The creation of the common historical past: the use of the heritage in the Turkish-Azerbaijani relations

written by Elshan Mustafayev

In August 2010, when visiting Azerbaijan, the-then Turkish President Abdullah Gül visited Oncallı village in Azerbaijan's northwest district of Qax [Gakh]. This visit was part of the president's official program. Oncalli village is home to a religious site – the grave of a popular 13th century Anatolian poet, Yunus Emre, rests there. The authenticity of the grave is widely contested. Some historians have denied the authenticity of the grave.[1] This however, mattered little at the time, as the Azerbaijani authorities sought to rebuild a common material heritage for both states,that would serve as part of the rapprochement between the two countries.[2]

The political use of the Ottoman history is one of the pillars of Turkey's new foreign policy since AKP's accession to power in November 2002.[3] Whether through restoration (or at times reconstruction) of the architectural works from the Ottoman era, or through an attempt to change the content of school textbooks in the successor countries of the Ottoman Empire,[4] the AKP government has tried for more than a decade to make the Ottoman heritage a tool of its regional diplomacy. In this sense, it is interesting to explore how the new neo-ottoman discourse impacts the relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan in light of the following conclusions. It is important to remind that the relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey are at the highest level, and the leaders of two countries describe it as "fraternal" on every occasion.[5] However, despite good relations between two countries, the neo-Ottoman discourse

could not, *a priori*, find the field of application vis-à-vis Azerbaijan, because current area of this country has never been part of the historical Ottoman territories, except for some short periods (1590-1607; 1723-1735).

There are no significant Ottoman monuments in Azerbaijan as is the case in the Balkans, for instance. This begs the question as to how major actors on both sides find historical evidence to support the discourse of the "ancient brotherhood."[6] Putting aside the complexity of this rhetoric, this paper will explore the Azerbaijani perspective of the politics of memory towards Turkey in Azerbaijan. For this purpose, the events of 1918 will be evaluated. This paper will also analyze the use of the Turkish-Ottoman history by Azerbaijani actors from political and cultural spheres and the limits of the discourse on ancient brotherhood.

Elchibey era and ethno-nationalism

The first politics of memory bringing Azerbaijan on the same historical ground with Turkey was carried out under the presidency of Elchibey. To cite one example, the head of Shamkir department erected a gray wolf statue in November 1992. [7] The main characteristic of this first period was the very ethno-nationalistic and mythical dimension of the discourse on the eternal brotherhood between two countries. This was a result of the training of a whole generation of historians and political scientists with nationalist *weltanschauung* in Soviet Azerbaijan.

In the post-soviet period, the Azerbaijani nationalist leaders who began to look for common heritage in the ancient times, aimed at giving historical depth to the close relations with Turkey. The ethno-nationalist vision that this Azeri intellectual generation propagated on the history of the country was reflected in their pro-Turkey vocabulary on one hand and clear rejection of Russian domination on the other.[8] The latter is reflected in the decision to erect the

statue of Sheikh Shamil, the leader of the anti-Russian struggle of Caucasian people in the nineteenth century in the northwest of the country in 1992.

President Elchibey himself was a historian and he was also surrounded by many other historians, who became high-ranking officials and political leaders of the country during his leadership between 1992 and 1993. Many of these historians, dominated the academic world. The dominant presence of the nationalist historians and intellectuals within the political, social and economic space had a significant impact on the country's policies that were being drafted at the time. One of the areas where this impact was felt the most was the content of textbooks, which was modified to fit nationalist senses.

