

# Armenia and Armenians in Soviet-Era Textbooks (Part Three)

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In this final part, which is devoted to the image of Armenia and Armenians in history textbooks, I will examine Soviet-era textbooks. I have at least three reasons for doing so. In modern Azerbaijan there is a widespread belief that history textbooks from the Soviet period were excessively falsified. The degree to which this belief is accurate can be clarified by analyzing how Armenia and Armenians were represented in those textbooks. Azerbaijani society also believes that both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union consistently adopted a pro-Armenian stance. Analyzing the image of Armenia and Armenians in the textbooks will make it possible to investigate this issue. Finally, the subject of this study allows for a comparison of textbooks produced during three different periods, which makes it possible to determine in which period history was falsified the most. Before turning to the main topic, I would like first to touch upon the issue of how history as a subject was taught in Soviet schools.

Although it may seem strange, until the early 1930s there was no subject called *history* taught in the schools of the Soviet Union. The Bolsheviks understood the ideological significance of history, yet they believed that its classical form of teaching did not serve the interests of Soviet power. During discussions at the People's Commissariat for Education, different opinions were voiced about how history should be taught. One group of Bolsheviks proposed introducing a subject called *Social Studies*, which would focus on the development of countries, culture, technology, and the economy. Another proposal was to replace separate school subjects with a *Complex Program* that studied the surrounding environment. One

of the ideologues of the latter proposal was Mikhail Pokrovsky, a Marxist historian and deputy to the People's Commissar for Education. Pokrovsky called history "politics projected into the past." He described archival documents and historical sources as weapons of the working class in its struggle against political enemies.<sup>1</sup> Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first People's Commissar for Education in Soviet Russia, was skeptical about teaching history in schools altogether. To justify his position, he referred to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who had called historicism a deadly feature of culture.<sup>2</sup>

The debates over teaching history in Soviet schools ended with the decision *On the Teaching of Civil History in the Schools of the USSR*, adopted in 1934 by the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks). In that same year, the Secretariat of the Central Committee issued another decision, *On the Teaching of an Elementary Course of World and Soviet History in Primary and Incomplete Secondary Schools*.<sup>3</sup> According to the decision, the subject of Soviet history had to be taught twice. In grades 1 through 4 it was taught in an abbreviated form as an elementary course, while a more extensive version covered grades 5 through 10. The world history course was designed for grades 5 through 9.

The preparation of textbooks for world and Soviet history began in the early 1930s. By the early 1940s, the first history textbooks for all grades had already been published across the Soviet Union. The preparation of these textbooks was entrusted to the staff of the Institute of History at the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. The team was headed by the well-known historian Anna Pankratova. All Soviet history textbooks were adapted to the content of the book *The History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): A Short Course*, published in 1938 under the editorship of Joseph Stalin. In these books, history was interpreted through the prism of

class struggle and resistance to foreign invaders.

From the late 1940s to the early 1950s, three separate history subjects were taught in Soviet schools: World History, the History of the USSR, and the History of the Republics. Among these, the History of the USSR was undoubtedly the dominant one. From 1963 until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the school curriculum included the following: *the History of the Ancient World* in the 5th grade; *the History of the Middle Ages* in the 6th grade; a two-part *History of the USSR* (from the primitive communal system to the end of the 19th century) in the 7th and 8th grades; *Modern History Part 1* together with the *History of the USSR (1900–1938)* in the 9th grade; and finally, *Modern History Part 2* together with the *History of the USSR (1938–1980s)* in the 10th grade. In this article, I will analyze the image of Armenia and Armenians in the Soviet history textbooks and the textbooks of Azerbaijani history taught in the final period of the Soviet era. At the end, I will compare the image of Armenia and Armenians in the textbooks of three periods: the Soviet era, the 1990s, and the early 21st century.

