On the Mir Jafar Bagirov's major role in Stalin's Great Purge of 1930-s in Azerbaijan

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The main opponents of Stalin within the Bolshevik party, and the potential opposition in general in the USSR were politically neutralized during the 1930s. However, the process continued intensifying and would later include physical destruction of potential opponents as well. This policy was a "necessity" caused by Stalin's intention to establish absolute power. Even though he described the 17th party congress (January 1934-February 1934) as the first ever congress without any opposition and fractions, he continued calling for "a fight against both domestic and foreign enemies."

Even before this congress, in December of 1932, the government had started a new and main repression mechanism of purging against Stalin's opponents.

The decision of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist (Bolshevik) Party made on December 12, 1934, called for the Great Purge to take place in 1933. However, as a result of various factors, the process continued until the late 1930s. Thus the peak of the Great Terror was in 1937, instead of 1933. [1]

Baghirov's appointment and the transfer of the party and government structures to the hands of the security apparatus

In 1933, Moscow appointed former head of the main Soviet security agency, called Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (*The Cheka*) in Azerbaijan, Mir Jafar Baghirov, as the First Secretary of this soviet republic's Communist Party. The reason behind his appointment was mainly Stalin's intention to ensure absolute power. The

leader of the Soviet Union needed a loyal man in Azerbaijan who would carry out his orders, without questioning them.

Baghirov's background made him a perfect fit for this position. He proved to be a "loyal soldier" of Stalinism during his tenure as the head of Azerbaijan's security apparatus. His extreme cruelty in some cases caused discontent even in Moscow. For example, in 1930, when he headed one of the operations against rebels protesting collectivization, he ordered artillery barrage at a village, killing more than 30 women and children, even though he already knew that rebels had left. As a result Moscow dismissed him from his post.[2]

However, the situation changed and Stalin was getting ready for repressions. There was a need for administrators who would not refrain from using harsh methods. And it is assumed, that it was also due to Baghirov's personal brutality that more people were killed during the repressions of 1936-1938 in Azerbaijan than in neighboring South Caucasian republics.[3]

Baghirov's friend Lavrentiy Beria played an explicit role in his appointment. Due to this friendship Baghirov was given unlimited power in Azerbaijan. Beria was the first secretary of the Transcaucasian Regional Committee of the Communist Party (*Zakkraykom*) since 1932.

Their relationship had started in early 1920s. They were nicknamed "conjoined twins" within the Caucasus Communist party organization. Even before that they served together in the security apparatus of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918-1920). After the sovietization, when Baghirov was appointed head of the Cheka in Azerbaijan, he invited Beria as his deputy. Later Beria became head of the South Caucasus division of the State Political Directorate (*GPU*). He rapidly climbed up the party and state hierarchy, becoming the first secretary of Zakkraykom in 1932-38 and People's Commissar of the Internal Affairs of the USSR (NKVD) and member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist

Party of the Soviet Union in 1938.

Beria was able to successfully nominate Baghirov to the Political Bureau, which was called Presidium at the time, on the same day Stalin died. But later, after Beria's execution, Baghirov was arrested and executed as well.

Lavrentiy Beria had created a strong network. The network he supported included employees of secret police service, who competed with other agencies over influence and power. The network had started its activities at the beginning of the 1920s and had taken leadership roles in the power structures in Moscow.[4]

On December 10, 1933, new appointments were made to Azerbaijan's party leadership during the joint session of the Central Committee of Azerbaijani Communist Party (*AK(b)P)* and capital Baku's Committee. Delegates relieved Mir Jafar Baghirov from his post of the head of the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of Azerbaijan and appointed him first secretary of both local Communist party's Central (*MK*) and Baku (*BK*) committees upon Beria's nomination. Second secretary of *AK(b)P MK*, Hussein Rahmanov replaced Bagirov as a chairman of The Council of People's Commissars, while S. Kudryavtsev replaced the former as the new second secretary.

Akopov who played a major role in mass repressions in Azerbaijan was appointed the second secretary of BK during this session. However, he later replaced A. Aqrba as the second secretary of *MK*.