The Turkic dimension of the country's history was prioritized. The new historiography dissociated Azerbaijan's national history from that of Iran and Russia. This homogeneity of country's history became dominant, refusing to recognize ethnic and religious particularities, which were an important feature of the Caucasian region. What is paradoxical in the official view of the nationalist government of 1992 and 1993 regarding Turkish-Azerbaijani relations is that Azerbaijani leaders did not hesitate to appear with the leaders of the Turkish far-right party, such as Alparslan Türkeş, who was actually from the Turkish opposition and got only meager results in the national elections in Turkey. This proximity helped to further the intervention of the some far-right elements into Azerbaijani politics, who even tried to organize a coup against Haydar Aliyev.[9]

The new leaders of Azerbaijan in the early 90s relied discursively on the heritage of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1920). Many of the first leaders of ADR (Azerbaijan Democratic Republic), who were exiled to Turkey and who died there, became important symbols in the path of rapprochement between the two countries. In addition, the memory of the other historic figures, who lived in the early

XX century in Azerbaijan and were buried in Turkey, was re-activated. They, in fact, became the symbol of the struggle against Russian occupation. The grave of a local Azerbaijani lord Kerbalayi Ismayil in the province of Igdir in Turkey later became a pilgrimage site for Azerbaijani nationalist authors is just one example.[10]

1993 and the era under Heydar Aliyev

While the ethno-nationalist dimension of Turkophile rhetoric was considerably reduced with Heydar Aliyev's accession to power in June 1993, the pro-Turkish politics of memory of the New Azerbaijan Party government was not too different from the Elchibey era. Since the political space in Turkey was controlled by the military establishment, Azerbaijan valorized secular symbols of the Turkish republic, such as erecting the bust of the founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, in different places, naming streets and avenues after him, and including him in the textbooks in Azerbaijan.

In another attempt to create a discourse on the common history, historical, religious, political, military, literary and scientific figures were identified as key players in the history of the two countries.[11] They were people, who were born in Azerbaijan, but later emigrated to the Ottoman Empire for various reasons. The two prominent examples are Hemze Nigari, a Naqshbandiyya leader and Azerbaijani poet of the nineteenth century,[12] and Seyid Yahya Bakuvi, the religious figure of the 15th century.[13] Other examples include figures from the medieval folklore, such as Dede Korkut, who were used to support the new dominant discourse on the ancient brotherhood.

1918 and the arrival of Ottoman troops to Azerbaijan

In this context of glorification of the Turkish heritage, the theme of the arrival of the Ottoman troops to Azerbaijan in the spring of 1918 became the main subject for constructing a

myth of historical fraternity between the two peoples. According to the official historiography elaborated by the Azerbaijani authors, “the Ottoman troops were sent to Azerbaijan “to help the young Republic of Azerbaijan to recover its territories fallen into the hands of the Bolsheviks and Dashnaks”, and “help the Azerbaijani people fight Armenian armed forces.” Thus, the existence of one enemy – Armenians – became a common point for both sides when referring to this specific historical episode.[14]

The scientific publications, TV shows were commissioned and funded by the Azerbaijani government to glorify this point in history. Documentaries were commissioned by the national television channels, exhibitions and poetry competitions were organized to commemorate this historical date and to praise the memory of the Turkish soldiers, who died in Azerbaijan in 1918. The day Baku was captured by the Ottoman troops on September 15 was marked as “liberation of Baku” and widely celebrated. Today, tens of thousands of new university students celebrate this day, as they begin the first day of the academic year in the main universities in Baku. This historical episode was so important, that the government of Azerbaijan commissioned the construction of a memorial site dedicated to 1130 Ottoman soldiers who died fighting for Baku in 1918. Inaugurated by the two presidents, Suleyman Demirel and Heydar Aliyev in 2000, this monument became an essential part of the diplomatic protocol for Turkish leaders visiting Azerbaijan.

