

The Image of Russia in Contemporary Azerbaijani History Textbooks

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Russia plays an undeniable role in both the socio-political life of modern Azerbaijan and its domestic and foreign policies. In February 1996, President [Heydar Aliyev](#) described the presence of the Russian embassy in Baku as a confirmation of the “state sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan” and referred to Russia as “a neighboring and friendly country.” He spoke of the “strong friendly ties between Azerbaijan and Russia that have existed for decades and centuries.” In a 2024 interview with the Russia Today TV channel, current President [Ilham Aliyev](#) cited the fact that nearly one million students in Azerbaijan are educated in Russian as evidence of friendly relations between the two countries.

But how are the Aliyev family’s – having led Azerbaijan since 1993 – public statements about Russia reflected in the history textbooks written during their tenure? How do Azerbaijani historians support the political leadership’s narrative of a “centuries-old friendship” with Russia in their research? This article analyzes the portrayal of Russia in Azerbaijani history textbooks written during the country’s independence (1991–2024). The analysis aims to assess the extent to which the commentary in these textbooks aligns with the rhetoric expressed by the political leadership regarding Russia.

The First Attempts to Reinterpret History

Gaining independence provided Azerbaijani historians with the

opportunity to reassess history and examine both distant and recent past events from perspectives different from those shaped by imperial and Soviet ideologies. Azerbaijani history began to be presented within the context of world history. In newly written historical works, topics such as the ethnic origins of the Azerbaijani people, traditions of statehood, historical-geographical borders, and relations with neighboring countries emerged as central issues.

Over the past thirty years, hundreds of historical works and textbooks have been produced in Azerbaijan. A portion of these is intended for students at general secondary and higher education institutions. These studies and textbooks possess several strengths. However, contradictions within the curriculum, distortions, claims unsupported by historical sources, reliance on unreliable materials and personal opinions of historians, and the absence of a unified conceptual framework have significantly undermined their credibility. These shortcomings are particularly evident in discussions of the role and place of Iran, Russia, and Türkiye in Azerbaijani history.

Russia is Azerbaijan's largest and most powerful neighbor and former colonial ruler. In history textbooks written during the independence era for general and higher education institutions, Russia is portrayed in multiple contrasting images: as a "bandit state," a "neighbor/ally state," an "occupier/colonial state," and, at times, simply as the "northern neighbor."

The Formation of Russian Statehood

Azerbaijani schoolchildren are introduced to the history of the Slavs and ancient Rus beginning in the seventh grade (Azərbaycan tarixi 2023, 40 [History of Azerbaijan]; Ümumi tarix 2022, 57 [General History]). A 1994 university-level textbook, edited by academician Ziya Bunyadov, discusses the tenth-century raids by the Rus on Shirvan in a section titled

“The Russians in Azerbaijan.” It notes that the ethnic origins of the Rus are disputed. Bunyadov argues that the Rus who attacked Shirvan were most likely not Slavic but of Bulgar-Turkic origin. The textbook dismisses claims of Kievan Rus’ attacks along the Caspian Sea coast in the 10th century as unreliable due to lack of credible sources (Azərbaycan tarixi 1994, I, 280).

In secondary school textbooks, these events are presented in greater detail. In a section titled “Slavic Raids on Azerbaijan,” there is no doubt expressed about the Slavic origin of the Rus: “Previously, the Slavs had conducted trade with Azerbaijan via the Don-Volga-Caspian route, and later they began launching pirate raids on the Caspian provinces” (Azərbaycan tarixi 1997, 86). The authors emphasize the brutality of the Slavic invaders toward the local population: “During the 914 campaign, Slavic forces plundered the settlements in Azerbaijan’s Caspian provinces for months with great cruelty. They massacred the local population and took women and children captive” (Azərbaycan tarixi 1997, 87). In 21st-century textbooks, a paragraph titled “Slavic Raids” similarly describes the looting campaigns, mass killings, and abductions of women and children by Slavic-Rus forces. Their attack on Barda is recounted as follows: “The Slavs slaughtered the people of Barda and looted their property” (Azərbaycan tarixi 2023, 42).

