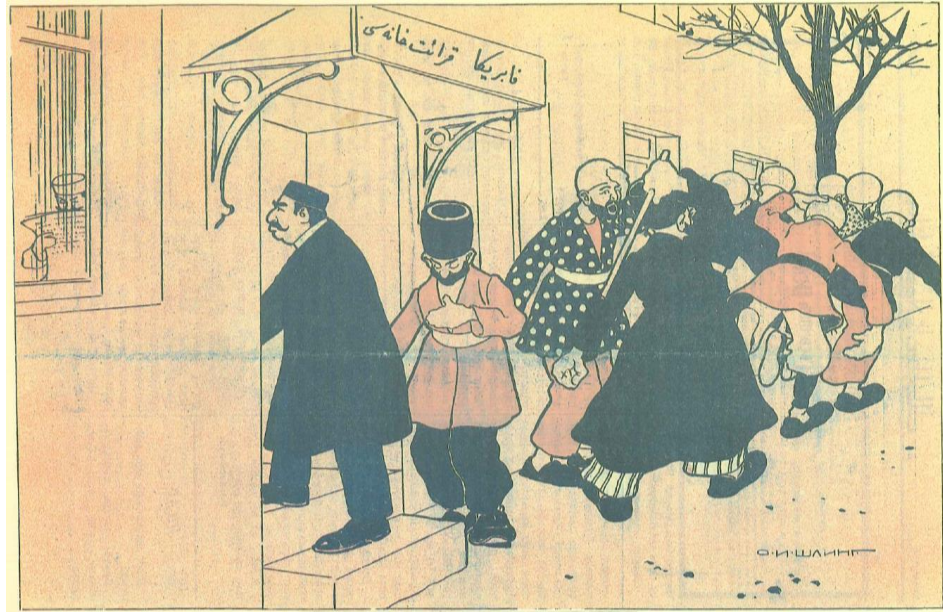


Figure 4 “Qiraetkhana”

A substantial sum of society expenditure was dedicated to reading rooms. Salvation Society stipulated in its charter that a full forty percent of its budget would be dedicated to its reading room, the largest percentage committed to any of the society’s other endeavors including aid to poor students (10%), education of primary school students (15%), and publishing (15%).¹⁴⁰ Salvation Society’s accounts for the period of March 15-June 1, 1909, show that maintaining its reading room and library were indeed its most expensive activities, with 592.96 rubles spent on them in a period that saw a total of 1,808.36 rubles in expenses. While this calculates out to approximately thirty-three percent of the society’s budget, falling short of forty, it is by far the greatest expenditure listed for that period.¹⁴¹ The sums spent by Azeri societies were not great in this era, and

¹⁴⁰ ADTA. F46 S2 Q78. p. 16.

¹⁴¹ “Bakida ‘Nicat’ Maarif Cemiyetinin 15 Martindan Iyun Ayinin Birinedek Olan Modakhel ve Mokharech.” *Ittifak* No 133, June 12 1909.

as will be discussed later, budgetary woes dogged societies for the entirety of their existence. The very fact that they were able to command sufficient financial resources to open schools and reading rooms and sponsor other cultural activities, however, gave them considerable influence in Azeri society. The Muslim Benevolent Society's 1915 accounts, reveal that even for a benevolent society, the reading room was a highly-valued endeavor. Of the 1,430.25 rubles the society spent on non-orphanage related activities (aid to and education of orphans being the primary focus of the Benevolent Society, especially in 1915 when war considerably increased their number), 515.90 rubles were spent on the reading room. Considering that in 1909 Salvation Society spent more than that amount in a three-month time period, it is clear that the Muslim Benevolent Society prioritized its reading room considerably less than the explicitly enlightenment-focused Salvation Society, however the economic conditions of World War I Russia also likely contributed to the comparatively small budget the Muslim Benevolent Society reported in 1915. Regardless, the Muslim Benevolent Society dedicated around thirty-six percent of its budget to its reading room, a similar portion to Salvation Society. After employee salaries, which took up 209 rubles, the second largest expenditure required in reading room maintenance was newspaper and journal subscriptions, costing 144.55 rubles.¹⁴² In 1915 a yearly subscription to the bi-weekly *Molla Nasreddin*, one of the most high-quality publications of the era, was six rubles, while a yearly subscription to *Iqbal*, one of the leading dailies coming out of Baku, was 8 rubles. 144.55 rubles thus translated to at least around eighteen subscriptions maintained by the reading room. Education-focused societies such as Salvation Society would have had even more. While I have not

¹⁴² AMK. "Qafqaz Musulman Cemiyyeti Kheriyyesinin 1915 Ilde Olan Gelir Gedirinin Sayisidir." Tifilis. Sherq bassma khanessinde bassildi. 10.

encountered a subscription list for any reading room, considering the ethnic breakdown of Salvation Society's readers as well as the pan-Turkic networks they participated in and the broader multilingual Islamic world to which they belonged, subscriptions would have been to Azeri-language publications as well as Tatar, Russian, Ottoman Turkish, Persian, and Arabic periodicals.

Visitors to Baku's various reading rooms would have encountered impressive collections of news, literature, and opinion from diverse sources. Those who were literate could enjoy access to many of the publications from the empire and abroad, something that would be prohibitively expensive for most Azeris. Illiterate Azeris could go to the reading room to hear the news read, or for public literary readings and lectures on the sciences and technology. Unfortunately, we do not know how often illiterate Azeris took advantage of this resource, or how welcome they felt when they did. Considering the multiethnic patronage of Salvation Society's reading room, and the essentially social function reading rooms served, these spaces also would have built connections across ethnicities among the empire's reading public, and fostered a new class sensibility among learned Azeris, to whom the concept of an intelligentsia was a rather new and aspirational ideal.¹⁴³

Beyond Baku

The associational activities of Azeris in Baku following 1905 had influence the reached well beyond their locality. The year of Salvation Society and Publication Society's founding, 1906, was the same year as the Third Russian All-Muslim Congress, held in Nizhny Novgorod in August. This was the first of the congresses held with the

¹⁴³ Expand on this when Tuna's article comes out in *Kritika*.

permission of the Tsarist authorities, granted after the organizers promised to warn participants against the dangers of pan-Islam, pan-Turkism, and socialism, and was attended by 800 delegates.¹⁴⁴ The first congress, held in secret aboard a rented pleasure boat, led to the foundation of the Muslim Union (*Ittifak-i Muslimin*) and the second, involving 108 delegates, turned the union into a formal political party aligned with the Kadets.¹⁴⁵ The primary aim of the congresses was to politically unify and organize Russia's Muslims as they sought representation in the newly formed Duma.

Alimardan Topchubashev, a Tiflis-born Azeri who had studied law in St. Petersburg and served as editor of the prominent Russian-language Baku periodical *Kaspîi*, was among the organizers of all three congresses, and chairman of the third. Among the many issues addressed at the congress was the foundation of Salvation Society in Baku. On August 24, both *Heyat* and *Irshad* published reports on a telegram from the congress congratulating Salvation's chairman, the dentist Mehmed Alibey Salimbeyov, on the foundation of the society. The participants in the congress "all applauded when they listened to the congratulations to Salvation Society," the article announced, and noted that the congress recognized it as "a society working on the path of progress, culture, and enlightenment."¹⁴⁶ The society's recognition at the congress was likely facilitated by Topchubashev, himself a member of Salvation, as well as a founding member of the Muslim Benevolent Society. The society's foundation represented a positive development in the progress advocated by the men from across the Russian Empire gathered at the congress. Salvation Society was not only a European-style learned

¹⁴⁴ Kemal H. Karpat. *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*. Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 299.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Həyat*, 24 August 1906 No. 189

society that gathered the intelligentsia and worked toward the betterment of the populace, it also offered an opportunity for Muslim elites to experiment in governance. Salvation and societies like it held elections for chairman, vice-chairman, treasurer, and secretary. Regular meetings were held for members to discuss their concerns and thoughts on society activities. It was through these societies that men could experience democratic participation and public debate. To the delegates at the Third Russian All-Muslim Congress, the creation of such an institution was something to encourage and emulate.

Although Baku was undeniably the heart of Azeri cultural and intellectual life in the early 1900's, it was not the only city that saw the emergence of new Azeri associations following 1905. The Muslim Benevolent Society maintained auxiliary societies in multiple cities in the South Caucasus, including Tiflis and Ganja. Although it is unclear what degree of independence the societies maintained, in its 1915 accounts the Baku-based Muslim Benevolent Society referenced the activities of the Tiflis society, especially its efforts to build a girl's school, for which it raised 10,000 Rubles.¹⁴⁷ Publication Society, meanwhile, maintained a chapter in Balikhani, a settlement on the Absheron Peninsula outside of Baku, and the Baku chapter regularly monitored the activities and management of this smaller chapter. The Balikhani chapter seems to have been opened not long after the original Baku chapter, as it appears regularly in the society's 1906 meeting minutes. At the December 8 meeting society leaders discussed some issues regarding the Balikhani chapter's *qerardadi*,¹⁴⁸ which only included costs for the repairs of school buildings in its budget description, while not including the

¹⁴⁷ AMK. "Qafqaz Musulman Cemiyeti Kheriyyesinin 1915 Ilde Olan Gelir Gedirinin Sayisidir."

¹⁴⁸ A *qerardadi* was similar to a charter but was written after the original founding charter. These documents reiterate the founding tenants of the society and seem likely to have had a legal function for maintaining official permission for a society to operate.

expenditures on yearly salaries for teachers and for other necessary expenditures for the schools. Thus, the Baku society concluded, its lawyers would need to organize and write a new *qerardadi* for the Balikhani chapter.¹⁴⁹ The Baku chapter's dealings with the Balikhani chapter seemed especially concerned with making sure that it was in line with the law. Salvation Society similarly sought to control any new chapters it founded. In its 1906 *qerardadi*, the society included in its list of the activities it would undertake to advance its goals founding branches of Salvation Society in other towns in the Baku Governorate, with the stipulation that these new branches would function according to the Baku society's established rules.¹⁵⁰ Society leaders did not take for granted their newfound freedoms under the Fundamental Laws, and were careful to not lose them on a technicality. As James Meyer has observed, Azeri reformers were much more careful to operate within the confines of the law than their Tatar contemporaries. Between the Armenian-Azeri conflicts of 1905 and the tendency for violent labor conflicts to flare up in Baku, the vice-regency of the Caucasus enjoyed greater powers of censorship and control than the governorates of inner Russia, and organizational activity was tightly regulated.¹⁵¹ While Azeri members of *Hummet*, the Muslim branch of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party, were engaged in political organizing that challenged tsarist authority, enlightenment societies needed to work within the confines of the law if they wanted to see their many public institutions—reading rooms, schools, libraries, etc.—stay open. There was a great deal of overlap between *Hummet* members and society members, indeed, Salvation Society was closely associated with *Hummet*, with members Mammed

¹⁴⁹ ADTA. F312 S1 Q2

¹⁵⁰ ADTA. F46 S2 Q78

¹⁵¹ Meyer, *Turks Across Empires*, 123.

Amin Rasulzade and Alimardan Topchubashov also acting as social democratic leaders, however they operated differently within the two organizations in order to accomplish the twin goals of social reform and political empowerment.

Budgeting for Enlightenment

The ambitious programs enlightenment societies sought to implement were costly, making fundraising and budgeting imperative to a society's success. Societies depended on the patronage of wealthy Azeris, membership fees, charitable donations, and their own income-producing projects to maintain their activities. To this end, societies sought to create a new culture of philanthropy that encouraged middle class and wealthy Azeris to donate to society endeavors and required a dedicated roster of members who reliably paid their dues. Based on the longevity of the major societies and their published membership lists, the latter requirement was easily met. Salvation Society's 1907-1908 accounts list 125 members, while the Muslim Benevolent Society included 83 members in 1915.¹⁵² Neither society had particularly large memberships, but they indicate the participation of the Azeri middle class. The number of Azeri economic elites was small, for society memberships to number in the hundreds indicates that membership expanded beyond the wealthiest Azeris. Press coverage of the various societies and their memberships indicate the type of members they attracted; doctors, lawyers, dentists, journalists, and teachers made up their ranks. This was a small but growing cohort in Azeri society. In addition to dues-paying members, there was an even larger number of Azeris who interacted with societies on a regular basis. Societies employed teachers, reading room attendants, actors,

¹⁵² "Bakida 'Nicat' Maarif Cemiyetinin 15 Martindan Iyun Ayinin Birinedek Olan Modakhel ve Mokharech." *Ittifaq* No 133, June 12 1909.; AMK. "Qafqaz Musulman Cemiyeti Kheriyyesinin 1915 Ilde Olan Gelir Gedirinin Sayisidir."

and journalists. They hired printers and patronized playwrights. In urban Azeri life, they were highly visible.

Societies offered three tiers of membership; “honored” (*fakhri*) members, the wealthiest members, usually earned their place by either contributing a large one-time donation or by paying a high annual membership fee. In the case of Salvation Society, honored members either contributed a one-time fee of five hundred rubles or paid fifty rubles annually.¹⁵³ Societies included few such members, with Salvation Society only listing two honored members and one honored chairman (the millionaire industrialist Zeynalabdin Taghiev.) Most members belonged to the second category, “true” (*haqiqi*) members, who in the case of Salvation Society paid either twelve rubles annually or one hundred rubles once. The remaining members listed in Salvation Society’s 1908 membership list belong to this category. Finally, for those who wanted to join a society but did not have the financial means to do so, there was the category of “aspiring” (*hevesli*) members, who could either pay one ruble annually or, in place of money, volunteer their services to the society for free, in exchange for membership. No such members are listed in Salvation Society’s roster, but it is possible that, as such members might not have contributed anything monetarily to the society, they were simply not included on a list attached to the published accounts. In Publication Society’s published 1908 accounts, the society indicate among its income two rubles from aspiring members, indicating that they had at least two such low-income members at the time, not including any who may have foregone paying the ruble in place of offering their free labor.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ ADTA. F46 S2 Q78..

¹⁵⁴ “Nashri Maarif Cemiyetinin Illik Hessabi.” *Irşad*. May 4, 1908.

Members who did not pay their dues would not remain in good standing with their societies. Salvation Society included rules for how to remove “harmful” members from the society, an umbrella under which members errant in their payments would likely fall. Happiness Society, meanwhile, addressed the issue more explicitly in its charter, stipulating that members who without reason failed to pay their dues would be ejected from the society, and could only rejoin after they had paid what they owed.¹⁵⁵

The honored members of societies played an essential philanthropic role in keeping societies financially solvent. Although far fewer Azeris reaped the benefits of the petroleum industry than Armenians and Russians, there was a handful of Azeri industrialists who became millionaires through the oil boom. This new class of economic elites were wealthy in a way previously unseen in the Azeri populace, and the men who made up this small group did not hail from Azeri society’s traditional class of elites. Most famous among Azerbaijan’s industrialists was Hajji Zeynalabdin Taghiev, an illiterate Baku native born to a family of cobblers. Taghiev’s millions originated with the purchase of a small parcel of land near Bibi-Heybat, a settlement south of Baku and at the heart of the petroleum industry, where he struck a massive oil well. Sharp business acumen and diversification to such industries as textiles and fisheries made Taghiev one of the richest men in the Caucasus.¹⁵⁶ Taghiev was joined by the industrialists Musa bey Naghiev, Shamsi Asadullayev, and Murtuza Mukhtarov in forming this small group of Baku’s Muslim millionaires. Not members of the traditional Muslim elite of the Caucasus, with the exception of Musa bey Naghiev, who came from a financially comfortable family of beys (but was himself a convert to the Baha’i faith, and thus not an adherent of

¹⁵⁵ ADTA. F46 S2 Q456

¹⁵⁶ Swietochowski. *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920*

traditionalist values), Baku's industrialists engaged in extensive philanthropy and supported the visions of reform and progress advocated by Azeri modernists. Having themselves broken traditional molds within Azeri society and reaped the benefits of modern industry, these men saw the sense in reforming education and promoting technology and the sciences. Mustafa Tuna discusses a similar patronage of progressive causes by the wealthiest tier of Tatars that was integral to the successes enjoyed by Tatar modernists. Encouraging donations to societies to fund their endeavors was not easy; as Tuna observes, the traditional class of wealthy Tatars did not change their charitable habits to support the reformist efforts of the modernists. They continued to observe the traditional means of charity in Muslim societies through the endowment of *vaqfs* and in donations to madrasas and mosques.¹⁵⁷

Societies also earned income through their properties, tuition fees, and ticket sales for the events they organized. In 1908 Publication Society reported earning 245 rubles from renting the rooms of its teacher's school, and an impressive 2,000 rubles from its "first Muslim evening cultural event."¹⁵⁸ Salvation Society, meanwhile, depended heavily upon its theater productions for income, earning 5,004.14 rubles from theater ticket sales in 1907-1908, out of a total reported income of 7,159.90 rubles.¹⁵⁹ Between donations, membership fees, and income-producing activities, enlightenment societies handled considerable sums of money. Salvation Society's 1907-1908 income pales in comparison

¹⁵⁷ Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims*, 138.

¹⁵⁸ ADTA. F46 S2 Q480. Baku "Nashri Maarif" Cemiyetinin 1911'inci Ile Makhsus Dakhil Kherchinin Hessabidir. 1908.

The word used to describe this event was *müsamir* which in classical Persian referred to "one who converses in the evening." Azeri societies used the term to refer to evening cultural gatherings that might feature literary readings, music, dance, and even vaudeville acts, and the word in modern Persian roughly translates as "soiree."

¹⁵⁹ AMK. "Bakida Musulman Maarif Cemiyeti "Nicat" in ikincisine devamisi (1907 ve 1908 sina)'nin hesabi."

to the sums Publication Society reported in their coffers between 1908 and 1911, peaking at 23,528.63 rubles in 1910.¹⁶⁰ In order to command such incomes, the societies depended upon membership payments and a new culture of philanthropy that they encouraged among the burgeoning Azeri middle class.

Zardabi's 1905 scolding of Azeris for their reticence to part with the money necessary for progressives to carry out their work spoke to the challenges of fundamentally changing how charity worked in Azeri society. Societies employed several strategies to try to encourage donations and reshape the nature of charitable work. The various benevolent societies throughout the region organized special charitable drives around the holidays of Qurban Bayram (Eid al-Fitr), Ramazan, and Novruz, when they would offer free meals to the poor. They supplemented these special occasions with permanent programs to aid the poor, however. In 1916, the Ganja Muslim Benevolent Society established a store that would sell basic goods such as sugar, flour, and grain to the impoverished at low prices.¹⁶¹ The Baku-based Muslim Benevolent Society focused its efforts on orphans, and in 1915 reported that it had been able to hire a teacher to teach Azeri literacy and handicrafts to the girls, while the boys were sent to the Mufti of the Caucasus, Hussein Effendi Qaibov's, school.¹⁶² The housing and education of orphans, creation of affordable stores for the poor, and financial aid to poor students were all projects that required sustained giving from a willing populace. The benevolent societies were aided in their efforts by support from powerful members of the ulama, with the Baku society listing both the Mufti and Sheikh ul-Islam of the Caucasus (the leaders of

¹⁶⁰ ADTA. F46 S2 Q480.

¹⁶¹ ADTA F421 S1 Q17. Ganja Musulman Cemiyeti Kheyriyyesinin 1916'nin ildeki modachel ve mokharech hessabi."

¹⁶² AMK. "Qafqaz Musulman Cemiyeti Kheyriyyesinin 1915 Ilde Olan Gelir Gedirinin Sayisidir." 6.

the Sunni and the Shia communities, respectively) as honored members and noting in its 1915 accounts that both men assisted the society in fundraising on behalf of its orphanage.¹⁶³ Having the spiritual heads of both branches of Islam promoting its efforts would have considerably boosted the Baku Muslim Benevolent Society's ability to solicit donations from a largely religious population.

Enlightenment societies faced greater challenges in convincing the populace of their worthiness for charitable donation than benevolent societies, which were expressly religious and less engaged in such controversial activities as promoting new method education, theater performances, and newspapers (although, as the reading room expenditures indicate, even the benevolent societies were not completely divorced from such activities.) One of the tactics employed by societies to reward their donors was through public acknowledgement in the press. Salvation, Publication, and Happiness Societies all regularly published lists of the names of every donor who had recently given to them, along with the amount given, in order of the amount. Whether someone donated twenty rubles or one, their name would appear in the press with a note of thanks. Societies used the press to encourage the idea that donating to their educational efforts was not only common, but laudable. Traditionally in Islam, charitable donations were meant to be given anonymously. Now, enlightenment societies encouraged public donations. With the regular appearance of published donation lists, they sought to promote the idea that giving to societies should be a common practice among members of the enlightened class, and the public acknowledgment of their giving was a way to signal

¹⁶³ Ibid. 4.

not only who could claim membership to this group, but offer a clear entry point for those aspiring to it.

With the onset of World War I, the nature of the charity work done by societies changed. Salvation Society and Enjoyment Society continued to organize theater productions, but now those productions were often charity events whose proceeds would go to the war effort. This was part of an empire-wide trend of cultural patriotism, in which theater and vaudeville performances increasingly featured patriotic war themes or were organized explicitly as benefit performances for the war effort.¹⁶⁴ In his history of patriotic culture in Russia during the war, Hubertus Jahn identifies this performative patriotism as occurring at a point of major innovation in visual culture throughout the Russian Empire, arguing that “The visual and performing arts and the cinema created a variety of patriotic ‘image worlds’ and expressed them with all the richness characteristic of a rapidly transforming culture.”¹⁶⁵ While Azeris did not write new patriotic war-themed plays, their performances, particularly of Hajibeyov’s operas, often were benefit concerts for “our injured brothers,” ensuring that ticket sales would go to the war effort. The war occurred at a time of intense cultural innovation in Azerbaijan, and theater activities did not cease with its onset. Instead, Azeris, like the rest of the empire, embraced the initial outpouring of patriotism that accompanied the Russian Empire’s entry into the conflict as a way to imbue their works with new significance, and the act of theatergoing with a new sense of morality.

Benevolent societies became almost wholly occupied in war relief efforts. Always engaged in work with orphans, the Baku Muslim Benevolent Society suddenly found

¹⁶⁴ Hubertus Jahn. *Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I*. Cornell University Press, 1995. pp 93-4.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

itself dealing with an unfortunate surge in needy orphans. In its 1915 accounts, the society included not only descriptions of its charitable activities, but also a list of 54 orphans by name and age in the hopes that family members might recognize some of them and claim them.¹⁶⁶ These orphans had only recently become subjects of the Russian Empire. The society had been granted permission by the government to extend its charitable activities into the regions of Ardahan and Kars, both formerly Ottoman territories in eastern Anatolia that had been newly acquired in the war. Much of the society's money went that year to constructing the orphanage and procuring schooling for the children. In the description of the Baku Muslim Benevolent Society's fundraising for the orphans of Kars and Ardahan, the society singles out two Russian women who made donations to the society and notes its gratefulness for their generosity.¹⁶⁷ It seems that these women's donations were remarkable, indicating that typically the society mainly received donations from other Azeris, and not from outside the community. The contribution of two Russian women to the Muslim Benevolent Society's relief efforts in Eastern Anatolia indicates an increasing sense of common cause among different ethnic groups of the Russian Empire, a feeling that, according to Jahn, surged in the empire in the first years of the war, but by 1916 was flagging as the subjects of the Russian Empire grew weary of a war that was destroying their economy and threatening famine.¹⁶⁸

Obstacles on the Path of Progress

Enlightenment societies managed to become influential entities within the Azeri urban populations of the South Caucasus within a brief period. They faced numerous

¹⁶⁶ AMK. "Qafqaz Musulman Cemiyyeti Kheriyyesinin 1915 Ilde Olan Gelir Gedirinin Sayisidir." 6.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia*.

obstacles in their attempts to implement the programs of social and cultural reform they outlined in their founding charters, however. Opposition to educational reform, education of girls, and the promotion of cultural activities such as the theater was at times fierce and violent. These will be investigated further in subsequent chapters on education and theater.

In addition to opponents outside the enlightenment societies, the members of the societies themselves could often be their own worst enemies. The operating budgets reported in yearly accounts did not always honestly reflect how society money was being allocated. Society budgets were stretched over a number of ambitious projects and money was not always managed competently. In the case of Salvation Society, as will be discussed in chapter five, money was also occasionally secretly funneled to support causes such as the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and covered up in the accounts to deflect government scrutiny. Corruption and misuse of funds also emerged as a problem for Salvation Society, preventing them from operating as successfully as they otherwise might. In their founding charters, societies included methods of oversight and transparency to avoid such problems and maintain their legal standing with the imperial government. Societies elected investigative committees tasked with oversight of the account books and investigating any claims of wrongdoing in the society. The promise made in society charters to regularly publish accounts in newspapers kept the reading public informed on society dealings. These systems, however, did not necessarily function as planned.

If an open letter published in the newspaper *Ittifaq* is to be believed, by 1909 Salvation Society was so hopelessly bankrupt that tea vendors refused to deliver to the

society's headquarters. The letter's author, the anonymous "*Nicatchi*" ("Salvationer") began with the observation that, "before we wrote about the importance of Salvation Society to Baku's Muslims. On the 15th of March an investigative committee reported arrogance, wasteful spending, disorderliness, and so on, but did not identify anyone as culpable since they did not offer any focus for their criticisms."¹⁶⁹ Because the committee failed to come to any concrete conclusions about the nature of problems facing the society, a new committee was appointed, consisting of Isa bey Ashurbeyli, Mehdi bey Hajibababeyov, and "our boss Vezirov" (Hashim bey Vezirov, editor-in-chief of *Ittifaq*.) According to this new committee's finding, "no one from the current leadership, nor the connected drama staff, schools staff, financial branch, or the boarding house leadership, did any work in agreement with the charter's laws." The author of the letter proceeded to name specific members of the society leadership and detailed their transgressions, down to the specific sums of money they had embezzled. The society's capital was a "toy in the hands of" the society treasurer, as well as its current chairperson, and one of Azeri society's most prominent intellectuals and politicians, Mammed Amin Rasulzade. Nicatchi accused these men of taking a full 2,100 rubles out of the treasury for a purported evening meeting at the society boarding house, despite there being no such evidence of the meeting having occurred. The very existence of this boarding house was something the author took further umbrage with, viewing it as an unnecessary institution founded out of arrogance that drained money away from the society's true purpose, which was its library and reading room. The two spaces were "so neglected that, it is impossible to estimate how many volumes are in the library, how many make up the

¹⁶⁹ Nicatchi. "Nicat Maarif Cemiyetinde." *Ittifaq*, May 12, 1909. No. 106.

library, how much they are worth, how many are lost and how many they have on hand.”

Nicatchi concluded with a breakdown of the various sums of money found inappropriately in the pockets of society members—from 404 rubles being held by the treasurer to the thirty-four rubles from ticket sales still being held by another errant member. The letter concluded with a call for new leadership following a stark image of Salvation Society’s situation:

The leadership and its extensions were doing all this at the same time Salvation could not pay its own debts and the electric company turned off power and the waterman did not give water, and the tea-vendor denied a request for five cups of tea. Through this type of arrogance, lawlessness, and pleasure-loving self-celebration the leadership and its extensions lowered the position of Salvation in the eyes of the public.¹⁷⁰

Beyond laying much of the blame for the struggles in successfully carrying out their programs of cultural and social reform squarely at the feet of Azeri modernists themselves, *Nicatchi’s* letter also reveals how one member of Baku’s most prominent enlightenment society understood the role the institution should be playing in Azeri society. *Nicatchi’s* most damning indictment of the Salvation leadership was that they had damaged the society’s reputation in the eyes of the public. To him, Salvation was beholden to an Azeri public who benefitted from the projects initiated by the society. Their participation in the educational initiatives, cultural programs, and public spaces fueled Salvation’s success. He also identifies the library and reading room as the most important aspect of Salvation’s work, echoing the priorities laid out by the society charters and account books.

Conclusion

Salvation ultimately survived its financial difficulties and continued its work

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

through World War I before dissolving in 1916 in a manner that *Nicatchi* likely could have predicted when writing his scolding letter seven years previously. In 1916 Salvation Society held general elections for the chairmanship and other leadership positions. Isabey Ashurbeyov, longtime member and, by 1916, one of the wealthiest and most influential members of Baku high society, was elected chairman with his associates filling most other elected positions within the society. Leading society members seem to have broken into two factions by 1916, one led by Ashurbeyov and the other by Rasalzade, vying for control of the society. The Rasalzade camp cried foul and published an open letter in Rasalzade's latest journalistic endeavor, *Achiq Soz* ("Plain Speech"), denouncing the election as corrupt and in violation of the society's charter. The letter writers identified a number of irregularities in the election, including possible bribes and the fact that the election might have been carried out despite the general meeting not reaching the quorum of one quarter of all Baku-dwelling members present.¹⁷¹ The authors demanded further investigation into whether quorum had, in fact, been met, and asked electors to consider, "would your honor allow you to be a representative of this kind of bad election that lowers the status of the society?" The letter then appealed to the sense of responsibility and leadership members of the Baku intelligentsia should feel to set an example for the less educated in their society:

Elector, ignorant people who are closed to constitutionalism and culture give no importance to the tools they use, saying "as long as the smoke goes upright" [from an Azeri proverb: "it does not matter if the chimney is crooked as long as the smoke goes up"]—they do things according to this nature...More educated people should show society that they work with a certain type behavior and purity.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ "'Nicat' idareine sechilenlere achiq mektub" *Achiq Soz* No. 141, March 24, 1916.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

The thirteen authors signed off with a thrown gauntlet, “Of course you would not leave us without answer,” before listing their names publicly. Signatories included Rasulzade and such prominent members of Azeri society as Nariman Narimanov, a prominent doctor, scholar, playwright, and social democrat who would play an instrumental role in the creation of Soviet Azerbaijan, writer and lawyer Mustafa bey Alibeyov, the young lawyer Mustafa bey Vekilov, who would serve as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic’s Minister of Internal Affairs, and others. Such a public rebuke from over a dozen of the most educated and successful Azeri men in Baku was a huge embarrassment for Ashurbeyov, and led to a civil war within Salvation Society that it could not survive.¹⁷³

Other Azeri societies were less susceptible to interpersonal strife than Salvation Society, but would not long outlive it. The Muslim Benevolent Society worked through the end of World War I, expanding its activities into the formerly Ottoman Territories of Kars and Ardahan after the Russian Empire conquered them, but disappeared with the Bolshevik Revolution and the chaos of the following civil war. The Publication Enlightenment Society, meanwhile, survived the collapse of the Russian Empire and transformed into the brief-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic’s Ministry of Education. The exact fate of Enjoyment Society and the many other, smaller societies of Baku and other cities is unclear, but it is likely that with the breakdown of the Russian Empire, the immediate concerns of survival superseded the demands of cultural reform and societies disintegrated. Their members, however, for the most part remained in Azerbaijan and would reemerge as the cultural leaders of early Soviet Azerbaijan, organizing themselves into new unions and associations that would continue much of the same work initiated in

¹⁷³ Yaqublu.

the late nineteenth century.

