

RONALD GRIGOR SUNY

The Baku Commune, 1917–1918

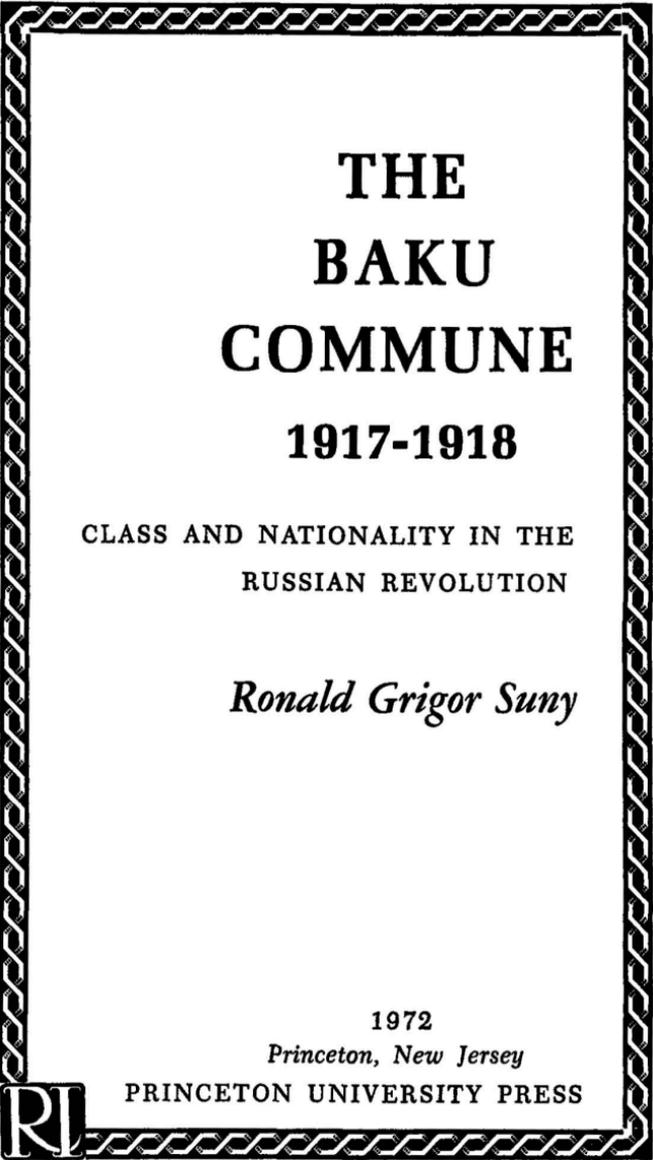
*Class and Nationality in the Russian
Revolution*



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THE BAKU COMMUNE
1917-1918

STUDIES OF THE RUSSIAN INSTITUTE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



**THE
BAKU
COMMUNE
1917-1918**

CLASS AND NATIONALITY IN THE
RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Ronald Grigor Suny

1972

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TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER



Preface

The historiography of the Russian Revolution in Western countries, for all its peculiar advantages of objective distance from the events, has produced a distorted view of the vast canvas of 1917-1918 by its almost exclusive concentration on the central cities, Petrograd and Moscow. Despite some interesting studies on the national regions during the revolution, important industrial centers have been overlooked, centers in which the revolution ran a course distinctly different from the pattern evident in Petrograd. This study endeavors to redress the balance somewhat by presenting a close look at the first year and a half of the revolution in the Caspian seaport and oil capital of the Russian empire, Baku. The very uniqueness of Baku, where class and national struggles were intertwined, offers a useful corrective to generalizations based on the better-known case of central Russia.

The revolution of 1917 was the culmination of a long process of social development and disintegration, the origin of which lay deep in Russia's past and in the peculiar characteristics of her society. A predominantly peasant country with an insignificantly small working class, Russia underwent the first so-called "socialist" revolution. This paradoxical occurrence, apparently inconsistent with orthodox Marxist prediction, was, in fact, explained by some of the Russian Marxists. From his earliest writings the "Father of Russian Marxism," Georgii Valentinovich Plekhanov, had maintained that the Marxist timetable would apply to Russia in a somewhat unusual form. Marx had argued that, in the transition from feudal society through

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capitalism to socialism, two great revolutions had to be endured: a bourgeois-democratic revolution which would abolish feudal relationships and permit the mature development of capitalist society; and a proletarian-socialist revolution which would liquidate capitalist exploitation and begin the transition to the classless society. Plekhanov carefully distinguished between these two revolutions, but contended that in backward, peasant Russia the miniscule urban proletariat would have to help the pusillanimous bourgeoisie carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution. During this first revolution the working class would be allied with the bourgeoisie and had to refrain from taking power. Only after a long interim period under a parliamentary republic, with the establishment of civil liberties and the slow development of an organized labor movement, could the second revolution be accomplished. This discipline and restraint of the working class were to characterize the Menshevik approach from the break with the Leninists in 1903 right through the revolution.

Lenin also maintained a distinction between the two revolutions; but in 1905 and again in 1917 he began to flirt with the notion of "continuous" or "permanent" revolution, a theory first expounded by the Social Democrats Helphand-Parvus and Leon Trotsky.¹ According to Lenin the period between the two revolutions was of indeterminate length and could very probably be shortened, i.e., the proletariat might be able to take power in the course even

¹ "Permanent revolution," according to Trotsky, was inevitable in Russia, given the fact that the bourgeoisie could not make its own revolution without the proletariat. Once the revolution was undertaken, workers' representatives would enter the government and be compelled by their constituents to introduce socialist legislation. Trotsky wrote: "*Political supremacy of the proletariat is incompatible with its economic slavery.* Whatever may be the banner under which the proletariat will find itself in possession of power, it will be compelled to enter the road of Socialism." (L. Trotsky, *Results and Prospects* [1906], trans. as *Our Revolution* by M. J. Olgin [New York, 1918], and republished in Robert V. Daniels [ed.], *A Documentary History of Communism* [New York, 1960], I, p. 46.)