General history textbooks provide more extensive information on the Slavs and ancient Rus. In Tofiq Mustafazadeh’s *Ümumi tarix* [*General History*], South, West, and East Slavs are introduced, and the text discusses the traditions of Slavic statehood and military conflicts with neighboring peoples. The textbook explains monarchical rule in Ancient Rus: “In 862, Oleg, the leader of a Varangian group, disguised himself as a merchant, entered Kyiv through trickery, killed the local ruler Askold, and seized power” (Mustafazadə 1995, II, 41).

Seventh-grade general history textbooks also include

information about Kievan Rus, regarded as the first Russian state. The authors describe the transition from feudal fragmentation to a centralized political authority. It is worth noting that in the paragraph “Eastern European Peoples in the 11th–15th Centuries,” only the political and economic aspects of Kievan Rus are discussed; cultural and spiritual life is omitted. In the section titled “The Culture of World Peoples in the 11th–15th Centuries,” attention is given to the cultures of Turkic peoples, Western Europe, India, China, and the Caucasus, while Kievan Rus is mentioned only in relation to the creation of the Slavic alphabet in the 9th century. In 21st-century textbooks, ancient Rus is referred to not as “Kievan Rus” but simply as the “Principality of Kyiv” (Ümumi tarix 2022, 59). A cultural section in the newer textbooks briefly mentions the Pokrov Church as an example of Russian architecture.

When covering historical developments up to the 15th century, Kievan Rus is characterized as a “bandit state” whose military forces regularly launched devastating raids on the Caspian provinces of Azerbaijan, looting and massacring peaceful populations. However, as textbooks describe the establishment of a centralized state in Russian lands, their tone shifts. One textbook states, “With the establishment of a centralized state, Russia became part of the European state system” (Mustafazadə, 174). Russia then transforms into a “neighboring state” and ally of the Shirvanshahs, the Aq Qoyunlu, and later the Safavids. According to textbooks, foreign threats (such as Russia’s conflict with the Golden Horde and the Aq Qoyunlu’s struggle against the Ottoman Empire) brought the Azerbaijani and Russian states closer together: “The envoy of Moscow, called Marko Rosso by Contarini, was sent to form an alliance with the Aq Qoyunlu state against the Golden Horde” (Azərbaycan tarixi 1999, III, 101).

But politics was not the only factor bringing the Azerbaijani and Russian states together. Economic interests and trade ties were even more important. These culminated in the signing of a

“treaty of friendship and agreement” between the Shirvanshah and the Russian prince (İsmayılov 1992, 141). While newer textbooks omit cooperation between Russia and the Shirvanshahs, they note that in 1475, Grand Prince Ivan III of Moscow sent an envoy to the Bayandur court to propose joint action against the Golden Horde and to expand trade ties – a mission that ultimately failed (Azərbaycan tarixi 2023, 102).

In summary, during the early feudal period, Russian forces are depicted as a bandit state in Azerbaijani textbooks, but in the early phase of classical feudalism, Russia appears in the image of an allied state.

Russia in the 16th–18th Centuries

In university-level world history textbooks, the internal policies of Russian rulers during the 16th–17th centuries are presented in detail, with particular attention paid to Ivan IV’s rule:

At the beginning of 1565, Ivan IV converted much of the state into his personal domain, the Oprichnina. Through brutal terror, executions, and exiles, Ivan managed to suppress his enemies. In 1570, the Tsar led an Oprichnina army campaign against his own country (Mustafazadə 1995, II, 218).

In secondary school textbooks, the focus shifts from internal to foreign policy. Authors emphasize the intensification of Russia’s expansionist agenda. They interpret the Russian campaigns in the Volga region as preparations for the occupation of the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Siberia (Orta əsrlər tarixi 2001, 270 [*Medieval History*]).

Significant changes in Russia’s domestic and foreign policy occurred in the second half of the 17th century. Expansionist campaigns in southern directions increased, and Russia’s political regime is described as an absolute monarchy with a feudal-serfdom economy. Russian foreign policy of this period is criticized, particularly in regard to Ukraine. The event

known as the “reunification” of Ukraine with Russia – contrary to the will of the Ukrainian people – is instead referred to as “the occupation of Ukraine’s western and other regions” (Yeni tarix 2001, 86 [*Modern History*]).

