

Book Review: The Patriarch of Turkism. Ahmet bey Ağaoğlu

written by Robert Denis

In the summer of 1887, Ahmet Ağaoğlu was in the mountains of Karabakh with his mother's relatives, nomadic herdspeople of the Saricali tribe. Having just graduated from the Realschule in Tbilisi, the young man was about to leave the pastures near Shusha and make the long journey north to the imperial capital of St. Petersburg to enter the Polytechnic Institute.

Ağaoğlu's uncle, who, as the oldest male, was head of the family, had planned for Ağaoğlu to receive a traditional Shi'i Muslim education, culminating with advanced training as a cleric at the Shi'i educational centers in Karbala and Najaf in modern-day Iraq. It was Ağaoğlu's mother, Taza khanim, who intervened, surreptitiously at first, and ensured that he received a secular European education, setting him on the path that he would follow for the rest of his life and career.

Taza khanim herself had received no such education. Her brother was an assistant to the head of the city administration of Shusha, and another relative had served in the Russian military in Poland and St. Petersburg. Their employment by the state and their fluency in Russian, the lingua franca of the empire, made them respected men in their community. Without understanding the full import of what she was doing, Taza khanim nevertheless fought to give her son every advantage, and if that meant a new, alien form of education, then that is what he would get.

And yet, deep down, Taza khanim harbored fears that her son's education might lead him too far from local traditions. In his memoirs, Ağaoğlu left a description of his departure from Karabakh. As a coach waited to take him to far-away St. Petersburg, he said goodbye to his mother for what would turn out to be the last time. In an emotional scene, Taza khanim

took a surprised Ağaoğlu aside, held his head to her breasts, and tearfully demanded that he swear, no matter what, never to marry a Christian.

It was Taza khanim who had fought for Ağaoğlu's education which would transform him into a cosmopolitan man of the world, a multilingual scholar, journalist, and politician, and yet in the final words she spoke to her son she seemed to reveal her own reservations, and the limits within which she hoped to be able to contain the process of change she had initiated. Ağaoğlu's entire life would be defined by this tension.

The story of Ağaoğlu's life and thought has been told most recently in a book published in Russian in 2018 by TEAS Press called *The Patriarch of Turkism. Ahmet bey Ağaoğlu*, by Aydin Balayev. The book traces Ağaoğlu's dramatic biography, from his time as a schoolboy in Shusha and Tbilisi to his studies in Paris, where he first gained recognition as a scholar; his return to the Caucasus, where he embarked on a career as a journalist and political organizer; and finally his relocation to Turkey, where he took an active and prominent role in politics during the turbulent period when the Ottoman Empire was crumbling and the Republic of Turkey was founded.

From a young age, Ağaoğlu was forced by his experiences to consider complex questions of identity. At school in Shusha, Ağaoğlu was one of only a handful of Muslim students in a majority Armenian class, and he was constantly picked on. As he continued his education, in Tbilisi and Paris, he was always in a small minority, or indeed sometimes the only Muslim. It was disheartening for him to see the frequent surprise with which people reacted upon meeting a Muslim pursuing a secular European education.

The Muslim district of Tbilisi, Sheytan Bazar, was the poorest part of the city, and its residents formed an underclass separate from the rest of the population. "For the first time

I observed a situation," writes Ağaoğlu, "when two human groups living side by side, without mixing, were clearly divided into 'upper and lower' categories. I remember vividly how this observation shocked my consciousness and conjured in me a feeling of disgust."^[1]

But at the same time, Ağaoğlu's early experiences also provided models and plans of action to remedy the problems that he saw in Muslim society. In Tbilisi, for example, Ağaoğlu attended his first underground political gathering, which "had a very powerful effect on [Ağaoğlu's] spiritual life."^[2] He also found work there tutoring an Armenian girl from a wealthy family in geometry and algebra. By her level of education, Ağaoğlu's student contrasted sharply with the Muslim women he knew, none of whom had even basic literacy. Such experiences suggested policies which must be pursued to lift Muslim society out of its torpor, such as education and women's liberation, as well as means of implementing them, i.e. revolutionary methods of political organization and mobilization.