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of a revolution which in its first stages was a bourgeois-democratic revolution. This would be accomplished, not with the aid of the liberal bourgeoisie, but in alliance with the poor and middle peasantry. Such a revolution in Russia he conceived as the opening shot in the international proletarian revolution. Believing that by herself Russia could not achieve socialism, Lenin argued that the aid of the advanced industrial states of Western Europe was essential for the final transition to socialism. Lenin was more radical in his approach to the workers than Plekhanov, more receptive to the potential of the peasantry, and more impatient in his anticipation of the international revolution.

All Marxists agreed in 1917 that the February Revolution was "bourgeois-democratic," despite the fact that the revolution in Petrograd had been made by workers and soldiers. Two contenders for power sprang up to fill the vacuum: the Provisional Government, made up of bourgeois, professionals, and liberal intellectuals, and the Soviet of Workers' Deputies. Evident from the beginning was the fact that real power rested with the soviet, which alone could order people into the streets and command the local soldiers. But the soviet leadership, largely Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary, reluctant to take formal state power into its own hands, recognized the Provisional Government. The workers had made the revolution, but their leadership considered it a "bourgeois" revolution and gave its conditional support to the "bourgeois" government. Thus, the "dual power" or *dvoevlastie* was created, in part as a result of fears that a workers' government could not unify Russia in its crisis and in part because of the notion that in a bourgeois-democratic revolution state power should remain in the hands of the bourgeoisie.²

The implicit conflict between the Menshevik view and the Leninist approach did not come out into the open until

² I. G. Tseretelli, *Vospominaniia o fevral'skoi revoliutsii*, 1 (Paris and The Hague, 1963), pp. 22-23.

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Lenin's return to Russia in April. The Bolshevik leader's attention was turned first to his own party in an attempt to win it over to his more radical position, appealing to the Bolsheviks to break decisively with the Provisional Government and adopt the slogan "All Power to the Soviets." The implications of this slogan were clear: immediate transition to the socialist revolution. Not only did Lenin's *April Theses* shock the Bolshevik moderates, it traumatized the conciliatory leadership of the soviet. Within a surprisingly short time, however, Lenin had won over his own party as well as a significant number of the city's workers. By May the conference of factory committees was passing Bolshevik resolutions.

The weakness of the Provisional Government and its absolute dependence on the support of the soviet was made abundantly clear in the "April Crisis," during which soviet discontent with Miliukov's annexationist foreign policy led to the foreign minister's resignation. In the aftermath of the crisis the government itself began to break up. Early in May a coalition government, made up of members of the old governing group and a number of socialist ministers from the soviet, was formed. The coalition was a stop-gap government, designed to lead the country through the war until a Constituent Assembly could be convened and a constitution adopted. But, unlike the *dvoevlastie*, the coalition tried to link the leadership of the workers with the representatives of the upper classes, and the divergence of interests of these groups led to a complete impasse in the government. The failure of the coalition government to respond to the deepening social crisis in the country and its inability to bring the war to an end worked to the advantage of the one party which promised immediate social reforms and an end to the war—the Bolsheviks.

Shortages of food combined with the failure of the "Kerensky Offensive" to increase the volatility of the workers and soldiers. Outside the cities the peasants undertook

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their own kind of land reform by seizing the land themselves, killing the landlords, and burning their manor houses. By September the Bolsheviks had majorities in both the Moscow and the Petrograd soviets. The coalition government had thus been *de facto* repudiated by the soviet electorate. The October Revolution, while in form a conspiratorial *coup d'état*, came about after a steady draining away of Kerensky's support. Just as in February 1917 no troops could be found to defend the tsarist order, so in October few but the famous Women's Battalion of Death were prepared to stand up for the coalition government.

The Bolsheviks came to power in Petrograd, Moscow, and a number of other cities in October and November 1917, but by overthrowing the Provisional Government they in effect declared war on the rest of Russia, which was unwilling to recognize a soviet monopoly of power. On the eve of the Civil War a deceptive calm lay over Russia, while elections to the Constituent Assembly were held. Those elections reflected the widespread opposition to the Bolsheviks and the peasants' support for the Socialist Revolutionaries. When two months later the soviet government dispersed the Assembly after a one-day session, the lines were finally drawn for the fratricidal struggle. On one side were those who accepted the October Revolution and soviet power; on the other was a diverse group unified by their rejection of October but only in part committed to February.

A thousand miles to the south, in Transcaucasia, the revolution resembled the pattern in Petrograd, at least for the first year. A "dual power" was created in both Tiflis and Baku, but in both cities real power was held by the soviet. There too the moderate socialists dominated the local soviets and refused to seize power in their own name. Only after a long and gradual radicalization of the workers were the Bolsheviks in Baku in a position to make a bid for power. In Tiflis the Georgian Mensheviks, considerably

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more radical than their Russian brethren, formed an independent Georgian government.

Similarities disappeared, however, soon after October. In Baku the local Bolsheviks decided not to seize power by force but to work toward a "peaceful transition" to soviet power. Thus Baku's "October" was delayed. Not until March 1918 did the soviet win the political monopoly in the city which it had sought since the fall of 1917. The consequences of this delay are discussed in this study.

The moderate Bolshevism of Baku had deep roots in the history of the local labor movement and Social Democracy in the city. Faced with a politically unconscious working class that was divided by nationality, skills, and wage-levels, the Baku Bolsheviks adapted their appeals to the particular interests of the oil workers. Thus Bolshevism in Baku, especially after 1905, developed a sensitivity toward workers' economic desires. Bolsheviks dominated trade unions, workers' clubs, and the legal labor movement. The underground party continued to exist, but often played a subordinate role to the legal institutions. The Bolshevik leaders did not simply respond to any spontaneously generated impulse of the workers but rather worked to shape those impulses and provide the economic struggle of workers with organization, appropriate rhetoric, and some political overtones.

A local history study such as this one can in some detail describe the growth of Bolshevik receptivity to workers' demands in both the pre-1917 and the revolutionary periods. This work attempts to demonstrate the dialectical relationship between the workers and the Bolsheviks in which the party taught and from which the party learned. The chapters that follow describe the origins, evolution, and eventual disintegration of the Bolshevik hegemony over the workers of Baku.