Chapter 3 **Bringing Progress to the *Millet*: Educational Reform Efforts by Enlightenment Societies**

When prominent members of Azeri society began to found enlightenment societies in 1906, they all expressed the same primary goal; to improve literacy and education among the Azeri population through educational reform. Societies would do this through founding schools that followed the *usul-i jadid*, the “new method” of education advocated by Ismail Gasprinskii, reforming preexisting schools to follow the new method program, organizing night classes for adults, and creating teacher training courses to answer the growing demand for teachers. Although Azeri society would remain largely illiterate until after Sovietization, demand for the educational services offered by enlightenment societies was high through the first years of the twentieth century. The reform efforts of educators produced results; in 1914 alone, the Azeri literacy rate doubled.¹⁷⁴ Efforts were hampered, however, by opposition to these efforts from some members of the religious class, many of whom taught in traditional *madrasahs* as their primary means of income and opposed educating girls. The imperial government regarded these efforts with suspicions as well. With its own schools, administered through the Caucasian Education District, the state strove for empire-wide administrative uniformity, which was to be aided by Russification.¹⁷⁵ Imperial officials sought uniformity in the empire-wide educational system, and native-language educational initiatives in the peripheries threatened that goal. In the case of new method

¹⁷⁴ Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920*. 56.

¹⁷⁵ Timothy K. Blauvelt & Anton Vachardze. “Pedagogy, Modernity, and Nationalism in the Caucasus in the Age of Reaction, 1880-1905.” *Caucasus Survey*. Vol. 5 No. 2, 2017. 3.

reform among the Muslim populations of the empire, tsarist suspicion of the threat of pan-Islam or, even worse, pan-Turkism, also made them particularly wary of educational efforts that emphasized native language education.¹⁷⁶

Reformists themselves, as seen in the previous chapter, could also often be their own worst enemies. Debates over language, particularly whether to adopt a modified Ottoman or promote the Azeri vernacular, plagued Azeri discussion on education and literacy. Actually running schools, paying teachers, and effectively teaching students also proved to be occasional stumbling blocks in the bid for educational reform. The objectives of educational reformers and their students were also not always aligned; while native language literacy was the priority of reformers, many students came to the schools with a greater interest in pursuing Russian language education. While native language proficiency certainly served the interests of the *millet*, social, economic, and physical mobility within the empire called for Russian proficiency, and students demanded it.¹⁷⁷ Russian was the language that was required for work within the state bureaucracy or continued education in institutes of higher education. Because of this, at the secondary level the reformist program gave way to pragmatism, and students were educated almost entirely in Russian.¹⁷⁸ Despite these obstacles societies, particularly Publication Enlightenment Society, proved adept at navigating social and governmental structures to win support for their efforts, founding dozens of schools between 1906 and 1918. In designing their educational programs, Azeri societies mapped out a path for illiterate

¹⁷⁶ Mustafa Tuna discusses the “specter of pan-Islam” and how it was surpassed in paranoia over pan-Turkism in *Imperial Russia’s Muslims*, pp 200-201.

¹⁷⁷ Blauvelt & Vachardze. “Pedagogy, Modernity, and Nationalism.” 10.

¹⁷⁸ Altstadt. *The Azerbaijani Turks*. 56.

adults and Azeri children to traverse the progressive path toward becoming enlightened and empowered participants in the Russian imperial domain.

Azeri Education Before the New Method

For centuries education in Azerbaijan followed a model similar to that of most Muslim societies. Young boys gained their educations through the *maktab* and *madrasah* system, in which they received knowledge almost entirely orally through one-on-one instruction with a teacher or an older pupil. Students learned to recite the alphabet before moving on to the Koran, which they memorized selected verses from in Arabic, without translation.¹⁷⁹ Students learned to read through oral recitation, with written works functioning as visual mnemonic aids. Thus, while students could recognize and read the works they had learned to recite, they were not equipped to read new texts they might encounter.¹⁸⁰ Only more advanced seminary students learned to write, often hand-copying texts, but printed texts were generally not used in *madrasah* education even after printing technology had entered Muslim cultures.¹⁸¹

When the Caucasus came under Russian rule, *madrasah* education persisted. Russian officials, however, also set about including the new populations within the imperial structure through various means, including educational. Russian approaches to incorporating and educating the Muslim populations in the Caucasus followed the model first established by the Orthodox lay-missionary Nikolai Il'minskii (1822-91), an 1846 graduate of the Kazan Theological Academy and talented Turkologist. Il'minskii had

¹⁷⁹ Adeb Khalid. *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*. University of California Press, 1998. 23.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸¹ Farzin Vejdani. *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture*. Stanford University Press, 2014. 11.

worked with educating baptized Tatars in the Volga-Ural region after many began submitting petitions to the tsar requesting to apostatize and be recognized as Muslims. Through this work, he began advocating native-language education as a way to better reach non-Russian populations.¹⁸² Il'minksii became a trusted advisor of Count Dimitrii Andreevich Tolstoi, who became minister of public enlightenment in 1866, and influenced the policies of the educational commissions in the Kazan Educational Circuit.¹⁸³ His ideas about educating Muslim Tatars led to the proposal to create government schools for Muslims that promoted Russian language acquisition and deemphasized Islam.¹⁸⁴ In 1870 Tsar Alexander II approved new regulations for the education of Muslim Tatars which included the creation of elementary schools where either Muslims who spoke Russian or Russians who spoke Tatar would instruct students in the Russian language, with additional religious instruction provided at the expense of the community.¹⁸⁵ These would become the first "Russo-Tatar Schools." Schools after this model would also appear in Azerbaijan following the Russian conquest of the Caucasus.

By the late nineteenth century, however, use of native language in teaching Russian began to be phased out of state schools for non-Russian populations. In the Caucasus, Filipp Zakharovich Levitskiy, the director of the Caucasus Educational District, began advocating the "natural method," a pedagogical model borrowed from French and German educational trends, which encouraged language teaching through images, demonstration, and action, eliminating the need for native language use in

¹⁸² Geraci. *Window on the East*. 56.

¹⁸³ Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims*. 66.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

teaching target languages. By the 1890s, the natural method had become the norm in CED schools, and native languages disappeared from state schools.¹⁸⁶ While early calls for educational reform among Azeris predated these policy changes, it was not until around this time that influential Azeri thinkers began more actively experimenting with educational reform themselves, partially in reaction to the increasing Russification of state schools.

The New Method and Educational Reform in Azerbaijan

The pedagogical shift toward teaching literacy through introducing students to the phonic characteristics of each letter and having them apply this to simple texts was a global trend beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Ismail Gasparinskii became interested in the approach through his relationship with Russian pedagogues, including A.O. Cherniaevskii, who had written an alphabet book for Azeri, and through Ottoman pedagogues who first called it the *usul-i jadid*.¹⁸⁷ Gasparinskii opened his own new method school in 1884 in Bakhchysarai, with just twelve students. With a program of Turkic literacy, basic calculations, and religion, Gasparinskii was able to produce impressive results in just forty-five days, when he invited a group of Muslim notables to witness an exam of the students. New students immediately enrolled in his school and the news of his success spread throughout the Russian Muslim communities.¹⁸⁸

It would be over twenty years after the opening of Gasparinskii's first new method school in Crimea before the reforms became popular in Azerbaijan. Only with the creation of enlightenment societies were Azeris were able to organize the manpower and

¹⁸⁶ Blauvelt & Vachardze. "Pedagogy, Modernity, and Nationalism." 17.

¹⁸⁷ Tuna. *Imperial Russia's Muslims*. 162.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

funds necessary to start organizing their own schools, and it was not until after the 1905 revolution that they had the means and collective momentum to do so. Gasparinskii's ideas influenced on the development of the Azeri reformist program from the start; his ideas inspired the first All-Russian Muslim Congress in 1905. Gasparinskii chaired the event, and while two of his deputies were the fellow Tatars Rashid Ibrahimov and Yusuf Akchura, the third was Alimardan Topchubashov.¹⁸⁹ Topchubashov went on to be member of the Duma and an active member of Salvation Enlightenment Society. His association with Gasparinskii from the inception of Russian Muslim political organizing no doubt influenced the trajectory of the Azeri reform movement.

As Azeri press and associational activity developed, they began engaging with Gasparinskii's new method, advocating it for their own society. In their writings, Azeri commentators revealed a fascination with both the methodology and the speed with which is seemed to succeed. Jalil Mammadguluzade and his collaborators at *Molla Nasreddin* were particularly supportive of Gasparinskii and the new method, often writing in praise of him and the possibilities of the school reforms in their pages. In perhaps the most historically famous cover of *Molla Nasreddin*, Oscar Shmerling (1863-1938), one of the two German caricature artists whose beautiful and biting art was at least as responsible as Mammadguluzade's pen for the journal's success, depicted Gasparinskii, holding his journal *Tercuman* and his new method textbook *Hoca-yi Sibyan*, confronted by



Figure 5 Cover of *Molla Nasreddin* depicting Gasparinskii

¹⁸⁹ Swietochowski. *Russian Azerbaijan*. 48.

two mollas brandishing shoes and sticks as well as papers reading “heresy” and “the new method is contrary to the Sharia.”¹⁹⁰ A year later, Mammadguluzade wrote a brief satirical piece on the new method, ruminating “this new method is a strange thing. Before, children studied for a year and could not read or write. But now, in two-three months, they are literate.”¹⁹¹ True to his fashion, Mammadguluzade turned the piece into a satire in which two illiterate villagers spend merely one week at a new method school, pass the exam to become mollas, and claim the title of *alim* (scholar) to their own financial benefit. Even in this context, however, Mammadguluzade holds up the effectiveness of the new method. Those who truly studied in new method schools could become fully literate, true *alims*. Even those who studied for only a week still managed to perform at the same level as their counterparts with *madrasah* educations when it came to the demands of earning credentials as a molla.

Mammadguluzade was not alone in deploying satire in support of the new method. Mirza Alakbar Sabir, frequent contributor to *Molla Nasreddin*, wrote a poem in the voice of an opponent to its educational reforms that mocked reactionary opposition while demonstrating the nature of learning literacy phonetically. The poem was included in Sabir’s *Hophopname*.

Vah!...this is the lesson of the new method?
 No...o! No...o! Boy, this is a rebel school!
 There is not a molla instructing here?
 Keep away, this is a new satan!
 Stop the outlaw, my son, this is head-to-toe bloody!..

See how these things are turned upside down
 It turns “alif-beys” to “a-ba”
 Look at this *bi’dah*. it reads “yeys” as “ya”
 It is as though this enemy is of letters!

¹⁹⁰ *Molla Nasreddin*. April 28, 1908 No. 17.

¹⁹¹ *Molla Nasreddin*. “Usuli Cedid.” June 7, 1909. No 23.

Stop the outlaw, my son, this is head-to-toe bloody!..¹⁹²

Sabir touches upon not just the novelty, and to some, alarming foreignness, of the new method, but also to the threat of social disruption the new method posed. While the new method included religious instruction, it reduced religion to one subject holding equal status to the subjects of literacy and calculation, and sidelined mollahs. For many, this was a very real threat to their livelihood. Clerical opposition to the new method was not universal, however. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Happiness Religious Society, an enlightenment society founded by mollahs with a charter stipulating that at least half of its membership come from members of the ulama, was the only society to explicitly state that the promotion of new method teaching was one of the society's primary goals.¹⁹³ Publication Enlightenment Society, meanwhile, regularly collaborated with the local religious establishment. In one document on the hiring of a new Russian teacher, the society listed his credentials as coming from both the provincial *Qazi* and "Publication Enlightenment's *usul-i cedit*," indicating that the instructor had both *madrasah* and new method training.¹⁹⁴

Educational Initiatives by Enlightenment Societies

Baku's enlightenment societies sought to use the new method to spread literacy through three primary strategies: they introduced it to preexisting *madrasahs*, founded new schools that followed the new method, and established evening courses for adults. While Publication, Salvation, and Happiness Societies all identified reforming existing schools and founding new ones as primary goals, Publication Society took the lead in this

¹⁹² Mirza Alakbar Sabir. *Hophopname*. Kitab Klubu, 2014. 132.

¹⁹³ ADTA f 46 s2 q456

¹⁹⁴ ADTA f312 s1 q17

project. Happiness Society, meanwhile, maintained one particularly prestigious and modern school, Happiness School. This school was housed in a new, two-story, fourteen-room building and was headed by Ali bey Huseynzade from 1910-1916.¹⁹⁵ Azeri newspapers regularly featured advertisements for the school and announcements for upcoming enrollment periods. Salvation Society dedicated most of its educational efforts to adult literacy initiatives, although it also maintained some schools. All three societies also gave financial aid to poor students to pursue studies in their own schools and in national institutes and sent particularly talented students to Istanbul to study in the famed *Darulfunun*.

For the most part, the new method schools founded or reformed by enlightenment societies were modest affairs. Happiness School stood out as a multi-grade institution housed in a dedicated building and led by an eminent scholar. The majority of schools were located in or near mosques, offered two-three grades, and were staffed by teachers who had obtained some level of secondary education and had, perhaps, attending a teacher's course or graduated from an institute of higher education. A 1909 article in *Ittifaq* reveals the typical Publication Society school. The article announces the opening a new three-grade elementary school located by the Imam Ali Mosque which would be run by Hajji Mirza Salim Qasimzade. The announcement directed that first-grade children applying should be seven years of age or younger and that students could be illiterate if entering the first grade but would be tested in *Musulmanca* (literally "Muslim language," but here meaning Azeri) if entering the second or third grad. Applicants were directed to society member Hajji Molla Ruholla, clearly a new method-supporting cleric.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Yaqublu. *Azərbaycanın İlk Qəyri-Hökümət Təşkilatları*. 38.

¹⁹⁶ *Ittifaq*. May 28, 1909, No. 120.

Teachers at society-founded schools could earn good salaries for Baku, with Publication Society teachers typically earning 400-500 rubles a year.¹⁹⁷ Potential work as a schoolteacher is what drew many educated young men from the provinces to Baku, and schoolteachers formed one of the largest contingents of educated Azeris who formed Baku's intelligentsia.¹⁹⁸ Some of the leading cultural and political figures in Baku had first arrived to work as teachers, including Hasan bey Zardabi, Mirza Alakbar Sabir, Nariman Narimanov, and Uzeyir Hajibeyov. In a 1911 report on its Balakhani school, Publication Society included a table of four teachers listing their position, training, and provenance, revealing the regionwide draw Baku's schools held for qualified young men seeking work. The Russian teacher, one Ismail Mustafayev of Ganja Governorate, was a graduate of the Gori Pedagogical Seminary, the institute of higher learning in Georgia whose Muslim branch boasted alumni including Hajibeyov, Narimanov, and Mammadguluzade. The principal of the school and the Turkish instructor both were graduates of gymnasiums, the principal of the Second Gymnasium in Tiflis and the Turkish instructor of the Third Gymnasium in Baku, making him the one Baku native employed at the school. The fourth teacher listed, the teacher of Sharia, was an Iranian from Ardebil, whose qualifications came from a traditional *madrasah* training, an example of a skilled Iranian migrant.¹⁹⁹

Russian teachers likely required the highest qualifications in new method schools. Many Azeris were not literate in Russian, making those who were valuable recruits to teaching staff. As the bureaucratic language, and as a language that was by the late

¹⁹⁷ Meyer. *Turks Across Empires*. 123.

¹⁹⁸ Swietochowski. *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920*. 24.

¹⁹⁹ ADTA f312 s1 q31

nineteenth century fully standardized, teachers needed to have attained true proficiency. Teachers of Azeri, meanwhile, had more leeway. While promoting native language literacy was a foundational aspect of the new method, Azeri was not itself a standardized language at the time, and Azeri reformers tended to emphasize dual Azeri-Russian literacy as part of their program more than Tatar new method advocates, who focused more on native language literacy.²⁰⁰ Spelling, vocabulary, and grammar were in flux, with literate Azeris drawing liberally from both Persian and Ottoman grammar in their writing. Any high school graduate who could read and write Azeri was more or less qualified to teach it and in doing so, become an active participant in the creation of the Azeri written tradition. Russian teachers, meanwhile, needed to prepare students for navigating imperial bureaucracy and perhaps studying at universities and technical schools. This task demanded more formal qualifications of them.

Because the Transcaucasus was a viceroyalty, Azeri reformers faced close monitoring by tsarist authorities and were careful to operate within the bounds of the law. While Crimean and Volga-Ural Tatars opened new method schools illegally, facing little repercussion for doing so, the schools opened by Baku societies were done so with permission from the governorate, and the schools were officially regarded as Russian-Tatar or Russian-Muslim schools.²⁰¹ A 1907 appeal by Publication Society written to several *qazis* within the bureaucratic structure of the governorate requesting permission to pursue its educational reform program reveals the pragmatic approach the society brought to its efforts and its eagerness to operate with the government's permission. The appeal stated the desire to receive support from the *qazis* in the society's bid to open new

²⁰⁰ Meyer. *Turks Across Empires*. 123.

²⁰¹ Meyer. *Turks Across Empires*. 124.

national (*milli*) schools and reform current ones, at the society's own expense. Promising that "our national schools are for the purpose of progress and instruction in the direction of Muslim society's science and culture," the writer of the appeal expresses hope that the program established in the past year might continue, because "only with this program can our national schools successfully advance Muslim science and culture."²⁰² The program put forth in the appeal was of teaching the mother tongue (*ana dili*), religion, and calculation, to be taught in all grades. Russian language education is not mentioned, perhaps because it fell outside the purview of state-employed religious officials. In speaking to religious authorities, society leaders framed their project as integral to Muslim culture and intellectual traditions, and thus entirely in line with Muslim values.

From its earliest years, the Azeri impulse for educational reform focused not just on school children, but also adults. Societies, particularly Salvation Society, organized night classes and Friday schools for working adult men. These courses were less standardized in their curriculum; Azeri and Russian literacy were the primary focus, but many of the courses also featured guest lectures from specialists on topics including geography, science, and technology. Religious courses did not make up the adult curriculum. Adult learners were not seeking sharia training, but the more pragmatic advantages that came with literacy. It is likely that these educational programs faced less scrutiny from religious authorities, since teaching adults had never been within the purview of the *madrasah* system. Demand for adult education courses was higher than supply for much of the era. Huseynqulu Sarabski learned Russian in one of the earlier programs for adult literacy organized by Baku's reformists. He recalled entering a night

²⁰² ADTA f312 s1 q1

school program for students aged ten-to-twenty-five while still a poor adolescent working as a stone mason's assistant. Sarabski does not name the year for these courses, but as it was before he became involved in theater, it was sometime before 1905. The night school had been founded by Zaynalabdin Taghiev, with an exam board that included Hasan bey Zardabi and Nariman Narimanov. The names involved indicate a likely high-quality educational program, but Sarabski and his fellow students' educational pursuits were cut short when Taghiev did not raise the teachers' salaries and they quit en masse.²⁰³ Following 1905, the demand for adult educational programs only grew.

In August 1908, *Tereqqi* reported on this growing demand, writing of a petition that had garnered 250 signatures requesting that the administration of Salvation Society organize more night classes for adults. The petition described the courses as in the service of those who had “stayed without knowledge (*elm*).”²⁰⁴ Salvation Society did not leave this petition unanswered and starting in 1908 organized a number of evening courses and Friday schools. The structure of these programs reveals how dedicated adult learners were to pursuing their educations. Salvation Society's evening courses lasted four hours, from 6-10 pm. On Friday evenings in place of the standard curriculum they would host lectures on topics including physics, geography, anatomy, animal sciences, botany, and history.²⁰⁵ Students would thus follow full work days, typically hard labor, with four hours of class, and spend their day of rest being introduced to academic topics many of them had likely never heard of before.

²⁰³ Sarabski, *Bir Akyorun Xatirələri*. 32.

²⁰⁴ *Tereqqi*. August 28, 1908, No. 63.

²⁰⁵ *Tereqqi*. January 19, 1908, No. 15.

As Salvation Society developed its evening and Friday educational programs, the adjustments it made were toward making them more rigorous, in response to student demands. The additional Friday lectures that became part of the night course program were at student request. In a letter to *Tereqqi* in early 1909, Dadash Bunyadzade, future leader in the Azerbaijan SSR, wrote in praise of the night classes, where he was a student. Bunyadzade praised the efforts of Salvation Society, noting that “comrades (*yoldashlar*) who had been deprived of knowledge” could now read the newspaper and write in the mother tongue. The classes, he noted, often had no space left because they were so full, and after students requested an expanded curriculum, feeling underserved by the absence of classes on history and geography, the Friday lectures were implemented. Bunyadzade welcomed new students to join him, “If other comrades have the will right now, come study in these lessons with us, it is clear that: we are going to increase our lessons.”²⁰⁶ In January 1909, the school commission of Salvation Society investigated why it was seeing declining participation in one of its Friday schools. It was determined that the weekly three-hour lessons offered at the school were insufficient, and that instead five hours of lessons were called for. Reflecting once again the high demand for Russian in the Azeri educational program, the lessons were expanded so that the formerly one-hour Russian lesson became two hours, and a new hourlong class on vocabulary was also added. Whether this was Russian or Azeri vocabulary is not specified, although the teachers of the vocabulary lessons would be Amhed Agaoglu, Mammed Amin Rasulzade, and two other teachers.²⁰⁷ Rasulzade and Agaoglu being two of the leading figures in the Azeri language press, it seems likely the lessons were in the native language. Considering the

²⁰⁶ *Tereqqi*, January 14, 1909, No. 11.

²⁰⁷ *Tereqqi*, January 29, 1909, No. 17.

two were perhaps the most verbose writers active in the Azeri literary scene at the time, they were well qualified to teach the subject.

Although more scholarly attention has been paid to the traditional new method schools founded by Turkic reformists in the Russian Empire in the turn of the century, in Baku, the adult learning programs arguably had a greater social impact. While schoolchildren in new method schools gained literacy in Azeri and Russian, the program for adult learners was tailored to facilitate Baku's urban Azeri population to better navigate and harness aspects of modern life and learning. Rasalzade and Agaoglu, two of the most politically influential Azeris of the era, did not concern themselves overly much with children beyond advocating school reform, yet actively engaged with adult learners. They were not alone in this; many members of the free professions, Azeri doctors, lawyers, engineers, and journalists, volunteered as teachers in evening classes and Friday schools.²⁰⁸ The Azeri intellectual elite did this so that they might transmit their ideas about social reform and Azeri identity to the masses. In return, the students in the courses, laborers who were encountering social democracy in its many forms from the radical organizers who worked among them, began to shape Azeri reformist discourse. Dadash Bunyadzade exemplifies this. In his letter in *Tereqqi*, he makes liberal use of *yoldash*, or "comrade," a term not widely employed in the more popular journals of the era. Salvation Society's night courses enabled him to put into writing the radical politics he encountered as a laborer in Baku, where he had worked successively at a rock quarry, in Taghiev's textile factory, and as a blacksmith. After gaining literacy in both Azeri and Russian and learning a range of other topics through Salvation Society's evening courses,

²⁰⁸ Altstadt. *Azerbaijani Turks*. 57.

he ascended into the free professions himself, becoming a translator and newspaper editor. In 1912 he founded his own newspaper, a satirical publication called *Ari* (*The Bee*.)²⁰⁹ He would go on to be a leader in shaping early Soviet Azerbaijan, becoming the first People's Commissar of Enlightenment for the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, and ultimately to the People's Commissar of the Azerbaijan SSR. As Commissar of Enlightenment, he outlined a vision for educational reform in 1920 that did not differ greatly from the reformist visions of 1906, calling for a literacy campaign, the founding of new schools, and opening of libraries, courses, and publishing houses.²¹⁰ He was arrested and killed in Stalin's purges, accused of being a "bandit theoretician" who had sullied Azeri language purity with "Quranic Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman elements," ending an extensive career shaping Azeri politics and education that began in Salvation Society's evening classes and carried over into the first two decades of Soviet Azerbaijan.²¹¹

Women and Girls Mobilizing for Education

Of all the vectors of the Azeri reformist program, education featured the most involvement on the part of women and girls. The wives of Azeri elites organized to support educational efforts, funding the establishment of a small number of new method girls' schools to serve the middle and lower classes who wanted literacy for their daughters. The daughters of the elite, meanwhile, were educated at home by tutors and governesses and occasionally sent abroad, becoming literate and multilingual members of

²⁰⁹ Audrey Altstadt. *The Politics of Culture in Soviet Azerbaijan, 1920-1940*. Routledge, 2016. 63.

²¹⁰ Ibid. 99-100.

²¹¹ Ibid. 83.

the upper strata of Baku society.²¹² Typical of most early movements for women's education, reformists framed the need for girls' schools and increased female literacy as an essential aspect of modern motherhood and domestic management. For the wealthy, there was the added concern of marriageability for their daughters. The Muslim millionaires born of the oil industry often looked to the Christian and Jewish populations of the region for more Europeanized and educated marriage partners.²¹³ Elite families knew the sons of other families would expect the same in their wives, and a rich but illiterate, veiled, Azeri girl, could not compete with a daughter of wealthy Armenians who spoke French and German and knew how to host a soiree where she would mingle with both men and women. The wealthiest girls in Azeri society, thus, received educations very similar to that of all elite women in the Russian Empire. Middle and lower-class girls, meanwhile, had modest options in new method schools, often facing violent opposition in the streets should they choose to take advantage of them.

Taghiev founded the first modern Muslim girl's school in 1901. He first petitioned Tsar Alexander III for permission to build a school for Muslim girls in the early 1890s but was rejected. After Alexander's death and on the occasion of Tsar Nicholas II's coronation (1894), Taghiev tried again. This time he proposed to name the school after the Tsar's wife, Empress Alexandra Fedorovna, and the proposal was accompanied by a gift for the Empress. Two years later, Taghiev had his permission, and construction began on the school.²¹⁴ Taghiev attempted to head off local opposition to educating girls by seeking permission from religious authorities in Mashhad and Karbala

²¹² Farideh Heyat. *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*. Taylor and Francis, 2002. 67.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

for the school, but his attempts at damage control were unsuccessful. The school's opening resulted in unrest characterized by attacks on Azeri women dressed in European clothing, attacks on the families who sent their daughters to the school (thirty-five of the fifty-eight girls in the first class were poor girls attending for free), and condemnations of the school voiced in mosques.

One of the newly hired teachers at the school was Shafiga Efendiyeva (1882-1959), a nineteen-year old Azeri woman from Georgia. Efendiyeva had received a modern education first through her father, a teacher, and then at a private girl's school. She was hired by Taghiev to teach Azeri. Efendiyeva wrote a brief unpublished memoir sometime later in life after Sovietization, it is undated but references both the revolution and changes in street names following the creation of the Azerbaijan SSR. The memoir opens with her recollections of the unrest following the opening of the Empress Alexandra School. Mobs in the street surrounded the school calling out "Ya Huseyn!" and blocking any exit for the teachers and girls inside. "They attacked the windows with rocks and cursed in Ali's name," she wrote.²¹⁵ Only direct intervention by the Empress voicing her support for the school calmed the city.²¹⁶ Over time Taghiev's school became overcrowded, leading Azeris in two western quarters of Baku to petition the city council to build a new school for Muslim girls in one of their neighborhoods. Azeri leaders campaigned for the school, and in 1910 a second girls' school was opened.²¹⁷ Shafiga Efendiyeva left Taghiev's school and took a position working at this school, which was headed by Hanifa Melikova, wife of Hasan bey Zardabi. She noted that "in two years

²¹⁵ MFƏİ Inventory B-6603.

²¹⁶ Heyat. *Azeri Women in Transition*. 67.

²¹⁷ Altstadt. *The Azerbaijani Turks*. 56.

time, those wanting lessons and the number of students wanting school increased greatly. It was progress. And a need for a second school was seen.” Thus, in 1911, the city council opened a second girls’ school.²¹⁸ Three girls’ schools for the entire Azeri population of Baku does not indicate overwhelming demand for primary education for Azeri girls but, as Shafiga Effendiyeva observed, it was progress.

The experience of the Empress Alexandra Russian Muslim Boarding School for Girls set the tone for future efforts in girls’ education in Baku. Azeri reformers in Tiflis faced fewer obstacles; as the cultural center of the Transcaucasus and most Europeanized city in the region, Azeri religious forces held less sway there. Indeed, this is why Jalil Mammadguluzade lived and published *Molla Nasreddin* in Tiflis; in Baku, his safety was not guaranteed. Mammadguluzade’s third wife, Hamida Javanshir of Karabakh, helped found the Tiflis women’s Muslim Benevolent Society in 1906, which opened the city’s first primary school for Muslim girls.²¹⁹ This school filled, and by 1915 members reported that they had raised 4,000 rubles for a new school, with an additional 6,000 raised by the main Tiflis Muslim Benevolent Society.²²⁰ The Benevolent Society also turned its educational efforts toward the orphans under its care during the war. Among the society’s expenses that year was the hiring of two women, one who baked for the orphanage, and another who taught the orphaned girls Azeri literacy and “handiwork.”²²¹

Finding qualified women teachers for the few girls’ schools founded in this period would have proven difficult. There were no preexisting gymnasiums or Russian-Tatar

²¹⁸ MFƏİ Inventory B-6603.

²¹⁹ Heyat. *Azeri Women in Transition*. 66.

²²⁰ AMK. Qafqaz Musulman Cemiyeti Kheriyyesinin 1915 Iilde Olan Gelir Gedirinin Sayisidir.” Tiflis. Sherq bassma khanessinde bassildi.

²²¹ Ibid.

schools for girls in Baku producing graduates in the years before 1901, when Taghiev created the first demand for women teachers with the Empress Alexandra School. The best educated women in Baku would have been the daughters of elites such as Taghiev himself, but they had not learned Russian and French so that they could teach primary school-aged girls basic literacy. Shafiga Efendiyeva and Hanifa Melikova seem representative of the literate women who might end up schoolteachers. Efendiyeva was the daughter of a village intellectual and her schooling was primarily at home and a simple result of having a father who believed in educating his daughter. Hanifa Melikova was educated at a girls' school in Tiflis that primarily served Christian students. The Georgian origins of the two suggest that it was easier for Muslim girls to gain education in regions where they were the minority, and ethnic tensions were not so fraught as they were in Baku, allowing them to attend schools serving multiethnic student bodies.