I should note in advance that Soviet textbooks used terminology rather freely and did not adhere strictly to the principle of historicity. For instance, when referring to Georgia, the textbooks used the term *Georgia* both for the ancient and modern periods, although the earliest state that existed on the territory of present-day Georgia was called *Iberia*. Similarly, although the term *Azerbaijani* emerged only in the 19th century, the textbooks referred to the ancient inhabitants of the territory of modern Azerbaijan as *Azerbaijanis* and their language as *the Azerbaijani language*.

### **Armenia and Armenians in the History Textbooks of the USSR**

The extended course on the history of the USSR began in the 7th grade. In the address to students, the authors of the textbook write that “the motherland has a long, exciting

history full of uninterrupted labor and struggle against foreign enemies," and that during these turbulent historical periods all peoples fought together against common enemies.<sup>4</sup> The main enemies of the Slavs in these struggles are said to be "the Turkic-speaking Khazars, Pechenegs, and Kipchaks."

The textbook begins with the primitive communal system and ends with the struggle against serfdom in the mid-18th century. The first mention of the peoples of the Caucasus and of Armenia appears in the section about the primitive communal system and the earliest human settlements on the territory of the USSR. The textbook states that on one of the hills in Armenia, local inhabitants found black stones that reminded them of "the fingers of the devil." They called that place "Devil's Hill." "Today, that site is known to archaeologists all over the world. The oldest stone tools ever found on the earth's surface have been discovered there."<sup>5</sup> Armenia is mentioned a second time in relation to early agricultural settlements, when the textbook says that scholars have discovered one of the oldest agricultural centers in the USSR near Yerevan.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest slave-owning state on the territory of the USSR is described as Urartu. The textbook states that in the first millennium BCE, "in Transcaucasia,<sup>7</sup> around Mount Ararat and the highlands near Lake Van," there arose a state whose name was connected with that of Mount Ararat. It emphasizes that construction culture in Urartu was highly developed, and that the labor of slaves produced magnificent fortresses and palaces that still astonish modern people with their remains.<sup>8</sup> The walls of the palaces were decorated with marble and faced with colored stones. In one palace discovered near Yerevan, 120 rooms and numerous cellars were found. In the cellars, tall containers were discovered in which grain and wine had been stored. Discussing the culture of Urartu, the textbook notes not only construction but also writing. "Cuneiform

inscriptions on clay and stone tablets that have survived to this day contain information about economic matters and the military campaigns of kings.” One of the inscriptions is said to describe “the military campaigns of King Argishti I, who ruled Urartu in the mid-8th century BCE.” The textbook states that cruel wars with neighboring peoples weakened Urartu, and that “in the early 6th century BCE, after existing for three hundred years, Urartu was destroyed by neighboring tribes.” The textbook regards “the Armenian and Georgian peoples as the heirs of the culture of Urartu.”<sup>9</sup>

Armenia is mentioned next in connection with the Arab conquests. The textbook notes that throughout history Transcaucasia had been invaded by many enemies – the Romans, the Persians, Byzantium, and the Arabs – and that the peoples of the region, including Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Georgians, had fought together against these invaders.<sup>10</sup> “These peoples helped one another in their struggle against foreign conquerors.” One example of such a struggle is the uprising led by Babak, which began in Azerbaijan and then spread throughout the region. In describing the resistance to Mongol invasions, the textbook again speaks of the “joint struggle of Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Georgians” and stated that the culture of these peoples “was superior to and more developed than that of the Mongol conquerors.”<sup>11</sup> The textbook writes that “the Mongol invaders caused great destruction and carried away skilled craftsmen and scholars as slaves, dealing a severe blow to the culture of the Transcaucasian peoples.”

When describing the period of feudal fragmentation in the 12th and 13th centuries, the textbook notes that Georgia and Armenia were among “the world’s most developed and prosperous cultural centers.”<sup>12</sup> Although there is a subsection titled “Georgia in the 11th–13th centuries,” there was no information about Armenia during the same period.