Any researcher dealing with the revolution in Baku must address himself to the perplexities which punctuate the

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events themselves. Questions arise how the Bolsheviks achieved paramountcy in the Baku soviet without a majority. Why did *dvoevlastie* continue after October 1917? What were the reasons for the revolution's "delay" in Baku? Particularly fascinating are the problems of the nationalist struggle within the city and its relationship to the class struggle. Was the insurrection in March 1918 the result of class or national antagonism? On this very point Soviet and non-Soviet historians are divided. Finally, why did the Baku Commune fail? Were the Bolsheviks at fault or were the objective circumstances beyond the capacity of any party to control?

Historical writing on the revolution in Baku has always been abundant but has never enjoyed freedom from partisanship (or, in Soviet terminology, *partiinnost'*). Whether the writer wanted to prove his party comrades innocent of the tragic murder of the Twenty-six Commissars,³ to demonstrate the correctness of Shaumian's general line,⁴ or to defend Great Britain from the accusations of the Soviet government,⁵ those who have taken up their pens to describe the confusion of those years in Baku have usually served a mistress less worthy than Clio. Needless to say, the cause of objectivity has not been served by the political shifts within the Soviet Union which have resulted in artificial reevaluations of various aspects of revolutionary history. As with most Soviet historiography, so with the material on Baku, the most productive period was between the Civil War and the consolidation of Stalin's dictatorship in the early 1930s. During that period the study of history

³ V. A. Chaikin, *K istorii rossiiskoi revoliutsii*, vypusk 1; Kazn' 26 bakinskikh komissarov (Moscow, 1922); an account of the execution by a Right S.R.

⁴ Artashes Karinian, *Shaumian i natsionalisticheskie techeniia na Kavkaze* (Baku, 1928); by the Bolshevik commissar of justice in the Baku Commune.

⁵ C. H. Ellis, *The British "Intervention" in Transcaspia, 1918-1919* (Berkeley, 1963); by a member of the British force in Transcaspia at the time of the execution of the Baku Commissars.

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was "Bolshevized," but not yet "Stalinized." The former process implied merely that the point of view of the Bolshevik party during the revolution was identified as the only correct position and that those of the rival parties were seen as ranging from "mistaken" to "anti-Soviet" and "counterrevolutionary." The works on Baku written in the twenties read as if they had been dictated by the participants in the events themselves, as if the old Bolsheviks were rationalizing their own actions in the recent past.⁶ Facts are not distorted, but they are interpreted in agreement with an *a priori* understanding of the "laws" of history.

Particularly important in the 1920s was the work of the *kollektiv* of scholars who eventually formed the Shaumian Institute of Party History in Baku. Collections of documents, memoirs, and secondary accounts by the leading Marxist historians in Transcaucasia were published by the Institute. Such writers as A. Dubner, Ia. A. Ratgauzer, S. A. Sef, and A. Raevskii provided Soviet readers with the first thoroughly analytical accounts of the revolution in one of the major cities of their country.⁷ Because the archive of the Baku soviet had been destroyed during the

⁶ For a general survey on Soviet historiography of the 1920s on the revolution in Baku, see N. M. Kuliev, "Sovetskaia istoriografiia sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii v Azerbaidzhane," *Istoriia SSSR*, no. 3 (1967), pp. 38-50.

⁷ A. Dubner, *Bakinskii proletariat v gody revoliutsii (1917-1920 gg.)* (Baku, 1931).

Ia. A. Ratgauzer, *Bor'ba bakinskogo proletariata za kollektivnyi dogovor 1917 g.* (Baku, 1927).

———, *Revoliutsiia i grazhdanskaia voina v Baku, 1: 1917-1918 gg.* (Baku, 1927).

S. E. Sef, *Revoliutsiia 1917 g. v Zakavkaz'e (dokumenty, materialy)* (Tiflis, 1927).

———, *Kak bol'sheviki prishli k vlasti v 1917-1918 gg. v bakinskom raione* (Baku, 1927).

A. M. Raevskii, *Partiia "Musavat" i ee kontrrevoliutsionnaia rabota* (Baku, 1928).

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Turkish occupation of the city, these researchers relied primarily on the stenographic reports of soviet sessions given in the local press. The completeness and apparent accuracy of these accounts make Baku newspapers the single most valuable primary source for investigations of the revolutionary events. Scholarly works of the 1920s are admittedly "Bolshevik" in tone, but they are invaluable to scholars as sources of information. Based on solid research and candid in dealing with controversial issues, their failure usually lies in the authors' readiness to impute the most diabolical motives to leaders of other political parties and to identify Bolshevik policies, as a rule, with an objectively correct course. These writers consistently argue the primacy of the class struggle within Baku over the nationalist conflict, often objecting strenuously to certain mistakes committed by the Bolshevik leadership. Debates raged in the 1920s, and the historiographical conflicts have been preserved in published symposia.⁸ They appear all the more lively when compared with the dearth of controversy which followed the establishment of the "Cult of Personality."

Stalinized history on the revolution in Baku grew out of the famous speech of Lavrenti Beria given in Tiflis on July 21-22, 1935.⁹ Stalin's lieutenant in Transcaucasia attempted to demonstrate to his audience, indeed to a generation of readers, that both the prerevolutionary and post-revolutionary history of Georgia and its neighbors had been dominated by the single figure of Iosif Dzhugashvili. Events which had occurred in Stalin's absence were attributed to him. Articles by other revolutionaries were said to have been written by him. He had been omniscient and ubiquitous. During his frequent stays in prison he managed,

⁸ S. E. Sef, *Kak bol'sheviki prishli k vlasti*. . . .

⁹ Lavrenti Beria, *On the History of the Bolshevik Organizations in Transcaucasia* (Moscow, 1949).

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in Beria's account, to carry on the business of the party from his cell. Stalin had, in fact, spent part of his revolutionary youth in Baku, and the party chief of Azerbaijan, M. D. Bagirov, in a speech which rivaled Beria's in imagination, celebrated Stalin's sixtieth birthday (1939) with a lengthy account of the General Secretary's years in that city.¹⁰ These two works determined the nature of all writing on party history in Transcaucasia until the death of Stalin (1953) and the Twentieth Party Congress (1956). The other major studies of this period, by Burdzhhalov, Tokarzhevskii, and Ibragimov, share this fawning dedication to Stalin and a rigid uncompromising view of the "enemies" of the Bolsheviks.¹¹ Those scholars who found it impossible to elevate Stalin to the position of prime mover in Transcaucasian politics either remained silent or spent years in the aimless pursuit of nonexistent material.