But first Ağaoğlu would have to define what society he belonged to and where its boundaries were, and his answers to these questions shifted over the course of his life. When he first began to write about such things in Paris, he identified as an Iranian. Although Persian was not his native language, Ağaoğlu was a Shi'i Muslim and the Caucasus had long been under the cultural and political dominance of Iran. Perhaps under the influence of Aryan racial theories popular in Europe at the time, Ağaoğlu idealized ancient Persia, but unlike some of his teachers in Paris, he believed that Shi'i Islam was a potentially revolutionary force, writing "if Muslims are to be revitalized, it will all be thanks to the Shi'i world." Turkey, meanwhile, "will not be successful," in his view, "because individualism is dead there."

In 1894, Ağaoğlu returned to the Caucasus, where he worked as

a writer, a teacher, and a politician. He actively campaigned for the spread of literacy and secular education, as well as for women's liberation in the Muslim community. As a politician, he served in the Baku City Duma from 1903 to 1909, using his position to fight for equal rights for Muslim subjects of the Tsar, although without much success. During the tragic Armenian-Azeri conflict of 1905, he founded the first Muslim political party in the Caucasus, Difai, and took part in the Armenian-Azeri peace negotiations held by the Russian viceroy in the Caucasus in 1906.

During this period, pan-Islamism began to overtake Shi'ism in Ağaoğlu's thought. In one of his works, he criticized Shi'i clerics for creating and exacerbating the divide between Sunnis and Shi'is, for which he was actually sentenced to death by a fatwa, saved only by the intervention of the oil millionaire Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev. He believed that the Muslim world must unite and reform to become the equal of Europe, rather than be swallowed up by the European empires. "Left to their own devices," he wrote in the newspaper Kaspî in 1900, "Muslim peoples, so disconnected, so diverse in terms of their ethnic and racial composition, and finally, so backwards, would never have recognized the unifying forces concealed within them... Only a strong external impulse, the fear of annihilation, and an acute sense of self-preservation could awaken these hidden and barely perceptible forces. That impulse was given to the Muslim world by Europe" (p. 119).

A controversial figure in the Caucasus, facing pressure from many different sides and in fear of imprisonment, Ağaoğlu decided to move to Istanbul in 1909. He would spend the rest of his life in Turkey, only returning to the Caucasus once, during the period of Azerbaijan's independence, as a political advisor to the Turkish general Nuri Pasha, commander of the Islamic Army of the Caucasus. During this final period in his life, Ağaoğlu embraced a Turkic identity and took an active part in nation-building in the formative years of the Republic of Turkey. He was one of the founders of the society Türk

Yurdu and its eponymous journal, and actively participated in other organizations as well, the purpose of which was to develop the Turkish language, promote scholarship and education in Turkish, study Turkic history, etc. He played a prominent role in Turkish politics, holding influential positions such as the head of the General Directorate of Press and Information, until 1930 when his relations with Atatürk and İsmet İnönü had deteriorated and he was relegated to the opposition. Ağaoğlu died on May 19, 1939.

The Patriarch of Turkism is informative and sometimes insightful, and particularly valuable for Russian-speaking readers, as it's the only biography of Ağaoğlu in Russian as far as I know, but it is not without problems, a few of which I will try to outline here.

Balayev is not merely a biographer of Ağaoğlu, but in terms of his positions on questions of ethnicity, Turkic nationalism, progress, etc., his is also an acolyte. One of the side-effects of Balayev's reverence for Ağaoğlu is a tendency at times towards idealization or even hagiography, turning Ağaoğlu into something of a secular saint. This can be seen quite clearly in the epithets and descriptions used to characterize Ağaoğlu throughout the book, as well as the overall tone. For example:

From a young age, an innate sense of justice and a striving towards freedom turned Ahmet bey into a principled and implacable fighter against any manifestations of arbitrariness, cruelty and self-indulgence of the powers that be (p. 84).

This is far from an isolated instance. Here is another example:

And until the end of his days he remained faithful to this ideal of serving his people, although on this path he had to face many obstacles and dangers, which often represented a real threat to his life and safety (p. 91).