In 1933, the process of replacement of the old party guard with the state security professionals (chekists) started in some of the important party and government bodies of the republic. Besides Baghirov, other secretaries of *AK(b)P MK* during 1933-1937 included professional chekists like former chair and deputy chair of the Azerbaijani GPU A.Aqrba (1934-1936) and R. Qulbis (1932-1937), respectively.[5]

Another professional chekist Y. Novikova was appointed director of the Secret Department of the Special Sector of the Central Committee, which kept the most classified information of the ruling party. Y. Novikova started working in Azerbaijan's Cheka in 1921, at the same time as Baghirov. After Baghirov became the chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of Azerbaijan in 1932, he appointed Y. Novikova to lead the Secret Department of the government. In November of 1938, Y. Novikova was promoted to become director of the Azerbaijani Communist party's Special Sector which was the most important body within the Central Committee of the party.[6]

Quliyev, who was chair of the Special Collegium of the Supreme Court of the Soviet Azerbaijan from October 1934 and head of the Supreme Court from October 1936 was also a professional chekist. In November 1937, he was appointed chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of Azerbaijan SSR. Other professional chekists appointed to the high government positions included the Republic's General Prosecutor in 1934-1936, Abdulhamid Yagubov and Q. Shahverdiyan, who headed the Special Collegium of the Supreme Court of the Azerbaijan SSR from 1937. Asad Akhundov, who became chief of the Main Directorate for People's Militia (State Police) in October 1933 was a security professional as well.[7]

Upon Central Executive Committee of the USSR's decision on July 10, 1934, a central penal authority, called the All-Union People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) was established. "Starting from this date political police, regular police, criminal investigation service, border troops, internal troops and from October 1934, the whole system related to criminal cases were merged under the control of one authority. NKVD became synonymous with the political police, even though the latter was only a part of it. This powerful machine itself was under direct control of Stalin."[8]

NKVD was established in other republics also. However, because

Azerbaijan SSR along with Armenia SSR and Georgia SSR were part of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (TSFSR) at the time, there was no separate NKVD in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani Department of TSFSR's NKVD was established on 22 July 1934 instead. A few days later Bagirov appointed Y. Sumbatov-Topuridze and I. Purnis chief and deputy chief of this body, respectively. They, along with many other members of TSFSR NKVD's Azerbaijan Department's leadership were career chekists, who had controversial pasts and had joined the Bolsheviks late.

For example, Y. Sumbatov who was member of the Menshevik party in 1905, was hired as an ordinary employee to Azerbaijan's Cheka in 1921, and received the Bolshevik party's membership card and became head of the Anti-Organized Crime Department in August 1922.

Sumbatov's friendship with L. Beria earned him Baghirov's trust. Sumbatov resigned from his post and left with Baghirov, when the latter was sent to Tbilisi in 1927. In 1929, when Baghirov returned to the leadership of Azerbaijan's security apparatus, he brought Sumbatov with him as well. Later, a little after Baghirov was once again fired from his position as the head of Azerbaijan's special service and sent to Moscow, Sumbatov left Azerbaijan and settled in Tbilisi again.

When Baghirov was appointed to the leadership of Azerbaijan in 1932-1933, he brought Sumbatov along and together they became master-minds of local mass repressions. Sumbatov became deputy chair of the Azerbaijani GPU and briefly head of that organization. In 1934 he was appointed to lead Azerbaijani branch of the Transcaucasian NKVD and after dissolution of Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Republic, he became the People's Commissar of NKVD of Azerbaijani SSR. [9]

One of the closest associates of Baghirov and Sumbatov during mass repressions was T. Borshev. He was one of the initiators of many criminal acts, including notorious "Ali-Bayramli

case," where more than 200 people were sentenced to death. He personally participated in tortures of detainees.[10]

Sumbatov and Borshev were members of Beria's personal network. Beria had a special role in Borshev's extraordinary career in the 1930s and on. While talking about Borshev in the 1950s, Mir Jafar Baghirov called him Beria's cadre. [11]

One of the main organizers of another notorious case during the years of Great Terror in Azerbaijan dubbed "Shamakhi case" Kh. Grigorian was also friend of Beria in the early 1920s. "Shamakhi case" continued from October 27 to November 2, 1937 and during that time 400 people, including famous Azerbaijani communist leader Hamid Sultanov, were sentenced to death.[12]

With the help of Beria and Baghirov, Grigorian held various positions within the Secret-political department of the Azerbaijani branch of NKVD from the late 1930s to the early 1940s and later became head of that department, head of the Troika Department and in 1943, he was appointed as Deputy of Peoples' Commissar of the NKVD of Azerbaijan SSR.

