

FIRST RESEARCH AND FIRST SPECIALISTS: THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES IN POST-SOVIET AZERBAIJAN.

Summary

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This review essay discusses the relatively meager scholarly output in the humanities and social sciences in post-Soviet Azerbaijan in its institutional and political context. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, historians, sociologists, political scientists, and ethnographers have joined politicians in attempting to construct a new national ideology. At times, the two groups have overlapped: the second post-Soviet president, Abulfaz Elchibey, was an Orientalist scholar and one of the ideologists of Azeri Turkic nationalism; his successor, Heydar Aliyev, was trained as a historian and helped create the ideology of civic nationalism known as “Azerbaijanhood.”

There has been a renewed interest in the country’s Islamic roots, its Turkic identity and ancient ethnic history, as well as the republic of 1918–20. Scholars have also focused on “debunking Soviet myths” by studying previously neglected topics and historical periods; yet many authors engaged in such pursuits were themselves trained in the Soviet Union, and the institutional organization of Azerbaijani academia retains most of its Soviet features.

While history departments existed at state universities in the Soviet period, there was no specialized social science training. New institutions, both public and private, were created in 1991. The new department of social sciences and psychology at Azerbaijan State University in Baku (now Baku State University) drew mostly on Soviet-era social philosophy for its curriculum. The Baku Institute of Social Management and Political Science was created on the basis of the South Caucasus’s only Higher Party School, and its previously existing research center became a polling agency. However, the institute’s new sociology department was shut down in 1999. At private universities, sociology, political science, and economics are taught in Azeri, Russian, and sometimes English. The national Academy of Sciences has research institutes in fields such as history, archaeology and ethnography, philosophy, sociology and law, Oriental studies, human rights, and folklore. In addition, some research is done by non-governmental or semi-independent organizations that specialize in areas such as human rights, as well as for-profit research centers. One example is the prolific output of Arif Yunusov, a trained historian who works at the Peace and Democracy Institute. His books on topics as diverse as Islam, migration,

and regional conflicts are largely based on media publications, although he also quotes quantitative studies and ethnographic interviews.

The annual scholarly output across all disciplines reaches 80–100 monographs at best, including many dissertations, few of which are based on original empirical research. Journal articles are often published with a view to meeting the requirements for a higher doctorate. Research funded by Western foundations is mostly published in the form of brochures or reports. Dissemination is very limited, and there are no functioning mechanisms of peer review and editing. A considerable number of Azerbaijanis have gone to Western Europe or North America to study, but very few have returned after completing their PhDs, and the few who publish in Western journals remain unknown in their home country. Most of those who went abroad chose to specialize in economics, law, or political science, rather than anthropology, sociology, or history.

Among historians, one of the central debates since the 1980s concerns the ethnic history of Azerbaijan. Authors such as Ziya Bunyatov and Ali Soybat Sumbatzade expanded on the Soviet-era idea that the historic population of Greater Azerbaijan, consisting of Caucasian-speakers in the North and Iranian-speakers in the South, was transformed into a single Turkic-speaking Muslim ethnic group due to the mass influx of Turkic speakers in the 11th and 12th centuries. Their opponents, such as Giyaseddin Geybullayev, contend that a Turkic-speaking ethnic group was already in place in Azerbaijan by the 7th–8th centuries. Critics such as Igrar Aliyev dismiss such revisions as “linguistic alchemy.” The post-Soviet interest in all things Turkic has also led to the publication of collective biographies of “great Turks.” Farida Mamedova’s work on Caucasian Albania from the 3rd century BCE to the 8th century CE has caused much controversy over the historical existence of a Greater Azerbaijan and Greater Armenia.

During and after the Karabagh conflict, there were numerous publications on the conflict itself and on the history of Azeri-Armenian relations, most of which were essentialist texts aimed at dehumanizing Armenians. A large subsection of this literature deals with the massacre of Azeris in Khojaly in 1992. A number of works champion the Azerbaijani identity of Karabagh, parts of Armenia, and Northern Iran on historical and ethno-cultural grounds. The 2000s saw a small number of joint Armenian-Azerbaijani works on the causes and consequences of the Karabagh conflict, but such books are not usually published in Baku.

Historians have also displayed a sustained interest in the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic of 1918–20. Many publications on this state attempt to construct a glorious past that was cut short by Russian imperial ambitions. More recently, there have also been well-researched publications on other short-lived republics of the same period. The 20th century more generally has been covered in a series of memoirs and collections of documents on individual Azeri politicians during independence and in exile. More recently, there has been a renewed interest in the history of Soviet Azerbaijan. Much of this literature initially focused on the bloody crackdown on the Azerbaijani independence movement in January 1990, but there is now a more consistent interest in relations between the USSR and its southern neighbors Iran

and Turkey. Jamil Hasanly and Eldar Ismaylov have published pioneering if methodologically traditional studies on Azerbaijan in the 1940s and 50s. In addition, there is an increased interest in the Azerbaijani Legion of the Wehrmacht, and, among radical Azeri nationalists, in Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler. However, there is a complete lack of substantive anthropological or sociological studies of the Soviet period.

Works on Azeri identity and mentality form a separate domain of research. These are often based on contemporary quantitative surveys or individual observation whose results are then extended into a distant past to establish “archetypes.” This area of research includes Rena Kadyrova’s work on attitudes toward religion among school-age children from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian families. Studies such as this usually neglect to discuss the social context that shapes individuals’ attitudes. The related fields of ethnology and ethnosociology discuss ethnic groups and their relations with each other in a spirit that continues the Soviet tradition of essentialist ethnography, in which the existence of such groups is seen as a primordial reality. This includes the work of Aliaga Mamedly, which draws on many years of field research and ethnosociological surveys. Studies of ethnic minorities also follow this model, while at the same time they are influenced by the ideology of a common Azerbaijani identity. The most serious works in this field focus on the German minority in Azerbaijan.

Books in sociology are usually analyses of “social and cultural processes,” such as labor migration or the formation of a middle class, that are based on the authors’ opinions rather than empirical research. Support by Western foundations of research on women and gender has led to numerous publications in this field, often in the form of short pamphlets or reports, which usually dispense with any kind of theoretical reflection.

There is also a considerable literature on religions in Azerbaijan, especially Islam and politics. Some interesting work on this topic has been published outside Azerbaijan itself. Much of it focuses on the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of the Caucasus and more recent religious trends from outside the country. Traditional and everyday practices have attracted less scholarly interest. Another neglected topic is the history of Islam in Azerbaijan.

Urban sociology or social anthropology as a field is still completely absent from Azerbaijani scholarship, although several interesting works on urban and architectural history have been published in Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijan, including Sara Ashurbeyli’s *History of Baku*.