I would never claim that Ağaoğlu didn't have many admirable qualities, but these exalted descriptions of him are symptomatic of a black-and-white view of the world, of good and evil, heroes and villains, etc., that distorts history by oversimplifying it. This demonstrates a lack of a critical distance between author and subject which would allow for more objective assessments.

Let's take a look at another example, which has nothing to do with Ağaoğlu personally. Here is part of Balayev's analysis of Russian Imperial and Soviet nationalities policies:

The unambiguously negative attitude towards Turkism in Russia did not change even after the Bolsheviks came to power as a result of the October 1917 coup. And it was quite natural, since the Soviet Union, in essence, was a somewhat modified form of the Russian Empire in the Marxist package. At the same time, the strategic goal of both empires was identical. The Soviet regime, like the former Tsarist Russia, tried to implement the idea of "the messianic role of the Russian people as a "teacher and spiritual trustee" of other nations. Only ideological attitudes, under the cover of which it was planned to solve this problem, have changed. And any national ideology that hinders the implementation of this messianic role, declared a reactionary and criminal (p. 207).

Whatever you think of Russian and Soviet nationalities policies, this passage is a massive generalization of very complex issues. Not only were there significant differences between Russian imperial and Soviet nationalities policies, but neither were even internally consistent, changing and evolving as time passed. To take one example, how is this passage compatible with the early Soviet policy of *korenizatsiya*, the expansion of state-funded Turkic language education and publishing in the 1920s, state support for "language building," etc. In this passage and others, the author sometimes makes generalizations so broad that they contribute nothing to our understanding and, in the worst

instances, are misleading.

This black-and-white approach to history, arising from a lack of critical distance, results not only in superlative epithets and oversimplified analyses. It has also affected Balayev's handling of purely factual matters. Allow me to quote a rather lengthy passage to demonstrate what I mean. Here is the account from *The Patriarch of Turkism* of the turbulent period in Ağaoğlu's life in Baku just prior to his move to Turkey, when he was a prominent writer and a member of the city Duma:

On top of all that, with his harsh statements and intractable and principled position on major sociopolitical and national problems, A. Ağaoğlu made quite a number of influential enemies among his fellow countrymen. These ill-wishers, including obscurantists from among the Muslim clergy and self-satisfied but narrow-minded representatives of the wealthy sections of Azerbaijani society, never missed an opportunity to arrange various kinds of provocations against A. Ağaoğlu. They were behind numerous articles published in the press with offensive attacks against Ahmet bey.

And when it became obvious that all these dirty tricks could not undermine A. Ağaoğlu's authority in society, which he had won by his selfless service to the interests of the people, his enemies took a rather vile step, which even a century later inspires only revulsion towards those behind it and those who carried it out. In 1908, in the building of the Public Assembly of Baku, Ahmet bey was beaten by paid hirelings of his enemies...

Most likely, this particular incident was the last straw that broke the patience of A. Ağaoğlu. Indeed, for Ahmet bey it was quite natural and even expected to face hostility towards his person from Armenians and Russian chauvinists, with whom he, to put it mildly, was in constant confrontation. It's another matter when such villainy is carried out against you by representatives of your native people, for whose interests you

have fought so wholeheartedly and selflessly... (p. 234-235).

First of all, we see the same idealization of Ağaoğlu that has already been pointed out. He has taken an "intractable and principled position" in his "selfless service to the interests of the people," for which he always "fought so wholeheartedly and selflessly," etc. The demonization of his political opponents is equally emphatic, turning them into nothing more than caricatures. They're presented as "obscurantists" or "self-satisfied but narrow-minded," plotting unspecified "provocations" and "dirty tricks," etc.

But the larger problem is that the reader comes away without any clear answer to the simple question of what happened. Who were Ağaoğlu's "ill-wishers" and "enemies?" We are told they published "numerous articles in the press," but nowhere are they quoted. Balayev hints that he has identified the people who hired Ağaoğlu's attackers as "representatives of his native people." Why doesn't he reveal their identities to the reader? Why do all of Ağaoğlu's political opponents and personal enemies remain faceless and mute?