Other well-known high-level brutal officials of NKVD, A. Atakishiyev and R. Markarian, who carried out mass arrests on trumped-up charges in various regions of Azerbaijan in 1937-1938 were considered to have been personal protégés of secretary Baghirov.

Some of the characteristics of the Great Purge in Azerbaijan.

Historians considered the trial of the "16s" in August 1936, which included Zinovyev and Kamenev, as the starting point of the "Great Purge." The "Great Purge" in Azerbaijan was openly announced via Beria's essay titled "Scatter the Ashes of the *Enemies of Socialism*," which targeted "the enemies of the people" in the South Caucasus republics and was published in Pravda, as well as all newspapers of Transcaucasia on August 1936.[13] Beria mentioned "a group of counter-revolutionaries gathered in Baku," among others, and showed them as the

target. He openly slandered and accused them of cooperating with the Mensheviks, Dashnaks, Musavatists[14] and "White Guardsmen". [15] The historical irony is that both Beria and Baghirov themselves would later end up getting accused of musavatism as well.

The wave of the Great Purge was in full extent by 1936. The first victims of repressions were those within the party, who were not loyal to Stalin's leadership and used to be members of other social-democratic parties and fractions.

Even before the Great Purge started in Azerbaijan, there were cleanups within the party in 1935-1936. As a result of the process of cleaning the party from "provocateurs" and "hostile elements," 12,718 out of 57,900 (22 percent) party members and candidates were expelled. [16]

95.5 percent of them had entered the party in 1930-1932. These expulsions were described as cleaning the party from "Trotskyists and Zinoyvevists," who were declared as the main enemies.[17] However, research shows, that many party members (38 percent of party members in Baku's industrial district and 54 percent of communists in the cotton-growing regions) were actually uneducated people far from direct involvement in politics.

As a matter of fact, many people joined party membership before the Great Purge either to avoid repressions or to receive benefits. The committee that carried out the purge in the beginning of 1936 reported that even though there were 54,928 party members on the official register, 57,903 people had party membership cards. Baberovski claims that party membership cards were being sold in Azerbaijan's many regions.[18] Professor Jamil Hasanli argues that this mismatch was the result of party members exodus from Azerbaijan. He also adds that party registrars could not catch up with the pace of repressions.[19]

Still it seems that many beks[20], mullahs, even people with

criminal backgrounds and Iranian citizens had been able to obtain Communist party memberships. However, the party leadership started performing background checks on the communists and launched a campaign to expose “hostile elements” in the Party. The second secretary of the Central Committee of Azerbaijan Communist Party, Akopov, announced at the plenum at the end of January of 1936 that 1204 oil workers, who were party members had been expelled from the party in 1935. They were the kulaks and fugitives that had fled from the village to the city in 1930-1931. These “alien elements” were not searched for only in the industrial regions. 51 out of 390 chairmen of collective farms (kolkhozes) were accused of sabotage and expelled from the party as well. There is no doubt that these background checks were used by regional party secretaries to conduct purges against their personal enemies.[21]

However, the person who used Stalin’s Great Purge to destroy his personal enemies in the most effective way was Baghirov himself. Stalin had allowed him to be Azerbaijan’s judge-absolute despot. Moscow was providing Baghirov with power in Azerbaijan, who used this power to first destroy all his enemies within the Azerbaijan Communist Party, or, in other words, party and state figures who had founded the Soviet government in Azerbaijan.

It was as if the Soviet repression machine was taking vengeance on the founders of the Soviet government in Azerbaijan. Many of 22 people’s commissars, 49 regional committee secretaries of the Communist Party, 29 chairmen of regional executive committees, 57 directors of manufacturing and oil enterprises, 110 servicemen, 207 union activists and 8 professors were executed in 1937 alone.[22] 200 employees of the prosecutor’s office of Azerbaijan were arrested in 1937-1938. 80 percent of the judges were declared enemies of the people. [23]

In 1936-1938 almost all members of the first Central Committee

of Azerbaijan's Communist Party who were elected at the first party congress held in 1920 were purged. Along with the party elite, scientists, literary figures, and members of the cultural community also became victims of the terror. However, repressions against the most significant figures could only be carried out directly with Moscow's authorization. There were 830 people on the list from Azerbaijan that required such permission. [24] These were called; "Stalin's list". Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich and sometimes Mikoyan co-singned them with Stalin. The party started to create these lists in early 1937. At the beginning Azerbaijan's list was dominated by non ethnic Azerbaijanis, by the second part of 1937 the majority in this list were ethnic Azerbaijanis. [25]