Women's auxiliaries of Baku-based societies also dedicated much of their energies to educational efforts. A group of women formed their own branch of Salvation Society in 1908 with the purpose of spreading knowledge and education among girls.²²² Most were likely the wives of Salvation Society members; while most Azeri surnames are too common to say with certainty which families the women came from, the names Akhundov, Vazirov, and Hajibababeyov all indicate connections to prominent male reformists of Baku society. There is no record of these women's activities in Salvation Society's accounts indicating what they did as there is for the Tiflis women's Muslim Benevolent Society activities, but they were likely the source of many of the donations that appear in the ledgers. As mentioned previously, Muslim women of Baku high society

²²² *Tereqqi*. October 30, 1908. No. 89.

were expected to be skilled hostesses, and they elicited charitable donations from guests at their events. Muslim women in the Baku elite often organized evening soirees for this purpose. These soirees showcased traditional Azeri culture mixed with literary readings and dramatic performances of both original Azeri works and European works in translation. In some ways, they synthesized the tradition of the Persianate literary assembly with modern European-style entertaining. A 1915 “eastern soiree” benefit for Salvation Society featured a performance from the Hajibeyov opera *Arshin Mal Alan*, traditional songs, readings from Shakespeare, a comic dialog by the playwright Najaf bey Vazirov, and concluded with a bardic performance by Ashiq Abbasqulu.²²³ At these events Muslim women mingled freely with other women and men, fellow elites from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, all of whom understood that the evening’s entertainment came with an expected donation to support the Society’s efforts. This was one key way education was funded in the era, and women played an important role in facilitating these events.

Funding Woes and Teacher Shortages

Social opposition was not the sole obstacle Azeri educational reformers faced in their quest for a modern educational system. Societies struggled to meet the costs and produce the human capital required to transform schooling in Azerbaijan. Maintaining school buildings, producing and employing qualified teachers, and demonstrating success in student progress all proved difficult for Azeri societies. They responded to these problems through eliciting donations, creating training programs for teachers, and using their social and financial resources to pressure those in the teaching community to fall in

²²³ AMK. “Nicat Cemiyetinin İkinci Şarq Musamirin Meramnamesidir.” 1915.

line with new method reforms. Their efforts in these directions demonstrates how massive and ambitious an undertaking the total reform of Muslim education in Azeri society was. It also helps explain why many late imperial reformists so readily embraced Bolshevism when they saw that it offered them the opportunity to leverage the power of the state to enact the reforms they had been laboring to implement for decades.

Teachers formed a growing contingent of the Azeri intellectual class in late imperial Baku, but their number never met the growing demand as new method schools proliferated. Many men who started out as schoolteachers went on to careers as journalists and writers, abandoning their former vocations, while others sought further education and entered more elite professions. This was true of Hajibeyov, who moved to Baku to work as a teacher, but who soon turned his focus to composing operas and contributing to *Molla Nasreddin*. Nariman Narimanov, meanwhile, left his teaching work to attend medical school in Odessa, returning to Baku a doctor. These early-career teachers were often educated at the Gori Pedagogical Seminary, one of the main schools of higher learning in Transcaucasia. The seminary opened a Muslim department in 1879. The school was unique in hosting a dedicated program for educating Muslims and attracted many ambitious young Azeri men over the years. The Gori Pedagogical Seminary alone did not produce sufficient teachers for the new schools in Baku, however, leading Publication Society to found its own teacher training institute to address the shortage.

Publication Enlightenment Society considered the recruitment and training of qualified teachers part of its mission from its inception. In its charter, founding members laid out, among its goals, to look for trial teachers for schools, to create courses for

training teachers, including female teachers, and to open schools specifically for gifted students to be tracked into becoming teachers.²²⁴ In addition to putting together a commission to investigate the educational needs and necessary reforms of neighborhood schools in 1906, Publication Society also formed a commission following a meeting on November 29, 1906, to assess the condition of the teaching of Azeri in the city's already existing Russian-Muslim schools and determine how the society might assist with whatever needs were determined as a result.²²⁵ Several weeks later, when the society held another general meeting on January 19, 1907, the commission reported its finding that "There are no teachers for the mother tongue and sharia...in all the cities of the Caucasus in Muslim society teachers with regards to this are in a state of ruin." Because of these findings, the society reiterated the intentions it had first laid out in its charter, declaring that it would open a *darulmuellimin* to train new teachers. It would additionally open a new method course for teachers already employed at neighborhood schools to learn the principles of new method pedagogy. The meeting's minutes noted that the course would attempt to correct the shortcomings of the old method with the new method, and that it would consist of two modes: lectures and practicum.²²⁶ On that same day, the society treasurer wrote a note recording that the society had sent 1,500 rubles to the treasury of the Baku Governorate so that it might deliver the funds to the Baku Realni School for a teacher's course offered through the school, likely the new method course referenced in the meeting minutes.²²⁷ For the new *darulmuellimin*, Publication Society recruited an Ottoman pedagogue, Javad Bey, as head. He stayed in that role until late 1908, when he

²²⁴ ADTA f46 s2 q157

²²⁵ ADTA f 312 s1 q2, p. 2-5.

²²⁶ Ibid., 10.

²²⁷ ADTA f312 s1 q1.

elected to return to Istanbul. Society leadership seems to have been pleased with his work getting the institute started, as they voted to reward him with three year's additional financial support upon his departure.²²⁸

Doubtless, Publication Society's investigative commission's recommendations were not entirely welcome at many of the schools it was seeking to reform. It was able to exert influence on Baku's preexisting schools through the high standing of its members, with de-facto leader of the Baku Muslim community Zeynalabdin Taghiev as its chairman and life member, and through the financial resources it was able to amass through such membership. At a meeting shortly before the commission announced its findings, members agreed to donate 180 rubles to a preexisting Russian-Muslim school, on the condition that the head of the school, Zarif Efendi, used the money as the society recommended.²²⁹ Considering their concerns over the pedagogical methods being employed in schools in 1906, it is likely Zarif Efendi was asked to use the funds to retrain his teachers in the new method.

Publication Society's money could not exclusively go to training teachers, however. The society faced the very real and practical concern of the woeful physical state of many school buildings in Baku. The investigative commission sent out to assess the shortcomings in education at Baku's schools also assessed deficiencies in the buildings, and the society dedicated its financial resources to addressing the situation. This concern carried over into the society's organization of its Balakhani chapter, deploying its lawyers to rewrite the chapter's charter because it failed to address

²²⁸ *Tereqqi*. October 24, 1908. No. 84.

²²⁹ ADTA f312 s1 q2, p. 8.

important costs including building maintenance and teachers' salaries.²³⁰ Salvation Society faced similar issues in its endeavors. In a 1909 meeting of Salvation Society's Schools Commission, members addressed problems with the waning enthusiasm for its recently opened Friday school. One of the explanations offered for the decline in student attendance from two hundred in the first weeks to seventy by January was that it was "maybe because of the cold."²³¹ These everyday concerns added to the costs of the educational reform project, stressing societies' resources.

Primary education at all Publication Society schools was provided to children for free, as confirmed in their charter. The society also dedicated funds, however, to sending students on to more advanced schooling. This included sending students to the *Darulfunun* in Istanbul, something Salvation Society and Happiness Society also committed to in their charters. Publication Society aided poor Muslim students studying in high schools, while all three societies opened boarding houses for poor students from outside the city to live in while they pursued secondary educations. Publication Society further provided financial aid to students studying at universities, committing three hundred rubles to students at Gori Pedagogical Seminary to continue their educations in Moscow and St. Petersburg in late 1906.²³² All three societies were heavily invested through various means in facilitating the educations of Muslim children. It was not long after they emerged, however, that Baku's Azeri societies also found themselves in unexpected position of needing to provide financial aid to their own teachers, something none envisioned in their charters.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²³¹ *Tereqqi*. January 29, 1909. No. 17.

²³² ADTA f312 s1 q2, p. 8.

As previously noted, the best-paid teachers at Publication Society schools earned between 400 and 500 rubles annually, which was a decent income for Baku. These were only the best-paid teachers, however. Many more teachers, it seems, found themselves as impoverished as the students who came to their classrooms through society aid. On October 24, 1908, a single line announcement in the “Baku News” section of *Tereqqi* announced that Salvation Society would now be serving lunch and dinner for impoverished teachers at its boarding house.²³³ Just a few months later, the same newspaper reported on a general meeting of Publication Society where several impoverished teachers petitioned the society for aid. As a result, leadership decided to dedicate the funds raised from their “Muslim soirees” (*musulman musamirler*) to needy teachers.²³⁴ Thus evening society events, where the wives of elites solicited money for needy children, now became benefit events for needy teachers. Such news coverage could not have helped Publication Society’s efforts to recruit the most talented students to its teacher training courses.

Societies could often find themselves at odds with teachers over issues of both pay and pedagogy. In 1909, Jamal al-din Daghestani, a teacher at the Turk Lisan School, a school funded by Salvation Society, wrote an article for *Ittifaq* accusing the society’s schools commission of gross negligence. He had recently taken a position at the school, he wrote, and found upon his arrival a school in complete chaos where “the students know nothing.” The students had no chance of passing their exams and, he complained, teachers were in fear of having their summer wages withheld if these “innocent children of the nation” did not improve. Daghestani concluded by calling upon his fellow “teacher

²³³ *Tereqqi*. October 24, 1908. No. 84.

²³⁴ *Tereqqi*. February 5, 1909. No. 28.

comrades” (an indication of his socialist leanings) to defend his rights and that of the students for more support. The article was appended with a statement from Salvation Society’s leadership, stating that five days previously they had visited the school themselves and examined the students, who after less than a year of schools were able to give good answers in Turkish. They thus refuted the “unconscionable lies” of the teacher.²³⁵ Publication Society, meanwhile, was never publicly denounced by any of their teachers, but still faced some trouble keeping them in line. In their 1908 meeting report, the first order of business the society discussed was reprimanding two of their schools and instructing that they adhere to the Publication Enlightenment Society Schools Official Rules.²³⁶

Defining the *Ana Dili*: Language Debates and Education

While Azeri educational reformers agreed that native language education was key to the reforms they wanted to see in the schooling of future generations, defining the native language proved surprisingly tricky. Azeri was, like many languages at the time, not standardized. Grammar and vocabulary varied regionally. Azeri intellectuals’ decisions regarding language was complicated by their relationship with the Ottoman Empire. Unlike Tatar, Azeri was closely related to Ottoman and in many cases mutually intelligible. Well-educated Azeris could read Ottoman periodicals and correspond with Ottoman intellectuals without dramatically altering their language. Many upwardly mobile young Azeris, like other Turkic populations in the Russian Empire, traveled to Istanbul to study in the *Darulfunun*, becoming fully literate in Ottoman Turkish. As a result, those engaging in the language debates in Azerbaijan fell largely into two camps,

²³⁵ *Ittifaq*. May 28, 1908, No. 120.

²³⁶ *Tereqqi*. October 24, 1908, No. 84.

the *Azerichiler* (“partisans of Azeri”) and the Ottomanizers.²³⁷ As these two groups debated the future of the Azeri language, they also debated the future of Azeri-language education.

The leading advocate of adopting a standardized version of Ottoman Turkish as Azerbaijan’s *ana dili* was Ali bey Huseynzade (1864-1940.) Huseynzade was born into a clerical family in Salyan, a city in southern Azerbaijan, and exemplified the close relations between religious and secular intellectuals in Azerbaijan during the late imperial era. Huseynzade was the grandson of Akhund Mehemmedali Huseynzade, the first *Sheikh-ul Islam* of the Caucasus, and nephew of Ahmad Huseynzade, the third *Sheikh ul Islam*. After receiving his secondary education in Tiflis, Huseynzade went on to study at Saint Petersburg University. After graduating he moved to Istanbul to enter the medical faculty at the *Darulfunun*. Huseynzade was among the most educated Azeri men of his generation and became influential in both Ottoman and Azeri circles. Returning to Azerbaijan in 1903, he was a prominent figure in the burgeoning Azeri press, serving as editor of both *Heyat* and the Russian-language *Kaspîi*. In 1906, he secured funding from Taghiev and began publishing *Fuyuzat*, a literary journal written in an elevated Ottoman Turkish. The journal reached a circulation of 1,500, impressive for a literary journal written in relatively inaccessible language, but was shut down after only thirty-two issues after Huseynzade hired the Ottoman subject Ahmed Kemal, a young progressive, to edit it. Kemal was living in exile in Baku because he was wanted by Ottoman police and used the organ to express his grievances with Sultan Abdul Hamid. Azeri readership at the time was generally pro-Caliphate and turned on the publication, accusing it of being part

²³⁷ Swietochowski. *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920*. 60.

of a Young Turk plot. Taghiev reacted by closing down the journal in December 1907.²³⁸ Huseynzade returned to Istanbul in 1910, and his greatest influence would be on the Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic; he was a member of the Central Committee of the Committee of Union Progress and Ziya Gökalp credited him as the instigator of the Turkist movement. Indeed, the title of Gökalp's famous work *Türkleşmek, İslamlaşmak, Muasirlaşmak*, "Turkification, Islamicization, modernization," was borrowed from Huseynzade, who advocated for "Turkification, Islamicization, Europeanization" in the pages of *Heyat* in 1905.²³⁹ Huseynzade continued to maintain a presence in Baku society during his many years in Istanbul, and he would return in 1918 to help lead the new Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, demonstrating his commitment to reforming his own society as much as Ottoman society. While primarily living in Istanbul, he began publishing a new Baku-based literary journal, *Shalala (Waterfall)* in 1912, and held the title of the head of Seadat School from 1910-1916.²⁴⁰ As head of perhaps the most prestigious new method school in Baku, Huseynzade was able to exert influence over educational language policy, attracting the ire of the *Azerichiler*.

Huseynzade's most vocal detractors were Jalil Mammadguluzade and his collaborators at *Molla Nasreddin*. Unlike *Fuyuzat* and *Shalala*, *Molla Nasreddin* was written in a vernacular Azeri more closely resembling what people spoke on the street. *Molla Nasreddin* rejected the idea of a unifying Ottoman Turkish that could be shared by all Turkic peoples, instead embracing a wholly Caucasian identity. Mammadguluzade promised in the journal's first issue to employ a simple and accessible language, and

²³⁸ Bennigsen & Lemerrier-Quelquejey. *La Presse et le Mouvement National chez les Musulmans de Russie Avant 1920*. 112.

²³⁹ Karpat. *The Politicization of Islam*. 306.

²⁴⁰ Yaqublu, *Azərbaycanın İlk Qəyri-Hökumət Təşkilatları*. p. 38.

many scholars and writers discussing the journal today take this promise at face value and declare it to have been a defining feature of *Molla Nasreddin*. While it was true that many articles in the journal did utilize a clear and simple Azeri, however, to truly fully read the journal, readers needed to know Azeri, Persian, and Russian. *Molla Nasreddin*, like Azerbaijan itself, expressed a culture where Turkish, Persian, and Russian collided. Ironically, it was *Molla Nasreddin*, not *Fuyuzat* or *Shalala*, that became the most influential and widely circulated journal to emerge from the Azeri language press, with readers abroad willing to grapple with its multilingualism and elliptical language in order to access its satire and striking artwork.

Molla Nasreddin definitively took its stand against Huseynzade in 1913, with a two-part article by Firidun Kocharli entitled *Ana Dili*. Kocharli was a philologist and literary critic who had been educated at the Gori Pedagogical Seminary. By 1913, Kocharli had already published numerous works on Azeri literature and language, including essays on Akhundov and a survey of Azeri literature that reviewed the works of 130 Azeri writers. He was the undisputed expert on Azeri literature during his lifetime, and thus a written rebuke from him carried some weight. Kocharli opened his article by acknowledging that the debate around standardizing the Azeri language had been going on for some time and identifying the two main camps as those who had received their educations in Istanbul, and those who had received their educations in Azerbaijan at Turk-lisan schools (Turkic language schools, thus any new method school.) Both camps felt strongly about their positions, he wrote, leading to a situation in which newspapers were written according to the language preferences of one group, and preferred and read by those with similar educational backgrounds. The implication of this trend was that

“people love this language and considerate it theirs, and instruct their children in this language.” Although Kocharli acknowledged the emotional connection either side of the debate held to the language they employed and consumed in the Azeri press, he did not hold both views in equal regard. Indeed, Kocharli was entirely disdainful of the attempts of some Azeri writers to impose an Ottomanizing project on the Azeri language. “Every people has their own specific mother tongue that is their specific possession. The mother tongue is a people’s spiritual resurrection,” Kocharli wrote. The Azeri language was, in his view, essential to the Azeri identity, and to advocate its erasure through standardization with Ottoman would be to erase the Azeri *millet*. Its particular idiosyncrasies were tied to the Azeri people’s history and were a benefit rather than an obstacle, and Kocharli defended the non-Turkic aspects of the language:

We Azerbaijani Turks have our own specific language. With having lived a long period under Iranian influence, our language is complicated by Persian grammar and structure. But this does not complicate and entangle our language so that it is incomprehensible...It is true that our capable and competent writers are few, but they loved the mother tongue as a dear language and wrote their works in an open and clear manner.²⁴¹

Kocharli concluded the first part of his article by listing Abbasqulu Bakikhanov, Mirza Fatali Akhundov, Qasimbey Zakir, Hajji Heybatbey Fedai, Hajji Seyid Azim, and Hasanbey Melikov Zardabi as examples of Azeri writers who were able to employ the mother tongue in an elegant and simple style. By Kocharli’s estimation, the work of these writers had been complicated of late by “those who have come from receiving incomplete educations in Istanbul to deliver damage.”²⁴² Kocharli opened his second installment of *Ana Dili* wishing that Huseynzade had “remained comfortably in Istanbul” for he had

²⁴¹ Firidun Kocharli. “Ana Dili.” *Molla Nasreddin*. September 16, 1913, No. 22.

²⁴² Ibid.

“not only confused our language, he has brought a new language.” He went on to criticize the language of *Shalala* and encourage a return to a simple native Azeri, for “only with writing on this path can fellowship, unity, and friendship come to readers.”²⁴³ During the efflorescence of press during the early twentieth-century Ottoman Turkish certainly did begin to creep into the Azeri vernacular. The ultimate destiny of the Azeri language was more in line with the *Azerichiler* than the Ottomanizers, however. Huseynzade returned to Istanbul following the entrance of Azerbaijan into the Soviet Union, where he would see Ottoman Turkish disappear under Ataturk’s Language reforms. The Azeri language, meanwhile, was standardized under Soviet sensibilities about nationalities, which elevated primordial origins of cultures and nations over any sort of pan-identity. Azeri under the Soviets did Turkify, with many Arabic and Persian words and grammatical constructions disappearing, but in the end Azeri maintained many of its unique characteristics.

While the *Azerichiler* and Ottomanizers were at loggerheads over the destiny of the Azeri language, one thing the two camps could agree on was the importance of prioritizing the native language over Russian. As previously discussed, Tsarist authorities in the late imperial era never sought to eliminate native languages or the culture of ethnic minorities, but they did seek order over their large empire through administrative uniformity. As Blauvelt and Vachardze observed, this drive for uniformity “further encouraged the growth of national awareness in the peripheries, to which the government responded by pursuing further uniformity, expressed in russification.”²⁴⁴ Thus a self-perpetuating cycle of reaction characterized russification and nationalism in the Caucasus

²⁴³ Firidun Kocharli. “Ana Dili.” *Molla Nasreddin*. October 12, 1913, No. 23.

²⁴⁴ Blauvelt & Vachardze. “Pedagogy, Modernity, and Nationalism.” 3.

starting in the late nineteenth century; the native populations of the Caucasus asserted their distinct identities in reaction to russification, and tsarist authorities sought to maintain order by seeking further uniformity. It was an inescapable fact that many Azeris wanted to learn Russian, as exemplified by the demand for Russian courses in adult education programs. Almost all of the leading Azeri intellectuals had received educations in Russian-Muslim schools and Russian institutes of higher education. They used the elevated social position their Russian educations had earned them, however, to push against russification and promote the idea that a truly self-respecting Azeri progressive proudly spoke and wrote in an unadulterated Azeri.

Uzeyir Hajibeyov's most popular comic operetta *If Not That One, Then This One*, written in 1910, offers a satirical take on urban Azeris, taking aim at both those who overused Russian and at Ottomanizers. The operetta tells the tale of two young lovers, Sarvar and Gulnaz, whose desire to form a love match is threatened by Gulnaz's father, who hopes to settle his gambling debts by selling her into marriage to a rich and much older bazaar merchant named Meshedi Ibad. The father, Rustam bey, is joined by four friends in celebrating the coming nuptials, who each represent a caricatured version of typical figures encountered in Baku society. As the mutually beneficial deal between Rustam bey and Meshedi Ibad begins to unravel, these men manipulate the hapless merchant into giving them increasingly more money for services never rendered. Finally, the young lovers trick him into agreeing to marry the maid instead. Significant to the language debates occupying many Azeri intellectuals of the era are the characters of Rza bey, a journalist, and Hasan bey, an intellectual. Rza bey, a clear parody of Ali bey Huseynzade, speaks in an exaggerated Ottoman style throughout the play, employing

verb conjugations and vocabulary that do not exist in Azeri. When he attempts to give a toast during the celebration for the upcoming nuptials, none of the other guests understand and, rather than admitting it, simply do not respond. This sends Rza bey into a rage, and he threatens to attack them all in his journal. Only then do the men admit they have no idea what he's been saying, a comic representation of the confusion in the language identified by Kocharli three years later in *Ana Dili*. Hasan bey, the "intellectual," is presented as an even more buffoonish character than the Ottoman chauvinist Rza bey. When Hasan bey rises to give a toast following Rza bey, he speaks in a confusing garble of Azeri, Russian, and a bit of French for good measure. Through his mostly meaningless prattle, Hasan bey references Darwin's theory of evolution, declaring it true as Meshedi Ibad clearly resembles a monkey. He then mocks the merchant for not drinking while the rest of them are deep in their wine, declaring him worthy of the beautiful young Gulnaz because he is a good Muslim.²⁴⁵ Hasan bey is represented as, beyond anything else, a drunken windbag, shallowly referencing European intellectuals for insults rather than insight. He deploys Russian as a way to assert his superiority over other men, relying on it to affirm his identity as an intellectual rather than having any meaningful ideas of his own. It was this idea that Russian somehow elevated men in late imperial Azeri society, an idea rooted in truths about economic mobility, that many Azeri intellectuals of the *Azerichi* persuasion rejected.

Unsurprisingly, *Molla Nasreddin* also had something to say about the (mis)use of Russian by Azeris. Jalil Mammadguluzade took on the topic in the journal's first year of publication, writing a humorous dialogue entitled "Sweet Russian Speaker" that had been

²⁴⁵ Uzeyir Hajibeyov. *O Olmasin bu Olsun in Sechilmish Eserleri, I Cild*. Sherq-Qerb, 2005. 260-262.

“overheard” in the bazaar taking place between an Azeri mason and a Russian. When the Russian asks how the mason is, he responds in a Russian peppered with Azeri grammar, complaining about this new gazette called *Molla Nasreddin* that was written in “*Musulmanski*.” The piece concluded with a parenthetical note: “To the management: if this kind of Russian-knower is needed, here you go.”²⁴⁶ Mammadguluzade wrote a similar dialogue in 1910, purporting to be a meeting of Salvation Enlightenment Society. The members, using more Russian than Azeri, elect a new chairman, who accepts the position, noting “I do not know *Tatarski* well but I am glad.” His claim not to know his own native tongue is immediately disproven when the secretary chimes in with perfect Azeri, describing a request from the *sheikh-ul Islam* that the society open a *darulmollayan*, a school for mollas (this is a made-up word playing upon *darulfunun*), because people in the villages wanted more mollas. The members all agree this is a worthy cause, showing that despite their self-stylings as Russian intellectuals, they are not truly progressive thinkers.²⁴⁷

Mammadguluzade was not opposed to Russian language knowledge. He himself had attained his position in society through Russian education at the Gori Pedagogical Seminary. The intellectuals he most closely collaborated with and those who had earned his respect rather than his ridicule, with some exceptions, were also competent speakers of Russian. Uzeyir Hajibeyov, Firidun Kocharli, and Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev had all received higher educations from imperial institutions. In Mammadguluzade’s view, however, Russian was a tool for Azeri reformists to use within the administrative structure to allow them to advance Azeri interests. In the two dialogues he wrote mocking

²⁴⁶ *Molla Nasreddin*. September 22, 1906. No. 25.

²⁴⁷ “Nicat Cemiyeti.” *Molla Nasreddin*. May 23, 1910 No. 20.

representatives from opposite ends of the Azeri social strata—a laborer and the members of an elite enlightenment society—Mammadguluzade is identifying improper use of Russian, a failed mimicry. The laborer attempts to use Russian to please his customer, hoping to appear more sophisticated in his eyes. The members of Salvation Society, meanwhile, needlessly use Russian in a purely Azeri setting, with no authorities to placate or bureaucracy to navigate. Homi Bhabha describes the process of mimicry in colonial India creating Anglicized Indians “in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English.”²⁴⁸ While Azeris were not a colonized people in the same sense as Indians, the administrative policy of Russification threatened traditional customs and cultural identities of non-Russians in the empire (and indeed of the Russian peasantry itself, complicating the application of post-colonial theory.) What this process produced were mimic-men, some, like Mammadguluzade, who consciously engaged in mimicry as a weapon of destabilization against Russian hegemony. As Bhabha notes, “mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically.”²⁴⁹ This was the mimicry some of the most influential Azeri intellectuals engaged in, while the dialogues Mammadguluzade wrote represent an obsequious mimicry that only worked to reinforce the process of Russification.

It is in these polemics against the use of Russian that the earliest seeds of Azeri nationalism emerged. Although Azeris liberally referred to the *millet* and its needs, few if any Azeri intellectuals were imagining themselves as members of a future independent state. The desire to empower the Azeri language, however, and to name themselves and

²⁴⁸ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994. 125.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 129.

their language as *Azerbaijan* rather than simply *Tatar* or *Musulman*, shows how some Azeri intellectuals were beginning to articulate their difference from other Muslims, Turks, and Persians. The need to develop this difference translated into an animated debate over pedagogical approaches to teaching the mother tongue in new method schools.

The Azeri Educational Press

As Azeri educational reformers increased the number of children and adults who read, the demand for simple texts for early readers rose. Baku, home to the most active publishing culture of any Muslim population in Russia, became the leading site of educational text production.²⁵⁰ Two influential educational journals for children were published in Baku. The first, *Dabistan* (1906-1908), included a supplement specifically for parents to aid them in teaching their children, and included regular contributions from Hasan bey Melikov Zardabi. Issues would include biographies of great Muslim scholars and historical figures such as Ibn Sina and the Mughal leader Akbar I.²⁵¹ A second educational journal *Mekteb*, was founded by two teachers in 1911, and ran until 1917. *Mekteb* often featured contributions from prominent intellectuals such as Narimanov and Ali Abbas Muznib, a writer and literary scholar. *Mekteb* offered to its readers aspirational figures a bit closer to home than Ibn Sina; in their second issue, coinciding with the jubilee marking one hundred years since Akhundov's birth (to be discussed further in chapter 4), the journal featured several pieces on Akhundov, including a biography, a poem in his honor, and statement on him from the editors. *Mekteb* also featured sections

²⁵⁰ Bennigsen & Lemerrier-Quelquejey. *La Presse et le Mouvement National chez les Musulmans de Russie Avant 1920*. 129.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.* 130.

on topics such as natural history, with an article on various species of monkeys and apes in its second issue, and concluded with a dictionary section for students to expand their vocabulary. Among the words the editors wanted their young readers to learn in the second issue were *tehsil* (study), *tekmil* (completing/perfecting), and *jehalet* (ignorance.)²⁵²

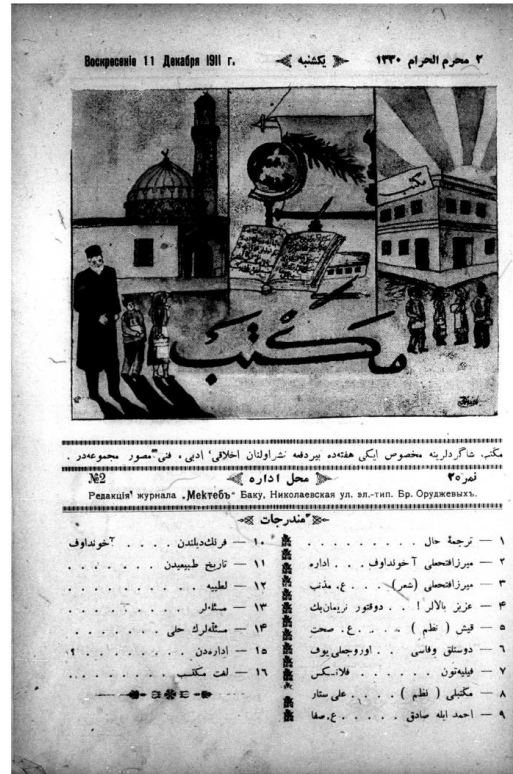


Figure 6 The contents page of *Mekteb*, 1911

Beyond the two educational journals, Azeri authors began writing short stories and novellas in simple language for the use of new readers. Some were meant for any reader at a beginner’s level; in 1916 a writer named Aghasi bey Giraybekov published a story entitled *Team of Spies (Jasuslar Destesi)* that he described as “an interesting story written in simple language that is fitting for students and adults.”²⁵³ Others were written

²⁵² *Mekteb*, December 11, 1911. No. 2.

²⁵³ AMK. Aghasi bey Giraybekov. *Jasuslar Destesi*. Tulu. 1916.

expressly for children. The Orujov Brothers Press's 1914 catalog included a dedicated section entitled "reading books especially for children" that included forty-three titles. Before the arrival of new method education, children's literature was a foreign concept, with reading reserved for the most educated adults. Now, the idea that for a child to learn they needed to independently pursue reading, and that parents should read to their younger children who were not yet themselves literate, was an important part of the educational reform project. Just as Azeri authors answered the call to develop an Azeri language literary canon, others addressed the need for native-language children's literature.