In a historical study, the cast of characters is determined not by their moral qualities, but by the significance of the roles they played. Balayev considered this campaign against Ağaoğlu significant enough to include in his book, and it is indeed very important if it played a role in Ağaoğlu's decision to leave the Caucasus. In that case the people involved and their actions should be characterized in some detail, certainly more than we are given here. Not only has Balayev failed to offer a sufficient description, he hasn't even supplied citations for inquisitive readers who would like to go to the primary sources. We are left without any real understanding of this conflict in Azeri society which played such a key role in Ağaoğlu's life.

Returning for a moment to August 1887 in the mountains of Karabakh, let's take another look at Balayev's retelling of

Ağaoğlu's parting with his mother. Here is the scene as it appears in *The Patriarch of Turkism* (note that Balayev has put this passage in quotation marks):

A number of friends and relatives, male and female, had come to see me off. I was saying goodbye to everyone beside the coach. When my mother's turn came, she drew me aside, pressed my head to her breast, and said, "Go, my son. May God be with you. But swear to me that you won't marry a Christian. Otherwise, I'll deprive you of my maternal blessing! "Come, swear, my son. People are waiting for us." "I swear," I said. "No, say it the way I said it." I repeated her words exactly. She, in her turn, kissed my brow, then we approached the coach (p. 46).^[3]

Compare that with the original passage as it appears in Ağaoğlu's memoir:

A number of friends and relatives, male and female, had come to see me off. I was saying goodbye to everyone beside the coach. When my mother's turn came, she drew me aside, opened her veil and brought out her two breasts from inside her blouse. She took my head between them and in a tearful voice said, "Go, my son. May God be with you. But swear me this oath – say 'If I ever marry a Christian girl, may the milk which I sucked from these breasts be poison to me!'" Everyone around was looking at us, but my mother had turned her back to the coach and no one could make out what was going on. I was so affected that I wanted to cry and hug my mother and, forgetting all about the coach, stay where I was without lifting my head from her breasts. In a soft voice my mother said, "Come, my son. People are waiting for us. Swear." "I swear," I said. "No, say it the way I said it." I repeated her words exactly. She kissed my brow one last time, then she closed her blouse, arranged her veil, and we approached the coach.^[4]

As this comparison demonstrates, for whatever reason, Balayev

has truncated Ağaoğlu's account of this seminal moment in his biography. Ağaoğlu's original recollection, in which his mother lifted her veil and exposed her breasts and Ağaoğlu was overcome with emotion, expresses much more intensely the drama of that moment. It is also more informative. For example, it describes a mode of behavior that is in some ways familiar and in some ways strange, giving us an insight into how different the world of Ağaoğlu's childhood was from the world we inhabit today. But most importantly, the original recollection is preferable because it's true: it is Ağaoğlu's best recollection of that moment in time. While memory is never 100% accurate, Ağaoğlu's recollection is naturally more accurate than an arbitrarily redacted version of it, where details have been removed and the words of the oath altered without any indication.

These are a few examples of how, in specific instances, the author has oversimplified Ağaoğlu's biography, by painting black-and-white pictures of heroes and villains, and by ignoring sources or details that could give the reader greater insight. And for these reasons, in my opinion, while *The Patriarch of Turkism* can serve as an overview of Ağaoğlu's life and thought for those new to the topic, it will often be unsatisfactory for the reader with a serious scholarly interest in the subject.

References

^[1] Ağaoğlu, Samet. *Babamdan Hatıralar*. Ankara, 1940, p. 78

^[2] Quoted in Ağaoğlu, Əhməd bəy. *Xatirələr*. Bakı: TEAS Press Nəşriyyat evi, 2019, p. 32.

^[3] Ağaoğlu, Samet. *Babamdan Hatıralar*. Ankara, 1940, s. 88-89 (This is adapted from Holly Shissler's translation of the same passage, altered where necessary to reflect Balayev's version:

Shissler, Holly. *Between Two Empires. Ahmet Ağaoğlu and the New Turkey*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2003, p. 56-57)

[\[4\]](#) This is a slightly adapted and expanded version of Holly Shissler's translation, cited above.