The 8th-grade USSR history textbook contains a chapter titled

"The Peoples of the Caucasus in the First Half of the 19th Century." This chapter is devoted to the Russian conquest of the Caucasus. It states that on the eve of the conquest, the peoples of the Caucasus "lived under the oppression of Iranian and Turkish feudal lords," and adds that "in areas that had remained outside Iranian and Turkish control, small states existed, and wars were fought among them. The slave markets of Asia Minor were filled with captives brought from Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia."<sup>13</sup> The textbook says that as a result of the war of 1828, "Eastern Armenia and Northern Azerbaijan" were annexed to Russia. It describes this annexation as "voluntary," noting that "Georgians and Armenians formed detachments and helped the Russians." The book also writes that "the Armenians fought heroically against the Persians." "The Russian offensives revived the Armenian liberation movement. They formed partisan detachments in the mountains and fought bravely behind enemy lines."<sup>14</sup> The textbook emphasizes that "the liberation of Armenia by Russian troops caused joy among Armenians all over the world. Armenians from distant India wrote letters." "The scorching sun rose over the land of Ararat. ... For this we owe gratitude to the humane Russian nation, among whom our people will always be able to live in safety and under protection."<sup>15</sup>

The 9th-grade USSR history textbook begins with the revolutionary movement in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century and ends with the "reconstruction of socialism" in the late 1930s. Armenians are noted for the first time in connection with the events of 1918. The textbook states that during the revolution in Transcaucasia, the Georgian Mensheviks, Armenian Dashnaks, and Azerbaijani Musavatists established bourgeois-nationalist dictatorships.<sup>16</sup> In November 1920, a new uprising of Armenian workers and peasants began against the Dashnak dictatorship, and it ended with the overthrow of the Dashnak government and the proclamation of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>17</sup> The textbook notes

the role of four people in the establishment of Soviet power in Transcaucasia: Semyon Kirov, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, Anastas Mikoyan, and Nariman Narimanov.

The 10th-grade USSR history textbook, which covers events from 1938 onward, contains no section devoted to Armenia or Armenians. It focuses entirely on the selfless labor of the Soviet people in building socialism.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, in the course on the history of the USSR, relatively detailed information about Armenia and Armenians appears only in the sections concerning ancient times. However, the authors do not equate the population of Urartu with the modern Armenian nation. They wrote only that part of the territory of present-day Armenia had once been within the borders of the state of Urartu. In other periods of history, Armenia and Armenians are mentioned mainly in connection with the struggles of the Caucasian peoples against foreign invaders, and the idea of joint struggle by the three South Caucasian peoples is promoted. This idea does not apply to all historical periods but is adapted to the Soviet principle of "friendship of peoples." The Soviet textbooks falsified history in part by asserting that the South Caucasus had voluntarily joined the Russian Empire. In fact, while some of the small states in the region voluntarily accepted Russian rule, others resisted Russian conquests.

### **Armenia and Armenians in Soviet-Era Azerbaijani History Textbooks**

The Azerbaijani history textbook for grades 7 and 8 begins with the primitive communal system and continues up to the second half of the 19th century. It states that Manna, presented as the earliest state on the territory of Azerbaijan, had been subjected to the invasions of powerful slave-owning states – Assyria and Urartu – but that both of these states fell under the domination of Persian tribes in the 6th century BCE.<sup>19</sup> It describes the Roman invasions of

Transcaucasia in the 1st century BCE and notes that the attacks on Armenia also posed a serious threat to Albania, Atropatene, and Iberia. The textbook writes that in the struggle against the Romans, the three peoples of Transcaucasia united their forces, and that the right flank of the troops defending the Armenian capital consisted of Albanians and Atropatenes.<sup>20</sup> It further describes how in 66 BCE the Romans again invaded Transcaucasia, Pompey captured Armenia, and later marched on Iberia and Albania.