In 21st-century textbooks, Russian military campaigns of the 16th–18th centuries are described as efforts to seize the lands of Turkic peoples living around Russian borders. These campaigns led to the establishment of a harsh colonial regime in the Volga region, the Urals, and Siberia (Ümumi tarix 2023, 42). The textbooks detail the cruel exploitation of Muslim-Turkic peoples by Russian Tsarism, disrespect for local cultures and religions, and efforts to sow discord among Turks by spreading Christianity in colonized territories. The textbooks also cover resistance movements by nations that could not endure this colonial oppression, noting that uprisings and revolts were ruthlessly suppressed by Russian forces (Ümumi tarix 2023, 50–51). The ongoing 17th-century struggle among Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and the Safavid Empire for control of the Caucasus is highlighted, emphasizing Russia’s failures and the heroism of North Caucasian peoples in battles against Russian forces. According to these textbooks, Russia exploited the favorable conditions of the 17th century to seize parts of Ukraine and Belarus by force, thereby expanding its territory (Ümumi tarix 2023, 119–120). The narrative clearly rejects the idea that Ukraine voluntarily joined Russia.

Thus, by the 17th century, Russia transforms in the textbooks from a “friendly ally” into an “aggressor state,” with its imperial ambitions around the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, and Baltic Sea coming under sharp criticism. The textbooks state that Russia closely monitored Ottoman actions in the Caucasus and aimed to consolidate its presence in the Caspian basin at any cost (Azərbaycan tarixi 1999, III, 268).

Russia’s initial moves to consolidate control over the Caspian region and the Caucasus began in the 18th century. The severe

socio-political crisis in Persia, along with constant uprisings against the Shah, led the Persian authorities to seek military aid from the Russian Tsar. At the same time, the ruler of Shirvan, hoping to restore his previous independence, also appealed to the Russians. Textbooks assert that Russia took full advantage of this opportunity and pursued its aim of strengthening its position in the Caucasus. After the occupation of new territories, Russia introduced its own administrative system. The hardships caused by foreign rule, ongoing armed clashes, and economic pressures made life extremely difficult for the local population. Textbook authors provide detailed descriptions of the Azerbaijani people's resistance against Russian and Ottoman invaders.

Let me note that the Azerbaijani historiography's interpretation of Russia's initial occupation of the Caucasus is not uniform. Most early independence-era textbooks criticize the khans who appealed to Russian military forces for personal gain and political survival, describing their decisions as naive or incompetent (Azərbaycan tarixi 1999, III, 373). However, in a textbook edited by Ziya Bunyadov, local rulers' actions are instead portrayed as pragmatic and farsighted: "When a threat emerged from Turkey and Iran, wise politicians attempted to establish close relations with Russia" (Azərbaycan tarixi 1994, I, 550). Overall, Azerbaijani historians associate Tsarist Russia's occupation of Azerbaijan with the empire's need for raw materials to support its developing industry. Some textbook authors even acknowledge that this policy had certain positive aspects, such as increased attention to the region due to its natural resources, leading to some economic developments (Azərbaycan tarixi 1999, III, 268). It is also argued that Russia's policies contributed to Azerbaijan's economic and cultural growth (Azərbaycan tarixi 1994, I, 508).

The section on world culture in the late 17th and early 18th centuries is the first time Russian culture is discussed in detail in Azerbaijani textbooks. Russia is presented as a

backward European power with an intellectual elite largely composed of foreigners. The textbooks mention scientific expeditions conducted by the Russian Academy of Sciences and highlight the achievements of scholars like Mikhail Lomonosov, Ivan Polzunov, and Ivan Kulibin. In literature, students are introduced to the works of Denis Fonvizin, Nikolay Karamzin, and Alexander Radishchev.

The second half of the 18th century marks a period of intensified Russian expansion in the Caucasus. As a result of the Russo-Ottoman War (1768–1774), Russia succeeded in entrenching itself in Georgia. The textbooks describe this development as the beginning of Georgia's occupation and portray Russian forces as hostile to the Georgian people: "Soon the Georgians began to feel the results of Russian 'aid.' In 1770, the Russians began to destroy Georgia and plunder its population" (Yeni tarix 2001, 205). Textbooks do not include Armenians among the peoples who suffered from Russia's colonial policies in the South Caucasus. Instead, Armenians are presented as supporters of Russian expansion, motivated by their desire to create a state of their own on "ancient Azerbaijani lands and six provinces of Turkey" (Yeni tarix 2001, 206). This narrative is linked to Tsarist Russia's policy of relocating populations in the region.