Active politics of memory was also carried out in several rural districts of Azerbaijan. Today, there are numerous memorials dedicated to the fallen Ottoman soldiers in Azerbaijan. One can often hear of miraculous discoveries of lost graves of Turkish soldiers in Azerbaïjan. The discovery of the six tombs which the Azerbaijani authorities consider to belong to Turkish-Ottoman soldiers in the village of Qubalioglu in Hajigabul district is one example. In September 2012, the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev visited one of these sites in the village of Orta Zayzid in the district of Sheki. [15]

In Azerbaijan, the politics of memory on Turkish tombs is spread all across the country. School teachers often make students in primary and secondary schools visit these monuments as a sign of patriotism. Local authorities also choose these Ottoman tombs as a place for gatherings.[16] Various Azerbaijani historians,[17] as well as some deputies, including Fazil Mustafa, who was sent to Turkey under Elchibey government, or Ali Masimli, pro-government deputy, demand today that the government take more initiatives to commemorate the memory of Turkish commanders and construct a statue in honor of Nuru Pasha, the commander-in-chief of the Ottoman troops sent to Azerbaijan.[18] One can find numerous poems, heroic portraits, and songs[19] by Azerbaijani authors dedicated to Nuru Pasha. His grave in Istanbul is visited by the Azeri associations in Turkey. Azerbaijan's flag is raised on his grave.[20] Back in Azerbaijan, the inauguration of a museum dedicated to Nuru Pasha's military activities in Ganja is scheduled to open at the centenary of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan on May 18, 2018. [21]

It is interesting to note that despite the fact that the Ottoman troops were composed of different ethnicities, the graves of these soldiers are identified as "Turkish soldiers," ignoring its heterogeneous composition. Some Azerbaijani actors, including the member of the parliament, Qanira Pashayeva, use this for some ideological and geopolitical issues, as was the case with the situation of Turkmens in Kirkuk. In order to attract the public attention to the defense of the situation of the Turkmen minority in Iraq, the Azerbaijani nationalists gathered around the Memorial to Turkish Soldier in Baku and emphasized that the six soldiers from the Ottoman troops who died in Baku in 1918 were from the city of Kirkuk. The message is simple, as formulated by one of

participants: “They came to save us a hundred years ago, they are the example for the future generations.”[22]

Searching for every little element in the past, Azerbaijani authors and members of the government actively carry out the politics of memory for the sake of bringing Azerbaijan closer to Turkey and proving that the friendship and solidarity between the two peoples is truly historic. For example, high-ranking officials from the Ministry of National Defense are proposing constructing a memorial on the island of Nargin, 11 kilometers east of the Absheron Peninsula, where thousands of Turkish soldiers (along with Austrians and Germans) were grouped together as prisoners of war,[23] many of whom died in deplorable conditions.

Nuri Pasha is not the only Turkish solider, who is often praised in Azerbaijan for his military skills. Kazim Karabekir Pasha is another commander who saved Nakhichevan, according to the official discourse in Azerbaijan. A Turkish mosque in Nakhichevan is named after Kazim Karabekir Pasha. In official historiography of Azerbaijan, he is described as the savior “who defeated Armenian forces defending Azerbaijani people against extermination by them.”[24] Just like Nuru Pasha, the name of Kazim Karabekir Pasha is also often celebrated at conferences and symposiums dedicated to the history of the country in 1918. A memorial site celebrates the memory of dead soldiers of Kazim Karabekir Pasha in the city of Nakhichevan. And now, there is demand to commission a statue of him. [25]

While Azeri actors are building a lot of memorials to reinforce the discourse of fraternity between the two peoples, they also demand the same acts from Turkey. For example, Azerbaijani organizations working on the diaspora issues are asking Turkish state institutions for a commemorative plaque in the territory of historic site of battle to the “three thousand Azeris who died at the Battle of Dardanelles in 1915.”[26] In addition, recently there has been proliferation of

monuments to the memory of the victims of the Khojaly massacres, mainly in the Turkish municipalities held by Turkish nationalists, such as in Sakarya, Kocaeli and Izmit districts. Every year on February 26, Turkish and Azerbaijani nationalist organizations meet in front of these monuments to protest against the occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia.[27]