Since the Twentieth Party Congress Soviet historiography on Baku has returned to the position of the 1920s, i.e., to a Bolshevik approach without Stalinist distortions. But the best-known works of the recent past have not yet rid themselves of the formulistic and oppressively dull style developed in the Stalin years. The role of the opposition parties has not yet been adequately investigated, and certain unrehabilitated figures have been neglected in the retelling of the revolution. In 1957, on the fortieth anniversary of the revolution, collections of documents were issued, but the processes of selection require that they be

¹⁰ M. D. Bagirov, *Iz istorii bol'shevistskoi organizatsii Baku i Azerbaidzhana* (Moscow, 1946).

¹¹ E. Burdzhhalov, *Dvadtsat' shest' bakinskikh komissarov* (Moscow, 1938).

E. A. Tokarzhevskii, *Bakinskie bol'sheviki—organizatory bor'by protiv turetsko-germanskikh i angliiskikh interventov v Azerbaidzhane v 1918 godu* (Baku, 1949).

The work of Z. I. Ibragimov is largely in the Azeri language; for a complete list see the bibliography in I. A. Guseinov *et al.* (eds.), *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana*, III, pp. 504-505.

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used with utmost care:¹² many interesting documents were left out or abridged—and only a close reading of the Baku press provides a true picture. The most interesting work in recent years has appeared in articles in *Istoriia SSSR* and other journals, rather than in book-length studies. First-hand experience in the USSR indicates that historical thinking is somewhat ahead of publications and that Soviet historians impatiently await the total eradication of the unscientific habits of an older generation.

¹² Z. I. Ibragimov and M. S. Iskenderov (eds.), *Bol'sheviki v bor'be za pobedu sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii v Azerbaidzhane. Dokumenty i materialy, 1917-1918 gg.* Hereafter this work will be cited as "Dok."



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The bulk of the research was done in the Soviet Union, where I participated in the Cultural Exchange of Young Professors and Graduate Students in 1965-1966. At that time I was privileged to work in the Lenin Library, the Central State Archive of the October Revolution and Socialist Construction (TsGAOR), the State Archive of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, and the Institute of

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Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

- "*Biulleten'*"—*Biulleten' komiteta revoliutsionnoi oborony*, the newspaper of the committee of revolutionary defense.
- "*Biulleten' diktatury*"—*Biulleten' diktatury Tsentrokaspiia i prezidiuma vremennogo ispolnitel'nogo komiteta so-veta*.
- Cheka (*Chrezvychainaia Komissiiia*)—the Extraordinary Commission set up by the Soviet Government in December 1917 to combat counterrevolutionary forces: the predecessor to the Soviet secret police agencies, e.g., the OGPU, NKVD, KGB.
- Dashnak—member of the Dashnaktsutiun (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), the most influential Armenian political party in Transcaucasia.
- desiatina—a measure of land equal to 2.7 acres.
- "*Dok.*"—Z. I. Ibragimov and M. S. Iskenderov (eds.), *Boł'sheviki v bor'be za pobedu sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii v Azerbaidzhane. Dokumenty i materialy, 1917–1918 gg.* (Baku, 1960).
- dvoevlastie*—"dual power": refers to the period when the Provisional Government and the Petrograd soviet both held power in the capital.
- Glavkoneft (*Glavnyi Neftianoii Komitet*)—the Central Oil Committee, established on May 19, 1918, in Moscow to supervise the oil industry throughout Russia.
- Hnchak—member of the Hnchak Party, an Armenian Marxist party.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- Hummet—the Azerbaijani Social Democratic Party, affiliated with the RSDRP.
- IKOO (*Ispolniteľnyi Komitet Obshchestvennykh Organizatsii*)—the Executive Committee of Public Organizations: the official governing agent of the Provisional Government in Baku, established in the first days of the revolution (March 1917) and disbanded by the Soviet in November 1917.
- IKS (*Ispolniteľnyi Komitet Soveta*)—the executive committee of the Baku Soviet.
- Kadet—member of the Party of People's Freedom, the principal liberal party in Russia.
- Musavat—the Azerbaijani nationalist party.
- "Ocherki"—M. S. Iskenderov *et al.*, *Ocherki istorii kommunisticheskoi partii Azerbaidzhana* (Baku, 1963).
- Ozakom (*Osobyi Zakavkazskii Komitet*)—the Special Transcaucasian Committee established by the Provisional Government as the highest governing authority in Transcaucasia. It exercised little actual power during its existence from March to November 1917.
- "Pis'ma"—S. G. Shaumian, *Pis'ma, 1896-1918* (Erevan, 1959).
- pood—a measurement of weight equal to 36.11 pounds.
- RSDRP (*Rossiiskaia Sotsial-Demokraticheskaia Robochaia Partia*)—the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party.
- RSDRP(b)—the Bolshevik Party.
- S.D.—Social Democrat: a member of the RSDRP.
- S.R.—Socialist Revolutionary: a member of the principal peasant socialist party.
- "Shaumian, I"—S. G. Shaumian, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, I: 1902-1916 *gg.* (Moscow, 1957).
- "Shaumian, II"—S. G. Shaumian, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, II: 1917-1918 *gg.* (Moscow, 1958).
- Sovnarkhoz (*Sovet Narodnogo Khoziastva*)—Supreme Council of People's Economy, both in Petrograd-Moscow and in Baku.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- Sovnarkom (*Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov*)—Council of People's Commissars, both in Petrograd–Moscow and in Baku.
- Tsentrodom—an agency set up in Baku to organize municipal services, such as sanitation, when order broke down in 1917.
- Tsentrokaspii—the Union of Caspian Sailors, a Socialist-Revolutionary stronghold.
- tsentsovoe obshchestvo*—the former ruling classes in tsarist Russia.
- TsK (*Tsentral'nyi Komitet*)—the Central Committee of the RSDRP.
- uezd—an administrative sub-division of a province.
- verst—a measurement of distance equal to 1.06 kilometers.
- Zafatem—the Union of Plant, Factory and Technical Workshop Owners, an association of oil industrialists.
- Zavkom (*Zakavkazskii Komisariat*)—the Transcaucasian Commissariat formed on November 15, 1917, as the successor to the Ozakom in Tiflis.



