

THE “WILD WEST” IN AZERBAIJAN: NOTES ON LATE 1980s SOVIET ETHNOSOCIOLOGY. *Summary*

Viktor Karlov in conversation with Alexander Formozov

Viktor Karlov is a professor of ethnology in Moscow State University's History Department. He has done ethnographic fieldwork in many regions of the former Soviet Union, although he specializes in Northern Russia. In 1985–87, he designed and led an ethnosociological survey in Azerbaijan, based on similar projects previously carried out in the North Caucasus. The project was devised jointly with Nailia Malikova, an Azeri sociologist then based in Baku and now in Moscow. The initial suggestion and institutional support came from Arif Abbasov at the Institute of History of Azerbaijan's Academy of Sciences, and political patronage was provided by Afrant Dashdamirov, a philosopher then working at the Central Committee of Azerbaijan's Communist Party. The project was carried out with the help of several younger ethnographers and doctoral students from Moscow and Azerbaijan.

The purpose of the project was to survey samples of all of Azerbaijan's ethnic groups and ethnographic regions in order to gauge levels of modernization and Sovietization, as expressed through indicators such as ethnic self-identification, values, gender roles, and attitudes toward traditional customs. There was also an ethnolinguistic component. The survey did not cover as many parts of Azerbaijan as initially planned, and had to be abandoned altogether due to the rise in ethnic tensions in 1987. The questionnaires were stored in several Moscow institutes and never fully analyzed, although a number of dissertations drew on them. Qualitative ethnographic observation during the course of the survey work proved more informative than, and complementary to, the quantitative data. For example, interviews with Sunni mountain dwellers revealed that they would turn to Shi'ite mullahs or even Orthodox Christian priests for some of their religious needs. Corruption and payment to obtain employment were rampant. There was an oversupply of labor, leading to hidden unemployment. Social frustration was evident in industrial towns such as Sumgait, where there were fewer ways than elsewhere to supplement meager official salaries. This frustration was vented in interethnic clashes.

Local authorities sometimes interfered with the survey work. In southeastern Azerbaijan, where many residents had informally identified themselves as Talysh, the questionnaires showed 100% Azeri ethnicity. In the western Azerbaijani city of Kirovobad (now Gəncə), known locally as “our Texas” or the Wild West, the authorities insisted they would perform the sampling; as a result, most of the Armenians included in the sample turned out to be working in Russia. This was done because Armenians were excluded from political participation and therefore known to be especially critical of the authorities.