It should be underlined that official (state institutions, members of the government, research centers financed by public money) or politicized actors (Azerbaijanis' diasporic associations in Turkey) are not the only vectors of the pro-Turkish politics of memory in Azerbaijan. Today, more than 10 thousand Azerbaijani students are studying in Turkey,[28] and some Azerbaijani social scientists are conducting research on topics that aim to demonstrate ancient ties between the two peoples.[29] For example, the websites of official institutions in Azerbaijan have focused on the Azerbaijani origin of Zahit Kotku, a leader of the Naqshbandiyya, formerly a spiritual guide to young Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.[30] Benefiting from the rich Ottoman archives, these researchers discovered documents related to the history of Azerbaijan. The results of their research are popularized in the media and in scientific literature for the sake of proving the historical depth of bilateral relations, and historians, like Shahin Mustafayev, have made public calls to concentrate more on the importance of the Ottoman archives for Azerbaijani history.[31] Public authorities in Azerbaijan actively support publication of these documents.[32] This is especially true for the documents from the Ottoman archives related to Karabakh, as they have a very symbolic and political value in Azerbaijan.[33]

Ideological discrepancies

Despite the enthusiasm of Azerbaijani actors with nationalistic pro-Turkish line, the discourse on historical fraternity remains fragile on several points. As it was

mentioned earlier, the Armenian enemy is a cement for the rapprochement of the two parties, but there is a fundamental problem with this argument. If Armenia is perceived as a total enemy for Azerbaijan and for all political actors in this country without an exception, this is certainly not the case for Turkey where one could easily find many protagonist actors, working to develop the bilateral relations between Turkish and Armenian people. Baku does not tolerate any positive developments in the relations between Turkey and Armenia. Every time, a sign of progress in relations between Turkey and Armenia emerges, Azerbaijan demonstrates its readiness to question the common historic elements. In 2008, when Turkey supported the idea of reopening the Turkish-Armenian border, that has been closed since April 1993, the Azerbaijani authorities at the time, responded by removing Turkish flags raised at the memorial site dedicated to the Ottoman soldiers in Baku.

There is also the fact that the Ottoman Empire does not have the same place in the collective memory of the Azerbaijani people as in Turkey. This was observed during the representation of Shah Ismail (the founder of the Safavide state)[34] and Uzun Hasan (founder of the Aqquyunlu State)[35] in the pseudo-historical television series produced in Turkey, which were very popular in neighboring regions. Azeri sources, however, claimed that it did not conform to historic truth. In fact, the memory of these two historical figures is perpetuated in school textbooks. The modern Azeri historians describe them as the "Azerbaijani kings of the middle ages." Azeri authors on social networks and internet sites condemned these series, calling filmmakers to respect historical truths.

Conclusion

Having looked at various factors that have shaped the Azerbaijani view of Turkey, it should help the reader understand one of the foundations on which the bilateral relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan are built on. The use

of the common history discourse has further strengthened the bond between the two states. From this point of view, one can observe that there's a real evolution in the bilateral relations: if the ethnic and linguistic factors have constituted the very foundation of bilateral relations for a long period, the common historic heritage becomes an important factor.

The existence of the Armenian enemy is one of the foundations of this new rhetoric. This helps to create an illusion of the historic brotherhood against a common enemy. Historical elements selected for the political use are to prove that the common enemy has always been so. In addition, Turkey and Azerbaijan try to spread this discourse on the common enemy to other cases: the enemy of Turkey also becomes that of Azerbaijan. In this sense, Turkish pro-government newspapers regularly publish unchecked information about the presence of the PKK in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. [36]

Given the good level of relations between the two countries, one should expect that the use of the heritage by two sides is to be reinforced in the years to come.

