

Between Ideal and Reality: The Origins of the Union of Azerbaijani Writers

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In October 2022, the Union of Azerbaijani Writers (*Azərbaycan Yazıçıları Birliyi*–AYB) [\[1\]](#) held its controversial XIII Congress at the National Drama Theater, the building of which evidences Stalinist neoclassicism. The event too bore resemblance to the late Soviet era with the *performative* nature of its participants' speeches.[\[2\]](#) Performative in the sense that the meaning of the utterances or the utterers' belief in their own rhetoric was not as important as performing loyalty towards the dominant discourse. Yet, the content of the dominant discourse in Azerbaijan has changed and does not contain the utopian sentiment characteristic of the Soviet period. Despite being a product of Stalinist civilization, the contemporary values attached to AYB and its current functions, should be evaluated in their own politico-ideological context.

We should also consider the subordination of the past to the present, which can be observed in the postcolonial attitude of post-Soviet Azerbaijani historiography towards Soviet history.[\[3\]](#) Azerbaijani national historiography argues that the Soviet Union employed with its nationality policy *divide and rule strategy*, imposed by the center (Moscow) on the peripheries (non-Russian nationalities) aiming to keep them under control. Accordingly, as a manifestation of nationality policy in the literary sphere, the Soviet Writers' Union is often reduced to its oppressive function. As a result, contemporary Azerbaijani discussions concerning the socio-political history of Soviet literature mainly focus on the Stalinist repressions and the tensions they engendered among writers.[\[4\]](#) Tracing the origins of AYB, this article, on the

other hand, aims to demonstrate an alternative and more nuanced approach towards the Party and writers and center-periphery dynamics as opposed to the bipolar analytical framework that paints them in sharp contrast.

When talking about the history of the Soviet Writers' Union (as well as the republican unions), it is important to approach it from two main aspects. The first aspect is interested in the institutional dimension of the union, concentrating on the relationship between the Party and literature. The second aspect, on the other hand, focuses on the center-periphery dynamics examining the ideological side of the Soviet nationality policy. Accordingly, the first part of the article deals with the political developments that led to the creation of the Soviet Writers' Union and the changes the union brought about in the Soviet literary environment. The second section focuses on the union's role in constructing Soviet multinational literature.

Sword and pen: the relationship between the Party and literature

Literature occupied a central place in the Party's cultural policy. Its supposed superiority to other art forms seems to be linked to the role of reading in the personal development of Bolsheviks as well as their political organization.[\[5\]](#) It can also be explained by the relative ease of censoring the text, which was seen as a mirror of the author's psyche. A more difficult task was to define the criteria for ideological criticism in music or painting, unlike literature, whose main tool (language) rendered it more accessible for the masses. As a consequence, Soviet literature had pioneered other art forms, especially in the 1930s, and its experience became a model for other art forms. Reaching its peak with the establishment of the Writers' Union, Stalin's centralization campaign further strengthened the role of the written word in Soviet society. It is no coincidence that the unions of composers and artists were only established in later years on

the example of the Writers' Union.

Constantly being in the spotlight not only provided the literary figures with prestige and financial privileges, but also made them vulnerable to punishment via deprivation of those privileges. The fact that the vast majority of the Great Purge victims were *men of letters* tells much about the contradictions of the Stalinist *republic of letters*. When the Politburo distributed government of different areas among its members, Stalin took over precisely the management of culture. Despite his limited competency, he assumed the role of arbiter in the minutest literary matters. This compulsive interference "was due to the primary role of literature in reproducing Bolshevik reality and its subjects." [6] The Party's demand for *ideological productivity* from the Soviet writer found its symbolic reflection in the metaphor of *engineers of human souls* (*inzhenery chelovecheskikh dush*). This phrase by Andrei Zhdanov, who represented the Central Committee in the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, was a metaphor of the industrialization era. According to Zhdanov, the main goal of engineers of the human soul was to "depict reality in its revolutionary development." [7] And the subjects of this reality were the toilers who built it with their own hands – the creators recreated by Soviet literature. The engineering analogy also heralded the centralization of the literary sphere and integration of the Soviet writer into the bureaucratic apparatus in the making.

