Teachers in Soviet Azerbaijan

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One of the most pressing issues facing Azerbaijan in the 1990s after its independence was the need to reform the education sector. The content of education, conceptualized under the rule of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, could not serve the interests of the independent Azerbaijani state. However, the problems Azerbaijan encountered in education demanded not only changes in the content of the subjects taught. The pedagogical staff who taught disciplines also had to now adapt to the new conditions. But it was impossible to replace Soviet-schooled teachers with personnel that would meet the requirements of the new conditions in just a few years. Thirty-two years have now passed since the collapse of the USSR, which is presumably a length of time sufficient to train a new generation of teaching staff. However, independent Azerbaijan's education personnel are still trained by Soviet-era specialists, professors and teachers.

The problems of the pedagogical personnel of modern Azerbaijan is rooted in the Soviet period. In the first two decades of the establishment of Soviet power, the project of combating illiteracy and launching a cultural revolution sharply increased the demand for pedagogical personnel. This, in turn, led to a massive influx of semi-literate people without pedagogical training into schools. Teachers who lacked sufficient professional knowledge and were not versed in teaching methodologies had to educate a politically reliable generation loyal to the Soviet power, as well as actively participate in political campaigns, to advocate and advance social and political projects of the Soviet power in the regions where they lived. In this article, I will examine the Soviet government's expectations of teachers and how they met or didn't meet those expectations.

Soviet Education: Mission and Goals

Education is a critically important infrastructure of every state because it transmits the politics and ideology of power within society. Education in different political systems – for instance, in politically liberal democracies and authoritarian states – has multiple purposes. State structures, through education, embrace the values they see as necessary in their societies, set social priorities, and ensure that society is unified around a particular ideology. The state accomplishes all these by defining the content of education. But the fact that education is so important to political power is not limited only to its content.

The state, by setting education policy, determines when a new generation starts schooling, how long that schooling lasts, as well as how learning standards are achieved. Through education people are subjected to the discipline established by the state; they start and end school on the same day and at the same time, having learnt the same information. Education takes place in specific institutions, and these institutions are accountable to state structures. The state defines the relations between different levels of education, establishes specific rules for student and teachers' transition from one level to another. These rules give the state the last word in the field of education. The rules adopted in educational institutions serve to ensure direct subordination, discipline, and political loyalty.

Researchers have noted the exceptional role of education in the formation of a nation-state, the rise of ethno-nationalism, laying the foundation for ethnic conflicts, and the unification of the nation around political power with different goals.[1] The Bolsheviks promised the people free and accessible education for all. The Bolsheviks understood the importance of education to political power. Ensuring access to educational institutions for all was not motivated by benevolence alone. Lenin, the leader of the Russian Bolsheviks, recognized this in his writings. Lenin equated the right to national self-determination with the right of peoples

to education in their own languages. He explicitly wrote: “It is not the language of education but its content that matters, and every nation can receive education in any language it wishes, but this does not mean that the right to determine the content of education will also be given to that nation.”[2] This response shows that the Bolsheviks realized that education had exceptional possibilities to serve the interests of political power.

In the early years of Bolshevik rule, compulsory mass schooling of various strata of society was welcomed not only by the ordinary population, but also by progressive intellectuals. Open-minded people such as Boris Pasternak and Lev Landau treated Bolshevik policy on education as an opportunity to destroy the social injustice that had prevailed in Russia for centuries. But this attitude toward Soviet education changed with the creation of Soviet textbooks. The intelligentsia gradually realized what purposes these textbooks served, and that abolishing illiteracy would lead to the dispossession.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, schools had a handful of teachers taught in Azerbaijani. But these teachers were for the most part highly qualified specialists with a strong educational background. For example, Hasan Zardabi graduated from the Department of Natural Sciences of Department of Physics and Mathematics at Moscow University. During this period, there was no shortage of teachers because the number of schools and pupils was small. But the situation changed after the Soviet authorities proclaimed a campaign against illiteracy and labeled specialists as “enemies of the revolution” and “alien elements.” The Soviet authorities needed teachers to fight mass illiteracy, and these teachers had to be of worker-peasant origin.