Three authors in particular worked to develop reading material for Azeri children. Jafar Rashad, one of the teachers who had founded *Mekteb*, also wrote children's books, and had titles such as *The Rich Sparrow and the Toothy Mouse* and *The Fox and the Wolf*. Fox-centered fables were particularly popular and were likely drawn from folktales that had previously been transmitted to children orally. Ali Abbas Muznib developed more instructional works, including a book of verse entitled *Children's Examples* and a book simply entitled *Qiraet* ("read aloud.") The most significant children's book author was Abdulla Shaig, who with seven children's books, had written more than any other author in the catalog. Like Rashad, Shaig was a schoolteacher. His works tended to be fables, such as *The Fox and the Nursery*, and stories about children such as *Jafar with Bashir and Murad*.²⁵⁴ Perhaps his most famous work was *Tiqtiq Khanim*, the story of a very vain and lonely bug who traverses the Azeri countryside looking for a friend, eventually finding one in a mouse. When Tiqtiq khanim is ungrateful for his friendship

²⁵⁴ AMK. *Baki Baradaran Orujov Kitabkhanesinin Esasi Al-Kitabi*. 1914.

the mouse leaves her to drown, a cautionary tale about friendship for budding young members of the *millet*. *Tiqtiq Khanim* was turned into a cartoon in 1974, with a slightly amended ending that maintained the moral of the story without killing the unappreciative bug, but rather punishes her by reducing her to being wet, ugly, and lonely. It remains a widely recognized symbol of Azeri childhood today.

Conclusion

Educational reform in Azerbaijan in the early twentieth century was an uneven, belabored process. Azeri enlightenment societies dedicated much of their resources to the project of educational reform. Indeed, Salvation Enlightenment Society stipulated in 1906 that a full forty percent of its expenditures would be dedicated to aiding poor students, funding primary schools, and funding *Darulfunun* students.²⁵⁵ Through these efforts, literacy increased among the Azeri population, particularly in Baku, and an Azeri reading public emerged. While literacy was primarily reserved to the middle and upper classes, enterprising laborers or poor children with dedicated parents could obtain modern educations that offered them greater class mobility. When the empire collapsed and the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was formed, Publication Enlightenment Society transformed into the Ministry of Education, and Alimardan Topchubashov focused on Azeri progress regarding teachers and educational reform to support Azerbaijan's legitimacy as a nation at the Paris Peace Conference.²⁵⁶

As significant as the actual strides made in the realm of educational reform were, the many debates around Azeri identity that inevitably emerged from discourses on

²⁵⁵ ADTA f46 s2 q78

²⁵⁶ Michael G. Smith. "Anatomy of a Rumour: Murder Scandal, the Musavat Party and Narratives of the Russian Revolution in Baku, 1917–20." *Journal of Contemporary History* 36, no. 2 (2001.) 230.

education are equally as significant to Azeri history. Through educating children and members of the lower classes, enlightenment societies recruited a growing portion of the Azeri populace into their project of social and cultural reform. Through schools, students were introduced to the theater, encouraged to read newspapers, and given the opportunity to voice their opinions in written form. They were not only shaped by the reformist project but began to shape it themselves, with figures such as Dadash Bunyatzade and the disgruntled teacher Jamal al-din Daghestani injecting increasingly radical, pro-worker rhetoric into the Azeri press. Questions around the relationship between modernized education and Islam, the standardization of the Azeri language, the role of the Russian language in Azeri society, the role of women in Azeri society, and the proper way to raise enlightened children, were never definitively answered through the educational initiatives of enlightenment societies, but they carried over into early Soviet Azerbaijani educational policies. Sovietization largely ended the at times collaborative, at times contentious, relationship between religious intellectuals and secular intellectuals in the realm of education. With regard to issues of language, gender, and childhood, however, Soviet Azerbaijan built upon the legacy left behind by new method reforms.

Chapter 4

Staging Reform: Creating an Azeri Opera and Theater Culture

One of the most celebrated and controversial components of the Azeri reformist cultural program was the native theater culture that took shape following 1905. A small community of Azeri actors and playwrights had been intermittently organizing performances since Hasan bey Zardabi, elder statesman of the Azeri intelligentsia, assembled a group of young students to perform the first Azeri playwright Mirza Fatali Akhundov's satire *Hajji Qara* in their schoolhouse in order to raise money for their educations in 1873.²⁵⁷ It was not until the revolution, however, that Azeris were able to organize enlightenment societies that, through the collection of membership fees and the philanthropy of the elites, wielded the financial resources necessary to create permanent theater companies that offered regular performances at Baku's main theater, Taghiev Theater. With the organization of Azeri intellectuals into societies and the possibility of a new Azeri public sphere, innovators in theater became increasingly active and visible in Azeri life. This led to great successes—the first-ever opera produced in the Muslim world was written by the Azeri composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov and debuted at Taghiev Theater in 1908—and fierce, often violent opposition. As the great Azeri actor and singer Huseynqulu Sarabski described it in his 1930 memoir, “from one side the mollas, from one side the tsar's government, from one side Muslims with guns! We had three censors above us. In order to put on a show first we needed permission from the government, then the mollas, then the armed Muslims.”²⁵⁸ Indeed, the Taghiev Theater was burned down twice between 1908 and 1917, with one instance a confirmed act of arson, while actors

²⁵⁷ Zardabi recounts this experience in an article in the daily *Həyat*. December 13, 1905, No. 117.

²⁵⁸ Sarabski, *Bir Akyorun Xatirələri*. 47.

faced the constant threat of violence from their families and community members who disapproved of their profession. Yet the members of the Azeri theater community were dedicated to the idea that theater could be an integral tool in the project of social reform. The development of theater in Azerbaijan is emblematic of the contentions around culture, representation, consumption, and morality that typified reformist = efforts in the early twentieth century.

Embattled though they may have been, the members of the Azeri theater community were lauded by their fellow members of the intelligentsia and the Azeri-language press enthusiastically covered and promoted each new production. Members of the Azeri intelligentsia fixated on theater as being particularly important to progress and took pride in their place as leading cultural innovators in the field. After all, the first secular plays produced in a Muslim society were the realist satires of Mirza Fatali Akhundov, who wrote his first play in 1848, and Hajibeyov was a pioneer of Muslim opera. While some Azeris were driven to mob violence in their opposition to the theater, a large enough portion of the Baku elites embraced theater-going for four professional Muslim drama companies to regularly produce performances in the city. Two of these companies functioned as wings of Azeri societies; one of Salvation Enlightenment Society and the other of Enjoyment Society. With a modest but growing theater-going public, the Azeri intelligentsia saw themselves as at the vanguard of Turkic drama and embraced their self-appointed role as cultural ambassadors. Theater held the potential to be an effective didactic tool for a largely illiterate population, while at the same time displaying the cultural capabilities of Azeri artists as advancing along European lines. In order for theater to effectively serve the purposes of Azeri reformists, however, they first

needed to fill the seats of the theater with a receptive audience. The quest for an Azeri theater-going public was often trying, with commentators in the press vacillating between praising great accomplishments and bemoaning an intransigent population that was not embracing this new cultural form as openly and swiftly as they would have liked.

Azeri Theater in the Late Nineteenth Century

The origins of Azerbaijan's theater tradition can be traced to 1848, when Mirza Fatali Akhundov (1812-1878) wrote his first play, the satire *The Story of Monsieur Jordan the Botanist and Mast Ali Shah, Famous Wizard* in the Azeri vernacular. Akhundov, along with Zardabi, was one of the first prominent Azeri intellectuals who pursued a secular education and promoted writing and literacy in a simplified Azeri language. Akhundov was born near modern-day Shaki (at the time called Nukha) in northern Azerbaijan in 1812. His mother was the second wife of a merchant, and his parents separated when he was six due to the animosity between his mother and his father's first wife.²⁵⁹ After his parents separated Akhundov and his mother lived with his uncle, Akhund Hajji Ali Ashgar, a learned molla who began his education in Persian and Arabic at the age of seven.²⁶⁰ Akhundov continued in religious education until the age of twenty-one, when his calligraphy teacher, the poet Mirza Shafi Vazeh, convinced him to abandon it. He returned to his home village and studied Russian for a year before moving to Tiflis in 1834. In Tiflis Akhundov's language skills earned him a job as an interpreter for the governor of Transcaucasia.²⁶¹ It was here, in the cultural center of Transcaucasia,

²⁵⁹ Mehrdad Kia. "Women, Islam, and Modernity in Akhundzade's Plays and Unpublished Writings." *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 34 No. 3 (Jul., 1998), 2.

²⁶⁰ Iraj Parsinejad. *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran*. 40.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

that Akhundov was introduced to European-style theater and various works of European intellectuals, including Hume, John Stuart Mills, Moliere, and Voltaire, in Russian translation.²⁶² Under the encouragement of Russian and Georgian intellectuals that Akhundov had befriended, including some exiled Decembrists, he began writing realist satires in vernacular Azeri. He wrote six plays in all between 1848 and 1855.²⁶³ It would take nearly twenty years for any of Akhundov's plays to be performed in Azeri. The first performances of his plays occurred in Tiflis in Russian translation, and only in the final years of his life did they begin to be performed in Azerbaijan in their original language.

For Azeris in Baku, initial exposure to theater did not come from these first works in their own language, but, as had been true for Akhundov himself, through Russian theater. Najaf bey Vazirov (1854-1926), a prominent playwright of the first generation of Azeri reformists, recounted his first experience at the theater in a brief autobiography he wrote as part of a forty-year jubilee celebrating his work in Azeri theater held in 1913. Vazirov marked the beginning of his career as a dramatist in 1873, when he was a secondary student at the Baku Realni Gymnasium. That year Vazirov had the opportunity to attend a performance of Russian theater, and the next day in class asked his teacher, who happened to be Hasan bey Zardabi, "Aya, do we not have any works of theater, or comedies, or tragedies, in our language?"²⁶⁴ This prompted Zardabi to show his students his copy of Akhundov's *Comedies*, gifted to him by Akhundov himself. Zardabi too recalled this moment in an article for *Heyat* in 1905, although he does not specifically note that Vazirov was the student that inspired the decision to read a play with his

²⁶² Cyrus Masroori. "European Thought in Nineteenth-Century Iran: David Hume and Others." *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. 61, No. 4 (Oct. 2000), 666.

²⁶³ Kia, "Women, Islam and Modernity," 28.

²⁶⁴ Najaf bey Vazirov. "Tercumeyi-Halim." *Iqbal* No 501, November 13, 1913.

students. According to Zardabi, the students selected Akhundov's play *Hajji Qara* to read, and upon reading it, were inspired to organize a performance.²⁶⁵ The performance would raise money for poor students, who, Zardabi noted, had barely enough money for school clothes and food for the school day. Zardabi taught "10-15" Muslim students (of the 50 enrolled) who were in their final year, most of whom were dependent on the government-funded boarding house for room and board as they pursued their educations.²⁶⁶ According to Zardabi the performance earned one hundred rubles, which went into a fund to support needy students. Vazirov, who played the role of the wife, recalled students rehearsing every day after their lunch break in the dining room. According to his account, the students' premier was well-attended, with the audience including local notables such as an official from the Baku Governorate by the name of Staroselski, who attended with his family.²⁶⁷ The majority of the audience, Vazirov recalled, was Armenian. The play elicited immediate commendation for the young performers and their school, with the governorate's translator, Habibeyov, visiting the school afterward. Both Zardabi and Vazirov mention in their accounts that Akhundov, learning of the performance from a congratulatory telegram sent to him by Zardabi, replied with a lengthy letter congratulating him on the performance and expressing his delight that one of his plays had finally been performed in Azeri. (Vazirov, as though anticipating the impulses of the historians who would come to read his account, noted with regret that the letter had since been lost.) This was the moment, according to Vazirov, that "our theater community finally went in a positive direction."²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ Hasan Zardabi. "Baki Teatr Binasi." *Heyat*. December 13, 1905, No. 117.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ Vazirov. "Tercumeyi-Halim." *Iqbal*. November 13, 1913 No 501.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

After this first performance of *Hajji Qara*, a vernacularized Azeri theater culture began to slowly develop. Huseynqulu Sarabski (1879-1945), the greatest opera actor and director of the era, first encountered theater while a student, much like Vazirov, but rather than going to the Russian theater, he attended a performance of the Akhundov comedy *The Vizier of the Khan of Sarab* (more commonly known and performed as the *Vizier of the Khan of Lenkeran*.) Sarabski acquired his first ticket from an associate of his aunt's husband, who was selling the tickets one day when Sarabski visited his aunt after classes. After his experience witnessing a performance, Sarabski was obsessed, and wanted to speak of little else, soon becoming involved in the city's nascent theater community as an actor.²⁶⁹ Although Sarabski does not give a year for this performance, as he would have been in his teens at the time he describes, it was some time in the 1890s. By this date Akhundov had been joined by Vazirov, Nariman Narimanov, and Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev in the growing canon of Azeri drama, and actors and playwrights were organizing occasional performances. The main theater in the city was the Taghiev Theater, built by Zeynalabdin Taghiev. Despite bearing the name of Azerbaijan's wealthiest Muslim, the cost of booking the theater was prohibitive for early Azeri theater troupes, and the theater mainly hosted Russian performances.²⁷⁰ In the late 1800s Azeri theater was more likely to be performed in a space known as the Naghiev Theater, a performance space in the building of the *Obshchetvo Sobraniia* ("Meeting Society"), a social club for the city's elite. This space had been endowed by Musa bey Naghiev, the second wealthiest Azeri industrialist in Baku, and started hosting Azeri-language

²⁶⁹ Sarabski, *Bir Aktyorun Xatirələri*, 28.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

performances in 1890. Performances also occurred in the homes of wealthy Azeris, notably Naghiev's stately mansion Ismailiyye.²⁷¹

Sarabski describes these early years of Azeri theater as poorly organized and performances as infrequent. Joining the theater community in 1902, from 1902-1906 Sarabski and his fellow actors organized performances primarily to raise money for poor students, performing every two-three months.²⁷² In late 1906, Sarabski and thirteen other men who were involved in Azeri theater organized themselves in the Turkish Actors Union in the hopes of furthering theater culture. Initially, government authorities refused permission for the union, insisting that the name be changed from "Turkish" to "Muslim" Actor's Union in order to assuage tsarist fears over any pan-Turkist tendencies the actors might have had.²⁷³ After forming, the Muslim actors received assistance from a Russian actor by the name of Stepan Ivanovich Valentinov in teaching them to direct plays.²⁷⁴ The new actor's union was unable to raise the funds to perform in Taghiev Theater, however. Within a year of its founding, Salvation Society, founded that same year, stepped in to assist the struggling union, first offering them one hundred rubles to prepare a performance of Gogol's play *The Government Inspector*. After this the society proposed a permanent partnership, granting money and performance space with a promise of the union's continued creative freedom.²⁷⁵ Salvation Society essentially bought itself a theater department, and it seems that the actor's union eventually became

²⁷¹ Ilham Rehimili, *Azərbaycan Teatrı Tarixi*, Baku, Çaşıoğlu, 2005. 86.

²⁷² Sarabski, *Bir Aktyorun Xatirələri*, 40.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

fully integrated into the society. With the society's financial backing, Azeri actors were finally able to book and perform at Taghiev Theater.

Affiliation with an officially recognized enlightenment society was beneficial to both the acting troupe and the society. As officially recognized associations operating with government permission and with large memberships that counted the Muslim community's most prominent members, societies could offer troupes access to audiences, financial assistance, and smooth the process of getting permission from government censors to put on performances. Indeed, Sarabski noted that when he was working on the premier of the opera *Leyli and Majnun*, the fact that Salvation Enlightenment Society was involved in every stage of the production meant that there was no trouble with the censors in receiving permission for the performance.²⁷⁶ Societies, meanwhile, sought the prestige that came with patronizing the theater and saw performances as useful tools in promoting their reformist projects. In addition to Salvation Enlightenment Society, Publication Enlightenment Society also assisted early acting efforts after its 1906 founding. In its 1908 meeting the society considered a proposal from the actor Jahangir Zeynalov to support his acting troupe with the condition that it not interfere with their budget or expenditures, and that in return the troupe would pay the society fifty rubles each month.²⁷⁷ It seems likely that Zeynalov made this proposal with the hope that by affiliating with the society, his acting troupe would be protected from both government scrutiny and, likely, local opposition from the more conservative sectors of society. The result of this proposal was not reported, but it is possible that Publication leadership directed Zeynalov to Salvation Society; according to theater historian Ilham Rehimli,

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 54.

²⁷⁷ "Baki kheberleri: Neshri Maarif Idaresini Iclasi." *Tereqqi*. February 5, 1909 No 28.

1908 is also the year that Publication Society decided to abandon its independent efforts in the realm of theater and instead join with Salvation Society and support their activities.²⁷⁸ The two societies shared offices in the same building,²⁷⁹ and as they matured Publication became increasingly focused on its schools, while Salvation activities branched out to encompass more cultural endeavors.

When Enjoyment Society was founded in 1910, it too created a theater department. Although many of the founding members of Enjoyment Society had themselves been members of Salvation Society or been involved in the society's programs, these two societies did not enjoy the same good working relationship that Publication and Salvation did. The Salvation Society and Enjoyment Society theater troupes became fierce rivals for the top Baku acting talent, and while some actors (including Zeynalov) regularly worked with both, the two troupes vied for absolute loyalty from their actors.²⁸⁰ Theater was a major revenue source for the two societies, and as some Azeri actors attained local celebrity, they became valuable commodities. Both societies relied on ticket sales for these performances as one of their primary sources of income. In its 1907-1908 accounts, Salvation Society reported that 5,004.14 rubles of its 8,159.90 rubles of yearly income came from its theatrical activities.²⁸¹ This was only the first full year of the society having a theater department, and before Salvation Society presented the premier of Uzeyir Hajibeyov's opera *Leyli and Majnun*, which would become its most regularly-performed piece and a major draw for audiences. In

²⁷⁸ Rehimili, *Azərbaycan Teatrı Tarixi*, 59.

²⁷⁹ Yaqublu. *Azərbaycanın İlk Qəyri-Hökumət Təşkilatları*.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ AMK. "Bakıda Musulman Maarif Cəmiyyəti "Nicat"ın ikincisine davamisi (1907 və 1908 sına)'nin hesabi." Baku. Orucov Qardashların Meetbesi. 1908.

subsequent years, with a growing theater-going public, Salvation's income from ticket sales would have grown substantially from these initial reports. According to Rehimli, there were two non-society affiliated theater troupes, the Muslim Actor's Company, and *Hemiyyet* ("Zeal"), that were also active in Baku in the first two decades of the twentieth century.²⁸² Ganja, Yerevan, and Tiflis were also each home to Muslim acting troupes. By the 1910's there was enough of a demand for Azeri-language theater to sustain four permanent theater companies that regularly performed in Baku and toured throughout the region, as well as Muslim acting companies in other population centers, performing original Azeri plays and European works in translation.

Writing for the Azeri Stage

The themes that emerge in Azeri plays from this era are revealing of the aspirations and anxieties of the reform-minded men who produced them and presented lessons they hoped to impart to their audience. Azeri plays tended to be overtly didactic, and playwrights saw them as a potentially powerful tool of persuasion in a largely illiterate society. Tragedies and comedies both typically featured a young, educated male protagonist who was open to progress and new ideas in a way his elders were not. In the tragedies, this tended to lead to his death or insanity, while in the comedies he ultimately triumphed over a number of buffoons representing various reactionary figures in society such as bazaar merchants, mollas, dervishes, peasant women, and aging beys. A common trope throughout late imperial Azeri theater was that of the scheming molla, an untrustworthy figure who often came from Iran and sought to defraud ignorant and naïve

²⁸² Rehimli, *Azərbaycan Teatrı Tarixi*, 58.

peasants out of their money and, occasionally, their daughters.²⁸³ This figure represented a conscious distancing from the Persianate undertaken by Azeri intellectuals, who increasingly began to equate the Persianate with the regressive, while they looked to Moscow and Istanbul for inspiration for progress. While these plays were mostly written and performed in urban Baku, they were typically set in the regions, offering both a sharp critique of the backwardness of provincial life and hope for the potential for reform through the efforts of an enlightened youth. Among the societal ills tackled by Azeri plays were opposition to new method education, arranged marriage, polygamy, corruption among both the clerical class and the old elites, and the adoption of European vices by the younger generation.

These themes are present from the very start of Azeri drama, and Akhundov's comedies laid out a template that would influence playwrights for the remainder of the late imperial period. The playwrights who followed adhered to Akhundov's dedication to realism and elaborated upon many of the themes and stock characters he first set out in his work. Akhundov's successors diversified from his blueprint by exploring tragedy and drama in addition to satire and developed their theater culture further through the introduction of operas to the canon. In the preferred themes of Azeri drama, the source of contention between theater advocates and their conservative opponents is clear. Azeri plays sharply critiqued existing social hierarchies, openly mocked men of religion, and asserted the place of a new class of secularly educated men as leaders in society. The threat presented to old elites such as mollas, bazaar merchants, and landed beys, in the

²⁸³ This character was originated by Akhundov in his first play, *The Story of Monsieur Jordan the Botanist and Mast Ali Shah, Famous Wizard*. Similar figures appear in Nariman Narimanov's *Ignorance*, Jalil Mammadguluzade's *The Dead*, Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev's *Broken Union* and many other contemporary works.

future envisioned on the Azeri stage was explicit. The violent reaction elicited by theater activities seems inevitable when one considers the radical messages present in Azeri plays.

The protagonists of late imperial Azeri plays exhibited the traits of the new men playwrights saw themselves as and hoped to fashion more of in the younger generation. These young men were inquisitive, the beneficiaries of secular education, determined to marry educated women for love, and generally disruptive to the status quo. The roots of this character can be found in Akhundov's very first play, *Monsieur Jordan*. In the play, two ignorant women pay the charlatan molla Mast Ali Shah to destroy Paris in order to prevent the younger woman's betrothed from travelling there, where he would surely be enticed by Parisian women and never return. The young man in question, Shahbaz, had been working as an assistant to the visiting French botanist Monsieur Jordan. Impressed by his intelligence, the French scientist had offered to take Shahbaz with him back to Paris so that he could receive a modern education. What follows is a farcical clash between reason and superstition, with Shahbaz's hopes for new opportunities in Europe dashed by news of the 1848 Revolution in France, which the women mistakenly think was caused by Mast Ali Shah's curse. While the primary characters of the play are the Frenchman and the dervish, Shahbaz was the first example of an enterprising young man open to new ideas who was ultimately held back by his ignorant society.

This character archetype recurs throughout the first wave of Azeri drama, including Nariman Narimanov's 1895 tragedy *Ignorance*, which tells the tale of the uphill efforts of a young Russian-educated Azeri teacher, Mehemmed Aga, to bring enlightenment to a village in the Central Asian steppes. Mehemmed Aga's only ally is

Omar, the eldest son of one of the village elders, who attends school rather than work in the fields and who is determined to lead an enlightened life and avoid his mother's efforts to marry him off to various young, illiterate, potential brides. In this play an educated Azeri takes the role of emissary of modernity, rather than a European as tended to be the case in Akhundov's comedies. The village's elders, the play's representatives of Central Asian backwardness, are resistant to Mehmed Agha's efforts to keep their sons in school. The elders express anxiety over the modernization surrounding them, acknowledging that "This iron road, telegraph, different machines, all with reading are brought to light," yet remain resistant to the modern education offered by the young Azeri teacher.²⁸⁴ Mehmed Agha is much more comfortable with the modern technology and Russian authorities than the village elders. Hailing from the land of the oil boom, where millionaire Muslim industrialists funded schools, theaters, and benevolent societies, the young Azeri was a model of Turkic progress heroically working among to the ignorant populations of the steppe. The play ends with Mehmed Agha's efforts thwarted and his one dedicated student dead, revealing a rather pessimistic impression of Central Asians. This character archetype also appears in Jalil Mammadguluzade's celebrated 1909 tragicomedy *The Dead*, in which the European-educated protagonist Iskender spends most of the play drunk and mocking his village, only becoming the positive force for change his learning should have made him when he sets aside the Western vice of drinking. Uzeyir Hajibeyov's operas and operettas similarly featured enterprising young men, such as the young student Sarvar in the 1910 operetta *If Not That One, Then This One*, who struggles to rescue his sweetheart from the

²⁸⁴ Nariman Narimanov. *Nadanlıq*, in *Seçilmiş Əsərləri*. Bakı, Lider Nəşriyyat, 2004. 35.

lascivious intentions of a corrupt bazaar merchant and marry for love, and Asker in *Arshin mal Alan*, a successful young business man who disguises himself as a cloth peddler in order to gain entrance into homes and see and speak to women so that he might choose a worthy wife.

The young heroes were paired with antagonists from the opposite end of the social spectrum, corrupt older men who opposed progress and sought to maintain the status quo. Akhundov established the tradition of the scheming molla in *Monsieur Jordan* in which the titular character Mast Ali Shah, claims to have magical powers. Of course, Mast Ali Shah is a fraud, and much of the humor of the play derives from his unscrupulous manipulation of the superstitious women in the play and their utter credulity. While the women believe in the powers of the molla, he himself cannot be excused by blind ignorance. Mast Ali Shah is presented as an unrepentant charlatan. When conversing with his assistant over their plans to claim to destroy Paris, the assistant questions the plan, as their fake spell would in fact do nothing to Paris. The molla reasons that he gave the women a ten-day window for when the spell would take effect, by which time he would be on the other side of the Aras River, the boundary separating Russian and Iranian territory.²⁸⁵

In *Ignorance*, Narimanov too relied on the immoral molla as an important plot piece in his polemics against ignorance. The action of this play is driven by the schoolboy Omar's mother, Yeter, who is alarmed by her son's bizarre predilections for studying, and rejection of all her candidates for marriage on the basis of their lack of education. Yeter hires Molla Qasim, an Iranian cleric, to cast a spell to fix Omar's deviant behavior

²⁸⁵ Mirza Fathali Akhundov. "Hekayəti Müsyö Jordan Həkinini-Nəbatat və Derviş Məstəli Şah Cadükuni Məşhur" in *Əsərləri I Cild*. Baku, Atilla. 2000. 57.

and convince him to get married. When she meets with the molla, he uses a book as a divination device, claiming that the pages tell him of her problem and its solution, contrasting sharply with the Azeri teacher Mehemmed Agha's use of almanacs and science books for rational information. The problem, the magical book concludes, is a jinn. To placate the jinn, and thus get her son to marry, the molla instructs Yeter to give the jinn a considerable sum of money, "because if it is little, your jinn will disrupt your happiness."²⁸⁶ There is, of course, no jinn, and the molla is represented as a swindler.

In *The Dead* (1909), Mammadguluzade juxtaposes Iskender with Sheikh Nasrullah, a molla who claims to have the power to raise the dead. Sheikh Nasrullah is described as about forty-five and accompanied by four heavily cloaked wives aged around thirteen to fourteen. The ruse is revealed at the last minute, saving Iskender's nine-year-old sister Nazli from her betrothal to the fraud and allowing Iskender to give a final, rousing speech in which he returns the young wives (abandoned in Sheikh Nasrullah's hasty departure) to their families and renounces his own errant ways, declaring "while Sheikh Nasrullah was oppressing these small children, I drank araq from this bottle."²⁸⁷ The final redemption lifts the veil of ignorance from the villagers' eyes and compels Iskender to embrace his responsibility as an educated man to guide his people on the path of progress, an event only possible with the expulsion of the corrupt religious force from the community.

Significantly, all three of the mollas in these plays are Persian. Akhundov's Mast Ali Shah came from Iran and conspires openly with his student to defraud the women who had hired him. Speaking of their intentions in Persian, the women, who only speak

²⁸⁶ Nariman Narimanov. "Nadanlıq" in *Seçilmiş Əsərləri*, 46.

²⁸⁷ Jalil Mammadguluzade. "Ölülər" in *Seçilmiş Əsərləri I Cild*. Bakuc Öndər Nəşriyyat. 2004. 382.

Azeri, are none the wiser. In his cast of characters, Narimanov's only note for Molla Qasim is "wearing Iranian clothes," establishing a firm visual link between Iranian culture and ignorance. Mehmet Agha, meanwhile, is described as wearing European clothes.²⁸⁸ An evolution can be seen in the protagonists paired with Akhundov's Mast Ali Shah and Narimanov's Molla Qasim. Akhundov paired Mast Ali Shah with a French botanist, with the inquisitive young Shahbaz only playing a supporting role. There are minor Russian characters in Narimanov's *Ignorance*, however the main protagonist is the Azeri teacher Mehmet Agha, who is the main point of contrast with Molla Qasim. Both men are outsiders in the unenlightened steppe, and both are figures of some authority and influence in the eyes of the villagers. Thus Narimanov shows Azerbaijan to be a source of positive outside influence, while Iran is the source of negative influence that hinders progress. Mammadguluzade's Sheikh Nasrullah hails from Khorasan and, like Molla Qasim, is paired with an educated Azeri man as his main opponent.

Polemics against ignorance and superstition were often accompanied by arguments for changing marriage practices and the greater participation of women in public life. Many of the dramatic arcs of Azeri plays were driven by two young people seeking to forge a love match while facing resistance from traditional forces who insisted upon arranged marriage. Other plays focused on young men who sought an enlightened and lively wife but were hampered in their efforts by veiling and the cloistering of women within the home. Akhundov, who depicted women quite negatively in *Monsieur Jordan*, included intelligent and proactive women in his subsequent two comedies *The Vizier of the Khan of Lenkaran* and *The Bear Robber*. In the former play, Akhundov tells

²⁸⁸ Narimanov, "Nadanlıq" in *Seçilmiş Əsərləri*, 46.

the story of the conniving Vizier of the Lenkaran Khanate, who tries to marry off his beautiful sister-in-law to the Khan in order to further his influence at court. The Vizier himself has two wives who are constantly at odds with each other. The younger wife and sister of the potential bride, Shola Khanim, colludes with her sister Nisa Khanim to prevent her from a forced marriage to the Khan and to continue meeting with Taymur, nephew of the Khan, who she wishes to marry. Through a combination of wit and luck, the two are at last married, and the corrupt vizier removed from power. *The Bear Robber* similarly features a young couple seeking to make a love match, but who are unable to do so because the girl, Parizad's, uncle and guardian seeks to marry her to his own son. A series of farcical adventures ensue that end with Parizad's cousin robbing an Austrian circus caravan and getting bested by a bear, with the intervention of Russian authorities finally allowing the couple to wed.

Concern over marriage practices continued to be a major theme for dramatists, with Narimanov's character Omar in *Ignorance* causing his mother particular distress over his refusal to wed. In *The Dead*, drunken protagonist Iskender's parents accuse him of ruining his younger sister Nazli's marriage prospects because he encourages her to voice her opinions and wander freely about the village. In the end Iskender must rescue her from becoming the latest addition to Sheikh Narullah's harem, which represented the opposite of the enlightened marriage process Mammadguluzade advocated. Hajibeyov's operas and operettas also often concerned marriage. In his version of *Leyli and Majnun* Hajibeyov dispensed of most of the religious themes of the poem and instead highlighted the love story between Leyli and Majnun, and the tragedy wrought by love denied by arranged marriage. His operettas often took after Akhundov's satires, with two young

lovers outsmarting and outmaneuvering their foolish elders to ultimately wed. In *If Not That One, Then This One*, a bankrupt bey betroths his fifteen-year-old daughter Gulnaz to a bazaar merchant who seeks to improve his social standing through marriage into an elite family. In the end Gulnaz, with the help of her love Sarvar and her no-nonsense maid, trick the merchant into marrying the maid and freeing Gulnaz to marry Sarvar. *Arshin Mal Alin*, in which the businessman Askar finds his wife through the subterfuge of disguise, ends with four happy marriages following a series of schemes and misunderstandings.