Foreword: 1920s

It is difficult to interpret Soviet history unequivocally. It was, on the one hand, an emancipatory project oriented towards the future and, on the other hand, a paranoia machine, which reached its peak in the 1930s, characterized by the Communist Party's systematic efforts to penetrate all spheres of society. This ambiguity is often explained through the *multiple modernities* perspective which argues for the classification of Soviet experience as a specific case of

modernity. Termed *Lefort's paradox*[\[8\]](#) by Alexei Yurchak, the oscillation between two extremes is one of the main characteristics of modernity, and this stems from the inadequacy of the enlightenment slogan calling for progress to address the complexities of reality. The realization of utopian ambitions delayed continuously leads to obsessive control over a reality in which radical change has yet to materialize. This *modern anxiety* was also manifest in the Bolshevik attitude to literature.

During the early years of Soviet power, Bolsheviks strived to strike a balance between fellow travelers (*poputchiki*) and radical proletarian writers since *proper historical circumstances* did not arise for the proletarians to seize *the means of literary production*. Therefore, literary policy of the twenties reflected a compromise between the future, where the triumph of proletarian literature was promised, and contemporaneous realities. Trotsky's article "Communist Policy towards Art" expressed this NEP-style (The New Economic Policy) Party line on literature: "The Party guides the proletariat, not the historical process. There are spheres where the Party guides directly and imperiously. There are spheres where it monitors and assists. There are spheres where it only assists. And there are, finally, spheres where it is simply trying to find its bearings. The sphere of art is not one where the Party is called upon to command. It can and must safeguard, assist, and only indirectly—guide."[\[9\]](#) Trotsky's soft attitude towards the representatives of the old regime was echoed in the Party resolution on *The Party policy towards literature* dated June 18, 1925.[\[10\]](#)

Notwithstanding their mild tone, neither Trotsky nor the official line recognized the possibility of literature outside its ideological function. Lenin's article "Party Organization and Party Literature," published after the 1905 revolution, already ruled out the option of neutral literature: "Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, 'a cog and a screw' of one single great Social-

Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organized, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.”[\[11\]](#) This outlook justifying any intervention in the literary process was later perpetuated by the creation of Writers’ Union and the proclamation of Socialist Realism as the Soviet Union’s official literary method.

The lack of a systematic policy towards literature during the 1920s, with hundreds of literary organizations and associations fighting each other, required the consideration of constantly changing interests. In other words, “the Party refused direct support from any group, and by retaining its freedom of action, preserved its role as arbiter.”[\[12\]](#) Even the Federation of Unions of Soviet Writers (FOSP, 1927),[\[13\]](#) created in the spirit of the 1925 resolution to homogenize the relative polyphony of literature and to suppress the tensions between fellow travelers and proletarian writers, did not change the situation. On the contrary, when the Party position shifted from compromise towards the old writers to favoring proletarian groups after Stalin’s proclamation of the First Five-Year Plan, it undermined the original intention of the Federation. Consequently, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) became the Party’s de-facto mouthpiece in the literary sphere by seizing a monopoly in the Federation.[\[14\]](#)

As in other peripheries, Soviet power was consolidated relatively later in Azerbaijan. This can be explained both by the turmoil of the Civil War (1917-1921) and the compromising stance of the NEP (1921-1928) towards provinces. As a result, Azerbaijani literature of the 20s, led by writers who lived their formative years under Tsarist Russia, retained its pre-revolutionary trends of romantic Fuyuzatism[\[15\]](#) and enlightenment realism. The comparative freedom of artistic expression in the periphery and Moscow’s attempt to fashion Baku as the center of an *East International* imaginary

attracted Russian experimental poets to the city. It turned the emerging proletarian literature of Azerbaijan into an intersection between the *Füyuzat* tradition and Russian avant-garde movements.[\[16\]](#) This synthesis manifested itself in the oeuvre of the members of *Young Red Pens* (*Gənc qızıl qələmlər*), an organization of Azerbaijani proletarian writers founded in 1925 by the Soviet Propaganda Council established at the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku (1920). Young Red Pens managed to supplant swiftly the local organization of fellow travelers (*ədəbiyyat cəmiyyəti*). A subsequent organization called *Red Pens* (*Qızıl qələmlər*, 1927) united the *poputchiki* and proletarian writers, but the aggressive wave of Stalinist *cultural revolution* put an end to the society's activities based on charges of nationalist deviation. Nevertheless, after the Red Pens ceased to exist, many of its members representing old literature joined the newly created Association of Azerbaijani Proletarian Writers, a local analog for RAPP.