Azerbaijan's villages were also subject to repressions. Baghirov personally went to all the cities and towns of the republic to oversee the purges of local party leaders. In one of his speeches he said that "to comrades who ask me where to look for all of this nastiness, I say, in regions, in enterprises, in schools, in workshops, in kolkhozes, in tractor brigades, in institutions of higher education, in theaters, in movie theaters, within militia and party organizations, and every place enemy can infiltrate."[26]

Regional departments of NKVD had their own first (execution) and second degree repression quotas. Victims of the repression did not include only the arrested and the accused. Many residents of southern regions bordering Iran, from Astara to Julfa, were being exiled to Kazakhstan as potential suspects. Even current and former spouses of the repressed people were also "victimized."[27]

Their children were subjected to repressions as well, they underwent long interrogations and would certainly lose their jobs. They were labeled as "children of traitors." [28]

The late professor Eldar Ismayilov claimed that the total number of victims of the Great Purge in Azerbaijan was over 80

thousand people. [29]

Baghirov's fight against his enemies outside the Azerbaijan

Baghirov had monopolized the relations with Moscow within the party and government leadership in Azerbaijan and had banned the local Central Committee members from communicating with the center in order to prevent the creation of an opposition against him. He was also able to bring potential opponents and old enemies from various parts of the USSR to Azerbaijan and punish them.

These included prominent communists and pioneers of Sovietization in Azerbaijan such as; G. Musabekov, Mirza Davud Huseinov and A. Garayev, who were residing in other parts of the USSR at that time. Chingiz Ildirim, who worked as a factory director in Ukraine and was known for his cruelty against his opponents in the early stages of Sovietization, was sent to Azerbaijan and sentenced to death on charges of being of a noble background. Baghirov's predecessor as the head of the Extraordinary Committee, Eyyub Khanbudagov was also a victim of repressions.

Baghirov was so obsessed with destroying his rivals, that he persecuted memories of deceased before the Great Purge of communist leaders of Azerbaijan like Nariman Narimanov and Samadaga Agamalioglu. Their books were removed from the libraries, their names were mentioned in the press only in negative contexts and even the derogatory term "narimanovshina" was invented to describe early 1920s.

It should be mentioned, that Stalin would regularly send emissaries to closely monitor the repression policy in the regions. During the terror years, Jdanov was sent to Bashkiria, Tatarstan and Orenburg, Mikoyan to Armenia, Kaganovich to Chelyabinsk, Yaroslavl, Ivanovo and Donbass, Andreev to North Caucasus, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, but he did not deem necessary sending such envoys to Azerbaijan and Georgia. This stemmed from Stalin's confidence in Baghirov and

Beria's loyalty and his intention to give them a kind of freedom in carrying out the repressions.[30]

Troikas

Starting from August of 1937, the authority to carry out repression was handed to the special "troikas" of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs. The first "Troika" in Azerbaijan was established upon Baghirov's request and included Y. Sumbatov, J. Akhundzade and T. Guliyev. [31]

The "Troika" could verify the list sent by security agencies, conduct trials without even formal presence of lawyers and state prosecutors and make any decisions, including capital punishment.

The cases investigated by the NKVD between 1936 and 1938 were either completely lacking prosecutor's supervision or carried out in a formal manner. During that same period former general prosecutors of Azerbaijan (Abdulhamid Yagubov, Bahadur Valibayov, Agahussein Alihusseinov) had not objected to any illegal activities of the NKVD. On the contrary, they had become its servants.

Baghirov, Sumbatov and Rayev chaired "troika" at different times. Mir Teimour Yagubov (member of "Troika," first secretary of the Central Committee of the Republican Komsomol, third secretary of the Central Committee of Azerbaijan Communist Party from 1938), Teimour Guliyev (chairman of the Supreme Court of the Republic), I. Likhidov (member of Troika, military prosecutor of NKVD forces), Agahussein Alihusseinov (Prosecutor of the republic) and others actively participated in Troika's meetings. Troika sentenced 2792 people to death and 4425 to long prison terms in 1937.[32]

On January 31 1938, the Politburo made a new decision regarding the so called anti-Soviet elements, who had to be punished. According to this new decision, 2000 people had to be sentenced to death in Azerbaijan SSR. Overall 10,000

people were investigated and interrogated. [33] Troika alone was involved in the investigation of 7421 people.[34] Aside from Troika, Military Collegiate, military tribunals and regular courts were also invited to assist in these cases.