The recurring themes of Azeri drama reflect the experiences of the men who wrote them, experiences that led them to join a community of reformers. Akhundov's mother was the second wife of a merchant, and his parents separated when he was six due to the animosity between his mother and his father's first wife, likely an inspiration for the relationship between the two wives of the vizier in *The Vizier of the Khan of Lenkaran*.²⁸⁹ Najaf bey Vazirov grew up in Shusha the son of a man he described as "sickly and without skill," with his mother forced to work as the sole source of income for the family.²⁹⁰ According to Vazirov, his mother hoped that he would become a village Mirza, but instead, much to her dismay, he went to Baku to enroll in the Baku Realni Gymnasium. Vazirov then went on to St. Petersburg to study forestry at the Petrovski Academy, living hand-to-mouth until finally winning a scholarship to continue his studies.²⁹¹ Uzeyir Hajibeyov grew up in Shusha as well, but in much better circumstances, the son of Khurshidbanu's secretary. Growing up in the circle of this

²⁸⁹ Mehrdad Kia. "Women, Islam, and Modernity in Akhundzade's Plays and Unpublished Writings." 2.

²⁹⁰ Najaf bey Vazirov. "Tercumeyi-Halim." *Iqbal* No 501, November 13, 1913.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

female-led household with a mother who regularly participated in the Khurshidbanu's literary assembly *Majlis-i Uns*, Hajibeyov likely developed many of his views on women's role in society in his early years. He too received a secular education at a Russian-Tatar school before continuing his education at the Gori Pedagogical Seminary. The men who wrote for the Azeri stage were members of a small but growing group of literate intellectual elites who had received secular educations, and their writings promoted to society a model of progress based on their own life experiences.

Translating for the Azeri Stage

The theatrical canon performed in Azeri in the early twentieth century was not limited to original works by Azeri playwrights. In addition to the many new plays that were being written for the stage, Azeri authors began to translate works of Russian and European drama. Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev played a particularly important role in translating Russian plays and the Russian translations of German, French, and English plays, and translated works by Evgeny Chirikov, Shakespeare, Voltaire, and Schiller. Jalil Mammadguluzade promoted the works of Gogol to his *Molla Nasreddin* readership, while the newspaper editor Hashim bey Vazirov and dramatist Najaf bey Vazirov also contributed translations of Shakespeare, Gogol, and Voltaire. The Azeri reformists who advocated for developing a native theater culture saw the European model of performance as one to emulate, but emphasized the need for Azeri culture and sensibilities to mark their own stagecraft. The plays selected were those that translators thought would most resonate with the local audience, and translations were not exact, but adapted to speak to Azeri society. Through translating and staging European plays, Azeris asserted their place in the broader European cultural context.

Although the works of English literature were generally of more marginal interest to Azeri reformists than those of French and German, Shakespeare's vaunted position in the world of European drama made his works a natural choice for Azeri translation. Hashim bey Vazirov translated *Othello* in 1892 and performed in the title role in 1904, but the play did not become a fixture of the Azeri repertoire until 1910 when Huseyn Arablinsky debuted in the title role.²⁹² Arablinsky was one of the Azeri stage's greatest dramatic actors and directed many of Salvation and Enjoyment Societies' productions. His promotion of *Othello* and celebrated interpretation of the title character made it the most popular Shakespeare play performed in Azeri. Abdurrahim Haqverdiyev translated other Shakespeare tragedies including *Hamlet*, but it seems that no other Shakespeare play was regularly performed until after Sovietization.²⁹³

Haqverdiyev also translated the Voltaire tragedy *Zaïre*, with the title changed to *Sultan Osman*. This play, in verse, tells the tale of Zaïre, a woman enslaved as a child by the Sultan of Jerusalem and raised in his household. While a fellow Christian slave embarks on a quest to raise the ransom for his and the other slaves' freedom, Zaïre and Sultan Osman fall in love. The play ends with Osman murdering Zaïre under the misconception that she was rendezvousing with a lover when in fact she was sneaking out to be secretly baptized, under pressure from her newly rediscovered father and brother. Upon realizing his mistake, Osman turns the dagger on himself. Haqverdiyev's translation of this play was first performed on October 24, 1908 in a performance organized by Salvation Society's theater department and advertised as the first ever

²⁹² Kourken Ayvasian. *The Theater in Soviet Azerbaidzhan*. New York, Research Program on the U.S.S.R., 1955. 5.

²⁹³ Rehimli, *Azərbaycan Teatr Tarixi*. 75.

performance of the tragedy by the “famous German writer,” showing a general lack of concern with distinctions in European identity.²⁹⁴ The choice of *Othello* and *Zaire* as two of the earliest stagings of translated plays in Baku is striking; both are European plays with heavily orientalist themes. *Othello* was a Moor, and often performed by European actors in blackface. According to Soviet theater scholar Kourken Ayvasian, a contemporary of Arablinsky’s protégé Abbas Mirza Sharifzade, “Most tragic actors in interpreting *Othello* stressed his Moorish wildness, but Arablinsky portrayed a man, a complete and real human being, a strong and passionate nature.”²⁹⁵ Ayvasian’s description of Arablinsky’s portrayal of *Othello* suggests that he was able to see beyond the ethnicized representation of *Othello* that had become dominant in European performances of the play, allowing him to access deeper levels of the character. *Zaire*, similarly, features a Middle Eastern male protagonist (although a more explicitly Arab and Muslim character than *Othello*’s ambiguous ethnicity) who tragically loves and kills a European Christian woman. It might seem counterintuitive that Azeris would be attracted to these European representations of eastern men, but there are several aspects to the two plays that made them attractive as early introductions to European theater for Azeri audiences. The characters of *Othello* and Sultan Osman could serve as entry points into the world of European theater; they were Muslim men living in or interacting with European society, and the plays took place in settings and contained references that would be more familiar to Azeris. Sultan Osman of Jerusalem hailed from the Levant, part of the neighboring Ottoman Empire to which Azeris regularly traveled. *Othello* embarks on a military campaign to Cyprus, also part of the Ottoman Empire, to fight “the

²⁹⁴ “Baku Kheberleri” *Tereqqi*. October 24, 1908 No 84.

²⁹⁵ Ayvasian. *The Theater in Soviet Azerbaidzhan*. 5.

Turks,” the very people Azeris counted themselves among. Much of the plots of the plays take place in settings that could be included in the broader Turkic geography, allowing Azeri audiences to better relate to and imagine the drama unfolding before them.

The themes of the two plays would also have spoken to an Azeri audience. The trope of a tragic “love across the void,” with Muslim men in love with Christian women, was popular in Azeri literature. Narimanov explored this theme in his novella, later adapted into a play, *Bahadir and Sona* (1898), in which the young Azeri student Bahadir falls in love with his Christian pupil Sona, only to have their love forbidden by her parents. Azerbaijan’s most famous novel, *Ali and Nino*, written by Lev Nussimbaum, the son of a Jewish oil magnate who was raised in Baku, presents the most famous example of this trope, setting the ill-fated love of the Azeri boy Ali and Georgian girl Nino against the chaos of World War I. Azeris had long lived alongside Christian Armenians, and marriage across ethnic and religious lines, while not common, certainly occurred. These became increasingly true as some Azeris entered the elite class of Baku with their success in the oil industry, and class sensibility overcame religious divide. Christian women in the Caucasus were more likely to be educated and integrated into high society, making them attractive mates to Baku’s new class of Muslim millionaires.²⁹⁶ Although Shakespeare and Voltaire both wrote their eastern characters with little knowledge of the east, using them instead as cyphers through which they could comment on their own societies, their inclusion in *Othello* and *Zaire* made them natural starting points for the process of introducing the broader European canon to the Azeri stage.

²⁹⁶ Farida Hayet. *Azeri Women in Transition*.

While *Othello* and *Zaire* offered Azeri audiences European plays set in more familiar locales within the Ottoman Empire, the process of translating and performing Russian plays helped connect them to the culture and intellectual production taking place in their own empire. Russian plays were regularly performed in Baku, and most literate Azeris were able to attend and understand these performances, but some Russian plays were also rendered into Azeri so that they might reach broader audiences. Not many Russian plays made it into the Azeri repertoire, but two that did are revealing of what sort of thematic content Azeri translators and theater directors found compelling. On June 9, 1909, at the Artist's Society Theater in Tiflis, Huseyn Arablinsky directed the debut performance of Haqverdiyev's Azeri translation of Evgeny Chirikov's *The Jews*.²⁹⁷ Chirikov was a Marxist writer whose works were published by Maxim Gorky's *Znanie* press. Written in 1904, *The Jews* was a work of socialist realism that was sharply critical of authoritarian repression and was banned from being performed in Russia.²⁹⁸ Whether the temporary loosening of censorship following 1905 allowed for its performance in Tiflis or somehow the translation slipped through the censors is unclear, but it was successfully staged by Arablinsky in 1909 with the intention to bring it to the Baku stage.

The second and by far more popular Russian play that appeared early on in the Azeri repertoire was Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (1836.) Gogol's play famously depicted corruption and inefficiency in Russian society, with residents of a small town desperately trying to temporarily reform their many poor behaviors before a rumored inspection by an incognito government inspector. *The Government Inspector* was translated by Nariman Narimanov sometime before 1897, the year he first directed

²⁹⁷ "Teatr ve musiqi." *Ittifaq*. June 17, 1909 No 137.

²⁹⁸ Victor Terras. *Handbook of Russian Literature*. Yale University Press, 1985. 84.

and starred in a production of the play in one of the earliest Azeri performances in Taghiev Theater.²⁹⁹ Narimanov's translation was performed again in 1902 and, when Salvation Society formed its own theater troupe, the troupe selected *The Government Inspector* for their debut performance on November 6, 1906.³⁰⁰ Gogol's spread to the Caucasus was furthered in the pages of *Molla Nasreddin*, where editor Jalil Mammadquluzade, himself a talented satirist, introduced his readers to the author through adaptations, translations, and an article entitled "Qoqol," that mocked readers for not being familiar with one of the greatest authors in the Russian canon.³⁰¹ According to literary scholar Leah Feldman, Mammadquluzade's interest in the works of Gogol "centered on three major themes":

The relationship between the imperial metropole and the provincial periphery, discourses of modernity rooted in a vision of literature as social critique and a rejection of westernization, and the trope of mistaken identity as a model for reading history.³⁰²

The Government Inspector was not solely popular among Azeri audiences in the Caucasus, in 1906 it was, in its original Russian, one of the most performed plays in Tiflis, and was staged six times that year.³⁰³ Gogol's tale of government corruption and incompetence rang true for revolutionary audiences following 1905. The decision of Salvation Society's theater troupe to stage this play, and not one of Akhundov's comedies or one of the several works by Haqverdiyev, Narimanov, or Vazirov that had been written before 1906, as their debut performance, shows their engagement with an empire-wide

²⁹⁹ Rehimli. *Azerbaijan Teatr Tarixi*. 54.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁰¹ Leah Feldman. "Reading Gogol' in Azeri: Parodic Genealogies and the Revolutionary Geopoetics of 1905." *Slavic Review* 75, No. 2 (Summer 2016.) p. 277.

³⁰² *Ibid.* p. 262.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

cultural moment. The interest Azeri theater innovators showed in translating and performing two Russian plays that were deeply critical of authoritarianism and corruption locates them within the revolutionary rhetoric following 1905, when a brief period of loosening restrictions and censorship allowed for greater critique of tsarist rule and Russian society more broadly. While Azeri playwrights focused their own works on critiques specific to Azeri society, they found the themes tackled by Chirikov and Gogol translatable to their own experience within the Russian Empire, and adopted their works into the Azeri repertoire.

Uzeyir Hajibeyov and the Birth of Azeri Opera

On January 12, 1908, the young composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov conducted the debut of his first opera, *Leyli and Majnun*, at Taghiev Theater. Huseyn Arablinsky directed the performance, which starred Huseynqulu Sarabski as Majnun and Abdurrahim Farajov as Leyli.³⁰⁴ This was the first native Azeri opera ever written, and the press enthusiastically marked the event as a watershed in Azeri progress and a singular cultural accomplishment. Hajibeyov was just twenty-two years old and had been aided in writing the opera by his brother Jeyhun, who was still a student at the Baku Realni Gymnasium at the time of the performance.³⁰⁵ The two brothers were lauded as heralds of a new era of Azeri cultural innovation and models of the new generation of Azeri modernisers. In its glowing review of the opera, the journal *Taza Heyat* declared “There is no known word that is worthy of every acknowledgement of glory and thanks for the labor of the Hajibeyov brothers in this work, or in showing its virtuous features.”³⁰⁶ The reviewer

³⁰⁴ Rehimli. *Azerbaycan Teatr Tarixi*. 59.

³⁰⁵ Musulmanca Opera “Leyli ve Majnun.” *Irshad* January 15, 1908.

³⁰⁶ “Turk Dilinde ‘Opera.’” *Tazə Hayət*, January 14, 1908.

acknowledged that all contributors to “our literature” deserved thanks, but that an opera was “of our literature, the most difficult and rare of dramatic work.”³⁰⁷ There seemed to be a sense among progressive Azeris that opera was the highest form of culture in Europe, and that should they master the form themselves, they would truly have elevated their own society above the ignorance and inertia that they so decried.

Aware of the exotic nature of this new form of performance described in the review, the author offered a brief explanation of opera to his readers. It was, he explained, a type of dramatic performance where the dialogue is sung and set to music, which is played throughout the performance. It originated in Italy in the sixteenth century where, according to the author, it remained isolated for two hundred years before spreading to France and Germany in the eighteenth century. It had since spread farther through the work of various composers, “For example Russia’s first famous opera innovator was Glinka.”³⁰⁸ Both this review and the review in *Irshad* emphasized *Leyli and Majnun*’s status as a first in Muslim society, with *Taza Heyat* declaring it “not just the first such performance in Baku, but possibly in all of Islamic staged performance” and *Irshad*’s reviewer, signed “Spectator” (“*Tamashachi*”) declaring that “for the first time in Muslim theater” an opera had been staged. Azeri commentators on the premier took particular pride in their ability to stake a claim on the first Muslim opera, proof of Azeri advancement ahead of their co-religionists. This was revealing of the scope of the ambition of Azeri reformists, who saw themselves as leaders among not only the Muslim population of Russia, but vanguards of progress for all Muslims.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

Azeri opera was not simply a direct copy of the European form. Hajibeyov melded traditional Azeri music with European classical music both out of necessity and out of a desire to develop a specifically Azeri brand of opera. The necessity was driven by the absence of Azeri musicians trained in the European classical style; he himself could play violin, and some of his fellow Gori Pedagogical Seminary graduates had received training on other instruments, but there were certainly not enough musicians to fill out an orchestra. It seems that one performer, named Daghestani, was able to sing in the operatic style, and did so in his two roles as the Arab officer Ibn-Salamliq and the Sarkar (Chieftan) Nofel (indeed even in contemporary performances of *Leyli and Majnun*, the Arab officer is the only character to perform in an operatic singing voice.)³⁰⁹ All other actors sang in the traditional mugham style. If Hajibeyov wanted to cast Azeri actors he had no other choice than to have most roles sung in the mugham style, but this was also a deliberate choice to appeal to Azeri audiences, to whom European opera singing would have sounded completely foreign and potentially unpleasant. As the *Taza Heyat* reviewer noted, “Of course, from the view of European criticism this would not permissibly be called an opera.”³¹⁰ Rather, the reviewer argued, “our mugham” was a worthy reflection of the culture, while it was “not our domain” to simply recreate European music.³¹¹ Indeed, Hajibeyov depended on the popularity of mugham and support from established mugham musicians to promote his new work. “Spectator” noted at the end of his review for *Irshad* that Hajibeyov had written a letter to be published in the paper thanking the famous tar player Shirin, who had performed with the orchestra at

³⁰⁹ Musulmanca Opera “Leyli ve Majnun.” *Irshad* January 15, 1908.

³¹⁰ “Turk Dilinde ‘Opera.’” *Taze Hayet*, January 14, 1908.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

the premier, for contributing his music and “helping our orchestra.”³¹² Famous mugham musicians were some of the biggest celebrities in nineteenth-century Azeri society, and their support was likely critical to Hajibeyov’s success.

The choice of the story of *Leyli and Majnun* was also calculated to draw in Muslim audiences. One of the most famous tales in the greater Persianate world, Azeris claimed a special connection to it as the most famous version was written by the twelfth-century poet Nizami Ganjavi, a lifelong resident of the city of Ganja who is now

considered the national poet of Azerbaijan, despite the fact that he wrote primarily in Persian. The Hajibeyov brothers chose to base their libretto off of the Fuzuli (1494-1556) version of the poem, as it was written in the Azeri language, but it was Nizami’s version that held the most indelible place in Caucasian culture. The *Irshad* review of the premier praised the choice of *Leyli and Majnun* for the first Muslim opera, noting that there was not a single part of the Caucasus that one could find where the story

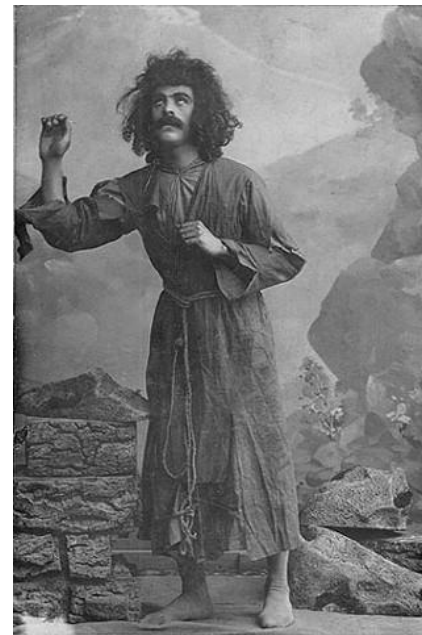


Figure 7 Sarabski as Majnun, 1908

was not known, and noting that there were few gazels in Turkic or Persian that did not bear the influence of the poem in some way. The author cast *Leyli and Majnun* as not only the natural, but the necessary, choice for Hajibeyov’s first opera, celebrating that it had “finally” been put on stage to eastern music.³¹³ Like his use of mugham in his scores, Hajibeyov’s choice of stories placed this new form of music firmly within the preexisting

³¹² Musulmanca Opera “Leyli ve Majnun.” *Irshad* January 15, 1908.

³¹³ Ibid.

Azeri cultural context, and his other operas drew from stories from the *Shahname*, were set in the recent past in Iran, and were based on stories from famous *ashiq dastans* (ballads) from the South Caucasus.

Leyli and Majnun proved a huge success, and a veritable goldmine for Salvation Society, which staged it regularly up through World War I, and owned the copyright to the opera. According to an article in the culture-focused newspaper *Besiret*, Salvation Society's stagings of *Leyli and Majnun* supported the society's reading room as well as other costs incurred by society activity.³¹⁴ Responding to popular demand, the society published the libretto to *Leyli and Majnun* as a chapbook printed by Isa bey Ashurbeyli's Kaspii Press in 1915.³¹⁵ Sales of the chapbook, which sold at twenty five kopeks at various locations including the offices of newspapers *Besiret* and *Iqdam*, as well as a Muslim-owned bookstore, would go to aiding Muslim students.³¹⁶

Hajibeyov followed *Leyli and Majnun* with a prolific period of production of popular operas and comic operettas, including the operas *Rustam and Zohrab* in 1910, *Asli and Kerem* and *Shah Abbas and Khurshidbanu* both in 1912, *Harun and Leyli* (1915, never staged), and the operettas *Husband and Wife* (1910), *If Not That One, This One* (1910), and *Arshin Mal Alan* (1913.) His operettas were particularly popular, but none of his work was performed as often as *Leyli and Majnun*. Hajibeyov almost single-handedly created Azeri opera and dominated the genre well into the Soviet era. Before fall of the Russian empire, the only other contributors to the canon were his brother Zulfugar, who wrote three comic operettas between 1909 and 1911 (with only one, *Married or Single*,

³¹⁴ "Leyli ve Majnun." *Besiret*. No. 39, February 7, 1915.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

receiving many performances) and an opera, *Ashiq Qerib*, in 1915, and the singer Mir Mehmed Kazimov who wrote the opera *Molla Jebi*.

Creating a Theater-Going Public

In 1916 Nariman Narimanov wrote an article in the daily *Yeni Iqbal* praising a recent performance of Hajibeyov's operetta *Arshin Mal Alin*. Narimanov began his article by observing the great progress Azeri theater culture had made in the past two decades, noting

Muslims who twenty years earlier forcefully, imploringly, did not go to the theater now walk to the theater two-three days before [a performance], pay double price for a ticket, come from surrounding villages with the intent to stay for memories of the theater. If they do not find many tickets, they return dejected. The Muslim stage has gone down the progressive path. The auditorium is full, the balcony is full, the boxes are full, even the special women's box is full!.. Everyone cries "bravo!" from one mouth...laughs from one mouth...returns home full of joy...³¹⁷

Whether the scene described by Narimanov was shaded by hyperbole or not, Azeri theater had certainly grown substantially in a relatively brief period. This growth was the result of a sustained, concerted effort by Azeri reformists through their societies and the press to encourage members of the Azeri population to embrace the theater. They faced diverse obstacles, from angry mobs to unruly audiences, but remained steadfastly committed to the idea that theater was an integral aspect of progress.

The mollahs and the "Muslims with guns" that Sarabski described in his memoir as two of Azeri theater's three censors stridently opposed theater for its perceived immorality and the threats it presented to the status quo, and actors faced genuine danger for their work. Sarabski recalled in his memoirs once performing in Vazirov's comedy

³¹⁷ Nariman Narimanov. "Arshin Mal Alan ve Operettalarimiz." *Yeni Iqbal*. March 16, 1916.

*Yağışdan Cıxdıq, Yağmura Düşdük*³¹⁸ in a role that required him to treat the molla character as the butt of a joke. The next day, a man who had seen the play approached him and struck him for his disrespect. Sarabski recounts that at the next performance, he replaced “molla” with “mirza” out of fear.³¹⁹ Families could be the source of the greatest opposition for actors, and Sarabski’s family deeply disapproved of his involvement in the theater, where men dressed up in women’s clothes. Sarabski persisted in his pursuit of a dramatic career with the encouragement of Narimanov, who assured him that the “intelligentsia” would understand his work.³²⁰ Sarabski does not record facing any physical violence from his family, but Huseyn Arablinsky, perhaps the most important actor and director of his generation, was shot to death by his cousin in 1919 in response to his acting career.³²¹ Opponents of the theater focused not only on the men who acted in the theater but on the physical space of the theater itself. In February 1909 Taghiev Theater burned to the point of ruin, leaving Baku temporarily without a theater.³²² The cause of the fire is not known but the theater burned again in 1918 in, according to Sarabski, a confirmed act of arson.³²³ While more and more Azeris embraced the theater as part of their culture, the actors, playwrights, and directors of the pre-Soviet period lived in a state of constant precarity.

Men had to take on women’s roles in the Azeri theater. While this was viewed as highly objectionable by some sectors of society, putting actual Muslim women on stage was unimaginable. This limited what plays Azeri theater troupes could perform, as any

³¹⁸ This is an Azeri phrase that is the equivalent of “out of the frying pan, into the fire” but refers to escaping rain for heavier rain.

³¹⁹ Sarabski. *Bir Aktyorun Xatirələri* 48.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

³²¹ Rehimli. *Azərbaycan Teatr Tarixi*. 84.

³²² *Tərəqqi*. February 27, 1909 No. 45.

³²³ Sarabski. *Bir Aktyorun Xatirələri*. 66.

play with too many female roles was unfeasible. While some actors such as Arablinsky and another prominent actor, Mirza Mukhtar, were willing to take on female roles, many refused.³²⁴ There were some Azeri-speaking Armenian and Russian actresses, but they were in short supply and not regularly available for Azeri plays. The limitations placed on Azeri theater by the absence of Azeri actresses was a contributing factor to greater freedoms for women becoming a top priority for the Azeri theater community, as reflected in the themes of many of their plays.³²⁵ Uzeyir Hajibeyov made one attempt to break the taboo of Muslim women on stage in 1912, after he met fifteen-year-old Shovkat Mammadova, an Azeri singer who had spent the previous year studying opera in Milan under the patronage of Zeynalabdin Taghiev. Mammadova had recently returned home, no longer able to afford her studies. To aid the young artist, Hajibeyov organized a concert featuring Mammadova singing her favorite European works and a few of Hajibeyov's newer compositions. This would be the first time a Muslim woman had ever appeared onstage, and Mammadova would do so unveiled and in European dress. The event was a complete scandal, and the audience erupted in outrage bordering on a riot. Mammadova was forced to flee out a back door into an awaiting carriage and subsequently hide out in the oil fields for several days before returning to her home in Tiflis. The money for the concert was lost in the chaos, and Mammadova was unable to return to Milan (she continued her studies in Tiflis and Kiev and became a noted

³²⁴ Ibid. 49.

³²⁵ Ibid., 48.

performer and music educator in the Soviet Union.)³²⁶ After this fiasco, no one attempted to place a Muslim woman on stage again until after Sovietization.³²⁷

While Azeri theater innovators never succeeded in placing Muslim women on the stage, they did make progress on bringing them into the theater as spectators. For Azeri performances, a special curtained section of the theater was prepared for Muslim women so that they could attend the theater without mingling with male audience members. Almost invariably, newspaper announcements for the latest performance included the reassurance that “a curtained box is prepared for Muslim ladies.” By 1916, if Narimanov is to be believed, these sections began to fill regularly.

The increasing availability of secular education for girls helped introduce young women to the theater in much the same manner many young men first encountered it. In 1901 Taghiev opened Baku’s first secular school for girls, the Empress Alexandra Russian Muslim Boarding School for Girls. Among the school’s teaching staff was Sakina Akhundzade, the first woman Azeri playwright, who organized a drama club at the school.³²⁸ In this exclusively female space, women could participate in the theater as more than spectators, and students would organize performances at the school. The school appears to have become an important cultural space for adult women as well, and in 1914 *Besiret* reported on a theater evening at the school, in which “spectators and performers were all wives.”³²⁹ Through schools and the women’s auxiliaries of various societies, Azeri women began to carve out their own public spaces in which they too

³²⁶ Fuad Mammadov. “Shovkat Mammadova, Audacious Challenge: The First Azerbaijani Woman of Stage.” *Azerbaijan International*. Winter 1997 (5.4.) 34-37.

³²⁷ According to historian Madina Goldberg, Tatar theater successfully incorporated women actors before the Soviet era, and took particular pride in this fact. See: Madina V. Goldberg. *Russian Empire–Tatar Theater: The Politics of Culture in Late Imperial Kazan*. PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009

³²⁸ Heyat. *Azeri Women in Transition*.

³²⁹ *Besiret*. October 25, 1914 No. 27.

could encounter the new cultural innovations spreading throughout their society without leaping immediately into fully gender desegregated spaces. In 1917, the women's wing of the Muslim Benevolent Society hosted a tea evening at Ismailiyye, the mansion home of Musa bey Naghiev, where Baku's Muslim high society often hosted their events. The evening's program included Georgian dancing and selections from Hajibeyov's *Arshin Mal Alin*, with proceeds going to the society's charitable works. The article covering the event noted that this evening was relatively cheaper than previous ones, indicating that women's tea and entertainment evenings were a recurring event.³³⁰ Such private events were an important part of the spreading of Azeri theater culture.

In addition to the new plays by Azeri playwrights being staged at Taghiev Theater, many more were being written and published that never made it to the stage. These were sold and purchased for amateur performances and dramatic readings, to be used as entertainment at private events and in the home. The Orujov Brothers Press, one of the largest publishing companies in Azerbaijan at the time, offered forty-four plays for sale in its 1914 catalog.³³¹ This included the regularly performed Azeri plays such as Narimanov's *Ignorance* and Hajibeyov's *Shah Abbas and Khurshidbanu* and a compilation of Vazirov's works, but also many translations and original Azeri works not performed on the stage, including many one-act plays by Azeri writers who never became established in the canon. The Orujov Brothers ran a for-profit publishing business, and the large, diverse, catalog of plays they sold indicates a reading public actively interested in consuming works of theater at home.

³³⁰ *Açıq Söz*. January 12, 1917.

³³¹ AMK. *Baki Baradaran Orujov Kitabxanesinin Esasi Al-Kitabi*. 1914.

Educating the Theater-Going Public

Once the advocates of the Azeri stage successfully got Azeris into the theater, they were faced with the task of educating them on how to behave as enlightened audience members. For most Azeris, the theater was a new space, and theater etiquette a foreign concept. Firsttime visitors needed to be educated in how to buy a ticket, how to find their seat, when to be silent, when to applaud, and what to expect to see unfolding before them on the stage. More experienced theater-goers often served as guides to friends and family members on their first excursion. This is how Sarabski described his first encounter with the theater, when his wealthier cousin took him to see Akhundov's *Vizier of the Khan of Sarab*.³³² Sarabski recalls needing his cousin to explain everything from why "Khan Sarab" was written on the walls (they were announcements for the evening's performance) to where to sit according to his ticket. Sarabski's cousin was a student at the Baku Realni Gymnasium, and they attended with other students. These students, although more experienced with the theater, were, according to Sarabski, extremely unruly, and had to be scolded by their teacher, the ubiquitous and ever-influential Hasan bey Zardabi.³³³

Getting audiences to behave properly was an ongoing fixation for Azeri cultural commentators. Attempts to create an orderly, silent, audience does not seem to have been met with much success. In 1908 one I. Naghiev wrote a letter to the editors of *Taza Heyat* to air his grievances against his fellow Azeri audience members. Naghiev recounted his recent experience at a performance of *Kaveh the Blacksmith*, a play by the Ottoman intellectual Shams al-din Sami that was popular in the Azeri theater. He complained that

³³² More often performed as "Vizier of the Khan of Lenkeran."