Establishment of the Union of the Soviet Writers of the USSR

With the Politburo's resolution of 23 April 1932 "On restructuring literary and artistic organizations," the power dynamics between the Party and literature entered a novel stage. The decree liquidated the proletarian associations and called for the unification of all writers who supported Soviet power around the Union of Soviet Writers.[\[17\]](#) It rendered the existence of RAPP redundant due to the supposed fulfilment of its historical mission, thus transferring the monopoly it acquired by the end of the First Five-Year Plan to the Party. Another resolution issued on 7 May by the Central Committee's Organizational Bureau decided to set up organizational committees at the all-union and republican levels to carry out the earlier instruction of the Politburo.[\[18\]](#) The main task of the all-union Organizational Committee was to determine the structure of the Writers' Union and arrange preparations for the Congress of Soviet Writers. During its two-year existence, the committee addressed a number of literary and

organizational issues, such as the change of the editorial boards of literary journals and newspapers, educational and financial support for writers, nationalization of publishing, organization of literary brigades and others. Politically speaking, the Party managed to exert more influence on the literary process by establishing a Party organization within the committee (later the Writers' Union).

The 1932 decree aimed at uniting the Soviet writers around a centralized apparatus of power. This process of bureaucratization was reflected in the campaign against factionalism (*gruppovshchina*), which was central to the agenda of the first plenum of the Organizational Committee. Although there was a softening towards the fellow travelers at the plenum, it was not a sign of tolerance towards neutral literature. Instead, it provided all writers with the opportunity to unite around the dominant narrative regardless of their political background.[\[19\]](#)

The mode of literary existence engendered by the Writers' Union also shaped an archetype of Soviet writer. Soviet literary discussions almost always referred to extraliterary factors that did not have direct connection with the text per se. This *self-conscious historicization*,[\[20\]](#) exacerbated by Stalinism, prioritized the practical or temporal aspects of writing over theoretical considerations. The increasing centralization created favorable conditions for personal manifestations of such historicism. According to Carol Any, the main aim of the Soviet Writers' Union was to transform the Soviet writer into a state cadre, and the organization had three main functions in this regard: "to communicate party policies to writers through organized discussions; to ensure the creation of a literature about the young communist nation by subsidizing writers' travel to factories, collective farms, and construction projects; and to reward cooperative writers with apartments, quality foodstuffs, supplemental income, and paid working vacations."[\[21\]](#) The reconstruction of the Literary Fund (*Litfond*) suspended after the revolution, played

a central role in the implementation of the latter function. The *dacha* complex (summer cottages) built by the Fund around Moscow in *Peredelkino* was a striking example of the fact that it was not only the Party who benefitted from the new course of events in the center. It can be seen from the eagerness that many writers showed for receiving residences.[\[22\]](#) Of course, the state support depended on the discursive *fluency* of the writers. This situation isolated a number of writers from the literary milieu forcing them to creative silence. However, the privileges that Stalinism offered to Soviet writers were as historically unprecedented as the repressions to which it subjected them.[\[23\]](#)

Soviet nationality policy and literature

The establishment of the Writers' Union not only formalized the relationship between the Party and literary cadres but also created mechanisms for controlling the literatures of non-Russian nationalities. During high Stalinism, the accountability of national republics to the center significantly increased. One of the decisive steps taken in this direction was the Gorky Literature Institute, established in 1933, to train Soviet writers, while the People's Friendship almanac, first published in 1939, familiarized the Soviet readers with national literatures translated to Russian. Literary cadres played an important role in transmitting information about the situation on the ground, as well as suspected class enemies. Nevertheless, the Party's limited knowledge of non-Russian literatures was framed by the narratives the local representatives chose to report to Moscow because those at the center were rarely interested in learning the languages of the nationalities.[\[24\]](#) This gave national representatives more freedom to construct their literary identity than is usually acknowledged.

High Stalinism tends to be associated with the triumph of socialism in one country, often analyzed as *the revolution betrayed* or a departure from the internationalism of the 20s.