Sections dedicated to Russia's conquest of the North Caucasus are also presented with a strongly anti-Russian tone. These parts of the textbooks provide detailed accounts of the North Caucasian peoples' national liberation struggle against Russia, highlighting the role of Islam and the Murid movement in that resistance. The authors express sympathy toward the mountain peoples and the leaders of the national liberation movement. Historians interpret Russia's conquests in the North Caucasus and its consolidation in Georgia as preparations for the eventual occupation of Azerbaijan. Overall, by the end of the classical feudal period and on the eve of the modern era, Russia is portrayed as a bandit state—one that oppressed the peoples living around it, tore them away from their national

and spiritual values, and attempted to forcibly integrate them into the Russian world.

Russia as the Conqueror of the Caucasus

In the early 19th century, Russia gradually occupied the Azerbaijani khanates, and these conquests were formalized through the Treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay. These treaties are described in the textbooks as the “most disgraceful documents” in Azerbaijani history, symbolizing the loss of national independence and the division of the country’s territory into two parts. As a result, the terms “Northern Azerbaijan” and “Southern Azerbaijan” entered the historical vocabulary.

The textbooks draw particular attention to the heroic resistance of Ganja Khan Javad Khan and the killing of Russian Imperial General Pavel Tsitsianov near the gates of Baku by a relative of the local khan (Azərbaycan tarixi 2001, 177–180, 192). Despite the textbooks’ clearly negative and hostile portrayal of Russian occupiers, the authors do not deny the presence of pro-Russian forces among Azerbaijan’s political elite. They claim, however, that this inclination toward Russia did not stem from a desire to submit to its authority, but was instead part of a calculated foreign policy:

Until now, the foresight of Fatali Khan, who sought assistance from Russia, has not been properly appreciated. Some interpret this step as pro-Russian sentiment, others as a desire to accept Russian subjugation. Both assumptions are incorrect[...] Fatali Khan was aware of Russia’s expansionist plans and skillfully thwarted them with his smart diplomacy (İsmayılov, 186).

Azerbaijani historians argue that the Turkmenchay Treaty was even more harmful to the Azerbaijani people than the Treaty of Gulistan. Not only did it destroy Azerbaijani traditions of statehood and halt the nation’s awakening, it also negatively impacted the region’s long-term future:

Azerbaijan was turned into a raw materials base for the Russian Empire. The empire soon implemented an administrative-territorial division that severed cultural and economic ties among regions of Northern Azerbaijan. The Nakhchivan and Iravan khanates were abolished, replaced by the Yerevan Province” (Azərbaycan tarixi 2001, 220).

Mahmud İsmayilov harshly criticizes historians who try to identify any positive outcomes from Russia’s occupation of Azerbaijan:

Some historians attempt to prove that Russia’s occupation brought positive outcomes. But with the occupation of northern lands of Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani people effectively lost their independence. Even the classics of Marxism-Leninism wrote that the loss of national independence can only be viewed negatively (İsmayilov, 205).

The empire soon began to absorb the occupied territories and establish a social support base. Textbooks note that Russia implemented a resettlement policy in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Armenian migration into Northern Azerbaijan is described in detail, and the role of Peter I in this process is emphasized. Particular attention is given to Article 15 of the Treaty of Turkmenchay, which officially sanctioned the resettlement of Armenians to Nakhchivan, Karabakh, and Iravan.