³³³ Sarabski, *Bir Aktyorun Xatirələri*. 28.

throughout, “Idiots remained brawling and screaming. I stayed frustrated while spectating.” He notes that there were several non-Azeri audience members, including a Jew and an Ossetian, who did not engage in such behavior, implying that this was a uniquely Azeri problem. He had also recently attended a sold-out performance of *Leyli and Majnun*, where he could find nowhere to sit because audience members were ignoring seating assignments, including those in the upper level who had paid a mere twenty-thirty kopeks to enter without tickets. Naghiev identified the affordability of the Azeri theater as part of the problem; “we do not want to give fifty kopeks for the theater, because this [low] price is supposed to educate poor studying Muslims, but perhaps we should give a special separate space [for the poor attendees.]”³³⁴ Naghiev proposed segregating those in the audience who paid for the cheaper tickets that were priced specifically to encourage attendance by poor students. By his estimation, there was a class element to which audience members did or did not present behavioral problems. Unfortunately for Naghiev, his suggested quarantining of the hoi polloi was directly contrary to the reformist goals of the Azeri theater, and such a measure was never insituted.

Just a few days before Naghiev bemoaned the chaos of an Azeri audience, the reviewer of the debut of *Leyli and Majnun* offered a much different assessment. “It must be said that, in every place for one person two men sat yet as such there was no mischief or disorder to be observed...this situation shows that, our society is day by day becoming accustomed and more comfortable with this sort of activity”³³⁵ The praise offered to the audience in this review reveals the moral stakes of the theater. This was a space that

³³⁴ I. Naghiev. “Idareye Maktub” *Taze Heyat*. January 18, 1908.

³³⁵ “Turk Dilinde ‘Opera.’” *Taze Hayet*, January 14, 1908.

represented progress, order, and enlightenment, and rhetoric around it contrasted it to other, immoral, social spaces that would be better abandoned. Sarabski started his career as a performer by singing in cafes and tea houses, places he described as crowded with unemployed boys and men.³³⁶ In the arc of his career as he describes it, it was not until he was exposed to the theater and began to perform on stage that his cultural work became worthwhile, a noble pursuit that had the potential to positively transform society. Like reading rooms, theaters were spaces of edification and progress, alternatives to competing public spaces that encouraged immoral behavior and ignorance. Bringing ever more Azeri audience members into contact with theater and teaching them how to consume it became one of the main priorities of the Azeri cultural elite.

Jubilee Mania Spreads to Baku

In the early 1900s the Russian Empire, like much of Europe, was swept with a jubilee mania, with cultural organizations and states organizing celebrations marking military victories, births and deaths of rulers and notables, and any number of other noteworthy events. This trend started in the 1890s but truly took off in Russia in 1907, following the 1905 Revolution and Russia's military defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. The imperial government saw such state-sponsored celebrations as a useful tool to distract the populace and stoke patriotic fervor, and Russian "jubilee mania" stood out in that the majority of events were organized directly by the state.³³⁷ In a period marked by increasing discontent and increasing nationalist movements on the imperial periphery, the Russian state sought to deploy jubilees as a way to emphasize imperial unity and a sense

³³⁶ Sarabski, *Bir Aktyorun Xatirələri*. 8.

³³⁷ K.N. Tsimbaev. "Jubilee Mania in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Russian Society." *Russian Studies in History* 47, no. 2 (2008) p. 16.

of belonging among its diverse population.³³⁸ According to Russian historian K.N. Tsimbaev they in reality had the opposite effect, rankling political activists and the general public. With his focus on jubilees in the imperial heartland, Tsimbaev does not investigate another way in which Russian jubilee mania backfired; nationalities on the periphery embraced the trend emanating from the center, and began organizing their own, culturally-specific jubilees that did much more to emphasize their autonomous identity than incorporate them more fully into the empire. Azeri enlightenment societies exemplify this and starting in 1910 they organized a series of jubilees celebrating Azeri cultural accomplishments that further advanced the Azeri theater and asserted their movement down the progressive path.

In 1910 Salvation Society founded its own newspaper, entitled *Nicat* (“Salvation.”) In their second issue, *Nicat* included a lengthy article by Mehdi bey Hajinski, society member and head of the theater department, entitled “*Yevm Ali*” in which he introduced readers to the concept of the jubilee and announced Salvation Society’s (and Azeri society as whole) first jubilee. “‘Jubilee’ is a word that is unclear among us Muslims” he began, but “in Europe this word has a great, great meaning.” Hajinski announced that he would follow the example of the Ottoman reformer Midhat Pasha, architect of the Tanzimat, who rendered “constitutionalism” legible to Turks by breaking it down into two Turkish words, “*qanun esasi*,” or “fundamental laws.” Hajinski thus transformed the foreign word “jubilee” (written as “*yubiley*” in Azeri, taken from the Russian) into the words *yevm*, or “day,” and *ali*, “exalted.” A *yubiley*, he explained, is a *yevm ali*, an exalted day, a day marking some significant date for an artist

³³⁸ Ibid. 26.

or otherwise famous individual, for whom celebrations would be thrown. On that day “a great ceremony will be put together in their honor, in their honor assemblies will be organized and theater will be prepared ”³³⁹ Hajinski further explained that jubilees were held on significant anniversaries, in an explanation that betrays his own ignorance of the original meaning of jubilee as the marker of the fiftieth anniversary of an event:

“Jubilees have several types: sometimes they are for ten years, sometimes fifteen years is correct, but the most important jubilee is twenty-five and fifty year jubilee according to Europeans. They are calculated by centuries’ one hundred years, a jubilee organized on a quarter century or half century is a grand celebration.”³⁴⁰ Hajinski’s embrace of much shorter periods of time tracks with the Russian state’s practice of jubilees; Tsimbaev notes that at the peak of Russian jubilee mania any sort of relation to the fifty-year marker had become unnecessary, with talk of such arbitrary dates as a two-year jubilee.³⁴¹ For Azeri reformists such shorter anniversaries were necessary. The artists and events they hoped to celebrate were primarily those that could be considered part of the reformist movement or members of the vanguard for Azeri progress. By their estimation, they could not reach much farther back than fifty years to find anyone worth celebrating.

Salvation Society’s first jubilee was in honor of comic actor Jahangir Zeynalov’s twenty-five years of service to the Azeri stage. Zeynalov had been among the first actors advocating for an Azeri theater culture in the mid-1880s, had helped organize the first actor’s union, and had debuted many comic roles on stage. For this, he would be honored with a day of performances at the Taghiev Theater, including many scenes from

³³⁹ “Yevm Ali.” *Nicat*. November 27, 1910 No. 2.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Throughout this article Hajinski uses “*yevm ali*” for “jubilee.”

³⁴¹ Tsimbaev. “Jubilee Mania in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Russian Society.” 17.

Akhundov's comedies, as Zeynalov was closely associated with his works. Also in honor of Zeynalov, Salvation Society would publish some of Akhundov's plays and, in order to encourage their spread, sell them at a cheap price.³⁴² Zeynalov's jubilee allowed Salvation Society to not only initiate its new jubilee department, but to further one of its most successful cultural projects: the enshrinement of Akhundov as the doyen of Azeri literature. Salvation Society followed this jubilee with a second jubilee in 1910 to mark thirty years since the construction of the Taghiev Theater. In 1913 Enjoyment Society organized a jubilee marking Najaf bey Vazirov's forty years in Azeri theater, accompanied by the publication of his autobiography in the pages of *Irshad*, while Salvation Society marked the actor Mirza Mukhtar's forty-year jubilee that same year. With few exceptions, Azeri jubilees celebrated the theater, from playwrights to actors to the physical building itself.

In 1911, one year after they first announced the establishment of a jubilee department, Salvation Society organize their most important jubilee, the one-hundred-year anniversary of the birth of Mirza Fatali Akhundov. The day of celebrations was divided into three parts, starting with a reading of Akhundov's biography and selected writings and a performance of the second act of *Hajji Qara*. The second part of the jubilee was comprised of a ceremony in honor of Akhundov lead by the deputy of the jubilee, one Doctor Q.B. Qarabekov. The celebration concluded with a fantastical play about Akhundov written by Haqverdiyev, in which Akhundov interacted with real-life contemporaries, such as his son and his secretary, and iconic characters from his plays, such as Hajji Qara, the dervish Mast Ali Shah (from *The Story of Monsieur Jordan the*

³⁴² "Yevm Ali." *Nicat*. November 27, 1910 No. 2.

Botanist and Mast Ali Shah, Famous Wizard), and Molla Ibrahim Khalil (from *The Story of Molla Ibrahim Khalil, the Alchemist*.) Music for the evening was provided by Uzeyir Hajibeyov, with selections from his original works featured.³⁴³

The event was further marked by a special issue of the *Mekteb*, a bi-monthly educational journal written for students. The journal featured a brief biography of Akhundov, noting that Mirza Shafi Vazeh “opened his eyes” and lead him to abandon a religious career to instead learn Russian and move to Tiflis to work as a translator.³⁴⁴ A lengthy article on Akhundov’s significance stated that before him, “Muslims lived in darkness and walked an unfortunate path,” with people “believing fortune tellers, dervishes, and those who claimed to speak to jinn.”³⁴⁵ Through his work, the article explained, Akhundov showed the common people the correct path. The article concluded by noting that in his honor, the Publication Enlightenment Society would be opening a school with his name.³⁴⁶ While Akhundov was well known in the secular elite circles of Azeri society, it was through a concerted campaign to disseminate and perform his work, attach his name to educational efforts, and educate the young about his life and contributions, that he became the undisputed father of modern Azeri literature.

Jubilees allowed society leadership to begin to define Azeri culture and values visibly and boldly. With jubilees celebrating the greatest actors and playwrights of the Azeri stage, reformists declared their place in the broader world of bourgeois culture and signaled their commitment to furthering the accomplishments of their own theater. While

³⁴³ AMK. *Baku Musulman “Nicat” Maarif Cemiyeti Adab Shehir ve Mezheke Nevis Mirza Fatali Akhundov 1811-1911*. 1911.

³⁴⁴ “Tercume-yi Hal” *Mekteb* No. 2, 1911.

³⁴⁵ “Mirza Fatali Akhundov.” *Mekteb* No. 2, 1911.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

contributing to the wave of jubilees sweeping the Russian Empire established their participation in the empire and its culture, Azeri jubilees also contributed to defining a specific Azeri identity, one that possessed a cultural canon whose value was increasingly asserted and promoted.

Azeri Theater Troupes on Tour

The modest but not insignificant gains made by Azeri theater culture lead Azeri reformists to begin to view themselves as leaders in the world of Turkic drama, and they embraced the identity of cultural innovators. Salvation and Enjoyment Societies' theater troupes regularly went on tour to perform original Azeri works for both Azeri audiences in the regions and other populations of fellow Turks throughout the empire. Azeri troupes toured throughout the Caucasus and into the Volga-Ural region, eventually making their way to Central Asia in the 1920's. They also frequently ventured into Iran to perform, which will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Azeris were by no means the only Turkic population fostering a nascent theater culture in the early twentieth century. As Madina Goldberg shows in her 2009 dissertation on Tatar theater in imperial Kazan, Tatar intellectuals were similarly occupied with encouraging a native theater culture as a key aspect of cultural reform. What Goldberg presents, however, is a view of theater as a key tool in a very Tatar project. She regularly cites themes of Tatar nationhood and pride in Tatar identity in late-Imperial Tatar plays, and quotes Zhamal Validi, a key Tatar intellectual, as rejecting the idea of unified Turkic nation as a fantasy constructed by Ismail Gaspirinskii, noting that language was an insurmountable barrier between Turkic populations.³⁴⁷ In her discussion

³⁴⁷ Madina V. Goldberg. *Russian Empire–Tatar Theater: The Politics of Culture in Late Imperial Kazan*. PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009. 41.

of Kazan's only professional theater troupe, *Sayar's*, touring activities, she notes that they traveled extensively throughout the Middle-Volga region to cities including Ufa, Astrakhan, and annually to the Makariev Fair in Nizhniy Novgorod.³⁴⁸

Kazan's Tatar theater was meant, it seems, exclusively for Tatar audiences. Baku's theater leaders, meanwhile, apparently had no naysayers making similarly valid observations on the limits of language as Validi. Although, with their language enjoying widespread use in Iran and mutual intelligibility with Ottoman Turkish, perhaps they were able to conceptualize themselves as part of a broader trans-Imperial network than their Tatar contemporaries, who had lived for centuries in the heart of the Russian Empire. Whether it was arrogance, utopian idealism, or both, Azeri theater troupes took a missionary approach to their craft, embarking upon numerous tours throughout the empire and into Iran. Certainly, their primary touring activities were to other Azeri towns and cities in the Caucasus; an Azeri theater troupe spent the summer of 1906 performing in Lenkeran, a town on the Iranian border, before taking their performance to Derbend, at the very north of the Baku governorate.³⁴⁹ Azeris brought their productions to Tiflis, Ganja, Shusha, and Yerevan. In 1913 Salvation Society's Muslim Opera Company traveled to Khankendi, near Shusha, under Sarabski's leadership to perform Hajibeyov's *Asli ve Kerem*. A flier for the event featured a portrait of a dashing Sarabski and excitedly declared that the "Muslim Opera Theater Company from Baku" would be performing "for the first time in Khankendi, the Caucasus's famous opera *Asli and Kerem*."³⁵⁰ Through their touring, Baku-based theater troupes were able to promote the cultural

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 87.

³⁴⁹ Sarabski, *Xatirələri*, 42.

³⁵⁰ ADİΘA f592 s2 sv2

innovations occurring in the Azeri cultural center throughout the Transcaucasian Azeri populations. Their arrival in provincial towns was likely a major event, and a way for the elites in the regions to engage with the same activities as their peers in Baku.

Troupes also, however, ventured to the Middle Volga region, and in May 1913 the Baku Muslim Artist's Company began a residency in Astrakhan with a performance of Uzeyir Hajibeyov's comic opera *Arshin Mal Alin*. This performance was followed by performances of the Hajibeyov operas *Shah Abbas and Khurshidbanu*, *Leyli and Majnun*, *Asli and Kerem*, and the Zulfuqar Hajibeyov opera *Ashiq Qerib*.³⁵¹ Whether these performances were well received or not is a question I have not answered, though the choice of exclusively performing operas was likely a calculated one for the Tatar tour; audiences in France, after all, did not need to understand Italian to enjoy Verdi.

It seems that in the imperial era, Central Asia was too distant for Azeri troupes to reach, but the Azeri reformist view of Central Asia as woefully lagging in the Turkic quest for cultural reform is expressed quite clearly in Nariman Narimanov's drama *Ignorance*, which, with its frequent stagings through the late imperial period, must have shaped contemporary Azeri views of Central Asia. In the early 1920s Azeri reformists seized upon the opportunity presented by the revolution and assisted in the sovietization of Central Asia. Sarabski was deployed to Turkestan in 1923 to aid in the organization of theater troupes and construction of theaters. In his memoir, he recounts encountering a man he took to be an intellectual in Bukhara, to whom he explained the purpose of his journey; that he and his companions were actors who were there to put on several performances and help develop Turkestani theater. In Sarabski's telling, the man had no

³⁵¹ ADİΘA f592 s1 sv21

idea what he was talking about, asking “what is an actor? What is a play?” When Sarabski asks if they have theaters or perform plays, the man replies in the negative, then asks “Are you a mutrub (dancing boy)? Do you dance?”³⁵² Sarabski proceeds to explain the theater to the Bukharan, noting that he could not tell if the man actually understood him or not, and then asked him to sell tickets for their performances. The man agreed, but ultimately sold no tickets, stating that he was afraid to do so.³⁵³ Sarabski, like many European travelers before him, offers up the practice of dancing boys as a symbol of Central Asian backwardness, and presents himself as the civilizer, bringing the people a morally superior form of staged performance and facing considerable obstacles in his quest to do so. Sarabski depicts the modern theater as a moral space that would serve as a replacement for such immoral, un-modern practices as dancing boys. As an established Azeri theater figure, he envisioned himself as an emissary of enlightenment, bringing the tools for a healthy society to ignorant Central Asians.

Conclusion

The project of building a native Azeri theater culture was the most ambitious, controversial, and dangerous, of the many cultural programs enacted by Azeri enlightenment societies after 1905. In the face of fierce opposition from conservative sectors of society as well as considerable social and financial constraints, reformists remained resolute in their pursuit of theater. Why was this particular category of cultural production so important to the Azeri reformist project? The student’s journal *Mekteb*’s explanation of Akhundov’s significance helps explain this: “He knew that for every nationality that had been pulled into the light from the darkness, the greatest cause indeed

³⁵² Sarabski, *Xatirələri*, 69.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

is theater. Therefore, every time effort was made to perform theater, our nation's every shame and shortcoming was shown to society."³⁵⁴

Reformist projects across the Turkic world in the late-imperial period focused first and foremost on educational reform, and Azeris saw in theater a powerful didactic tool. Simple advances in literacy were not enough; Turkic reformists sought to morally uplift their societies, offer them a competitive chance in the European world, and usher them along the progressive path. Performances on stage that unmasked societal shortcomings and mocked regressive social forces had the ability to evoke an emotional response beyond what written polemics could hope to achieve.

Azeri commentators in the press who covered accomplishments in theater and opera equated staged performance with the height of progress along a European model. They celebrated new productions as proof of Azeri potential and pointed out the cultural specificities of Azeri productions as examples of how their own cultural heritage could translate into new, sophisticated forms of cultural expression. Theater served a twofold purpose of educating (and potentially shaming) audiences and asserting Azeri society's place as a leader in the Muslim world's experimentations in secular reformist reform and transformation.

³⁵⁴ "Mirza Fatali Akhundov." *Mekteb* No. 2, 1911.

Chapter Five

Intimate and Contentious: the Caucasian Azeri Relationship with Iran

The Azeri reformist project of the early twentieth century was neither insular nor modest in scope. The intellectuals based in Baku saw the potential reach of their cultural production stretching from the Central Asian steppes to Istanbul, and from the Central Volga homeland of the Tatars down into Iran. As a Turkic-speaking Shia people living in the Russian Empire, Azeris were able to conceptualize themselves as members of multiple communities and claimed a stake in the destinies of three empires. During the tumultuous early years of the new century, when the Russian Empire, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire erupted successively into revolution, Azeris watched, commented on, and actively participated in each revolution, and in the reforms that followed. Azeris were particularly active in and opinionated about developments in Iran, to whose empire they formerly belonged. Azeris were intermittently hopeful for and scornful of the trajectory of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the progress of Iranian society afterward. In Iran they saw a free Muslim nation that was the perfect audience for their reformist agenda, and the texts, cultural developments, and political ideologies of both regions reached populations on either side of the border, where they influenced, complimented, and clashed with, the politics of reform developing in both societies.

While Azeris presented themselves as model reformers for the broader Muslim world, the Iranian and Young Turk Revolutions, comparatively more successful than the Russian Revolution, left an indelible impact on Azeri thinking. While scholars such as Moritz Deutschmann, Tadeusz Swietochowski, and Audrey Altstadt have discussed the Azeri influence on Iranian constitutionalism, the exchange of ideas was reciprocal, and Azeris were deeply influenced by the intellectual activity and revolutionary potential they

saw in Iran. Starting with the oil boom, hundreds of thousands of Iranian labor migrants poured into Azerbaijan to work menial jobs in the oil industry. Azeri socialists actively tried to recruit these populations, whom they referred to as *hamsharis*, or fellow countrymen, to their movement, with limited success. In addition to this large, impoverished population of Iranians, Baku and Tiflis became homes to smaller populations of educated Iranians who were either exiles avoiding arrest or violence for their own activities or working in Azeri reformist institutions at the invitation of Baku's enlightenment societies. The world of the nineteenth century was expanding for many populations across the globe. Improved infrastructures and new technologies such as the telegraph, railways, and steamships integrated previously isolated populations into their broader empires. For Azeris, a borderland population that had long experienced their home as a zone of encounter, the expanse of their potential networks sparked a new level of ambition. Through their efforts to standardize the Azeri language and reach out to their Iranian co-ethnics both in the Russian Empire and Iranian Azerbaijan, reform-minded Azeris sought to assert their place in the changing world. When the Russian Empire dissolved under the weight of World War I, Azeris retooled their cultural nationalism to a new territorial outlook that would help define the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan and the independent nation that followed.

Azeris and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution

When Iran erupted into revolution in 1906, Azeris in the Russian Empire took a keen interest. It had been less than a century, after all, since they themselves had been under Qajar rule. Between their shared imperial history and constant population exchanges, Azeris felt invested in the outcome of Iran's constitutional movement. Fresh

off a revolution of their own, many radical-leaning Caucasians headed south to support the Iranian struggle. This was not a simple tale of trans-Imperial comradeship, however. As Moritz Deutschmann has pointed out, Armenians, Georgians, and Caucasian Azeris all tended to judge Iranians as inferior and misguided revolutionaries. Coming from the context of the Russian Empire, where there was a strong imperial presence providing an obvious adversary, Caucasian revolutionaries did not understand the continued rhetoric of loyalty to the shah, or the leading role of clerics and religious mobilization among Iranians. Just as they sought to reform their own societies, Caucasians' activities in Iran served as a proselytizing mission of progress to their less-developed neighbors.³⁵⁵ Azeri reformists in particular, as co-religionists and co-ethnics to the second largest ethnic population of Iran, assumed the mantle of harbingers of reform for the Iranian people, whether Iranians agreed with this particular self-perception or not.

Although still negotiating what their own recent revolution meant for their society, many leading Azeri intellectuals saw themselves as seasoned revolutionaries better qualified than Iranians themselves to define constitutionalism for Iran, and Azeri societies became sources of funding for Iranian constitutionalists. The ambitious and versatile Mammed Amin Rasulzade was chairman of Salvation Enlightenment Society at the time the revolution broke out. According to historian Nasiman Yaqublu, Rasulzade steered the society toward supporting the revolution financially, staging a dramatic robbery of society funds so that the money could be funneled to Iranian revolutionaries without leaving a paper trail for tsarist authorities.³⁵⁶ Rasulzade likely relied on his fellow

³⁵⁵ Moritz Deutschmann. "Cultures of Statehood, Cultures of Revolution: Caucasian Revolutionaries in the Iranian Constitutional Movement, 1906-1911." *Ab Imperio* 2013, no. 2 (2013): 180.

³⁵⁶ Yaqublu. *Azərbaycanın İlk Qəyri-Hökumət Təşkilatları*.

political organizer Nariman Narimanov to funnel the money into the revolutionary cause. Narimanov was the leader of a shadowy organization identified in Russian police reports as the Mujahedin, who moved between Azerbaijan and Iran, especially Tabriz, fighting for the revolution. Financial and ideological support of the movement in the South Caucasus was largely overseen by Narimanov.³⁵⁷ Salvation Enlightenment Society was not the only association providing funds; historian Cosroe Chaqueri notes that Soviet scholars cited documents regarding a meeting of the Mujahedin in Tiflis in 1909 in which a new committee was elected that collected money through multiple sources, including the Tiflis Muslim Benevolent Society, to fund its activities in Iran.³⁵⁸ It is not clear if the decision to financially support Iranian revolutionaries was one made by select leaders of these societies or if a larger portion of the membership supported the initiatives. Either way, between Rasulzade and Narimanov, at least two influential Azeri societies were involved in financially supporting armed insurrection in Iran in addition to founding schools, feeding orphans, and opening reading rooms.

Rasulzade, eventually found himself wanted for arrest for his political activities and tendencies toward nationalism and fled to Iran in 1909. After observing and aiding the revolution from Baku for three years, he decided to offer his experiences as a journalist and organizer, and after arriving south of the border he threw himself into the revolution. Although he initially spoke little Persian, Rasulzade became a prominent figure in the social democratic wing of Iranian constitutionalists and founded *Iran-i No*

Yaqublu does not cite any specific sources for this story nor have I been able to independently corroborate it, however Yaqublu is the leading historian of both Rasulzade's life and the Musavat Party. What is certainly true is that Rasulzade was an enthusiastic and resourceful supporter of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution.

³⁵⁷ Deutschmann. "Cultures of Statehood, Cultures of Revolution." 185.

³⁵⁸ Cosroe Chaqueri. *The Russo-Caucasian Origins of the Iranian Left: Social Democracy in Modern Iran*. London, Curzon Press. 2001. 122.

("New Iran") (1909-1911), a newspaper almost entirely written by him, which became the official organ of the Social Democratic Party and had the largest circulation of any paper in Iran during its run.³⁵⁹ Rasolzade used the paper to introduce Iranian readers to the concepts of Marxism and the history of European socialism, articulating the philosophies he would later bring to *Musavat*, the Azeri social democratic party he helped found in 1913, in the Iranian context. In 1911 Rasolzade was expelled from Iran at the demand of Tsarist authorities and moved to Istanbul, where he would remain for the next three years. Upon returning to Baku, he founded Musavat.³⁶⁰ Musavat drew from social democracy, Azeri nationalism, and pan-Islam in equal parts, reflecting Rasolzades experiences as a Baku intellectual, Iranian revolutionary, and Ottoman Young Turk.³⁶¹

It was not just journalistic experience that Caucasian revolutionaries brought to Iran, however. Baku and Tiflis were both hotbeds of radical politics—with the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party and its affiliated organizations such as the Muslim *Hummet* organization particularly influential. Caucasians injected the social democratic politics of urban, industrialized Russian imperial cities into the Iranian movement. Prominent Caucasian figures in Iran included Sergo Gamdlishvili, a Georgian veteran of the Russo-Japanese War who had been active in Moscow during 1905. In the initial years following, Gamdlishvili moved to Baku and organized workers in the Balakhani and Sabunchi oil fields, encountering many Iranian laborers. He was sent to Iran by the RSDWP in late 1908, where he participated in guerilla actions in defense of the constitution. Gamdlishvili was captured while returning to Russia in 1910 and executed

³⁵⁹ Ervand Abrahamian. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton University Press, 1982. p. 104.

³⁶⁰ Chaqueri. *The Russo-Caucasian Origins of the Iranian Left*. 208

³⁶¹ Smith. "Anatomy of a Rumour." 218.

in an Iranian prison.³⁶² Perhaps the most celebrated Caucasian Azeri involved in the revolution was Haydar Khan “Amioghlu” (“cousin.”) The son of Iranian migrants to Ganja, Amioghlu was a trained engineer who encountered socialism while a student in Tiflis. He moved to Mashhad in 1903 to work in an electrical plant, becoming involved with the revolution from its inception. Amioghlu established a branch of the mujahidin in Tehran and became known as *bombi* for his talent for building and deploying bombs. He was involved in the assassinations of the anti-constitutionalist premier Mirza Ali-Ashgar Khan Atabak and the moderate constitutionalist cleric Sayyid Muhammad Behbahani. He was also involved in the failed attempt on Shah Muhammad Ali’s life.³⁶³ Haydar Khan in particular introduced the type of political terrorism—bombings and assassinations—that were common in Baku and other industrialized cities in the Russian Empire to the Iranian revolution.

In July 1908 a group of prominent Iranian constitutionalists arrived in Baku after fleeing their own country following the coup by Muhammad Ali Shah Qajar that sparked a civil war between constitutionalists and the Shah’s forces. Their arrival was covered in two lengthy articles in *Tereqqi* that described the backgrounds of the new arrivals, the reasons behind the coup, and the bombardment of the Iranian parliament by the Shah’s Cossack Brigade. The group included Sayyed Hasan Taqizadeh, the leader of the Iranian Democrats, who the article described as “a person who no reader of Muslim newspapers does not know,” Mirza Ali Akbar Khan, more famous under his *nom de plume* Dekhoda, editor of and contributor to the influential constitutionalist paper *Sur-i Israfil*, and Agha Sayyed Hasan, brother of the founder of *Habl-al Matin*, a Persian newspaper that had

³⁶² Chaqueri. *The Russo-Caucasian Origins of the Iranian Left*. 206.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 207.

been published in Calcutta since 1893, and had become an important source of public opinion regarding constitutionalism.³⁶⁴ The article began by individually praising each member of the cohort and the parliament they had helped found. Moving on to the cause of their exile, the author asked “Gentlemen! Who is the cause of the dissolution of the parliament?” and named three figures who carried the blame for the Shah’s betrayal of the constitution: the lawyer Hajji Mehmed Ismail Maghazchi, Sayyid Murteza, and Hajji Mayyin Tajer. These three men, the author declared, were the reason why “the Shah got the thought of destroying his own parliament.” The problem, the article went on to explain, was that “the shah and the men who surround the shah are informed by vile diplomats, newspapers, informants, and general members of society who are against the parliament and the organizations (*anjumans*) on which it depends for support.”³⁶⁵ While the Azeri revolutionaries on the ground were frustrated by Iranians’ declared loyalty to the shah, the *Terreqi* journalist seems to have respected this position (and also may have been prevented by Russian censors from condemning the shah), instead blaming three “perfidious individuals,” for placing wrongheaded ideas in the mind of the shah. The author of the articles likely saw reflected in these individuals and the “general members of society” who opposed the Iranian constitution his own struggles as a member of Baku’s reformist class against reactionary forces who opposed their programs in education, press, and performance.

Hamsharis

In the late nineteenth century, Iran was experiencing rising unemployment and declining value of its currency. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Iranians left the

³⁶⁴ “Iran Eqtishaneh Dair.” *Tereqqi*, July 16, 1908. No. 10.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

country to seek work elsewhere. The Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, India, and north Africa were the favored destinations of Iranians seeking work abroad.³⁶⁶ For northern Iranians, especially ethnic Azeris, the South Caucasus was a particularly attractive destination, for its proximity, high demand for labor, and population of co-linguists. By the early 1900's, Baku's petroleum industry was heavily dependent upon the influx of Iranian labor to fill low skill jobs, leading to a large, primarily male, population living on the margins of Baku society. This population, like the that of the city itself, mushroomed in the early twentieth century. In 1872 the population of workers in the petroleum industry was 1,800, by 1907 it had reached 30,000.³⁶⁷ In 1900, Iranians made up about a quarter of the entire unskilled labor force, and Russian officials acknowledged that industry in the South Caucasus was dependent upon Iranian labor migration to continue apace.³⁶⁸ As historian Touraj Atabaki has noted, while local Azeris referred to these Iranian transplants as *hamsharis*, "fellow countrymen," the two populations remained in many ways separate, and attempts to include the Iranians in associational and political activities often failed.

Iranians in the Baku area organized their own schools and political organizations, taking advantage of the 1905 Fundamental Laws decree that "All foreigners residing in Russia shall enjoy the same rights as Russian subjects, within certain limitations established by law."³⁶⁹ According to Atabaki, Iranians founded two Persian schools, one in Baku and one in the Sabunchi district, an area on the Absheron Peninsula home to

³⁶⁶ Touraj Atabaki. "Disgruntled Guests: Iranian Subaltern on the Margins of the Tsarist Empire." *International Review of Social History* 48, no. 3 (2003): 401.