However, despite the gradual fading of revolutionary zeal from the late 30s, Stalinist discourse did not completely lose its utopianism.[\[25\]](#) An embodiment of the growing statism of the time, the Writers' Union turned Soviet multinational literature into a permanent institution that united (or at least attempted to unite) around the idea of the people's friendship. As much as fixing the self-expression of non-Russian peoples, this idea retained a belief in the eventual disappearance of the differences between them.

Soviet Nationality Policy

The Red Army's conquest of the former peripheries of the Russian Empire, and their subsequent accession to the USSR urged the anti-imperialist Bolshevik authorities to vehemently separate itself from the *ancien régime*. The result was the Soviet nationalities policy, which sought to redress the grievances of the ethnic groups that had suffered from "great Russian chauvinism" through *affirmative action*.[\[26\]](#) The nationalities policy can be characterized by the Bolsheviks' ambivalent attitude towards nation-building in the peripheries. This dichotomy manifested itself in the coexistence of the support for national cultures (*national in form, socialist in content*) based on *ethnic particularism* (the perception of ethnicity as a natural fact) with an acute antagonism towards political nationalism.[\[27\]](#)

The promise of a classless society outpacing Soviet reality was also delayed due to the *backwardness* of the periphery. The goal of Soviet nationality policy was to synchronize the *historical time* of the center and periphery. Based on Marx's stadialist view of history, Bolsheviks saw nation-building as a temporary stage on the road towards communism. The necessary evil eventually became a permanent element of the Soviet system, as the fusion of the peoples (*sliianie*) was postponed indefinitely. This coexistence of the national with the international was heralded by Stalin's slogan of the people's friendship, which he first used in the 1935 meeting with

Turkmen collective farmers. Marking a departure from the class-based language, this ethnic primordialism might be seen as a manifestation of the Party line leaning towards the right. However, it did not equal an abandonment of utopian sentiments. On the contrary, according to Stalin's evaluation, the extermination of the internal enemies as a result of the first and second five-year plans necessitated a new metaphor, i.e. the friendship of peoples.

Soviet multinational literature as world literature

Currently, one of the widely discussed questions in Soviet historiography and comparative literature is the possibility of approaching Soviet multinational literature as a case of *world literature*. Theories about world literature can be divided into two groups: descriptive and normative. While descriptive theories view world literature as a sum of national literatures, normative theories go further as to argue that literature should be international. [28] According to Susie Frank, there are similarities between Soviet multinational literature and the normative theories that see "literature as a means of cultivation based on the universal values of humanism." [29] It is worth noting that the universal humanism in question was not based on the immanent value of human beings. [30] Grounded on an assumption of correctable human imperfection, Soviet humanism sought to conquer, transform, and wield that which it labeled as the *non-human* according to its vision of the singular and transcendent human. That is why the Bolsheviks classified the Soviet peoples as *the cultured West* and the *backward East*. It is difficult to imagine the paternalistic nationality policy without this hierarchy and the savior pathos that assigned *more humanity* to one ethnic group over another.

In this respect, the Bolsheviks seem to have followed the path laid down by Western missionaries, but a postcolonial approach towards Soviet nationalities policy is insufficient to explain why it promoted nation-building in titular republics and

mobilized material resources in this direction. It is true that Russian became the dominant, international language that served as a bridge between Soviet cultures. Yet, finding unity in the multilingual Soviet empire was not an easy task. If the nationalities were to ever mix to form a single Soviet nation (*Sovetskii narod*), what would be the language of that nation?[31] Diversity could never be abolished, while Soviet multinational literature, instead of becoming a unified literature, continued to serve as a stage on which national literatures were showcased through the medium of the Russian language.

As Samuel Hodgkin points out, “it was in the Soviet Union that world literature attained the institutional structure familiar to us today: congresses, prizes, publishing series and journals compiling works in translation, all of them full of writers identified by nationality.”[32] The said organizational building was systematized with the establishment of the Soviet Writers’ Union. Although the idea of world literature can be traced back to the Silver Age of Russian poetry, at the time, the sporadic measures taken for its realization were mainly oriented towards the Western literature. For example, the publishing house *Vsemirnaya literatura* (World Literature, 1918-1924), promoted by Education Minister Anatolii Lunacharskii, issued an eastern literature series but it perpetuated the imperial tradition which viewed the *East* as an exotic object of inquiry.[33] The literatures of non-Russian nationalities were, by and large, considered backward in the center, while the Russian experience functioned as a reference point for the former. The fast-track development of Russian literature in the 19th century via state intervention was inspired by the perceived superiority of Western experience. The rapid cultural construction that began in the peripheries in the 1930s followed the same pattern.[34]