When discussing the spread of Christianity in Azerbaijan, the textbook states that "in Albania, Christianity, unlike in Armenia and Georgia, did not leave a deep mark. People continued for a long time to worship the sun, the moon, fire, and so on."<sup>21</sup> "In the province of Artsakh, which connected Albania with Armenia, the influence of the Christian church was stronger. When this province came under the rule of Armenian rulers, the influx of Armenian population into the area increased."<sup>22</sup> The textbook wrote that the province of Artsakh "included part of Mountainous Karabakh and the Mil plain" and noted that as a result of the resettlement of the Armenian population into this region "the language of the Armenian population gradually blended with that of the local Albanian inhabitants," and "the Karabakh dialect of the Armenian language emerged."<sup>23</sup> This explanation of Artsakh is based on the analysis of early medieval written sources. These sources report that the province of Artsakh had long remained under the influence of Armenian rulers and that they had used resettlement policies to create a social base in the region.

Describing the Sasanian period, the textbook states that there had been prolonged wars between the Sasanians and the Romans for control over Transcaucasia. In these wars both empires "sought to win over the Albanians and the nomadic Hun tribes to their side." The Huns frequently raided Albania and sometimes reached as far as Atropatene.<sup>24</sup> The textbook notes

that the prolonged wars “ended in 387 with the partition of Armenia. Albania and Eastern Georgia remained under Sasanian rule.” It adds that in the early 6th century the Huns seized power in Albania and held the territory for two years, after which the Sasanians managed to restore their authority there.<sup>25</sup>

The textbook draws attention to the resettlement policies of the Sasanians and attempted to clarify the ethnic composition of the region. It wrote that “in order to strengthen their rule in Transcaucasia, the Sasanians expelled Albanians, Iberians, and Armenians from these territories and settled Persian-speaking tribes in their place. As a result, separate settlements of Albanians, Armenians, and Iberians appeared in Central Asia, while Persian-speaking populations settled in Absheron and in some of the northeastern regions of present-day Azerbaijan.”<sup>26</sup> Discussing the religious policies of the Sasanians in the occupied territories, the textbook states that since the authorities suppressed Christianity, “in 450 a powerful uprising broke out in Albania, Iberia, and Armenia. The rebels established contact among themselves and appealed to the nomadic tribes of the North Caucasus and to Byzantium. The uprising was led by the Armenian prince Vardan Mamikonian.”<sup>27</sup>

When describing the period of the Arab conquests, the histories of Albania, Georgia, and Armenia were presented as interrelated. The textbook stated that the uprising led by Babak soon spread to “Armenia, Georgia, and Central Asia.”<sup>28</sup> The joint struggle of the South Caucasian peoples against foreign invaders is mentioned again in later periods. The textbook notes that during the Mongol and Teymurid invasions, all three peoples of the South Caucasus suffered under oppression, and that as a result of “the wars between the Safavid state and the Sultanate Turkey [the Ottoman Empire],” Transcaucasia was again divided.<sup>29</sup>

The mutual relations among the peoples of the South Caucasus are also mentioned in the section on the culture of the classical feudal period. The textbook writes that "Azerbaijan's cultural relations with Georgia, Armenia, the countries of Central Asia, Iran, and the Arab East were expanding. In his works, Khagani often referred to the friendship between the Azerbaijani people and the Georgian and Armenian peoples."<sup>30</sup> When describing 18th-century Azerbaijani culture, the textbook also refers to the friendly relations among the peoples of Transcaucasia, noting that the Armenian *ashug* Miran, who lived in Tabriz, composed songs "in the Azerbaijani language," and that Sayat-Nova wrote beautiful poems in three languages.<sup>31</sup>

In the section on the period of the khanates, there is no information given about the Armenian meliks of Karabakh or about the appeals of the Armenian population to Russia to intervene in the region. However, the textbook states that "when Agha Mohammad Qajar attacked Karabakh, the entire population of the khanate fought against the invaders," and, citing the Karabakh historian Mirza Jamal, the textbook notes that "Azerbaijanis and Armenians formed a united army and fought shoulder to shoulder against the enemy."<sup>32</sup>