The role of the Bolsheviks’ educational policy in eradicating illiteracy, the rate of which was quite high in Soviet Azerbaijan, is undeniable. 2.313.744 people lived in the

republic of Azerbaijan in 1926, and only 422.000 people (14%) were literate. The literacy level among the Muslim population of Azerbaijan was quite low compared to other nationalities. For example, the literacy rate for Azerbaijanis (Turks), 62% of the population, was 8,5%. Meanwhile, 33,2% of Armenians and 62,5% of Russians were literate.[3] The Azerbaijani SSR lagged behind both the Armenian SSR and Georgian SSR in the implementation of the Soviet educational policy. In the late 1920s, Armenia and Georgia managed to execute a state plan set to eliminate illiteracy by achieving 76,9% and 65,6% literacy, respectively, while Azerbaijan only reached 58%.[4] Azerbaijan's lagging behind in education was largely because of a lack of teaching staff capable of teaching in the native language. To quickly overcome this problem, preference was given to Azerbaijanis upon admission to higher educational institutions in the republic, especially pedagogical specialties. In 1924, all 605 students enrolled in the Azerbaijan Pedagogical Institute and teachers' seminaries were Azerbaijani.[5] However, the admission of only Azerbaijanis to these specialties seriously undermined the quality of education. The main reason for this was a shortage of university teachers who could teach these students in Azerbaijani (Turkish). Thus, cadres who were semi-literate in Azerbaijani began to work in universities. These semi-literate personnel gave incomplete knowledge to students studying in higher education institutions. On the other hand, the educational structures, with a view to statistically implementing the Soviet state plan, weren't worried about students' proper understanding of the syllabus, and therefore, students were still graduated despite incomplete mastery of the subjects taught.

Shortcomings that existed in the training of pedagogical personnel in the 1920s-1930s were the main reason for the low quality of education in the republic, the insufficient level of knowledge of teachers specializing in both humanities and sciences. These shortcomings were clearly manifested only a

few years after semi-literate teachers with incomplete education and no knowledge of teaching technologies and pedagogy began teaching in schools.

Through their activities in the cultural sector in the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet educators became active participants in and the backbone of Soviet projects in the socio-economic sphere.[6] When Soviet rule was established in Azerbaijan, more than 70% of the population lived in rural areas, and Soviet legitimacy in the republic was maintained by ensuring the loyalty of the rural population to the government. It was the teachers who voluntarily or forcibly undertook this mission. Soviet authorities demanded that teachers, as representatives of the intellectual class, reveal anti-revolutionary elements, and participate in the anti-religious campaign, the abolition of illiteracy, collectivization, and the implementation of the anti-kulak campaign. In dire economic times, teachers economically dependent on the state had to either meet the expectations of the authorities or face repressive measures, which included being publicly condemned as enemies of Soviet power. Teachers often chose the former.[7] By securing teachers' loyalty through economic pressure and financial opportunities, the authorities were thus able to convert the Soviet teacher into a propagandist for their political values.[8] It was the start of the politicization of both education and educational institutions. After that, the Soviet authorities also assigned teachers responsibility for a number of projects in education. In the early 1930s, the Campaign for Compulsory Universal Primary Education challenged teachers to identify children who were not attending school and force them into school. However, in the 1930s, the dire economic situation severely limited the participation of children from rural poor families in education. This situation created a conflict between teachers and their local community. As a result, the Soviet teacher tried to find common ground with both the authorities and the local community.

The intelligentsia of Soviet Azerbaijan

In the 1920s and 1930s, when Soviet power was just established and the cultural revolution was launched, the perception of educators in the regions was largely unfavorable and the main reason for this was that the clergy targeted the Bolsheviks' cultural revolution policy. These religious figures opposed secular education, hindering the expansion of the Soviet educational system. Encouraged by the clergy, progressive thinkers and Muslim women faced persecution in both urban and rural areas, enduring insults and violence. Religious leaders' influence among the population was so strong that during anti-Soviet rallies, they could provoke men to take the most brutal actions against Soviet educators.

During the wave of protests against Soviet power, the first to suffer were the Soviet intelligentsia. For instance, during the suppression of the Nukha-Zagatala uprising in 1930, government officials stated that the rebels had committed particularly cruel acts against the intelligentsia.[9] The Soviet government's anti-religious policy, the destruction of religious institutions' influence mechanisms and financial resources, dealt a severe blow to the authority of the clergy. Repressions that accompanied collectivization completely broke the resistance of the middle-class and rich peasant farmers. In the villages, there were no longer any forces capable of opposing Soviet power and its educators.