Ahead of the First Congress of Soviet Writers, the literatures of the nationalities struggled to maintain their existence in

the face of material constraints. The shortage of paper for printing, the involvement of the few writers in management, and the weakness of literary criticism were the most pressing problems complained of by local representatives during the discussions in the Organizational Committee.[\[35\]](#) The situation in Soviet Azerbaijan was not encouraging either. Although the national literature of Azerbaijan emerged in the pre-revolutionary era, we can attribute this period to the first stage of national movements characterized by the invention of tradition by an intellectual minority.[\[36\]](#) The upheavals of the following years made it impossible to institutionalize and popularize the national literature. Fertile conditions for that came about in the 1930s, when stability was partially restored. The irony of nationalities policy was that Soviet Azerbaijan, without de-facto sovereignty, managed to construct a popular national culture typical of sovereign nations.

At all-union plenums of the Organizational Committee, Azerbaijani delegate Taghi Shahbazi (1892-1938) also complained about the financial deprivations faced by the national committees as well as publishing houses.[\[37\]](#) Like other local representatives, he hinted at the need for financial support from the center to prepare for the congress. In view of all these complaints, the Organizational Committee decided to send brigades to the peripheries. The brigades were to survey the current state of the local literatures and the work of the organizational committees, to guide them, and to report on their trip to the central authorities. Writers from the center were rarely dedicated to the brigade's cause. For example, at the third plenum, Azerbaijani representatives voiced their concerns about the negligent attitude of the former RAPP member Moisei Averbakh, who headed the brigade dispatched to Azerbaijan. Eventually, the Secretariat of the Organizational Committee sent a new team led by Aleksandr Afinogenov. The negligence of the central cadres stemmed from the fact that they regarded the brigade's mandate as a burden distracting them from creative work and more important

discussions in Moscow.[\[38\]](#) Nevertheless, the activities of the brigades drew more attention to national republics, especially in terms of financial support. The insistence of local representatives and the center's haste to project harmony in diversity made this development possible.

The First Congress of Soviet Writers

On the first day of the Congress (17 August 1934), Maxim Gorky, who at the time was made into a literary icon by Stalin, delivered a long lecture on the history of Western and Russian literature. Near the end of his speech, he briefly mentioned non-Russian literatures, stating a self-evident fact that Soviet literature "does not equate to Russian literature."[\[39\]](#) The need to emphasize this fact is more telling than the fact itself. According to the writer, "national minorities are also capable of producing their Pushkins."[\[40\]](#) Although Gorky's statement hints at the superiority of Russian literature in practice, there is no national exceptionalism in it. He did not see the high position of Russian literature as a manifestation of the innate superiority of the Russian people. It was rather the result of a specific historical development that imperial powers deprived the oppressed people of until the establishment of the Soviet Union which liberated the latter.

Because of the lack of literary institutionalization in the national republics, two main tasks were set before them in preparation for the congress: to write an ideologically adequate history of national literature and to form their own union of writers. On the first day of the congress, each national representative gave a short lecture on their national literary history. They narrated the course of its development from the Middle Ages through the Soviet period portraying poets and writers that lived in different epochs and environments, as part of the continuous growth of a singular national consciousness.

Another feature of Soviet multinational literature was its fixation on the written word and particularly on the novel, which was seen as the pinnacle of literary genre. . Stalinist preference for *high culture* and monumentalism put Azerbaijan, which used to be part of the poetry-oriented Persianate tradition and did not possess a national alphabet, into a difficult position. In his congress speech, the first chairman of the Writers' Union of Azerbaijan, Mammadkazim Alakbarli (1905-1938) began the history of Azerbaijani literature by mentioning the 8th-century poet Zibeyda Khatun, who supposedly wrote verses in Turkic, Persian and Arabic.[\[41\]](#) Although this character failed to join the national canon, the reference to her represents the attempts of Azerbaijani officials to demonstrate the historical depth of their national literature. For the same reason, Nizami Ganjavi, who is thought to be born in Ganja (Azerbaijan) and whose surviving oeuvre is in Persian, was given the status of Azerbaijani *Pushkin*. It was the principle of antiquity alongside Soviet ethno-territorial primordialism that rendered another less problematic candidate Muhammad Fuzuli (16th century), who also wrote in Turkic, not suitable to be placed on such a pedestal.