The Azerbaijani history textbook for grades 9 and 10 is entirely devoted to the events of the 20th century. Its main themes were the revolutionary movement, the construction of socialism, and the policies of the Soviet state. The 9th-grade volume begins with the revolutionary movement and covered events up to 1938, while the 10th-grade volume continues up to the early 1980s.<sup>33</sup> The only reference to Armenia and Armenians appears in connection with the revolutionary movement in Baku at the beginning of the 20th century. The textbook states that Tsarism "used massacres and plunder in Baku to distract attention from the revolution, and in this work the Armenian and Azerbaijani bourgeoisie assisted Tsarism. Attempts were

also made to organize such massacres in Yelizavetpol and Shusha.”<sup>34</sup> The events of March 1918 are presented as clashes between Soviet forces and Musavat detachments, and the textbook blames the Musavatists for these incidents: “The Musavatists were preparing a revolt against Soviet power in Baku.” It claimed that about twenty thousand people took part in the clashes on both sides. The textbook writes that the Dashnaks tried to turn class battles into ethnic confrontations and added that they began to kill and plunder the Azerbaijani population, but “the Soviet troops crushed the Dashnaks’ provocation.”<sup>35</sup> The entry of the Caucasian Islamic Army and the military units of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic into Baku was described as “the Turkish-German intervention in Transcaucasia.” It states that in May Turkish troops occupied Armenia while German troops occupied Georgia.<sup>36</sup> It also notes that in August 1918, under British instructions, the Socialist Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, and Dashnaks established the counterrevolutionary Centro Caspian Dictatorship.

Thus, the Soviet-era textbooks completely subordinate the interpretation of the events of 1918–1920 to Soviet ideology. The main culprits in these events are identified as the Musavatists and their principal rivals, the Dashnaks, while the Bolsheviks are presented as peacekeepers. In fact, sources tell a very different story. The conflict was undoubtedly political in nature, yet the main sides in this struggle were not the Dashnaks and Musavatists but the Musavatists and the Bolsheviks, with the Dashnaks fighting on the side of the latter.

In the 10th-grade textbook, which covers the second half of the 20th century, the only reference to Armenia appears in the section describing the achievements of socialist construction. It states that after the war, significant progress was made in the development of the national economy, and that “the traditional socialist competition of collective farmers from

Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia reached new heights.”<sup>37</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this three-part study, I have attempted to analyze the transformation of the image of Armenia and Armenians in the history textbooks taught in Azerbaijani schools from the late twentieth century to the present day. This comparative analysis helps not only to understand how Azerbaijan’s closest neighbor (and, at the same time, its main regional rival) has been portrayed, but also to see how the nature and content of political power have shaped the version of history presented to society.

The textbooks of the Soviet period were written by professional historians. They were subjected to strict censorship and approved by the Ministry of Education before publication. This meant that during the Soviet era, all schools used the same textbooks, and there were no alternative versions that could offer a different interpretation of history. These textbooks present both Soviet and world history through the lens of class struggle. Internally, this struggle began in the age of slavery and continued up to the establishment of Soviet power. Externally, it lasted until the existence of the USSR, taking the form of a struggle against imperialism. When describing the ancient and classical feudal periods, the authors rely on historical sources, and their interpretations are adapted to the scholarly research of Soviet and international specialists in each period. However, the interpretation of the capitalist era is different. Because it was based on Marxist theory, it was highly politicized. Marxist theory compelled Soviet historians to distort political history and interpret it in accordance with the directives of the Communist Party.

Another characteristic feature of Soviet textbooks is their effort to convince readers that friendship and good neighborly relations had always existed among the peoples of the USSR

since ancient times. This principle was true for certain periods, but it was not a continuous historical process. In antiquity and the Middle Ages – eras marked by invasions, wars, deportations, and resettlements – friendship and neighborliness were neither stable nor constant. They depended on religious and political factors.