Denunciation – Donos

The repression environment, the transfer of government under the control of special service agencies, mass persecution of persons who played prominent roles in Sovietization of the country caused great fear among the population. Loss of trust in law enforcement agencies, resulted in an environment of distrust, doubt and disbelief. Everyone was suspicious of one another, historical ties and traditions of the society were rapidly disappearing and degrading. Under the climate of degradation, denunciation letters had become a widespread phenomenon. Many resorted to denunciation letters as a means of attacking those whom they did not like or considered rivals. However, denunciation letters were also used as a tool for people to avoid highly possible persecution.

Also, the climate of terror had turned the practice of denunciation into a means of fighting between opposing groups within the government structures, where cronyism and nepotism were widespread. The ordinary people were adopting state rhetoric and using this for their own purposes as well.

The style of denunciations was similar. Those who wrote them, presented themselves as loyal supporters of socialism and bolshevism ready to fight against enemies. The denunciations would usually start with the praise of Stalin and his policies. They were mostly addressed to the USSR leadership in Moscow.

The reason behind the fact that Azerbaijan had become one of the regions that sent most denunciations to Moscow was precisely due to the particularly difficult situation in the republic created by Baghirov’s absolutely immoral rule. The denunciation epidemic was so widespread that Azerbaijan’s

prosecutor's office alone received 68,035 complaint letters and due to these complaints started trials of 20,000 people in 1937. Tens of thousands were sentenced to death and concentration camps without any formal legal procedures.[35]

The situation reached such a point that the high number of complaints from Azerbaijan drew the attention of one of the leaders of the USSR, Molotov. Baghirov received an official letter from Molotov in April of 1938. In that letter it was stated that 1477 complaints were received from Azerbaijan in 1937 and 699 complaints in 1938.[36] Molotov, asked sarcastically whether a separate denunciation ministry was operating in Azerbaijan.

In January 1938, during a meeting of party secretaries of republics and provinces in Moscow, where they discussed results of purges, Baghirov was told that the number of complaints from Azerbaijan was higher in comparison with all other regions.

Baghirov, in turn, blamed it on insufficient supervision in the fight against "denunciation epidemic" and harshly criticized the local Politburo after returning to Azerbaijan.

In early May, Baghirov entrusted the Politburo with clearing the Azerbaijan state apparatus from "anti-Soviet elements arranging the remittance of complaint letters to Moscow." The head of the government and public prosecutor received orders to clear their apparatus from "enemies of the state", sending complaints to Moscow. In July, in order to insure himself, Baghirov reported to Molotov that "majority of those sending complaints were relatives of state enemies of Iranian origin" and that necessary measures had been taken.[37]

However, Baghirov was also forced to free some people subjected to repression and arrested on the basis of denunciations.

Starting from 1938 the process of rehabilitation started for

communists that were expelled from the party and arrested. Now it was time for denunciators to face the Soviet witch hunt machine. Prosecutor General Alihusseinov told prosecutors of the republic that 402 collective farm (kolkhoz) chairmen and 1075 collective farmers were arrested on the grounds of kompromat materials. [38]

Additionally, 131 prosecutors were arrested as a result of denunciations in 1937. In 1938, 100 cases were re-examined and as a result 22 prosecutors' jobs were restored, while 14 slanderers were arrested.[39]

Azerbaijan's prosecutor's office, per Molotov's request reported to him that in the first month of 1938, 15,000 people who had been arbitrarily arrested were released from prison, whereas hundreds of denunciators were put behind bars.[40]

Moscow played a very skillful game. It would launch repressions, then appoint a cruel man as a leader of the republic, would give that person full power to perform his duties easily to ensure that repressions were harsh and at the same time would prepare the ground for accusing him in abusing his power.

Thus, Moscow was in a way presenting itself as more merciful than Baghirov. During Bagirov's trial famous USSR's general prosecutor Rudenko would accuse Baghirov of destroying the lives of tens of thousands of best Azerbaijanis, to which Baghirov would respond that "even tearing me in pieces because of what I had done would not be enough." [41]

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