Textbooks also examine the demographic consequences of Russian colonial and resettlement policies, highlighting dramatic changes in ethnic composition in several Azerbaijani regions. The increase in the Armenian population of Nakhchivan, Karabakh, and Iravan is especially noted (Azərbaycan tarixi 1996, 13). A 2024 textbook also maintains a critical stance, describing Tsarist Russia as the “primary threat” to Azerbaijan and portraying the Treaty of Turkmenchay as a document that split the Azerbaijani people and transformed the region into a distant colony (Azərbaycan tarixi 2023, 147, 182). In these newer textbooks, Armenians are said to have

been relocated to not just three but four provinces: Nakhchivan, Karabakh, Iravan, and Borchali. It is claimed that 124,000 Armenians were relocated from the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran to Azerbaijan in just two years (1828–1829) (Azərbaycan tarixi 2024, 10).

Textbooks emphasize that the resettlement of Armenians to Northern Azerbaijan was a deliberate and long-term strategy throughout the 19th and into the 20th century. Russian authorities are blamed for entrenching Armenians in Azerbaijani territory, a policy said to have led to Armenian land claims and the displacement of Azerbaijanis in regions such as Nakhchivan and Karabakh: “This created serious tensions. Due to Tsarist Russia’s unjust policies, these tensions escalated into military conflicts initiated by Armenians” (Azərbaycan tarixi 1996, 14).

Russian colonial and resettlement policies were not limited to supporting Armenians. Textbooks also mention that Russia facilitated the migration of Germans and Russians into Northern Azerbaijan: “The establishment of Russian-German colonies in Karabakh was of strategic military importance to Russia. However, unfavorable conditions prevented Paskevich from implementing his plans.” The establishment of Russian settlements in Azerbaijani territory is also portrayed negatively. The seizure of Azerbaijani lands for redistribution to Russian families is said to have damaged traditional livestock-based economies and reduced the population’s quality of life. This narrative persists in 21st-century textbooks, which claim that Russian settlers were granted the “most fertile lands” seized from locals (Azərbaycan tarixi 2024, 11).

Reactions to the socio-cultural changes under Russian influence in the 19th century are mixed. While Russian rule is generally viewed as politically detrimental, economic and cultural developments (e.g., the oil industry, capitalist infrastructure, and the opening of secular, Russian-language

schools) are acknowledged positively in university-level textbooks. In contrast, secondary school textbooks describe Russian administration overall as negative, asserting that colonial rule undermined Azerbaijani national values and identity. One textbook states: “In colonial Northern Azerbaijan, reactionary educational policies were pursued. All reforms in the field of education were colonial in nature” (Azərbaycan tarixi 1996, 50). At the same time, textbook authors concede that state schools required instruction in religion, Russian language, math, geography, and history, and that teaching in local languages, particularly Azerbaijani (Turkish/Tatar), was also prioritized (Azərbaycan tarixi 1996, 52). This view is echoed in the 2024 textbook, which states that Russian educational policy was “fully subordinated to colonial interests” (Azərbaycan tarixi 2024, 43).

A Time of Upheaval: Russia in the 20th Century

The early 20th century brought social and economic turmoil to both Russia’s central provinces and its remote colonies. The rise of socialist and revolutionary movements, combined with anti-Tsarist sentiment, affected Azerbaijan’s oil industry as well. Textbooks report that after the Russian occupation, Baku’s oil sector rapidly developed, exacerbating class divisions. During this period, Tsarist authorities allegedly provoked ethnic conflicts to weaken class-based unity. In 1905–1906, Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes erupted, and textbooks claim that Tsarist officials supported the Armenians. Orders were reportedly given by the Caucasus viceroy, a known supporter of Armenians, for Russian and Cossack units to fire on Tatars (Azerbaijanis). One textbook states:

The Caucasus viceroy Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov, who carried out the Tsar’s orders, openly favored the Armenians and considered them a reliable pillar of Tsarist power in the region (Azərbaycan tarixi 1996, 188).

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the image of Russia

in Azerbaijani textbooks had become overwhelmingly negative. Russia was portrayed as a colonial power that distrusted Muslim populations and allied with Armenians – strengthening the “aggressor state” image.

In world history textbooks, this period is analyzed through Russia’s internal and foreign policy shifts, including the Russo-Japanese War and World War I. The fall of Tsarism and the rise of the Bolsheviks gradually altered Russia’s image. Azerbaijani textbooks began presenting the 1917 revolution and subsequent civil war from a new perspective. Tofiq Mustafazadeh’s textbook describes public discontent with Bolshevik policies between 1917 and 1920:

By spring 1918, a major shift had occurred in the peasants’ mood. They began openly expressing dissatisfaction with the new regime. The Soviets were in a weak position. A ‘democratic counter-revolution’ composed mainly of Socialist Revolutionaries and other leftist groups became their main opponent (Mustafazadeh 1998, IV, 16).