Prior to the First Congress, the canons of Soviet multinational literature had not been fully established yet. For example, before Alisher Navoiy became the *Pushkin* of the Uzbek nation, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan claimed the poet for themselves.[\[42\]](#) Speeches by the national representatives at the congress helped to end such discord and map the future trajectories of national literatures. While at the beginning of the century, *Literature of the Azerbaijani Turks* written by Firudin-Bey Kocherli (1863-1920) was an attempt by a national intellectual to reconstruct his heritage,[\[43\]](#) the Stalinist nationality policy provided a necessary institutional ground to popularize the national culture among ordinary Azerbaijanis and fix it into collective memory.

The Rituals of Soviet Multinational Literature

Soviet multinational literature was not only a normative ideal. It also played a decisive role in the formation of literary practices, many of which have survived until now. These literary practices can be divided into linguistic and ceremonial ones. While translations and anthologies provided a meeting space of a textual kind among the Soviet peoples, ceremonies such as congresses, *dekadas*, and jubilees brought them together physically. This meeting was the result of *Soviet-style* solutions to the emerging practical issues usually omitted from its romanticized depictions.

Due to the national specificity of language, it is difficult to imagine the existence of world literature without translation.[\[44\]](#) This situation also necessitated translation in the multilingual Soviet empire, which sought to find unity in diversity. Although Russian was considered a pragmatic tool for familiarizing Soviet peoples with each other, Soviet translation practice included translations among national literatures as well.[\[45\]](#) The peripheral text traveled to Moscow through interlinear translations (*podstrochniki*).[\[46\]](#) More often than not, word-for-word translation of the original text into Russian was done by anonymous interlinear translators who were native speakers of the source language. However, the overwhelming majority of writers and poets in the center who produced the literary translations into Russian did not know the target language. *The Anthology of Azerbaijani Poetry* (1939), published by the state publishing house GIKhL (in Moscow) and co-edited by Vladimir Lugovskoy (1901-1957) and Samad Vurgun (1906-1956), also relied on interlinear trots. The publication of the anthology was a debut of Azerbaijani literature in the Soviet canon as well as its entry point to world literature.[\[47\]](#) It was also a significant moment in the construction of the national literature, the trajectory of which had been charted in Alekperli's speech.

The growing celebratory atmosphere amidst the Stalinist repressions and deprivations was an attempt by the Soviet government to gain legitimacy through establishing an

emotional connection with its citizens.[\[48\]](#) Similarly, the First Congress of Soviet Writers embodied the unity in diversity, which the Party aimed to instill in its internal audience and prove to external viewers (the *imperialist West*). Such ceremonies were also an international venue that brought together the representatives of different nationalities. This platform gave the national republics the opportunity to create their own literary canons and put them on display for the gaze and praise of other Soviet peoples.

Demonstrating culture in the center was of particular significance to local cadres because in doing so, they managed to attract attention at the all-union level. The *dekadas* of arts in Moscow (a series of events lasting ten days) were driven by special enthusiasm. This can be seen in the comprehensive preparation by Azerbaijani leader Mirjafar Bagirov for the *dekada* of Azerbaijani Art in Moscow (1938), showcasing national music and folk art.[\[49\]](#) However, literature was the cornerstone of Soviet culture. Invention of a literary history seen as the main criterion for how civilized a nation was can be considered a *rite of passage* of the Soviet people. Figuratively speaking, reaching *literary maturity* was to be marked through a special ceremony. Because in the 1938 *dekada* Azerbaijani literature was not sufficiently represented, another *dekada* in 1940 specifically devoted to Azerbaijani literature intended to make up for this lack.[\[50\]](#) Demonstrating the antiquity of its literary heritage in the ceremony, Azerbaijan proved itself a worthy member of Stalinist civilization.