A Note on Transliteration and Dating

Transliteration from Russian is based on the Library of Congress system, although common English usage has been adopted for certain names and terms. Transliteration from Armenian is based on the eastern Armenian dialect which is spoken in the Armenian SSR. Azeri words and names have been transliterated according to the Russian system except in cases where accepted practice has established other spellings.

The dates are given according to the Julian calendar, then in use in Russia, which was thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar used in the West. Where the latter calendar is used indications are made in the text.



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THE BAKU COMMUNE

1917-1918

1

Nationality and Class in Baku

A POPULAR ETYMOLOGICAL EXPLANATION of the name "Baku" is that it comes from two Persian words (*bad* and *kube*) which roughly translate as "buffeted by winds." Baku is indeed subject to winds, blowing in from the Caspian and bringing the little relief from the heat that its inhabitants enjoy. The city is today the fourth largest in the Soviet Union, the elegant capital of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, and the home of more than a million people. The oil industry which spawned it is remote from the downtown boulevards, yet its influence is felt everywhere. Baku's history, both before and after the revolution of 1917, is intimately connected with its principal resource, oil. As early as the tenth century an Arab traveler wrote that Baku's wells provided both white and black oil, useful for lighting, heating, and lubrication, as well as medicine. In the ensuing centuries a modest but profitable trade in oil made the city an important link with Iran and Russia. In 1723 Tsar Peter I sent an expedition to Baku and ordered his victorious general to bring several poods of the renowned white oil back to Russia. The city remained in Russian hands until 1735 when a weakened empire returned it to Iran in exchange for trading privileges.

Russia's mercantile interest in Baku never slackened, however, and many Russian and Armenian merchants settled in the city. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Baku had about five hundred buildings and three thousand inhabitants, and was the center of a small Persian khanate. Three powers—Iran, Russia, and Turkey—

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coveted the town, and a series of campaigns finally culminated in its annexation by the Romanovs.

Travelers to Baku marveled at the ancient temple of the fire-worshippers, where a flame fed by the petroleum underground burned constantly. With the coming of the Russians in 1806 enterprising men began systematically to exploit the natural riches of the Caspian shore. In the district of Surakhany, near the fire-temple, the production of kerosene was begun in 1859, the same year that Edwin Drake drilled the first oil-well in Titusville. A successful attempt to drill a well near Baku was made by a local entrepreneur in 1869; and in the following decades the industry, based on this more efficient method of obtaining petroleum, surrounded the sleepy port of Baku with a forest of derricks. The first gusher came in 1873 amid cries of "We have our own Pennsylvania now!"¹ Within a few years oil had turned Baku from an oriental curiosity into a modern cosmopolitan city.

With the development of the oil industry in the last decades of the nineteenth century a new class of entrepreneurs appeared in Baku side by side with the older commercial bourgeoisie. The *neftepromyshlenniki* ("oil industrialists") soon dominated the economy and politics of the Apsheron Peninsula, displacing the older-established elites. At first Armenian capitalists were favored by the tsarist government. During the period (1821-1872) when the government held a state monopoly on the oil-fields and leased them for four-year terms to selected entrepreneurs, the Armenians were given special treatment. From 1850 to 1872 a monopoly on the pumping of oil was granted first to the Armenian capitalist Ter-Gukasov, and later to his countryman Mirzoev.² Local Azerbaijani capitalists, cut off from the pumping of oil, managed in this period to gain control of more than half the refineries in the area.³

1 I. A. Guseinov et al. (eds.), *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana* (Baku, 1959-1963), II, pp. 201-202.

² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

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When the government abolished the state monopoly and began selling the fields to the highest bidders, the dominance of the Armenians was challenged but only slightly shaken. Paradoxically, with the influx of Russian, Georgian, Jewish, and foreign capital, the relative position of the Azerbaijanis deteriorated sharply.⁴ Azerbaijanis owned none of the larger companies (those producing over ten million poods of oil a year), being primarily involved in smaller enterprises. It was the Russian and Armenian owners who shared control of the middle and large companies with the foreign investors.⁵

While local Baku entrepreneurs lived in splendor by the Caspian, the real control of the oil industry steadily drifted from the city to foreign investors with their headquarters either in Saint Petersburg or abroad. More than half the capital in Russia's oil industry came from abroad. British capital alone accounted for 60 percent of the total capital investment in Baku's oil industry.⁶ The largest company at the time of the revolution was owned by foreigners, the Nobel brothers, Robert and Ludwig. During the First World War their company, the Société Anonyme d'Exploitation du Naphte Nobel Frères, acquired the majority of stock in the giant Russian General Oil Company, thus becoming the single largest oil producer in the empire.⁷

The trend toward monopoly, so often cited by Marxist historians, was clearly evident in Baku, particularly after

⁴ By the beginning of the twentieth century, of the 167 oil companies around Baku, only 49 (29.3%) were owned by Azerbaijanis, while 55 (32.9%) were owned by Armenians, 21 (12.8%) by Russians, 17 (10.2%) by Jews, 6 (3.6%) by Georgians, and 19 (11.3%) by foreigners (*ibid.*).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 256; this national breakdown was not characteristic of all industries. For example, Azerbaijanis dominated Caspian shipping, owning 80% of all vessels. Armenians, however, ran the fishing industry. The only large textile mill in Transcaucasia belonged to the Azerbaijani millionaire, Z. A. Tagiev.

⁶ Heinrich Hassmann, *Oil in the Soviet Union* (Princeton, 1953), p. 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

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the turn of the century. Baku had assumed world-wide significance as a source of oil and had played a leading role in the industrial expansion of Russia in the 1890s. From 1898 to 1901 the oil fields of Baku produced more oil than all the fields in the United States.⁸ Then, suddenly, a general economic crisis hit Russia with immediate and disastrous effect on Baku. Primitive technology and heavy taxes made competition with the Americans difficult, and after 1901 Baku suffered a net decline in the amount of oil drilled and refined.⁹ The industry never fully recovered. Demand for oil declined, prices fell, and panic gripped the Baku stock-exchange. Drilling was halved between 1900 and 1902. Output dropped 11 percent from 1901 to 1903.¹⁰ The smaller firms were the greatest losers; many went bankrupt. Because of their resources for flexible operation, the larger firms survived the crisis, often showing a profit.¹¹ As a result consolidation of companies took place, giving the larger companies even greater influence and power in the industry. In 1900 the six largest companies—Nobel, Mantashev, the Caspian-Black Sea Corporation, the Baku Oil Society, the Caspian Company, and the Society for Drilling Russian Oil and Liquid Fuel—produced 50 percent of the oil drilled in Baku.¹² In 1912 Russian banks and industrialists combined the Mantashev Company with G. M. Lianosov, and the Neft Company to form Russian General Oil. That same year the Royal Dutch-Shell group bought the Rothschilds' Caspian-Black Sea Company to add to their other holdings.¹³ Consolidation, however, did not affect the net decline in production which continued irregularly until the second decade of the century. Thus, just as the labor movement began to have an effect in Baku, the industry as a whole faced a crisis of shrinking output.