On the eve of World War II, the role of the teacher in Azerbaijani society increased significantly. As representatives of the intelligentsia, teachers became a means of ensuring society's loyalty to the government. The association of Soviet teachers with the government allowed them to strengthen their authority in society. However, teachers' growing social position and authority in society was due not so much to their level of professionalism as to their social value. This situation was favorable for the government. The authority of teachers, whose level of professionalism did

not correspond to that authority, depended entirely on the attitude of the government towards teachers.

In his report to the Central Committee for the 1954-1955 academic year, Mirza Mammadov, Minister of Education of the Azerbaijan SSR, noted that out of 32.488 teachers working in the republic's primary and secondary schools, 8.017 (i.e. 24,6%) had higher education, 10.447 teachers had completed teacher training courses, 13.761 had completed secondary education and 213 had not completed secondary education at all.[10] In the report, the minister discusses the mission of Soviet teachers, emphasizing that they were the leading intellectual class responsible for developing the worldview of the republic's population and forming their political maturity. Nonetheless, the data included in the report indicates that the teachers of Soviet Azerbaijan were unable to reach a level where they could meet the people's needs and serve as an example for society. The minister touches upon the issue of illiteracy among teachers in his report. He highlights instances of injustice in evaluating students' knowledge, in which teachers awarded high grades in exchange for bribes, and in which teachers and school principals did not adhere to ethical norms in some cases. He also draws attention to incidents such as male teachers marrying their underage students, as well as cases of sexual assault and domestic abuse.[11]

There are numerous documents in the archives of Azerbaijan related to the organization of Soviet education, the stages of development of the education strategy and quality standards. These documents consist of reports and analyses sent from local regions to the center. Surveys on the education sector were prepared by the principal of each school and sent to the local education departments and based on these materials, the education departments prepared general reports for quarters and years and submitted them to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education analyzed these materials, prepared reports and presented them to the Central Committee of the

Azerbaijan Communist Party (ACP). To verify the transparency of the information presented by the Ministry of Education, the Central Committee did not usually send inspection commissions to local education departments or schools, but rather directly to the Ministry of Education. Commissions assigned by the ministry determined whether reports reflecting the activities of district education departments were accurate. Ministry commissions rarely organized data verification at the school level. This work was usually implemented by education departments. This means that the reliability of information on the functioning of schools depended on education departments.

In Soviet Azerbaijan, education departments were directly responsible for the reliability of information on the quality of education, the activities of teaching staff, and ethical behavior. Since education departments were subordinate to local party committees, the reports prepared were coordinated with the secretary of the party committee. This influenced the overall evaluation of the work of the district's party committee, so the education departments preferred to remain silent about negative issues in official documents. Rarely, when a criminal incident occurred or the ministry received regular and massive complaints, the ministry would initiate inspections at the school level and the district party organizations and education departments had to face the reality.

The most frequently noted problem in education reports was the quality of teaching and students' comprehension of subjects. These issues were brought up for discussion at teacher congresses and meetings of education officials. For example, in August 1953 in the republican meeting of employees of public educational institutions of the Ministry of Education of the USSR, the head of the Kirovabad (now Ganja) city education department stated that one out of every five students had difficulty in mastering the subjects taught and a quarter of students received an unsatisfactory grade in the written exam in their native language. The department head

explained the main reason for this was that teachers' allowed "liberalism" when assessing students' knowledge.[12] That same year, the education minister, in one of his speeches to the Central Committee, raised the issue of teachers' liberalism and noted that the headmaster of a secondary school in Baghir village, Goychay district, was forcing teachers to write exam assignments and then students copied the assignments. In one of the secondary schools in Gazakh, although 100 students in the 10th grade had provided unsatisfactory answers in their exams, 59 of them were given high grades. In a Kazakh comprehensive school, 59 out of 100 10th grade students gave an unacceptable answer on an exam.[13]

Reports and minutes of meetings prepared in 1953 by the Guba District Department of Public Education noted the illiteracy of teachers in rural schools, their inability to correctly draw up a learning plan, the division of the school year into three quarters instead of four, and delivery of false information to the Department of Education about the attendance of pupils and their mastery of subjects.[14] As an example of teachers' illiteracy, the head of the department cited the fact that an elementary school teacher was unable to write the names of students correctly in the journal. Reports compiled by education departments emphasized that students faced serious problems in understanding their native language and mathematics. For example, one of the reports of the above-mentioned department wrote that an H. Babayev, the elementary school principal and teacher in the village of Bad Galagah, while solving the equation 2 + 2×2, he performed the operations in order, rather than first multiplying and then subtracting.[15] The situation was similar in other district and Baku schools.[16]