Another important event in the literary life of the 1930s was the centenary of Pushkin's death. The anniversary, celebrated throughout the Soviet Union in 1937, not only signified the return to the classics, but also the rehabilitation of Russian national identity that had been demonized in the 1920s.[\[51\]](#) This event became the benchmark for Soviet jubilees, prompting other nationalities to also celebrate their national poets. While Soviet jubilee practice encompassed anniversaries of

various personalities, historical events, and institutions, each republic's celebration of its national genius held special significance. The image of a genius poet, seen as the supreme bearer of national consciousness, is one of the tropes of romantic nationalism. At the same time, the poet had to *speak Bolshevik* to find its place in Stalinist discourse. Conversely, the recognition of one's literary genius as part of world literature reinforced the national pride of non-Russian peoples.

Georgia had succeeded other republics in honoring the memory of its *Pushkin*, Shota Rustaveli. The 750th anniversary of the poet, which took place in 1937, set a precedence for non-Russian nationalities to organize such celebrations.[\[52\]](#) Despite the cultural rivalry among the Transcaucasian (South Caucasus) republics instigated by the center, the 800th anniversary of Nizami Ganjavi, for which Azerbaijan started preparing since the 1940 *dekada*, could be celebrated only in 1947. There were both discursive and institutional implications that the nationalization of Nizami bore. The ideological solution to the poet's Azerbaijanization presents an example of how local cadres capitalized on the discourse of nationality policy. They came up with a narrative of Nizami's failure to write in Azerbaijani under "Persian oppression" and the poet's restoration to Azerbaijani culture by the Soviet state (led by Stalin) which astutely appealed to the Bolsheviks' savior pathos.[\[53\]](#) The high reputation of the Leningrad Institute of Oriental Studies, which considered Nizami a Persian poet posed another threat to the poet's nationalization. With the establishment of the Nizami Ganjavi Institute of Literature in Azerbaijan, the discursive authority of Russian orientologists was transferred to local literary scholars.[\[54\]](#)

The nation-building project in Soviet Azerbaijan was a process of analogizing Azerbaijani literature to Russian and other more successful non-Russian literatures. The limited local experience led to anxiety among the national cadres, who tried

to meet the often-abstract expectations of the center. This state of mind, agitated by Stalinist terror, also resulted from local representatives' concerns about displaying themselves before the Other, Russian and otherwise, who was considered important and, in some cases, superior to the Self. Nevertheless, Stalinist nationality policy stimulated the subjectivization of Eastern literature within a Soviet framework, Azerbaijani literature being a prime example of that.

Notes and references:

[1] After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Writers' Union of the Azerbaijani SSR (Azərbaycan Yazıçılar İttifaqı) was renamed the Union of Azerbaijani Writers (Azərbaycan Yazıçılar Birliyi). The full name for the all-union Soviet Writers' Union was the Union of the Soviet Writers of the USSR until 1954.

[2] Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 18-21.

[3] Here, postcolonial refers not to a theoretical school of the same name, but to a worldview that views the Soviet experience as a form of colonialism.

[4] Cəmil Həsənov, *Ağ ləkələrin qara kölgəsi* (Bakı: Gənclik, 1991); Ziya Bünyadov, *Qırmızı Terror* (Bakı: Azərənəşr, 1993).

[5] Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[6] Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Soviet culture and power: a history in documents, 1917-1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xiii.

[7] *Первый Всесоюзный съезд советских писателей 1934: стенографический отчёт* (Москва: Художественная литература, 1934), 4.

[8] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 10-14.

[9] Л.Д. Троцкий, "Партийная политика в искусстве," *Литература и революция* (Москва: Главполитпросвет 1923), http://az.lib.ru/t/trockij_l_d/text_1923_literatura_i_revolutzia.shtml. The translation to English here has been taken from Clark and Dobrenko, eds., *Soviet culture and power*, 32-33.

[10] "Резолюция ЦК ВКП(б) 'О политике партии в области художественной литературы'," *Между молотом и наковальней: Союз советских писателей СССР: Документы и комментарии*, ред. Т.М. Горяева, т. 1 1925-июнь-1941 гг. (Москва: РОССПЭН, 2011), 30-32. An English version can be found here: Marxists Internet Archive, "Party Organisation and Party Literature," <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/13.htm>.

[11] В.И. Ленин, "Партийная организация и партийная литература," *Новая Жизнь* 12 (13 Ноября 1905), <https://www.marxists.org/russkij/lenin/1905/09/part%20lit.htm>.