Notes and References

[1] As it exists many « concurrent » graves in Turkey, the exact place of the "authentic" grave is still undetermined. http://www.yunusemre.net/turbesi

[2]« Türkiye prezidenti Abdullah Gül…. », *Azertag*, https://azertag.az/xeber/Turkiye_Prezidenti_Abdullah_Gul_Zaqataladan_Sekiye_gelerken_yolustu_Qax_rayonunun_Oncalli_kendindeki_oguz_qebiristanliginda_seyx_Yunus_Amre_ve_onun_mursidi_Haci_Tapdigin_mezarlarini_ziyaret_etmisdir-490066?device=Desktop

[3] The PhD thesis on this subject was submitted successfully by the author in the Institute of Political Science in November 2017. In French, this work is not yet published and

only consultable via the university intranet.

[4] Jeton Musliu, “Kosovo Textbooks Soften Line on Ottoman Rule”, *Balkan Insight,* 22 January 2013

[5] In addition to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (which only Turkey recognizes as a sovereign country in the world) the first official visit of each new head of government is carried out in Azerbaijan.

[6] A french researcher Adeline Braux wrote a very good paper where she questionned this question : Adeline Braux, «Turquie et Azerbaïdjan en quête d’une mémoire commune », 2 february 2015, https://dipnot.hypotheses.org/964

[7] Gray wolf is a symbol of the turkish ultra-nationalist movement.

[8] Landau, J. M., & Kellner-Heinkele, B. (2001). *Politics of language in the ex-Soviet muslim states: Azerbayjan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan*. University of Michigan Press, 2001

[9] Cornell, Svante E. *Azerbaijan since independence*. Routledge, 2015, 86 p.

[10] The nationalist authors from Azerbaijan reconstitute the biography of this historical figure and pretend that he was one who resisted against the sovietization of Azerbaijan and against Armenians armed forces in the early XX century.

[11] To take one example, Azeri authors prefer to focus on the deportation of artisans and architects from the Tabriz Safavid Palace in 1514 by Sultan Selim (1514-1520). Among them, a certain Ali the architect, whom they consider a pionner of the architectural art of Mimar Sinan, the famous Ottoman architect.
http://www.anl.az/down/meqale/zaman/2011/fevral/155442.htm

[12] This religious leader is from Karabakh region and died in Amasya, a city in an Anatolian city, Amasya. This detail gives more importance to the politization of his heritage. For more information, see the publications submitted to a symposium dedicated to him in Amasya, in 2012 : www.miras.az/userfiles/Hemze_Nigari_kitab%20chap.pdf

[13] The mausoleum dedicated to Yahya Bakuvi is standing next to the Shirvanshah Palace. His religious and scientific activities spread from actual Azerbaijani territories to all Anatolian territories in the 15th century. A symposium was organized about him in Eskishehir in November 2013, where Azerbaijani and Turkish researchers presented their papers.

[14] The different books published in Azerbaijan on the period 1918-1920 present the Ottoman army as savior of Azerbaijan. For example, Abışov, V., *Azərbaycanlıların soyqırımı* (Genocide of Azerbaijanis), Baku, 2007 ; Aşırlı, A., *Cumhuriyyət dövri mətbuatında Qafqaz İslam Ordusu,* Baku, 2007

[15] http://www.azadinform.az/news/a-28416.html

[16] Heads of the Hajigabul, Neftçala and Salyan departments co-organized an event in front of the ottoman soldier's memorial in Hajigabul district": http://apa.tv/video/8231

[17] For example, the director of the Institute of the History, Yaqub Mahmudov : https://apa.az/daxili_siyaset/yaqub-mahmudov-bakida-nuru-pasaya-abide-ucaldilmalidir.html

[18] "Nuru paşaya abidə qoyulsun-təklif », *teleqraf.com,* 15 September 2014 URL : http://teleqraf.com/news/gundem/22185.html "Bakıda Nuru Paşaya abidə ucaldılsın", *oxu.az,* 18 september 2017 URL : https://oxu.az/society/215461