³⁶⁷ Abrahamian. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Ibid., 408.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 417

³⁶⁹ Dodd. *Modern Constitutions*. 188.

many oil fields. These schools served not only as educational institutions, but cultural and social clubs for the community.³⁷⁰ The Azeri social democratic organization *Hummet* assisted in the creation of the Social Democratic Party of Iran, while the Iranian Democratic Party was also active in the area.³⁷¹ In Ganja, also home to an Iranian population, there was, in 1918, a “National Committee of Iranians in Ganja” functioning in the region, although I have been unable to unearth any information on its activities beyond its existence in the archives. It was likely an Iranian political organization founded to represent Iranians living in the city during its brief time as capital of the embattled Azerbaijan Democratic Republic.³⁷²

Atabaki’s assertion that the Iranian and local Azeri populations remained largely separate is somewhat overstated, however. The Baku-based Iranian school Atabaki discusses, called *Ettehad*, did not exclusively serve the Iranian community. In the previously discussed *Tereqqi* article on the arrival of fleeing Iranian constitutionalists to Baku, the author opens by discussing the preexisting ties between Baku’s local Azeri population and Iranians, noting that the former Iranian consul in Baku, Mazed al-Saltana (Abusalem Pirnia) had been involved as a mediator during the “Armenian-Muslim events,” the violent conflict between Armenians and Azeris in 1905-1906. The article also discussed Ettehad School as an example of this relationship, noting it was a place where “now hundreds of Iranian and Caucasian children together in the school perfect their training.”³⁷³ Ettehad School was not, thus, solely a center of cultural and educational exchange for Iranians in Baku, but in fact an institution that served both the

³⁷⁰ Atabaki. “Disgruntled Guests.” 422.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² ADTA f421 s1 q19

³⁷³ “Iran Eqtishaneh Dair.” *Tereqqi*, July 16, 1908. No. 10.

Iranian and local Azeri populations. If Azeri children were studying in at least one of the two Iranian schools in the area, it is likely that Iranian children were also taking advantage of the many schools founded by Azeri societies. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Publication Enlightenment Society had an auxiliary chapter in the settlement of Balakhani, an area not far inland from Baku. Balakhani was a major oil producing area, the source of much of the Nobel Brother's oil fortune, and thus, home to a large Iranian labor migrant community. The chapter in Balakhani, far removed from the Azeri middle and upper classes, existed for a charitable purpose.³⁷⁴ Without student enrollment records indicating each student's nationality, we cannot assume the Iranian children of labor migrants did not enroll in Azeri society schools, indeed, it seems likelier that they did.

It was not only labor migrants who made their way to the Caucasus, however. Just as Iran was a popular destination for Azeris fleeing tsarist scrutiny, the Caucasus became home to many Iranians who were under threat from either the Qajar government or, more often, the religious authorities. The Caucasus, home to revolutionary political parties and active cultural associations, offered a considerably more freethinking atmosphere to Iranians who found themselves incurring the ire of the Qajar state or local mollahs. As Atabaki observed, "For many politically minded Iranians, the Baku and Tbilisi of the late nineteenth century were cultural magnets where they could become acquainted with new ideas and practice their aspirations."³⁷⁵ One such Iranian was Ahmad Kasravi, who before becoming one of the most prominent Iranian intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century was an impoverished young schoolteacher with Constitutionalist leanings. Kasravi came from a clerical family well established in the neighborhood of

³⁷⁴ ADTA f312 s1 q2

³⁷⁵ Atabaki. "Disgruntled Guests." 406.

Hokmvari in Tabriz, and initially received a religious education and worked as a molla. His vocal support of constitutionalism, however, alienated him from the local religious establishment. Kasravi ultimately abandoned his religious vocation and began studying at the local American school, and his increasing interest in Western science and philosophy led to local mollas accusing him of being a Babi.³⁷⁶ In 1915, having failed to secure a permanent position as a teacher and fearing for his life, a twenty-five-year-old Kasravi boarded a train toward the border, ultimately bound for Tiflis. His stay lasted five months, with his search for employment proving fruitless.³⁷⁷ Kasravi's account of this period of his life reveals the diverse reasons Iranians came to the Caucasus, and the communities they built there.

Kasravi's companions on the train included a man traveling to Baku to soak in the local mineral springs to treat his rheumatism. There was also a group of mollas on pilgrimage to Mashhad.³⁷⁸ This was perhaps the most common reason for Iranians to travel temporarily to Baku. For Iranians in northern Iran, particularly Azerbaijan, the overland route to Mashhad was both longer and more perilous, as the region they would cross was populated by nomadic Turkmen who would raid caravans. Instead, Iranians traveled north to Baku, from which they took a ship to modern day Turkmenistan and traveled overland to Ashgabat, and then south back into Iran. As discussed in Chapter One, Iranians on the Hajj also traveled to Baku, taking an overland route westward to Batum, where they would board steamships headed to Istanbul. Thus, Baku became a

³⁷⁶ Ahmad Kasravi. *Zendegani-ye Man*. Tehran, 1963. 69.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

travel hub for Iranians on pilgrimage, and some Iranian merchants established permanent residence there to supply their countrymen on the first leg of their long journeys.

After arriving at the border in the ancient Armenian town of Julfa he described his shock at the diverse ethnicities represented in this corner of the Russian Empire: “there was a mass of people and various languages—from Turkish and Armenian and Georgian and Russian, were being spoken.”³⁷⁹ Kasravi, rather aimless at this time in his life, would traverse many of the common routes taken by Iranians in the Caucasus, first going to Tiflis for two days before returning to Baku to search for work and, not meeting with success, boarding a ship for Ashgabat and crossing back into Iran to visit Mashhad before retracing his steps back to Tiflis. Upon settling in Tiflis, Kasravi found a bookstore in one of the major markets owned by an Iranian constitutionalist, a man named Ismail, that was a popular haunt for exile Iranians. Through the local Iranian network Kasravi also befriended likeminded denizens of the Russian Empire, noting “In the Caucasus in this time with all the hardening of the tsarist state, Muslim, Georgian, and Russian constitutionalists collaborated together and were united.”³⁸⁰ The bookshop and its patrons influenced Kasravi’s intellectual development; as he continued in his failure to secure gainful employment, he instead spent hours in the bookshop speaking with Ismail and whoever else happened to be there at the time. “We covered discussions of Islam, history, and the misfortune of Muslims,” he recalled in his memoir.³⁸¹ The Iranian public life that emerged in Tiflis fostered discourses on Iran and Islam that were strictly censored in Iran by both the state and religious authorities. Some of the Iranians engaged in it, such as

³⁷⁹ Ibid. 71.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 72.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 73.

Kasravi, would return home and become significant figures in shaping an Iranian national identity.

Mirza Alakbar Sabir's *Hophopname*: A Study in Azeri Literary Influence in Iran

Kasravi never managed to earn money in Tiflis and was only able to return to Iran after begging a loan of one hundred rubles off a former employer. With this money he paid off his bill at his boarding house and purchased tickets home. With his remaining money, he returned to the marketplace bookstore to buy gifts for his family and friends in Tabriz in the form of ten copies of the Azeri poet Mirza Alakbar Sabir's collection of satirical poetry, *Hophopname*, which had been banned by the Qajar government.³⁸² As discussed in Chapter One, Mirza Alakbar Sabir was a satirical poet from Shamakha who published in Azeri language publications such as *Gunesh* and *Molla Nasreddin*.

Hophopname, which collected many of his poems, was published in 1912. The collection was illustrated with caricatures from *Molla Nasreddin* and was printed by the Orujov Brother's Press. Kasravi's decision to purchase ten copies to bring home is a testament to both the value readers placed on the work at the time and, perhaps, the youthful Kasravi's financial irresponsibility. The Orujov Brothers 1914 catalog listed *Hophopname* first in its poetry section, with a listing price of one ruble, fifty kopeks. This made *Hophopname* one of the most expensive titles in the Orujov Brothers catalog. With its popular poems and colorful *Molla Nasreddin* illustrations, it probably was viewed by consumers as a collector's item; an impressive addition to one's book collection that was visually appealing and representative of one's reformist politics. Purchasing the books in 1915, Kasravi likely spent around this price on the ten books, meaning each book cost the

³⁸² Ibid. 74.

equivalent of three days room and board at his Tiflis boarding house (Kasravi recalled spending twenty rubles for his forty day stay.)³⁸³ That the chronically broke Kasravi saw it as worth the financial loss to bring so many copies back with him to Tabriz shows the extent of Sabir's popularity in Iran.

Sabir addressed a wide range of social and political issues in his poetry, often addressing events in Iran and the Ottoman Empire. He took a particular interest in their respective constitutional movements, celebrating the successes of the Young Turks and chastising the revolution's failure in Iran. In one poem he opened with the declaration "I am the Shah's slave, I am Iran!/What is a constitution, I am a *firman* (decree)!" Describing Iran as ragged and louse-bitten, he ends by referring to voices rising in the Ottoman Empire, but reassuring Iranians "Do not sadden, oh elderly, oh old-fashioned [people]/My Iran is not influenced by such voices!"³⁸⁴ In another poem, Sabir encouraged the Young Turk Revolution by warning the Ottomans against the violent path taken by Iran.

Ottomans, do not be deceived, God keep you!
Do not burn like Iran, God keep you!
In the Ottoman Empire, let it be present day, a constitution!
Iranians are injured, they do not say constitution
Iranians' heads' are bloody with scandal
mothers mourning dead sons and old men³⁸⁵

In the final stanza Sabir conflates the experiences of Russian Azeris and Iranian Azeris, referring obliquely to the failed Russian Revolution of 1905, writing "One time we also smiled happily/a treasure that, gave us a conscience of freedom/we thanked, human beings inner-humanity/we did not keep it for our children." He also references the

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Sabir. *Hophopname*. 103.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

thwarted efforts of Hajji Mirza Hasan Roshdieh, writing that in response to his efforts “These mollahs said, but we have faith/no, no, no, do not be enticed by him, God keep you!” Roshdieh was a Tabriz-born educational reformer who founded new method schools in Yerevan and later Tabriz but faced such severe opposition from Tabriz’s clerical class that he fled to Tehran. His support of constitutionalism further led to his exile from Iran, to which he would return intermittently before retiring in 1927. Using the twin failures of the Russian and the Iranian revolutions, Sabir exhorts the Ottoman Empire to take a different path, to keep its freedom for its children. Sabir criticized Iran much more explicitly than Russia. Having lived through Russia’s Revolution of 1905 and seen the failure of the Duma, he had authority on the consequences of the failure of constitutionalism, but it would have been impossible to publish clear criticisms of the Tsarist suppression of the constitution. Instead, Sabir placed his hopes, and his frustrations, on the two neighboring Muslim states, and his harsh words toward Iran were enough to get him banned there. Despite this, they were heavily sought by Iranian Azeris who could read his words. It is no wonder Kasravi, a Tabrizi who had witnessed Roshdieh’s failure before being run out of town himself for similar reasons, sought out the work to bring home with him.

Translations in Azerbaijan: Iranian and Arab Literary Influence

The movement of literature in Azerbaijan was not unidirectional. As Azeris exported their work to Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and further afield, they also imported both the classic and contemporary works produced in Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. The reading rooms maintained by enlightenment societies held texts in a variety of languages, for the use of the most educated readers. Additionally, presses such as

Orujov Brothers and Isa bey Ashurbeli's press, included translations of Persian and Arabic works that they marketed to consumers. The Orujov Brothers' 1914 catalog contained numerous such translations, including many of the twenty-nine selected books featured with descriptions in the front of the catalog. Indeed, by the Orujov Brothers' estimation it seems that consumers much preferred the works of their fellow Muslim authors. Only two of the featured books were by European authors and one, *Hajji Baba of Isfahan*, was a picaresque novel by English author and orientalist James Justinian Morier which had been translated into Persian in 1905 and was popular with Iranian readers.³⁸⁶ It was likely from this translation that the Azeri version was translated. This leaves Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, translated from the Russian translation, as the only featured work in the catalog that came to Azerbaijan from purely European pathways of transmission.

Among the works translated into Azeri and sold by the Orujov Brothers, and the first featured work in their catalog, was *The Travel Diary of Ibrahim Beg*. This work, published anonymously in Cairo between 1895 and 1902 by Hajji Zayn-al Abidin Maragehi, is the first modern novel written in Persian. Structured as a travel diary by the fictional Ibrahim Beg, the novel offers a scathing critique of late nineteenth-century Iran as a hopelessly backwards and corrupt society. The Orujov Brothers catalog praises the novel as being written "with a modern pen and intelligent language" and notes that it depicts the guilty and immoral nature of the Iranian state.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁶ Abbas Amanat, "Hajji Baba of Ispahan," *Encyclopædia Iranica* XI/6, 2003, pp. 561-568; available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hajji-baba-of-ispahan>.

³⁸⁷ AMK. Baraderan Orujov Kitabhanesini Asami Alkitabı. 1914.

The translation sold by the Orujov Brothers in 1914 was not the first exposure Azeris had to *The Travel Diary of Ibrahim Beg*. Jalil Mammadguluzade translated an excerpt of the novel and published it in *Molla Nasreddin* in 1906. Entitled “The Travel Diary of Ibrahim Beg, Excerpt from the Novel: The Aghas,” Mammadguluzade selected a passage from the novel in which Ibrahim and his travel companion Uncle Yusif are traveling from Tabriz toward the Aras River by horse. The two encounter a group of men sitting by the side of the road, all of whom are dressed in green and claim to be sayyids. Uncle Yusif, thinking he is prepared to deal with Iran’s beggars, gives them small sums of money from his purse, but is soon overwhelmed by the numerous sayyids demanding alms.³⁸⁸ This particular episode of the novel would have appealed to Mammadguluzade, who reserved particularly sharp critique for the corruption and avarice of those claiming status as religious figures within Shiism, especially within Iran. These widely aired opinions eventually led to clerics in Tabriz issuing a fetva calling for his death in 1908, which did little to discourage him.³⁸⁹ Mammadguluzade’s initial introduction of the text to Azeri-reading audiences in 1906, just four years after it had been published, indicates that it was likely circulating in Persian in the region from initial publication.

That the novel would interest Azeri readers is not surprising—early in the novel, the narrator and his traveling companion travel from Istanbul to Batumi to begin their journey to Mashhad, which takes them through the South Caucasus and territory that would be familiar to most readers. Maragehi, an ethnic Azeri who had grown up in Egypt, where his father was a wealthy merchant, had himself traveled this route as a

³⁸⁸ *Molla Nasreddin*. “Maraghali Zeynalabdin ‘Seyahatname-yi Ibrahim Beg’ Romandan parcha: Aghalar.” No. 17. 1906.

³⁸⁹ MFÖİ. Inventory No. 15474.

young man when he traveled to Ardebil in Marageh.³⁹⁰ It was on this first visit to Iran that he became disillusioned with the Qajar government and the state of Iranian society, inspiring him to write the work. Eventually, Maragehi would live for a time in Yalta, and then Istanbul, where he died.³⁹¹ His descriptions of the thousands of Iranian migrants in the Russian and Ottoman Empires living in abject poverty were based on his own observations.

The oil wealth of Baku looms large in the early pages of the novel, in which Ibrahim Beg notes the relative prosperity of the locals of the South Caucasus, compared to his downtrodden countrymen working as laborers far from home. In a conversation with an Armenian man he meets in a train car on his way to Tiflis, Ibrahim is told “Today, from the blessing of this same black oil of Badkubeh [Baku], several million manats pours into this country every year from foreign lands. That is why you see that there is a prosperous village every few steps.”³⁹² In *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*, Adeeb Khalid describes a short story by Uzbek reformist intellectual Abdulhamid Sulaymon published in 1914 that depicts the young protagonist’s good fortune beginning with a move to Baku, “the city of Muslim millionaires.”³⁹³ Baku’s place in the Muslim imagination as a source of economic and social power for Muslims was not contained to other Muslim populations of the Russian Empire; Maragehi also identifies the city as a powerful place where Muslims prosper, writing ““This city is devoid of gardens, flowerbeds, flowers, and plants, but it has high,

³⁹⁰ Yahya Aryanpur. *Az Saba ta Nima: Tarikh 150 saal adeb-i farsi*. Tehran: Kitabha Jibi. 1978. 305.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Zayn ol-‘Abedin Maraghe’i. *The Travel Diary of Ebrehim Beg*. Trans. James D. Clark. Mazda Publishers, Inc. 2006. 29.

³⁹³ Khalid. *Making Uzbekistan*. 34.

splendid buildings and very fine commercial firms that belong to Moslems and Armenians. They have amassed all this wealth from the blessings of that dark, thick oil that is one of the most obscure minerals on earth.”³⁹⁴ Maragehi does not depict the Azeris of Baku as benevolent pan-Islamists, however, writing of a scene in which a group of local Azeris deliver a beating to a poor Iranian man, with no apparent provocation. Questioning a bystander about the event, Ibrahim is told “The people of Baku are very unmerciful when it comes to Iranians.”³⁹⁵ Whether this episode made it into the Azeri translation is impossible to know without the original translation, however it does offer further evidence of Atabaki’s observation that, despite the label *hamshari*, local Azeris and Iranian migrants were in many ways socially and culturally separate from each other.

The work of the Arab *Nahda* also shaped early Azeri reading culture. The great Lebanese novelist Jurji Zaydan in particular made his way into Azeri translation, with two of his novels offered in the Orujov Brothers catalog. Zaydan’s novel *Egyptian Armansura* (1897) followed *The Travel Diary of Ibrahim Beg* in their selected featured works, with Zaydan touted as the “eminent Egyptian author,” showing once again the general lack of concern on the part of Azeris in the distinction of identities outside the Turkic and Persianate spheres. Zaydan’s novel *Ottoman Revolution* was also translated and featured in the catalog. *Egyptian Armansura* was notably translated by the Baku *gazi* Akhund Mir Mehmed Karim Mir Jafarzade, whose title indicates his position as a religious judge. The book, celebrated as a great work of Islamic history, was nonetheless a work of secular literature by an Arab Christian. Its translation into Azeri by a religious

³⁹⁴ Maraghe’i. *The Travel Diary of Ebrahim Beg*. 35.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

leader, to be printed and sold by a secular press company, further indicates that the involvement of religious intellectuals in the reformist movement was not unusual.

Azeri Theater Troupes on Tour in Iran

The role of Azeri revolutionaries in the politics and armed struggles of the Constitutional Revolution is well documented in preexisting literature and addressed here as well. During this tumultuous period, it was not only political revolutionaries crossing the border play their part in Iran's new chapter, however. Starting with Iran's constitutional period and continuing well into the Soviet period, leaders of Azeri theater regularly traveled to Iran and played an important role in shaping Iranian theater. Just as they sent out touring acting troupes to other Muslim populations within the Russian Empire. Azeri reformists sought to use their progress in the realm of theater as a tool to reach Iranian audiences, encourage them in their revolution, and nudge them along toward embracing secular cultural productions.

On January 9, 1910 *Iran-i No* published an account of a performance by a group of Azeri actors from the Caucasus that had occurred the previous evening. The actors performed two brief works that seem to have been created specifically for that evening on the theme of constitutionalism and progress. The performance, in Azeri, was attended by around one hundred people and was a satirical critique of *qadimian* ("old-thinkers") and negative social forces that hindered the promises of constitutionalism. Mindful of their Iranian audience, the actors included a famous hadith from Saadi's *Gulistan* in their performance: "Luqman, being asked from whom he had learned civility, answered from those who are uncivil!" The author of the review of the performance (quite possibly Rasulzade himself, as he wrote the majority of *Iran-i No*), praised the actors for their

humor and the importance of their message, lamented the necessity of such a message, and noted that at the end of the performance “one of the actors delivered a detailed speech about constitutionalism and freedom with great eloquence.”³⁹⁶

Although the origin of the actors is never specified beyond “from the Caucasus,” they were almost certainly from Baku. The performance was held at the Farus printing house, the house that printed *Iran-i No*, marking a clear connection between the performers and Mammed Amin Rasulzade. Rasulzade had extensive connections to Baku’s theater community. Indeed, he had himself dabbled in theater, writing a play entitled *Qaranliqda Ishiqler* (“Lights in the Darkness”), a tragedy set in Baku during the 1905 revolution. The play had been staged by the theater department of Salvation Society in December 1908 during Rasulzade’s tenure as chairman of the society.³⁹⁷ It was never staged again, either due to censorship, or an indication that perhaps Rasulzade was a better journalist than a playwright, but his dedication to Azeri theater was evident in his life’s work. Even in the brief review of the Farus house performance, the Azeri reformist sensibilities of the performers comes through. The actors engaged in dramatic polemics against Iran’s *qadimian*, a direct Persian translation of the hated *qadimchiler*, the reactionary conservatives of reformist discourse. The Azeri cultural production of the early 1900’s was colored by revolutionary sentiment, contestations of identity and authority, and an increasing alienation of the intelligentsia from the rest of Azeri society. Feeling themselves veterans of revolution and reform, Azeri cultural actors in Iran imported these themes and worked to shape the continuing debate in Iranian society on what constitutionalism would mean for the nation.

³⁹⁶ “Tamasha Shaab 21 Dhu l-Hijja.” *Iran-i No*. No 107, January 9 1910.

³⁹⁷ “Teatr o Musiqi” *Ittifaq*. December 7, 1908 No 6.

Despite the upheaval throughout the region during World War I, Azeri actors remained dedicated to their cultural missions into Iran. In his memoir, Huseynqulu Sarabski recounted a tour of Iran with the Muslim Opera Company, affiliated with Salvation Society, in 1916. Initially, the company was performing Hajibeyov's comedic opera *Arshin Mal Alin*, and his operetta *If Not That One, Then This One*.³⁹⁸ According to Sarabski, Iranian audiences then specifically requested that the Azeri actors perform the Ottoman writer Shams al din Samibey's 1876 tragedy *Gaveyi-Ahenger* ("Kaveh the Blacksmith.") *Gave* was based on the legendary hero of the *Shahname*, Kaveh, a blacksmith who lived under the tyrannical rule of the foreign king Zahak. After losing two of his sons to Zahak's serpents, Kaveh led a successful uprising against him, restoring native rule to Persia. In the age of colonialism and empire, the legend of Kaveh was particularly resonant for Muslims living under European rule, and in the nineteenth-century thinkers from the Persianate sphere, including Akhundov, began to use the story as inspiration for political resistance.³⁹⁹ The same year that the Muslim Opera Company received the request to perform *Gave* from Iranian audiences, the Persian literary newspaper *Kaveh* was founded, taking its name from the same legend. In its first issue, the newspaper recounted the story of Kaveh, referring to his rebellion against Zahak as a "national uprising" and encouraging readers to follow his example in similar revolt against British and Russian interference into Iran's affairs.⁴⁰⁰ One wonders if the Iranian audiences who petitioned the Azeri actors to replace their comic operas with Samibey's

³⁹⁸ Sarabski. *Xatirələri*, 65.

³⁹⁹ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet. *Frontier fictions: shaping the Iranian nation, 1804-1946*. Princeton University Press, 1999, 148.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

nationalist tragedy were themselves readers of *Kaveh*, eager to see the ancient legend, reimagined as a nationalist allegory, played out on stage.

Sarabski and the other actors indulged their audience's request and, with some additional amateur Iranian actors to fill out the cast, prepared *Gave* for performance. After performing the play in Tehran, a tsarist representative stationed there revoked the troupe's permission to perform it. It is unsurprising that the tsarist authorities would have been concerned over a drama troupe of Russian Turkic subjects performing this overtly nationalist play for an Iranian audience that chafed under Russian political domination, especially in the final years of the war when the tsarist government was increasingly losing its grip on its vast imperial domain. The Russian demand that the opera company cease performance of *Gave* put the actors in the awkward position of arriving to their next performance, where tickets had already been sold advertising the new program, and being unable to perform the play. Their next performance was in Rasht, however, a region under the sway of the Jangali revolt, where neither the Russian nor the Iranian governments held much authority any longer. The actors thus appealed to the Jangali leader Mirza Kuchuk Khan for permission to perform *Gave*. Described by the British as a "whole-hearted nationalist,"⁴⁰¹ the themes of the play naturally resonated with Kuchuk Khan. As they had hoped, he granted permission for the performance. Tsarist authorities learned of this, however, and although the Tsarist government was unable to directly influence activities in Rasht at the time, delivered the message to the actors that should they perform the play they would be arrested upon their return to Baku.⁴⁰² Sarabski describes himself and his fellow actors as becoming unwitting agents of revolution, stuck

⁴⁰¹Ibid., 154

⁴⁰² Sarabski. *Xatirələri*, 65

in a power struggle between the rebel Kuchuk Khan and the imperialist authority of the Russian and the Iranian governments. When a deputy of Kuchuk Khan encouraged them to perform the play anyway, the actors cast their support behind the Jangalis and performed, he recalls, creating a “revolutionary spirit” among the people.⁴⁰³ The actors managed to avoid arrest, and returned to Baku on the dawn of the revolution.⁴⁰⁴

Entry into the Soviet Union supplied Azeri reformists not only with long-sought influence at home, but also with the clout they had long desired to export their brand of cultural and social reform to Iran and promote it in Central Asia. The first, and until the creation of the Uzbek SSR in 1924 only, Turkic, Muslim, Soviet Socialist Republic, the Azerbaijan SSR acted as the model for progress and development that the Soviet Union presented to both its internal Muslim populations and its Muslim neighbors while pursuing good relations with Iran and Turkey.⁴⁰⁵ This policy continued into the early 1930s, when Soviet relations with its two southern neighbors soured as Turkey moved closer to the West and Iran drew closer to Nazi Germany. Thus Azeri actors, for whom travel to Iran had previously carried with it the threat of arrest upon their return home, now entered Iran for very similar activities as representatives of the state.

By the 1920’s, the effects of the often-beleaguered attempts at promoting drama by the touring Azeri theater companies of the late imperial era finally began to show. A number of theater companies emerged in Tabriz and Rasht in the 1920s, foremost among which was the “Ariyen” or “Ariya Nijad” theater troupe, founded by Iranian communist

⁴⁰³ Ibid, 66. It should be noted that, as Sarabski’s memoir was written in 1930, it should be understood as functioning within the constraints of Soviet ideology and censorship. While there is no reason to doubt his account of touring in Iran, his assertion that his performance created a “revolutionary spirit,” revolutionary though the time was, must be qualified within the Soviet context of the work.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Harun Yilmaz. *National Identities in Soviet Historiography: The Rise of Nations Under Stalin*. New York: Routledge, 2015. 21.

writer Abulqasim Lahuti shortly before he fled Iran permanently for the Soviet Union in 1923, and the “Tabriz Drama” troupe, led by Reza Quluzade Sherqli, who would later live and work in Baku and Ashgabat.⁴⁰⁶ Both troupes drew heavily from the works of (now Soviet) Azerbaijani playwrights for their repertoires, performing the operettas of Hajibeyov and the plays of Haqverdiyev and Mammadguluzade.⁴⁰⁷ In addition to these original works, Russian-educated Iranian, Azeri and Armenian directors led the way in translating European works for the emergent Iranian stage.⁴⁰⁸

Despite the considerably greater force with which Soviet Azerbaijanis were able to exert influence in Iran following sovietization, they continued to be deeply disappointed by what they perceived to be the backwardness of the nation and cultural domination by the *qadimian*. A 1923 issue of *Molla Nasreddin* included a satirical announcement for an upcoming tour by an Ardebil theater company lead by the comedic actor “Shaykh...” The company, read the announcement, would be touring during the holy month of Muharram, and assured readers that a “walled and ceiled” section of the theater would be prepared for women, a play upon imperial-era theater advertisements that always promised a curtained off balcony for Muslim women who wished to attend performances. The announcement is followed by a list of the scheduled performances, all imagined plays themed around Ashura, including such gems as “The Troops on Both Sides are Prepared,” a tragedy in six acts, the opera “Qasim and his Bride,” “Abbas, or the Bloody War,” a tragedy in fifteen acts, and “Jinn Jafar’s Troops,” a comedy authored

⁴⁰⁶ Rehimili. *Azərbaycan Teatrı Tarixi*. 499.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 500.

⁴⁰⁸ Saeed Talajooy. “The Impact of Soviet Contact on Iranian Theatre: Abdolhosein Nushin and the Tudeh Party.” In *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions since 1800*. ed. Stephanie Cronin. New York: Routledge. 2013. 339.

by “a jinn poet.”⁴⁰⁹ The announcement served not only to lampoon Iranian religiosity, but also shame Iran for the weakness of its theater culture. Indeed, little had changed twenty years later when, in 1944, under pressure from his Tudeh colleagues to stage an Iranian play, Iran’s first great theater director, Abdolhosein Nushin, selected the Persian translation of Mirza Fatali Akhundov’s nearly century-old 1851 play *The Vizier of the Khan of Lenkaran* as the best option for an original Iranian work.⁴¹⁰

Iranian theater in the 1940’s still fell heavily in the shadow of Azeri theater culture. From the Soviet Union’s inception through World War II, the Tabrizi theater community benefitted from its links with Soviet Azerbaijan and in some ways outstripped Tehran. Nilla Cram Cook, a cultural attaché of the American embassy, who became the head of the office of theater in the early 1940s, noted that

Groups under Soviet influence have stolen a march on the official Tehran theater in stagecraft. The Tabriz theater, during Soviet occupation, went far ahead of Tehran in production technique, particularly in lighting and scenic design. The best-equipped theater in Iran, it was ‘nationalized’ during the brief regime of the Democrat Party of Azerbaijan (1946)...the colloquial Turkish of the province, which the whole public could understand and relish, was the language officially used. More was done here in original writing and in the use of folk materials and costumes than Lalezar, Tehran’s Broadway, had ever done for the folklore of the Persian language.⁴¹¹

The Soviet Union’s cultural outreach efforts included the establishment of the Iran and Soviet Cultural Relations Society, which published the monthly literary journal *Payam-i No* (“New Message.”) The journal was run by leading Iranian leftist intellectuals, including the great novelist Bozorg Alavi, who was appointed editor upon

⁴⁰⁹ “Teatro və Musiqi” *Molla Nasreddin*, Number 28, 1923.

⁴¹⁰ Talajooy, “The Impact of Soviet Contact on Iranian Theatre,” 350.