The main reason for the problem of illiterate teachers was undoubtedly the schools that trained pedagogical personnel. For example, the report of the Azerbaijan Correspondence Pedagogical School for the 1951-1952 academic year indicated that the performance of students was rather low. Out of 64

students in the school, 3 got a five, 19 a four, 35 a three, and 7 a two in the written exam in the native language. At the written exam in mathematics, one student got a 5, 11 a 4, 29 a 3, and 10 students could not pass the exam. Out of 73 students subject to state exams, 53 got satisfactory marks and were awarded the title of elementary school teacher by the decision of the state qualification commission of the school.[17] In the summer of 1953, when the state exam was held at the Correspondence Pedagogical School, out of 90 students who passed the exam in Azerbaijani language and literature, 30 got unsatisfactory marks on the exam. [18] Vali Akhundov also recognized the low quality of correspondence education institutions.[19]

The situation was no better not only in the correspondence department, but also in the full-time department of the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical Institute. The 1962 report, for example, noted serious problems with attendance and acquisition of courses among the institute students, low level of teachers' knowledge, and lack of research work at the institute. The report also referred to negative circumstances such as improper staff recruitment by the leadership of the institute, prioritizing subjective factors (parochialism, acquaintances, orders from the top) rather than professionalism, and illegal dismissal of employees by leadership. [20] Similar problems existed in important educational institutions such as the Kirovabad Pedagogical Institute and the M.F. Akhundov Institute of Languages.[21]

In the 1950s and 1960s, even the Ministry of Education recognized the poor state of educational institutions: inflated grades, the formal nature of education, the issuance of educational certificates to students who did not attend school, and the theft of funds allocated to vocational schools by government agencies. But these reports did not touch on more sensitive issues related to the activities of educational personnel, such as teacher-pupil, teacher-parent, and school-society relations. Planned inspections in educational

institutions were formal, and reports were prepared in a standardized manner.

Politicization of education

Analyzing the impact of the Soviet system on societies after the collapse of the USSR, experts emphasized the exceptional role of education in this system. The Bolshevik project of cultural revolution brought innovative and progressive ideas to areas across the country, especially in locations of the Soviet Union like Central Asia and the Caucasus and contributed to the eradication of mass illiteracy. Experts noted that Soviet authorities achieved full literacy in the Azerbaijani population, which had lagged far behind in education. These views were based on biased Soviet statistics and public speeches by party leaders. But reality was far from such descriptions. 257 out of every 1000 people in Azerbaijan aged 10 and older had primary education on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union.[22] That is, the Soviet government failed to realize its goal of completely eradicating illiteracy in Azerbaijan. Instead, it opened the doors of educational institutions to semi-literate people, encouraging unprofessionalism, low quality teaching, and an emphasis on political loyalty over science and literacy, with the intention of making education accessible to all.

The Soviet regime highly politicized the education system, with both the content and organization of education under the direct control of the communist party. The politicization of education, first of all, began with the drafting of the curriculum and the definition of the content and purpose of the subjects to be taught. This process that started in the late 1930s, intensified after World War II. It was primarily the establishment of subjects, such as history of the party, scientific communism, philosophy of Marxism-Leninism, political economy. The existence of a single system of discipline in education, subordination and downward accountability in educational institutions politicized the

management of education and created obstacles for school autonomy.

Soviet power did not allow any independent organization of teachers outside the party. The organization of the educational process on the basis of the same curricula, textbooks and manuals prohibited the professional freedom of teachers. Teachers who worked in the education system actively participated in various political campaigns of the Soviet regime and became its representatives and support on the local level.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet teachers justified in schools the policy of Soviet power and actively involved in the political projects of the Soviet power, such as industrialization, collectivization, anti-religious policies, the fight against kulaks, cultural revolution, etc.

In the 1950s and 1970s, Soviet teachers were involved in the fulfillment of the state's economic plans. In regions where cotton grew, teachers worked in cotton plantations together with pupils, pupils skipped school at least 3 months of the academic year every year, while Soviet intellectuals were directly involved in the exploitation of child labor. The status of the teacher in the Soviet era arose from the state administration. By politicizing education and turning teachers into an instrument of policy, the party granted them a dual status: Teachers became influential leaders of the local community and obedient servants of power.

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