In the new textbooks, the social and economic measures implemented in Russia after the October Revolution and the Bolsheviks’ rise to power are presented in a way that completely diverges from Soviet historiography. A different conceptual approach has also been developed regarding the Sovietization of Azerbaijan. This is due to the significant political developments that took place in Azerbaijan following the collapse of the Russian Empire, including the declaration of independence and the internal and external policies pursued by the national state. In these textbooks, Azerbaijan’s Sovietization is interpreted as the second invasion by Russia against the country’s independent statehood. The Armenian-Russian alliance is said to have played a key role in this process. It is claimed that this alliance was aimed at destroying Azerbaijan’s independent republic. For example, Mustafazadeh writes that an uprising in the mountainous region of Karabakh led to the withdrawal of regular Azerbaijani army

units from Baku and the eventual collapse of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Armenians launched invasions in Gazakh and Nakhchivan, while the Armenian uprising in Karabakh began with an assault by Dashnak armed groups on the military garrison in Khankendi. In an effort to suppress the rebellion, military forces were redeployed from Baku and the border with Dagestan to the mountainous parts of Karabakh. As a result, Azerbaijan's northern borders were left undefended (Mustafazadə 1998, IV, 53).

On Soviet cultural policy, there is broad agreement among textbook authors. Bolshevik anti-religious campaigns and repressions against Russian intellectuals and the Orthodox Church are criticized. The textbooks mourn the destruction of Russian cultural life: "During the fabricated 'Petrograd Combat Organization' case, scholars such as Professor M. Tikhvinsky, V. Tagantsev, and the poet N. Gumilyov were executed" (Mustafazadə 1998, IV, 60).

Sovietization is said to have inflicted major suffering and destabilization in Azerbaijan. The alien Bolshevik ideology, forced nationalization, anti-religious campaigns, and harsh repression are blamed for stoking anti-Russian sentiment. Soviet rule is characterized as colonial domination, with Azerbaijan's nominal independence seen as a tool for spreading communism in the East (Mustafazadə 1998, IV, 85).

A 2024 textbook for 9th graders describes the founding of Soviet Azerbaijan as "the end of national independence" and "the reestablishment of an indivisible empire," noting that the slogan of "an independent Soviet Azerbaijan" collapsed with the formation of the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Republic (Azərbaycan tarixi 2024, 108, 112). Contemporary foreign policy topics such as the 2008 Russia–Georgia War, the 2022 Declaration of Allied Interaction between Russia and Azerbaijan, and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh are mentioned briefly, but no dedicated section on modern Russia-Azerbaijani relations exists. This gap is

partially filled by a general history textbook section on the Russian Federation, which discusses Russia's foreign policy and its desire to maintain "influence and presence in the post-Soviet space." The 2008 attack on Georgia and the ongoing occupation of 20% of Georgian territory are cited as examples (Ümumi tarix 2023, 115–117).

Thus, in the 20th century, Russia is portrayed as a state that, under the guise of Bolshevism and communism, reoccupied former imperial lands and subjected their populations to constant oppression. In the 21st century, it is shown as an aggressive power that undermines the sovereignty of its neighbors.

Conclusion

A dual image of Russia emerges from Azerbaijan's contemporary history textbooks. In world history textbooks, Russia is portrayed as a European country within a broader global context. In Azerbaijani history textbooks, however, Russia appears as a backward, colonial state. In secondary school textbooks especially, nationalist narratives dominate. While these textbooks offer a general understanding of events in Russia and the USSR, they also include populist claims and unsubstantiated interpretations that undermine their academic reliability. All problems of the modern era are attributed to Russian colonial policies and the decisions stemming from those policies. The textbooks do not mention any "centuries-old friendship" between Russia and Azerbaijan. Instead, Russia is consistently presented as a serious threat to Azerbaijani statehood and as a political force that endangers the national and spiritual values of the Azerbaijani people.

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