⁸ A. M. Raevskii, *Bol'sheviki i Men'sheviki v Baku v 1904-05 godakh* (Baku, 1930), p. 26.

⁹ I. A. Guseinov *et al.*, II, p. 433.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 437.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

¹³ Hassmann, p. 27.

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The development of the oil industry had made Baku in a few short decades a capitalist city in a feudal land, a proletarian oasis surrounded by a peasant population. With the industry the city itself grew rapidly in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In the mid-1870s Baku housed only about 15,000 people; according to the census of 1913 it had grown to be the largest city in Transcaucasia, with a population of 214,600 in the city proper and 119,300 in the industrial districts.¹⁴ Baku was structured in three distinct concentric circles of population. In the center were the city districts (Maritime, Bailov, Railroad Station, City, and Armenikend) where most of the educated elite, the skilled workers, and the propertied classes had their homes. Surrounding the city were the industrial districts (*promyslo-zavodskoi raion*), divided between factory districts (*zavodskoi raion*) (Black City, White City, and the villages of Zlykh, Akhmedly, and Kishly) and the more distant oil-field districts (*promyslovoi raion*) which contained the villages of Sabunchi, Balakhany, Ramany, Zabrat, Bibi-Eibat, Surakhany, Binagady, Amirzhany, Biul'-Biuli, Shikhovo, and Baladzhary. At the limits of Baku *uezd* and interspersed among the oil-fields lived the simple Azerbaijani peasants, the vast majority of the population of eastern Transcaucasia. These peasants, poor and completely uneducated, were cut off from the city and remained politically passive until well after the revolution.¹⁵

The government of Baku was largely in the hands of

¹⁴ G. A. Arutiunov, *Rabochee dvizhenie v Zakavkaz'e v period novogo revoliutsionnogo pod'ema (1910-1914 gg.)* (Moscow-Baku, 1963), pp. 34, 43.

¹⁵ The districts were ethnically mixed, though there were districts largely populated by one nationality. For example, the Armenians were heavily concentrated in Armenikend. Russians had a majority in White City (75%), Black City (61%), and large minorities in Sabunchi, Balakhany, and Bibi-Eibat. The Azerbaijanis had majorities in the villages of Zabrat, Surakhany, and Balakhany. Generally the Azerbaijanis were losing ground in the Baku area, as the non-Azerbaijani populations increased more rapidly than they. (V. V. Pokshishevskii, *Polozhenie bakinskogo proletariata nakanune revoliutsii [1914-1917 gg.]* [Baku, 1927], pp. 7-8.)

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officials appointed by the tsarist government. Local self-government came late to Baku (not until 1878) and never developed independently of the tsarist appointees. In many respects Baku was treated as a semicolonial area. The government's main concern was keeping order and exploiting the oil reserves. Consideration of public welfare was left to the local authorities or to the charity of private persons. It is not surprising, therefore, that both workers and the propertied classes agitated for political reforms.

In 1878, after considerable delay, the Municipal Statute of 1870 was extended to Baku, thus ending police and military rule in the city. The provincial governor, appointed by the tsar, was given limited powers over the urban self-government. A city *duma* was created, which in turn elected a city board (*gorodskaiia uprava*), and a mayor (*gorodskoi golova*) who chaired both the *duma* and the city board. These new institutions were to concern themselves with the social, educational, and health needs of the municipality, and to assist in keeping order. Government was paternalist in nature, though men of property could participate in the *duma* elections. A law stipulated that not more than half the members of the *duma* could be non-Christians.¹⁶ In this way both the lower classes and the Moslems were effectively kept from the seat of power.

Even these small concessions to urban self-government by the Tsar-Liberator, Alexander II (1855-1881), were rescinded by his more conservative son, Alexander III (1881-1894). In 1892 he issued a municipal "counter-reform," in which the franchise was further limited, the powers of the governor were increased, and non-Christian

¹⁶ A. Sh. Mil'man, *Politicheskii stroi Azerbaidzhana v XIX-nachale XX vekov (administrativnyi apparat i sud, formy i metody kolonial'nogo upravleniia)* (Baku, 1966), p. 211. The electorate, based on tax assessments, was divided into three groups. The top dozen or so taxpayers by themselves chose one-third of the *duma* members.

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representation was reduced to one-third of the duma membership. In Baku at the turn of the century only 1,631 people, or less than 1.5 percent of the population, had the right to vote in elections to the duma.¹⁷ Although the duma did intensify its activities in the fields of sanitation and education in the 1890s (fourteen elementary schools were opened in that period), the general public was apathetic about the duma, and only about one-quarter of the electorate participated in elections.¹⁸ Every third duma session had to be canceled because of the lack of a quorum. The Baku city duma was thus a body elected, attended, but only occasionally supported by the *grande bourgeoisie*.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, labor agitation, national animosities, and revolution led to a repressive response by the tsarist government. The powers of the police, the military, and the tsarist bureaucracy were increased, while former concessions of self-government and political rights were withdrawn. In January 1902 a "state of emergency" was declared in Baku. This permitted the police to circumvent the established judicial system in dealing with labor disorders and political agitation. In February 1905 Baku was placed under martial law (*na voennom polozhenii*), and a temporary governor-general was appointed.¹⁹ That summer Baku was declared to be "in a state of siege" (*na osadnom polozhenii*). Not until October 1906 was the government of the city normalized. At that point a new official, the *gradonachaľnik*, was appointed by the tsar on the recommendation of the viceroy of the Caucasus. The *gradonachaľnik* was given the powers of a governor in administrative and police matters in the city and represented the city in the councils of the governor of Baku Province. As if to underline the fact that this latest administrative reform had increased the military nature of the municipal government, every six months the tsar decreed that Baku remained in a state of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

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emergency (*chrezvychainaia okhrana*).²⁰ With the coming of the First World War Baku returned to martial law. Unpredictably vacillating between military rule, police repression, and "days of freedom," the government of Baku never won the confidence of the city's population. A tradition of local self-government did not develop either among the men of property or among the lower classes who remained completely estranged from urban politics.