⁴¹¹ Nilla Cram Cook. “Theater and Ballet Arts of Iran.” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Oct., 1949), 412.

its foundation in 1944.⁴¹² *Payam-i No*'s entire fifth issue was dedicated to Soviet Azerbaijan, beginning with a profile of Akhundov in which he was reimagined as "the first person from the past who worked day and night for the progress of freedom and democracy."⁴¹³ Other profiles included those of Uzeyir Hajibeyov, still alive and the dominant figure in Azeri opera, and Jafar Jabbarli, Azerbaijan's first writer and playwright who could be considered a truly Bolshevik literary figure. A multi-page profile of Soviet Azerbaijan's theater praised the progress brought by the revolution, noting that while before there were but two theaters in all of Azerbaijan, now there were twenty-five, with 2,262 men and women employed in the theater and a full 1,532,300 theater-goers in a year. This, the paper concluded, was an example of how "in a short period of time (a quarter century) theater in Azerbaijan was created without pause, and every day goes further down the evolutionary road."⁴¹⁴ In this article the author presents Azerbaijan's theatrical development, which overcame religious opposition and colonial suppression of native writers, as a roadmap for how to create a robust theater society that Iran might follow. Many of the contributors to *Payam-i No* traveled to the Soviet Union and returned to publish accounts of the great intellectual, social, and cultural progress they saw in the Soviet Union and advocate for similar programs in Iran. Instead many of them, including Alavi, would end up in exile in the Soviet Union and its satellites following the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh's government. The journal naturally focused on the Soviet Union and the revolution as the source of Azerbaijan's successful theater culture, but in its profiling of Akhundov, Hajibeyov, and Jabbarli (whose early

⁴¹² Hasan Mir'ābedini, "ALAVI, BOZORG," *Encyclopædia Iranica Online*, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/alavi-bozorg-novelist> (accessed on 6 August 2014).

⁴¹³ "Mirza Fatali Akhundzade" *Payam-i No*. No. 5, 1944.

⁴¹⁴ E. A. Germisiri. "Teatr der Azerbayjan Shuraya" *Payam-i No*. No. 5, 1944.

writing career was in the journals of the late imperial era), implicitly acknowledged Soviet Azerbaijani theater's late imperial roots.

De-Persification of Azeri Culture and Hidden Persophone Communities

While Azeri reformists were deeply invested in Iranian politics and cultural development, at home they were engaged in a project to de-Persify Azeri culture. Baku's cosmopolitanization politicized ethnic identity at the turn of the century. Azeri reformists responded by vernacularizing Azeri culture, breaking away from the larger Persianate sphere they had historically occupied. Azeris in the Caucasus increasingly no longer looked to Persian literature and culture as representative of their own identity. Furthermore, as European culture and society became the model of progress, Azeris sought to distance themselves from that which could be perceived as "oriental" or "backwards." As a former region of the Persian Empire, Iran represented stagnation while Russia, as the Caucasus' window to the west, represented progress in the eyes of many reform-minded Azeri intellectuals. The schools and educational programs developed by Azeri enlightenment societies focused on Azeri language literacy and fostering Azeri cultural production. When the Persianate was represented, it was typically in a negative light, as in the stock character of the corrupt molla in Azeri plays. The voices of Azeri reformists who adhered to the project of vernacularization clamor the loudest in the archives, but in relying on them we risk the erasure of other populations who remain largely silent on the page.

The Persian speakers of the South Caucasus were not exclusively Iranian migrants; there were, and continue to be, indigenous Persophone populations, as well as Azeri communities who pursued classical education in Persian rather than new method

educations for their children. Religious education also took many Azeris to Iranian territories. Azeris were a Shia population, and Azeris who harbored ambitions toward religious leadership tended to leave Russian territories for Iran or Iraq to receive their training. Many remained there rather than pursue the few available positions within the imperial structure, both because of their relative dearth and the lack of freedom that accompanied becoming, essentially, a government bureaucrat.⁴¹⁵ Many did return, however, to administer the Shia populations of the Caucasus, having received a classical education in Persian and Arabic.

The Iranian Ettehad School also hints at the indigenous Persophone community. As previously discussed, the newspaper *Tereqqi* identified the school as home to “hundreds of Iranian and Caucasian children” studying together.⁴¹⁶ Who were the Caucasian children enrolling in an Iranian school when Azeri reformists were founding dozens of Azeri-language schools throughout the city? We cannot know for sure, but there are two equally plausible answers: they were the children of parents who had not bought into the Azeri reformist program and who placed a higher value on Persian literacy than Azeri, as had been true for centuries before, or they were the children of Persian-speaking Caucasians whose needs were not served by schools that focused on Azeri-literacy.

Baku’s social and political dominance from the late nineteenth century onwards also elevates the Azeri-language cultural output of the era. Regions to the south closer to the Iranian border were naturally more heavily Persianate. Indeed, when Azerbaijan was

⁴¹⁵ Altstadt. *The Azerbaijani Turks*. 57.

⁴¹⁶ “Iran Eqtishaneh Dair.” *Tereqqi*, July 16, 1908. No. 10.

first entering the Soviet Union, delegations from Nakhchivan wrote in Persian, indicating that the region may have only become predominantly Azeri-speaking under Soviet rule.

The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and Azeri Territorial Ambition

Azeri establishment of a distinctive identity with relation to their brethren in Iran took on increasingly imperialist overtones with the foundation of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920.) When the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917, Azeris suddenly, and rather unwillingly, found themselves independent. Azeri reformists went from advocating an Austro-Marxist form of cultural autonomy to the new leaders of an independent state. On May 28, 1918, the Azerbaijani National Council, led by Musavatists, declared the foundation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic.

Historian Michael G. Smith captures the uncertainty and gravity of the moment in his description of the announcement:

The chair of the Council, Fath'ali Khan Khoiski, announced the birth of a new state, where none had existed before, fraught with anxiety and disbelief, his face white and his hands shaking. Only the inveterate visionary, Mammäd Amin Räsulzadä, could fully imagine a world without empire, persuading his colleagues that Azerbaijan was a "great and powerful nation," a "most freedom loving and revolutionary republic."⁴¹⁷

In this initial declaration of independence, Azerbaijan was defined geographically, but its new leaders offered little to define it as a nation. The declaration was devoid of historical claims or pan-Turkic ideology.⁴¹⁸ The new Azerbaijan Democratic Republic never fully controlled its declared territory, however, and leadership looked to the Ottoman military as their only hope to recapture land lost to the Bolsheviks and secure their borders.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁷ Smith. "Anatomy of a Rumour." 228.

⁴¹⁸ Michael Reynolds. *Shattering Empires: the Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. 213.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

With the end of the war and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, they had no clear allies to look to.

Despite these vast challenges, Rasalzade began to consider the possibility of a greater Azerbaijan, with its boundaries stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea, and down into Iranian Azerbaijan. By 1919, when the Paris Peace Conference commenced, his vision had become ADR policy, and the Azeri delegation, led by Alimardan Topchubashev and adopting French as their language of negotiation, presented ambitious territorial claims to the conference, justified through history, culture, and demographics. While Azeris fought Bolsheviks and Armenian Dashnaks back home, maintaining a capital in Ganja because they did not control Baku, Topchubashev argued for the territorial integrity of a newly envisioned Azerbaijan. In their initial memorandum to the conference the delegation described the boundaries of the Transcaucasus as bound by the Black and Caspian Seas, with Persia to the south and extending north to Quba. More importantly, they included a table showing the three major population groups of the region: 2.653 million Turks, 1.782 million Armenians, and 1.641 million Georgians, the implicit point being that they represented the dominant population of the region.⁴²⁰ Referencing the region's pre-Russian history, the Azerbaijan delegation emphasized the history of Muslim rule in its argument for the historic right to autonomy of the Transcaucasus. It noted that much of the region had historically been "under the dominion of Turkey, of Persia, or were yielding their territory to the khans of Azerbaijan." The Transcaucasian Federation thus included the regions formally ruled as the Qarabagh, Ganja, Sheki, Shirvan, Derbend, Quba, Baku, and Talysh Khanates. In

⁴²⁰ Anita L.P. Burnett, ed. *Caucasian Boundaries: Documents and Maps, 1802-1946*. Cambridge Archive Editions, 1996. 584-5.

addition, the regions of Daghestan and Zaqatala were “occupied after the glorious battles of Sheikh Shamil,” while the regions of Batum, Kars, and Sohoun (Abkhazia) had been captured in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, which, by the delegation’s logic, placed them within Transcaucasian domain. With these additional regions considered, the delegation increased the Muslim population of Transcaucasia to 3.306 million, with little change to the Armenian and Georgian statistics.⁴²¹ The specific boundaries of the Republic of Azerbaijan, they declared “depend on natural frontiers,” and were comprised of the entirety of Baku and Elizavetpol (Ganja) Governorates, sections of the Yerevan Governorate, including one-fifth of Nakhichevan, sections of the Tiflis Governorate, including the entire district of Borchali and part of Tiflis, and the district of Zagatala.⁴²² Naturally, the delegations from Georgia and Armenia were not in agreement with Azerbaijan about its rights to much of these regions, and the three delegations made competing claims throughout the conference, each failing to gain recognition for their state. As the ADR delegation lobbied for their claims, however, they also acknowledged their ambitions to expand south, as well.

In his minutes on a meeting with Topchubashev during the Peace Conference, the British diplomat J.T. Simpson notes that Topchubashev would not entertain the idea of Azerbaijan rejoining Russia, telling him “Our language, our religion, our ways of living, are different from those of the Russians; our plan is to make a Caucasian Federation of the four states, perhaps also including Persia at a later stage.”⁴²³ Azeris hoped that they could rally their co-linguists below the border to overthrow Iranian rule and join the new

⁴²¹ Ibid., 586.

⁴²² Ibid., 593-4.

⁴²³ Ibid., 620.

republic. Iranian Azeris, however, largely remained loyal to Iran, and in fact were beginning to envision Azerbaijan as the nationalist heartland of Iran. As Touraj Atabaki put it,

Gradually the belief arose among Iranians that although the Constitutional Revolution was born in Tehran, it was later baptised in Tabriz and the Constitution had no chance of surviving without Azerbaijan. Moreover, Azerbaijan was seen as the most important centre from which any future progressive political changes would originate. This appraisal of the cardinal role played by the Azerbaijanis in restoring constitutionalism in Iran left Azerbaijani constitutionalists with a strong consciousness of being the protectors of the country's territorial integrity, a consciousness which has persisted to the present time.⁴²⁴

The Baku branch of the Iranian Democratic Party rejected Musavatist rhetoric about Greater Azerbaijan as a fundamental threat to Iran's sovereignty, founding a bilingual Azeri-Persian journal entitled *Azerbaijan: an Inseparable Part of Iran* to compete with the Azerbaijani nationalist rhetoric in Rasulzade's journal *Achiq Soz*.⁴²⁵ Following the closure of *Achiq Soz*, Musavatists opened a new journal in 1918, also entitled *Azerbaycan*, no doubt a rebuke to the Iranian Democratic Party's organ.⁴²⁶

Iranian Azeris were not united in their commitment to the territorial integrity of Iran, however, and in the chaotic years of World War I, accusations of separatism were regularly thrown at Azeri political leaders. In Tabriz the debate around separatism raged, splitting the local Democratic Party. In his memoirs Ahmed Kasravi strongly condemns certain members of Tabriz's democratic party of being Turkish separatists, accusing the poet Mohammad Taqikhan Rafat, a follower of the democratic leader Sheikh Mohammad Khiabani who had received his education in Istanbul, of supporting the Ottoman

⁴²⁴ Touraj Atabaki. "Recasting and Recording Identities in the Caucasus." *Iran & the Caucasus* (2002). 2288.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

occupation of Tabriz during World War I.⁴²⁷ Rafat's continued presence as an important member of the democratic party was proof to Kasravi of the party's corruption by Turkic separatists. Kasravi similarly accuses Khiabani, the most powerful democratic leader in Tabriz, of separatist and Turkish nationalist sentiments. The rivals Kasravi accuses of separatism, however, never entertained the possibility of a union with Caucasian Azerbaijan and were disturbed by the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic's claim over the name "Azerbaijan." When Khiabani did revolt against the state in April 1920 he declared the separatist state he founded "Azadistan," partly to symbolically protest Caucasian Azeris' use of the name "Azerbaijan" for their own republic, which lay on the fringes of the traditionally accepted heartland of Azerbaijan.⁴²⁸ Azadistan fell violently by September 1920, with Khiabani killed and Rafat dead by his own hand in response. While the threat of Azeri separatism in Iran would persevere, the fractures that developed in the early twentieth century between Caucasian Azerbaijan and Iranian Azerbaijan ensured the evolution of two distinct identities.

Conclusion

With the conclusion of the second Russo-Persian War through the signing of the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828, Russia consolidated its rule over the southern Caucasus and set the Azeri population of that found themselves north of the new border on a separate path from their co-ethnics who remained in Iran. As the global trend of nationalism and movements for cultural autonomy within multiethnic empires spread at the close of the nineteenth century, Azeris in the Russian Empire increasingly took measures to distinguish themselves from Iranians and establish a distinct identity. Their

⁴²⁷ Ahmad Kasravi, *Zindigani-i man*. 89.

⁴²⁸ N. Parvin. "Azadistan" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, New York, 1996.

relationship with Iran was a complicated one, both intimate and contentious. Azeris of the Russian Empire claimed a stake in the destiny of Iran, often directly involving themselves in Iranian national politics. At the same time, Azeri mobility through Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman spaces allowed them to slip in and out of Iranian identity in a way actual Iranian subjects could not. Azeri revolutionaries could always return to Transcaucasia or, if facing arrest there, transfer their exile to the Ottoman Empire, where the policy of providing subjecthood to any incoming Muslims offered the opportunity to remake themselves as Ottomans.⁴²⁹

Tracing the political ideologies, cultural influences, and texts that circulated between Iran and the Caucasus in the early twentieth century and into the early years of the Soviet Union reveals the intertwined and overlapping nature of Caucasian Azeri and Iranian identity. Satirical works from both were read in their original and in translation on either side of the border, promoting common sensibilities about progress and reform among the literate classes. Iranian intellectuals with a constitutionalist bent, meanwhile, gathered in Tiflis and Baku, where in the early years after the Russian Revolution they were able to participate in a comparatively open political discourse. The mark of Azeri theater culture, exported to Iran through touring theater troupes, was one of the driving influences that shaped Iranian theater well into the twentieth century.

When the Russian Empire collapsed, and the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic rose feebly from its ashes, Azeris departed from their historical cultural outreach in Iran to begin to view their role in the region in increasingly colonialist tones. Despite never fully controlling their own claimed territory, including Baku, Mammed Amin Rasulzade

⁴²⁹ Meyer. *Turks Across Empires*. 11.

and Alimardan Topchubashov, the two most ambitious visionaries of the fledgling nation, looked south with thoughts of creating a greater Azerbaijan. Most Iranian Azeri intellectuals rejected such a notion wholeheartedly, instead claiming a place as the protectors of Iranian territorial integrity. With the collapse of the ADR and creation of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, Azeris reverted to their role as cultural ambassadors, fostering ties with Iranian leftists, many of whom found themselves in exile in the USSR.

Throughout these years, the complex relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan persisted, with the names of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, Azerbaijan SSR, and Republic of Azerbaijan, a source of ire for many Iranians. Even in academic publications today, some scholars will refer to the nation as “Aran,” a historical Persian term for approximately the region now occupied by the Republic of Azerbaijan, rather than grant its claim to the name, and to the language as “Caucasian Turkish.” Both nations, meanwhile, have on different occasions declared nullifications of the treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay, with the same logic that without the treaties, they could claim territory rightfully belonging to their nation. The conflict does not quite reach Greece’s objections to Macedonia, but the emotions driving the objections in both cases seem similar. Iranian Azeris, meanwhile, hold positions as both important national figures, such as the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself, and diehard separatists such as the poet Pirouz Dilanchi, whose idea of a “Whole Azerbaijan” is quite similar to Rasolzade’s greater Azerbaijan. Youths at Iranian football matches featuring the Tabriz team, meanwhile, chant out “*Azerbaycan bir olsun, istemeyen kor olsun!*”– “*May Azerbaijan be united, may those who oppose it be blind!*” And yet, the second part of that chant, “*Azerbaycan*

bir olsun, Tabriz paytakht olsun!”– “*May Azerbaijan be united, may Tabriz be the capital!*” betrays immediately the fundamental differences the two populations hold on their ideas of the meaning of Azerbaijan, and where it is centered.

Epilogue

Early Soviet Azerbaijani Theater and the Continued Influence of Late Imperial Reform

The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic collapsed in 1920 and Azerbaijan became the first Muslim, Turkic republic to join the Soviet Union. This event led some prominent Azeri reformists to flee, particularly those leaders of the ADR such as Mammed Amin Rasulzade, Alimardan Topchubashov, and Ali bey Huseynzade. Many more reformists, however, stayed in Azerbaijan and took part in the construction of the new socialist state. Nariman Narimanov in particular led the way in shepherding in a new Soviet identity, while Uzeyir Hajibeyov became the leader of Soviet Azerbaijani cultural progress. For many reformists, the revolution offered a new opportunity to continue along the progressive path, but this time with the full weight of the state behind them.

The rhetoric in the early Soviet Azerbaijani press around topics of cultural reform did not transform dramatically from the late imperial era, although it did become more strident in its demands for progress. Many of the same names from before the revolution also continued to be featured. The trajectory of early Soviet Azerbaijani theater exemplifies this. On February 7, 1923, Sarabski, so integral to the organization of previous jubilees, received a jubilee of his own, marking his twenty years in the theater. The jubilee was organized at the instigation of Nariman Narimanov and the Education Commission.⁴³⁰ In an announcement of the jubilee, the staff of *Molla Nasreddin* extended their congratulations to Sarabski, and opened the announcement by noting that in Azeri theater history, significant individuals were so few that they could be counted on one's hands, and that talented youth had long run from the stage because of their fear of

⁴³⁰ Sarabski, *Bir Akyorun Xatirələri*. 68.

“*oyunbazlıq*” (“buffoonery.”) This was now changing, according to the announcement, and the authors expressed their hope that with this positive change in thinking people would consider this jubilee day as a holiday.⁴³¹

The anxiety expressed by the staff of *Molla Nasreddin* over the shortage of significant figures of the stage in Azeri theater history was indicative of a common concern regarding cultural stagnation among early Soviet Azerbaijani intellectuals. Though the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic was a new political entity, supposedly with an entirely new political and cultural mode of thinking, the fact was that the cultural leaders of late imperial Azerbaijan, by and large were the same cultural leaders of Soviet Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan’s proud but nascent tradition of opera continued to be dominated almost exclusively by Hajibeyov, who oversaw performances of his repertoire, though only produced one new opera after the revolution, *Keroglu* (“Blind Man’s Son”) in 1936. Hajibeyov was joined in his work on Azerbaijani music by the composer Muslim Magomayev, also an active figure in the intellectual life of prerevolutionary Azerbaijan, who had written one opera, *Shah Ismail*, in 1916, and his second, *Nargiz*, in 1935, with libretto by yet another reformist figure, Mammed Said Ordubadi. In the theater, the greatest stage actors continued to be the same who had labored to create a theater culture in Azerbaijan in the late imperial period. Abbas Mirza Sharifov, known for his work in Shakespearean tragedies, and Huseynqulu Sarabski continued to dominate the dramatic stage. In comedic works, Mirzaagha Aliyev and Hajjiagha Abbasov continued to be featured. Even in early Soviet experimental theater, so different from what the reformist actors had ever experienced or advocated in the late imperial era, they maintained a

⁴³¹ İdarədən. “Səhnə Yaraşığı” *Molla Nasreddin*, Number 12, 1923.

presence, with Abbasov and Aliyev involved in the Satiragit Theater, an experimental cabaret that encouraged actors to create spontaneous theater among the workers. In the 1930s, with the creation of the title of People's Artist, all of the first ethnic Azeri awardees had started their careers on the late imperial stage, with the exception of the first awardee, the tar player Qurban Pirimov, in 1931. He had nonetheless had been a member of Hajibeyov's music assembly. In 1932 Abbasov and Sarabski were declared People's Artists, with Aliyev receiving the honor the following year. In 1934 Shovkat Mammadova, the young soprano who Hajibeyov had put onstage in 1915 to perform his work and advocate for Muslim women's place in the theater, became the first woman to receive the honor. Sharifov and Hajibeyov were honored in 1936 and 1937, respectively.

It was not only the faces on stage that were not changing, but the works being performed. According to Kourken Ayvasian, an Armenian theater scholar who served as a consultant to multiple Baku theaters and lectured in theater studies at Baku State University in the 1930s, "for seven or eight years after the sovietization of Azerbaidzhan, not a single dramatic work of any value was written."⁴³² Works written in the imperial era that remained initially in the repertoire of the Soviet Azerbaijani theater included many of Uzeyir Hajibeyov's operas and operettas, such as *If Not That One, Then This One*, *Arshin Mal Alin*, *Leyli and Majnun*, *Ashiq Qarib*, and *Asli and Kerem*. Jalil Mammadguluzade's *The Dead* was also initially heavily promoted and performed in the early Soviet period. In addition to these native-language works, translations of a number of Shakespearean tragedies, Russian classics, and works by Schiller and Hugo rounded out the repertoire.⁴³³

⁴³² Ayvasian. *The Theater in Soviet Azerbaidzhan*. 6.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 5.

Azerbaijani cultural observers largely blamed this lack of new dramatic works for the slow development of the Soviet Azerbaijani theater. In 1923 an article in *Molla Nasreddin* lamented “Because of the lack of intricate language in the works of Turkic theater, the people do not yet come to the theater with enthusiasm.”⁴³⁴ A year later, the journal’s view of the state of Azerbaijani theater had not improved. “How many pupils have finished their studies?” an article asked, “Because in order to say new words new people are needed.” The author concluded that despite thousands of promises, when one went to the theater, nothing new was on offer.⁴³⁵ These desired new voices were slow to appear. Of the notable Azerbaijani playwrights who were working in the early years of sovietization, only Jafar Jabbarli produced new dramatic works in the early and mid-twenties, with the others, including Huseyn Javid, Samad Vurgun, and Suleyman Rustam, emerging only in the late twenties and early thirties.

Jabbarli, the first prominent Azerbaijani writer who actively incorporated the new Bolshevik vocabulary into his work, wrote his first plays, *Oqtay*, *Son of the People* and *Aydin* in 1923. Both plays dealt with life in pre-revolutionary Azerbaijan, depicting the class struggle through laborer heroes fighting the injustices enacted by rich industrialists. Jabbarli followed these works with a number of historical plays, a genre also popular among his prerevolutionary predecessors. It was not until 1928 with *Sevil* that he produced a work that took place in a modern Soviet Azerbaijani setting and featured a liberated new Soviet woman. Despite this effort, Soviet authorities found Jabbarli’s work overly nationalist, and jailed him for six months in 1931.⁴³⁶ It was only after serving his

⁴³⁴ “Teatro Xəbərləri” *Molla Nasreddin*, No. 36, 1923.

⁴³⁵ “Teatro Açıldı” *Molla Nasreddin*. No 20, 1924.

⁴³⁶ Ayvasian. *The Theater in Soviet Azerbaidzhan*. 7

sentence that the first great Soviet Azerbaijani playwright wrote a properly Soviet play, *Yashar*, which depicted kolkhoz life.

During Jabbarli's early years as a playwright he was also a frequent contributor to the gazette *Kommunist*, in which he set about the necessary Bolshevik task of tearing down the work of his elders. Jalil Mammadguluzade's *The Dead* was a source of particular ire for Jabbarli, who rejected the play's protagonist entirely. In his critical article of *The Dead*, "About the Work 'The Dead,'" published in *Komumnist* in 1925, Jabbarli recasts Iskender as the greater villain of the play, an enlightened individual who does nothing for the people, but instead squanders his gift of education through his weak will and immorality. Iskender is the opposite of the ideal Soviet man, someone who has had the rare and invaluable advantage of a European education yet feels no sense of responsibility to his society and, most damningly, to his young sister, who he abandons to the predations of Sheikh Nasrullah. Jabbarli further points out, not incorrectly, that Iskender in fact had nothing to do with the village's discovery of Sheikh Nasrullah's fraudulence, as it was the arrival of a letter from the resident of another village that had fallen victim to him that reveals the molla for what he is. Iskender, Jabbarli concludes, by right of his refusal to act as an enlightening figure and failure to protect his sister, "Is the killer of the future generation. He is a worse villain than Sheikh Nasrullah." In his final lines, he challenges the reader to consider who deserves greater blame, "Sheikh Nasrullah, who owing to the environment and as a result of psychological illness performed criminal acts? Or drunk Iskender, having come from a privileged environment, but at the same time dragging the poor people straight into darkness and killing the future

and the youth?”⁴³⁷ From Jabbarli’s Soviet perspective, Sheikh Nasrullah, a product of his ignorant environment, had more potential for rehabilitation than the subversive intellectual Iskender, who had no excuse for his failings. In his polemic against Mammadguluzade’s most famous protagonist, Jabbarli offered a polemic against the older generation of reformists, whose ethics no longer applied to the new Bolshevik world.

While young Soviet writers increasingly sought to distinguish themselves from their reformist predecessors, the anxieties they expressed about creating an enlightened, theater-going public echoed the rhetoric of the late imperial period. Sarabski’s memoirs frequently dwell on the tension between the *camaat* (“people”) and *ziyalilar* (“intellectuals”), with the potential of violence from the masses ever-present as the small, enlightened, segment of the population struggled to drag Azerbaijan into the modern world. His descriptions of the obstacles faced by the theater community of the late imperial era place the theater in direct conflict with the mosque. Sarabski had first learned to sing in mosques, and then abandoned his Koranic studies for the stage. In his conception of the cultural battles fought in the early twentieth century, actors and mollahs competed for the hearts of the people, with actors facing an almost impossible uphill fight.

With the sovietization of Azerbaijan the balance of power suddenly shifted, and the theater community found itself with the weight of the state behind it. The dichotomy of the mosque versus the theater continued to appear in commentaries on the theater, however now those invoking it could do so in a forcefully didactic manner that directly

⁴³⁷ Jabbarli, Jafar, “‘Ölülər’ Əsəri Haqqında” in *Seçilmiş Əsərləri, IV Cild*. Bakı, Şərq-Qərb, 2005. 175.

cast the mosque as a space of ignorance and indolence, without fear of reprisal from the religious community. “Summer came and our theaters closed, and it was good that they were closed” begins a *Molla Nasreddin* article written from the perspective of an unenlightened Azeri. This was a good thing “because Muslims have stayed loafers from the mosques and from some money,” and could now rest rather than go to the theater. The lazy Muslim proceeds to complain that apparently the Tiflis Academic Theater would be coming to Baku on tour, and that people were expected to attend their performances. He, however, had no intention to do so. “Every city has its own artists who perform in their own city. So why does this [group] from Tiflis come here?”⁴³⁸ He concludes that theater, education, and culture were all unnecessary and besides, tomorrow was the start of Muharram, and he would rather watch the mosque and the pulpit. This character of an ignorant Azeri fails to appreciate the values of Soviet internationalism, remaining provincial in his thinking and resentment of the Tbilisi theater company’s inconvenient tour of Baku. His desire to attend mosque services rather than see his fellow Soviet brethren perform is cast as a moral failing. The journal had highlighted the moral implications of poor theater attendance many times before. In one 1922 cartoon the image of a crowded room of gamblers, labled “Our lotto houses,” is contrasted with a theater occupied solely by a few bats and birds, labled “our theaters.” The commentary here was clear. Azeris flocked to such immoral institutions as gambling houses while abandoning culture to the vermin. However energetically reformists embraced the new power afforded them by the Soviet government to promote their cultural projects, they still faced

⁴³⁸ “Teatro İşləri” *Molla Nasreddin*. No 25, 1923.

a public that, in their view, remained in the grips of the mollas and of vice and had yet to reform their priorities to match those of a modern populace.

Despite the pessimism that often characterized discussions of the state of theater in Soviet Azerbaijan, reformists used the weight of the Soviet government to undertake new projects aimed at bringing workers into the world of theater. The old barrier between the *camaat* and *ziyalilar* was broken down by new institutions such as the Satiragit Theater. The theater was founded in 1921 and organized by a group of actors from the National Academic Drama Theater, including Mirzaagha Aliyev and Hajjiagha Abbasov.⁴³⁹ The theater, also known as the *Bakı Azad Türk Tənqid və Təbliğ Teatrı* (The Baku Free Turk Criticism and Propaganda Theater), was formed specifically to reach out to workers, and tailored its performances to appeal to a population that had not encountered the theater before, and to serve a didactic function by promoting Soviet ideals. As such, the theater featured one-act comedies, readings of satiric poems by authors such as Mammed Said Ordubadi and Jafar Jabbarli, vaudeville acts, and improvised *meykhanas* on Soviet themes. During performances, the curtains and boards standing in the foyer featured various revolutionary slogans.⁴⁴⁰ One of the driving principles of the theater was that “the actor must create not in the theater, but spontaneously, among the workers in industry during their midday break.”⁴⁴¹ The theater modeled itself on similar Russian troupes, often directly borrowing from their repertoire and translating it into Azerbaijani.⁴⁴² This was an entirely new experiment in theater for Azerbaijan, yet with the exception of Jafar Jabbarli’s contributions, it did not involve

⁴³⁹ Rehimli, *Azərbaycan Teatr Tarixi*, 682.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid. 683.

⁴⁴¹ Ayvasian, *The Theater in Soviet Azerbaidzhan*, 6.

⁴⁴² Rehimli, *Azərbaycan Teatr Tarixi*, 684.

figures new to the stage. The preexisting community of actors, directors, and playwrights, who had so long lamented their lack of an audience, were willing to try radical new approaches to create a theater going public. It took a revolution, it seems, for them to begin considering the problem of accessibility in their works and attempt to meet the *camaat* halfway.

By 1930 the long-desired new generation of Azerbaijani playwrights and actors, more naturally conversant in the new Bolshevik vocabulary, had arrived and gradually replaced their reformist predecessors. Some of the old generation, such as Mirza Abbas Sharifov, fell victim to Stalin's purges, though a surprising number survived 1938 and died natural deaths in the forties and fifties. Today, the reformist movement of the late imperial era is celebrated in Azerbaijan as the nation's period of intellectual and cultural renaissance, and the late imperial years of the oil boom are presented as a gilded age for Baku. In the national imagination, however, Azerbaijan's renaissance is drawn to a sharp close with sovietization, as if the intellectual and artistic leaders of Azerbaijan simply ceased to exist after 1920. This false historical bookend effaces the considerable work done in the realm of Azeri cultural reform in the early 1920s, when the reformists of Baku's supposed gilded age in reality enjoyed much more influence and success than ever before in their quest for a modern Azerbaijan.

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Bəsirət

Həyat

İqbal

İrşad

İttifaq

Məktəb

Molla Nasrəddin

Nicat

Təzə Həyat

Tərəqqi

Yeni İqbal

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