[19] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XHsbhM380I

[20] http://www.haber7.com/tarih-ve-fikir/haber/2141646-nuri-killigil-pasanin-mezari-onarildi

[21] https://a24.az/nuru-pasanin-xatiresi-gencede-yasadilacaq/

[22] "Bakıda türk şəhidliyində kərküklü şəhidlər anıldı", modern.az, 16 september 2017 URL : http://modern.az/az/news/143517/#gsc.tab=0

[23] http://cebhe.info/bakinin-sirli-adasi-10-min-turk-esiri-burda-acliq-susuzluq-ilan-vurmadan-olub—fotolar-61089

[24] Musayev, I, *Azərbaycanın Naxçıvan və Zəngəzur bölgələrində siyasi-hərbi vəziyyət və xarici dövlətlərin siyasəti (1917-1921-ci illər),* Azərb. Res. EA Şərqşünaslıq İnstitutu, Bakı, 1997, p.7

[25] "Türk dünyası üçün çarpışan, vuruşan bütün sərkərdələrə abidə ucaltmalıyıq", *moderator:az,* 27 february 2018 URL :

http://www.moderator.az/news/214988.html

[26] « Çanaqqalada azərbaycanlı şəhidlərə abidə qoyulmalıdır », *hafta.az,* 12 february 2009 URL : http://hafta.az/index2.php?m=yazi&id=45330

[27] For example, in Izmit, the event for this purpose was co-organized by Azerbaijani and Turkish nationalists : URL : https://www.haberler.com/hocali-sehitleri-izmit-te-anildi-10596945-haberi/

[28] «Türkiye'deki yabancı öğrenci sayısı 795 bin 962'ye ulaştı », *NTV,* 4th may 2017, URL :

https://www.ntv.com.tr/egitim/turkiyedeki-yabanci-ogrenci-sayisi-795-bin-962ye-ulasti,OpnWuWDZLkyNsTNv5cZTpg

[29] For example, the head of the Department of the International Relations in Karabuk University Ali Asker, an Azerbaijani researcher, translated a book on Safavid state in Turkish from Azerbaijani : http://www.trt.net.tr/azerbaycan/turk-dunyasi/2018/02/12/azrbaycan-s-f-vil-r-dovl-ti-turkiy-turkc-sind-yayinlandi-908656

[30] The Institute of Ancient Manuscripts which is subordinated to the National Academy of Sciences published a little note on him, complaining that this great religious leader is not known well in his own country, in Azerbaijan: https://www.elyazmalarinstitutu.com/index.php?subaction=showfull&id=1479448116&ucat=1,15&

[31] A special meeting was organized in the Institute of History for this purpose : https://azertag.az/xeber/Azerbaycanin_orta_esrler_tarixini_arasdirmaq_uchun_menbe___Osmanli_arxiv_menbeleri-1149080

[32] For more information on the subject, the article on the site of National Academy of Sciences : http://www.science.gov.az/news/open/7696

[33] Turkish autorithies published all documents on the Relations between Ottoman State and the Muslim states which territories constitue Republic of Azerbaijan : *Osmanlı belgelerinde Azerbaycan türk hanlıkları*, Ankara, 1993; Azerbaijani state financed the publication of ottoman documents on Karabagh. *Gəncə-Qarabağ əyalətinin müfəssəl dəftəri,* Şuşa Nəşriyyatı, Bakı, 2000

[34] İn an episod of “Magnificent century”, which is a historical fiction, Shah Ismail was described as a king of Persian-iranian origin. That generated the anger in Azerbaijan, several journals complained about it : http://musavat.com/news/mohteshem-yuzyilin-texribati-irani-hevesleendirib_177349.html

[35] An episod of the recent television series on Sultan

Mehmet desribed Uzun Hasan as a invader in the Eastern Ottoman territories. Azerbaijani users on the social medias protested against it, some sending emails to the studio.

[36] https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2016/04/07/pkkdan-ermenistana-terorist-destegi