[12] Clark and Dobrenko, eds., *Soviet culture and power*, 49.

[13] FOSP is often regarded as the prototype of Writers' Union.

[14] Clark and Dobrenko, eds., *Soviet culture and power*, 150.

[16] Leah Feldman, *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 176-182.

[17] "Постановление Политбюро ЦК ВКП(б) 'О перестройке литературно-художественных организаций'," *Между молотом и наковальней*, 128.

[18] Clark and Dobrenko, eds., *Soviet culture and power*,

153-155.

[19] Carol Any, *The Soviet Writers' Union and Its Leaders: Identity and Authority under Stalin* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16t6ncb.6>.

[20] Literature as part of a specific historical development is usually *post facto* contextualized by historians. This contextualization involves the explicit articulation of historical processes that are assumed to be implicit in the literary. In that sense, self-conscious historicization means that Soviet literary discourse molded subjects who were constantly aware of their own historicity.

[21] Any, *The Soviet Writers' Union and Its Leaders*, 3.

[22] Ibid, 70.

[23] Clark and Dobrenko, eds., *Soviet culture and power*, xiv.

[24] Kathryn Schild, "Between Moscow and Baku: National Literatures at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers," (PhD diss, University of California, 2010), 157.

[25] Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[26] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 15-20.

[27] Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 415.

[28] С.К. Франк, "Проект многонациональной советской литературы как нормативный проект мировой литературы (с имперскими импликациями)," *Имагология и компаративистика* 11

(2019): 235,
<http://vital.lib.tsu.ru/vital/access/manager/Repository/vtls:000659523>.

[29] Ibid, 240.

[30] Neni Panourgíá, "Immanent Human(Ism)s: Engagements with James A. Boon." *Anthropological Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2017): 1169.

[31] Nikolai Marr's new linguistic theory, which was the dominant one in the Soviet Union before its repudiation by Stalin in 1950, argued that communism would bring about a non-national, universal language.

[32] Samuel Gold Hodgkin, "Lahūtī: Persian Poetry in the Making of the Literary International, 1906-1957" (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 2018), 25.

[33] Maria Khotimsky, "World Literature, Soviet Style: A Forgotten Episode in the History of the Idea," *Ab Imperio* 3, no. 13 (2013): 143.

[34] Isabelle Ruth Kaplan, "The Art of Nation-building: National Culture and Soviet Politics in Stalin-era Azerbaijan and Other Minority Republics" (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2017), 21, <http://hdl.handle.net/10822/1047813>.

[35] Schild, "Between Moscow and Baku," 52-61.

[36] Miroslav Hroch, "National Self-Determination from a Historical Perspective," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 37, no. 3/4 (1995): 284-285, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40869721>,

[37] Schild, "Between Moscow and Baku," 54-56.

[38] Ibid, 71.

[39] *Первый Всесоюзный съезд*, 15.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid, 113.

[42] Boram Shin, "Inventing a National Writer: The Soviet Celebration of the 1948 Alisher Navoi Jubilee and the Writing of Uzbek History," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2017): 124-125.

[43] Although Kocherli includes Nizami Ganjavi in his catalog, he introduces him as an Iranian poet based on one of his poems. Firudin Köçərli, *Azərbaycan ədəbiyyatı*, I cild (Bakı: Avrasiya Press, 2005), 100.

[44] David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 281.

[45] Translations among national literatures often relied on Russian as an intermediary language.

[46] Susanna Witt, "The Shorthand of Empire: *Podstrochnik* Practices and the Making of Soviet Literature," *Ab Imperio* 3 (2013): 155-161.

[47] Kaplan, "The Art of Nation-building," 187-195.

[48] Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 6.

[49] This preparation also resulted from the uncertainty the Terror gave rise to. Kaplan, "The Art of Nation-building," 136-138.

[50] Ibid, 183-184.

[51] Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment," 443.

[52] Stalin's personal connection to Georgia played an important role in Rustaveli's high reputation in the Soviet canon. Eric R. Scott, *Familiar Strangers: The Georgian*

Diaspora and the Evolution of Soviet Empire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 77.

[\[53\]](#) Kaplan, "The Art of Nation-building," 195-202.

[\[54\]](#) Ibid, 237-240.