Characteristic of Baku's working class was its lack of deep roots in the city. Sixty-four percent were Russians from the central provinces, Moslems from the Volga region, Armenians who had come down from the mountains of Karabagh, or immigrants from Northern Persia.²¹ Of the population of the oil-fields 72.6 percent had not been born there. About the same percentage owned land in their place of birth, and every year some of the workers returned to their farms while others took their place at the drilling-site. Those who had not come from great distances maintained direct ties with their families in the villages. Most lived alone—especially the Moslem workers. For every thousand men there were only 394 women.²² The oil-field workers lived in a compact workers' ghetto without the comfort of wives or families. They were actually half peasants, half workers, a phenomenon well known to other parts of Russia, especially in the early years of industrialization. The Moslems experienced most notably this semiproletarian existence; they were the most transient, the most closely tied to the village, the least proletarianized. Of the various nationalities the Russians were the most settled, judging by the higher proportion of women among them.²³

Identification with the city was slight among workers,

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

²¹ Arutiunov, p. 58.

²² S. S. Aliiarov, "Izmeneniia v sostave rabochikh Baku v gody pervoi mirovoi voiny," *Istoriia SSSR*, no. 2 (1969), p. 56.

²³ Pokshishevskii, p. 8.

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especially among the unskilled who lived outside the city in the districts where the only government known was that provided by the owners of the oil industry. Negotiations for improvements in housing, schools, welfare, sanitation, etc. had to be carried out with the Unions of the Oil Industrialists, not with the municipal government in Baku. The tendency of the workers up to and through 1917 was to agitate for piecemeal and immediate alleviation of specific hardships, rather than for basic reforms.

The economic orientation of the Baku workers cannot, however, be explained solely by their transience and isolation from the political order. The wage system and the attitude of the employers also contributed. Workers, as is true everywhere, could be distinguished as skilled and unskilled, but there was the difference in Baku that the two groups tended to live separately, were usually of different nationalities, and had different cultural and political affiliations. The social distance between skilled and unskilled workers was accentuated by the system by which the employers paid their employees. Separate agreements were reached by the individual firms with the various categories of workers, so that workers doing the same work for different firms received different wages while the wage-rates within each factory showed considerable differentials.

The system of separate agreements was combined with a program of bonuses and subsidies rather than simple increases in wages. These bonuses could be rescinded without changing the basic wage-rates, and made the workers dependent on the good will of their employers. This *beshkesh* policy, as it was called, was a contributing factor in the tendency of the Baku workers to be concerned primarily with economic improvement rather than with political change. The discontent of the workers was easily alleviated by small grants of subsidies and bonuses. Moreover, the Baku industrialists were flexible in their dealings with their workers, making concessions unknown in the rest of Russia. The willingness of the industrialists

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to grant the workers the substance of their demands often distracted the labor movement from considering long-range political programs.²⁴

In Baku wages were high in comparison with the rest of Russia, but living and working conditions were abominable by any standard. In her memoirs Eva Broido, a Menshevik who worked in Baku in 1905, describes the physical conditions she found on her arrival in a workers' settlement in Balakhany:

I was immediately plunged into the very midst of toil and soot—the road to hell, I thought, would be very similar to the one we were driving on. It was narrow and indescribably dirty; and on both sides of it towered the dark and gloomy derricks from which minute droplets of oil escaped in clouds and slowly settled on everything. On the skin of my face, neck and hands it felt like prickly dust; my clothes were sticky with it. We were surrounded by derricks on all sides. As far as the eye could reach there was nothing but derricks and an

²⁴ The "liberalism" of the Baku industrialists stands out in sharp contrast with the behavior of the bourgeoisie in the rest of Russia. The attitude of the oil industrialists toward their workers may have its origin in the paternalism of the owners toward their employees. Many firms were owned by men who employed only members of their nationality and who provided schooling, housing, and welfare for their workers. A unique personal link thus developed between employer and employee in the oil-fields and refineries. Another explanation for the liberalism of Baku oil capitalists has been provided by a Social Democrat active in Baku after the 1905 revolution. Iurii Larin (Lur'e) writes:

The oil industry's possession of a firm base in the form of a guaranteed and growing domestic market put it on its own feet, made it self-sufficient. This explains to a significant degree the independent tone and well-known liberalism of the Baku industrialists in comparison with their colleagues in the rest of Russia. . . . A large role in this was played by the pressure of the intensive workers' movement, of course, with which they thought to deal at first with "gentle measures." (Iurii Larin, *Rabochie nefitianogo dela [iz byta i dvizheniia 1903-1908 gg.]* [Moscow, 1909], p. 10.)

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occasional factory chimney. Along both sides of the road, and completely dwarfed by the derricks, stood rows of squat, one-storied dwelling-houses with windows darkened by soot and sometimes covered with wire netting. Crawling around the derricks were some tall black figures in long, greasy Persian coats and high ginger-colored sheepskin hats. It was a picture of unremitting and hopeless gloom.²⁵

The hierarchy of workers by skills and wages was closely related to the national differences within the Baku working class. By 1917 the total number of workers in and around Baku numbered about 108-110 thousand.²⁶ Of these, Azerbaijanis made up 36.9 percent, Russians 23 percent, Armenians 21.4 percent, Daghestanis 11.3 percent, and Volga Tatars 3.6 percent.²⁷ Most of the skilled workers, office employees, and administrators were Armenians and Russians, while the Azerbaijanis and Daghestanis formed the bulk of the drillers and field workers.²⁸ Nationality tended to accentuate differences of status within the work-

²⁵ Eva Broido, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, trans. and ed., Vera Broido (New York and Toronto, 1967), pp. 68-69.