A further feature of Soviet history textbooks was the presentation of the history of the Soviet people in the context of Russia and Russian national history. The national histories of the republics are presented only superficially. Processes that could not easily be reconciled with Soviet ideology and Marxist theory are ignored, while controversial episodes are distorted. In general, the textbooks of the USSR devote only a few pages to the history of Armenia and the Armenians, and their presence in these books carries little weight. If one sets aside the Russian conquests, it is difficult to claim that the history of Armenia was falsified in Soviet textbooks. Many aspects of Armenian history are simply omitted. Among the omitted topics are the ethnic conflicts and massacres that were widespread throughout the empire at the beginning of the twentieth century.

After the collapse of the USSR, the democratic environment of the early independence period gave Azerbaijani historians an opportunity to research and present history from different perspectives. For the first time, schools were allowed to use alternative textbooks. These, too, were written by professional historians, who tried to base their narratives on primary sources and the results of scholarly research. It was in the textbooks written during this period that references to Armenian sources appeared for the first time when discussing ancient and early medieval history. It should be noted that even in the Soviet period, Armenian narratives had provided the main sources for the early medieval history of Azerbaijan, but the Soviet textbooks had not cited them directly. Such citations appeared for the first time in textbooks written in the early 1990s. However, since these textbooks were written

at a time of escalating Armenian-Azerbaijani relations and heightened nationalism, many issues, especially those concerning Azerbaijani ethnogenesis, Turkification, and religious tolerance, were based on unsubstantiated or contradictory claims. Although these textbooks clarified many questions that had been ignored, avoided, or distorted in the Soviet period, they still lacked evidence and proper citations. Another serious problem is the attempt to project the modern Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict artificially into the distant past and to transfer it to the early Middle Ages. To achieve this, Azerbaijani historians distort the sources used in the textbooks.

The history textbooks created in the twenty-first century have been written by order of the Ministry of Science and Education, censored, approved, and then distributed for use in schools. Unlike in the 1990s, there is now no place for alternative history textbooks in Azerbaijani schools. As in the Soviet period, contemporary Azerbaijan also has only state-sanctioned history. These textbooks, too, are written by professional historians. Yet, unlike in the Soviet era, there is no unified concept, and as a result, history appears inconsistent. The claims often contradict one another, and the interpretations do not align. All the history textbooks used in Azerbaijan over the past half-century are highly politicized and falsified, and the information from the cited sources has been distorted. Although Soviet textbooks adapted ancient and medieval history to scholarly literature, they never went beyond the framework of class struggle and violated the principle of historicity.

We see a more detailed and systematic presentation of national history in the textbooks written in the early years of independence. However, the most serious flaw of those textbooks was also the violation of the principle of historicity: the transfer of modern problems, especially the Azerbaijani-Armenian tension, to the distant past. A comparative analysis of all three periods shows that history

has been most heavily falsified in the textbooks written in the twenty-first century. These textbooks distort both the distant and the recent past, deny the achievements of historical scholarship, and rely more on populist writings than on academic literature. Most of the sources cited in them are either distorted or presented with bias. This undermines the notion that history can be written more objectively in nation-states.

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14. Ibid., 74.
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16. SSRİ tarixi. 9-cu sinif. Bakı: Maarif 1982, 167.
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  28. Ibid., 32.
  29. Ibid., 51-52, 56, 66.
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  31. Ibid., 98.
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  33. Azərbaycan tarixi. 9-10-cu siniflər üçün dərslik. Bakı: Maarif, 1981.
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## Part 1

[Armenia and Armenians in the History Textbooks of Azerbaijan \(Part 1\)](#)

## Part 2

[Armenia and Armenians in the History Textbooks of Azerbaijan \(Part II\)](#)