²⁶ This estimate is made in S. S. Aliiarov, "Chislennost' professional'nyi i natsional'nyi sostav bakinskogo proletariata v period pervoi mirovoi voiny," *Uchenye zapiski azerbaidzhanskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta imeni S. M. Kirova, Seriya istorii i filosofskikh nauk*, no. 1 (1967), p. 73.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁸ *Ibid.* Among office workers the national breakdown was as follows:

Azerbaijanis	11.1%
Russians	33.0%
Armenians	29.8%
Daghestanis	3.4%
Volga Tatars	1.0%

Among highly skilled workers the national breakdown was:

Azerbaijanis	16.1%
Russians	46.8%
Armenians	24.9%
Daghestanis	4.7%
Volga Tatars	2.1%

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ing class. National animosities were thus coupled with social and economic antagonisms which led to tension and disunity in the working class rather than the cohesion which the Social Democrats tried to promote. At times class interests prevailed over national antagonisms, as in the great strikes of 1903, 1904, 1913, and 1914; at other times, notably in 1905 and in the "March Days" of 1918, proletarian solidarity disappeared in a frenzied interethnic bloodletting.

Nationality reinforced class, but at the same time national loyalties cut across class lines. A poor unskilled Moslem worker had little in common with a skilled Armenian worker apart from their memories of the massacres of 1905, whereas he had the bonds of religion and custom tying him to a Moslem peasant and, indeed, to a Moslem capitalist. Moslem workers occupied the bottom of the labor hierarchy while at the same time Moslem industrialists experienced condescension from Armenian, Russian, and foreign capitalists. The Azerbaijani community did not participate as fully in the economic and political life of Baku as did their neighbors, though they

Yet among unskilled workers the Moslems predominated:

Azerbaijanis	54.0%
Russians	10.7%
Armenians	13.9%
Daghestanis	17.0%
Volga Tatars	3.1%

Altogether 71% of all workers in and around Baku were Moslems—northern Azerbaijanis, southern Azerbaijani immigrants from Persia, Volga Tatars from the region of Kazan, or north Caucasian Moslems who were usually from Daghestan and sometimes called "Lezgins." The largest single contingent within the Moslem working class was the Azerbaijani, about 46%. Most of these men were from eastern Transcaucasia and were Russian subjects. During the First World War they replaced their brothers from Persia who returned home when the ruble exchange proved disadvantageous to them. (*Ibid.*, no. 2, p. 35.)

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made up an absolute majority in Baku *uezd* and considered eastern Transcaucasia as their historic homeland.

In describing the Azerbaijani peasantry of Transcaucasia, the urban intelligentsia always resorted to words like "dark," "unconscious," or "reactionary." Most vexing to liberals and radicals in Baku was the peasants' loyalty to the landlords, the noble beks and khans, and their obedience to the Moslem clergy, the mullahs and imams. Although they were the poorest peasants in Transcaucasia, the Moslems were also the least revolutionary. Perhaps the answer to this paradox lies in the unique village society in which they lived. The Azerbaijani village did not suffer from absentee landlordism and consequently the peasants did not share a common antagonism to an invisible exploiter. Instead the nobles lived in the villages, only slightly distinguishable from their peasant neighbors. Their landholdings were small. Altogether Moslem nobles owned only 18.9 percent of the arable land.²⁹

Within the village there was little influence of the urban culture or the secular nationalism which developed among Baku Moslems in the decade from 1905 to 1917. Village needs were satisfied by a natural, nonmonetary economy, which effectively isolated one village from another. The periodic crisis suffered by Georgian and Armenian peasants because of market fluctuations did not affect the Azerbaijani peasants.³⁰ Surplus labor on the land was

²⁹ N. Pchelin, *Krest'ianskii vopros pri musavate (1918-1920). Ocherki* (Baku, 1931), pp. 2-5: 32.4% was state land; 48.7% was owned by the peasants. Seventy-two percent of the landlord class owned less than twenty-five desiatins (on the average, 6.31 desiatins). Sixteen percent of the beks owned from twenty-five to one hundred desiatins, the average holding in this group being 45.64 desiatins. A small group of rich beks, 8% of the nobility, owned the great estates (averaging about 155 desiatins), while a still wealthier group, 4% of the nobility, owned estates which averaged 1,580 desiatins.

³⁰ Grigori Uratadze, *Vospominaniia gruzinskogo sotsial-demokrata* (Stanford, Calif., 1968), pp. 26-27.

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siphoned off by Baku, thus preventing the development of a rural proletariat.

Called Tatars or Turks until the 1930s, the Azerbaijanis developed a national consciousness only in the recent past. Though they had lived in the Baku area for centuries, Azerbaijanis never thought of themselves as a distinct national group until late in the nineteenth century. Even after the Russian conquest, Persia maintained a cultural and religious dominion over the Transcaucasian Azerbaijanis, just as she maintained a political hold on the southern Azerbaijanis. This cultural domination was reinforced by the Iranized clergy of the Shiite wing of Islam. Sixty percent of Azerbaijanis considered themselves Shiite, and only a minority Sunni.³¹ Linguistically the Azerbaijanis were closer to the Ottoman Turks, though the Ottomans were Sunni. To combat this Persian influence, young intellectuals fashioned a national literary movement to renew interest in the Turkish language, a linguistic challenge specifically directed against the conservative nobility and the clergy who insisted on the use of Persian.³²

The first newspaper in the Azeri vernacular, considered at the time a "peasant dialect," was published in 1875 but lasted only two years. *Ekinchi* ("Laborer") was designed to reach the Azerbaijani peasant, and contained much material on agricultural techniques. Politically *Ekinchi* was representative of the newly emerging Azerbaijani intelligentsia; it was anti-Iranian, anti-Shiite, and secular in its outlook.³³ In this initial period the pro-Turkish posture of Baku's Moslem intellectuals was shaped by the Pan-Turkism of the Tatar thinker Ismail Bey Gasprinskii, and closer to home by the Azerbaijani playwright Mirza Feth-'Ali

³¹ A. Bennigsen and C. Lemerrier-Quellejey, *La presse et le mouvement national chez les musulmans de Russie avant 1920* (Paris and The Hague, 1964), p. 28.

³² Serge A. Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 92-94.

³³ Bennigsen and Lemerrier-Quellejey, p. 28.