

# The Intelligentsia, Nationalism, and the National Liberation Movement (1988-1991)

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In this article, I will review the formation, activity and ideology of the intelligentsia that shaped the Azerbaijani National Liberation Movement (1988-1991). My goal is to explore the intellectual history of the movement and to expand research in this area. The importance of this article will be to reveal the Liberation Movement not as a set of chaotic processes, but the fundamental role of the new intelligentsia that shaped it. The current academic debate is difficult to delienate owing to the small number of conceptual papers on the subject. These papers include those by Jamil Hasanli, Zaur Gasimov or Adalat Tahirzade. On the one hand, Gasimov does not consider the Azerbaijani intelligentsia as a homogeneous group in the Soviet period and describes a process of moving closer to nationalism. He divides the intelligentsia into three currents: (1) radical intelligentsia, (2) non-radical intelligentsia, and (3) intelligentsia denying the regime, ideology and political movements (Гасымов 2009, 187). On the other hand, Tahirzade considers most of the intelligentsia homogeneous, that is, "faithful communists" (Tahirzade 2021, 14). My goal is to show the separate roles Azerbaijani Soviet dissident and mainstream intelligentsia played in shaping a humanist (those specializing in the humanities) intelligentsia, which laid the intellectual and ideological foundations of the National Liberation Movement. Since historians, orientalists, and writers shaped the movement, the main sources also refer to them. To strengthen Gasimov's position, I analyze and contextualize statements made within the Liberation Movement and historical sources (those produced

by dissident societies, historical and artistic works). As a result, I conclude that both dissidents (opponents of Soviet ideology) and mainstream intelligentsia (which remained within the framework of Soviet ideology, but gradually adopted elements of nationalism as a result of a number of political developments, including the Karabakh events in particular) played an important role in shaping this movement.

### **The Formation of an Independent Intelligentsia**

The emergence of Azerbaijan's independent intelligentsia is largely associated with Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the restoration of Azerbaijani independence. But there are two turning points in the history of the intelligentsia, which shaped the National Liberation Movement. They encompass the periods under Nikita Khrushchev (the First Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee) and Mikhail Gorbachev (General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee). The 1960s constitute a special stage because the reforms carried out by the Soviet government during these periods did not meet all socio-political expectations, but as a result of certain political transformations, favorable conditions were generated for the formation of nationalist intelligentsias in the union republics and the center.

The Khrushchev period is characterized by its generation of nationalism in the intelligentsia, and the 1960s are seen as a periodic *ideological relaxation*. In Azerbaijan, the leaders from 1954 to 1959 were Imam Mustafayev (First Secretary of the Central Committee), Mirza Ibrahimov (Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet), and Sadig Rahimov (Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan SSR). This period is characterized by a gradually increasing predominance of national thought in Azerbaijan and in a number of other union republics over the official Soviet ideology built on the theory of class struggle. According to Hasanli, in 1950s, "Azerbaijani science, literature and art played an important role in transforming the national idea into a leading

direction. The South theme, rooted in the fate of South Azerbaijan, then became a means of expressing patriotism in literature" (2008, 8). The subsequent 1960s in Azerbaijan are characterized by a periodic *ideological relaxation* of public life and culture, although the change in the Soviet political leadership resulted in a revival of Soviet ideology. The intelligentsia formed in 1954-1959 might have gained its first political support from the local Soviet nomenclature by defining themselves in nationalist terms. Hasanli notes that "in 1956, the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan SSR added an article to the Soviet Azerbaijani Constitution, which declared that the state language of the Azerbaijan SSR is Azerbaijani (to that point, it had only provided for Russian). The widespread use of the national language in state offices, clerical work, educational and cultural institutions gave a great impetus to the development of national consciousness. The republic was swept up in a wave of nationalism" (2008, 6). Moreover, the heroic epic *Kitabi Dede Gorgud* and other banned works were republished (Gaffarov 2008, 116).

The exposure of Stalin's cult of personality at the XX Congress of the Soviet Communist Party by Khrushchev and the association of the repressions with the name of Stalin resulted in rehabilitation of many members of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia who were victims of repression. As Hasanli observes, "the emergence of a new leadership as a result created an optimism among Azerbaijani intellectuals that the cases of those who were repressed to Azerbaijani society would be reevaluated" (2008, 32-33). It should also be noted that Musavatist intellectuals, such as Huseyn Javid and Yusif Vazir Chamanzamanli were rehabilitated under First Secretaries Imam Mustafayev and Vali Akhundov (Hasanli 2018, 207-209). At the end of the 1950s, as a result of the change in Azerbaijani leadership, Soviet ideology regained its hold and steps were taken to undermine the social status of the Azerbaijani language. However, despite the restoration of the political power of the Soviet ideology, as we said, periodic *ideological*

*relaxation* took place. As a result, during this time, Sara Taghiyeva, the daughter of Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev, was able to compose written requests to the local and central Soviet authorities to request the rehabilitation of her father, who was deemed a reactionary capitalist by the Soviets, and she also conducted research and collected memories about her father. Taghiyeva's activities led to the publication of her father's philanthropic activities in the press (Hasanli 2018, 84).

Under Khrushchev, because the majority of the intelligentsia was mainstream, it refrained from participating in political activities. The mainstream intelligentsia's approach to nationalism was rarely manifested. The emergence of national issues that at times countered Moscow's tolerance for ethnic particularism (such as Karabakh, the irredentist idea of South Azerbaijan, state language, and national cadres) was mainly driven by several intellectuals such as Abbas Zamanov and Rasul Rza. The reason for the cautious political behavior of the intelligentsia in the 1950s and 1960s was constant surveillance by Soviet authorities (Glavlit, CC/MK, and KGB). In the 1960s, despite the Soviet government's attempts to keep Armenian claims to Karabakh and Nakhchivan confidential, some Azerbaijani intellectuals openly responded to the Armenian claims. Speaking at an event dedicated to Samad Vurgun, literary critic Abbas Zamanov stated that Nakhchivan was an integral part of Azerbaijan and that Nakhchivan would not be given to anyone (Hasanli 2018, 90). In such situations, the Azerbaijani intelligentsia backed each other up; for example, Rza assured Zamanov that his action would make him a national hero of Azerbaijan (Hasanli 2018, 93). The critical literature produced by Rza and other writers about Andronicus in the 1960s can be regarded as a response to the claims of Armenians intellectuals to Karabakh and Nakhchivan (Hasanli 2018, 467).

*Ideological relaxation* continued in the 1950s and 1960s. The intellectuals who were criticized by the Soviet authorities (e.g. Mirza Ibrahimov) or expelled from the Communist Party

(e.g. Abbas Zamanov) were not later subjected to severe persecution (Hasanli 2018, 99,195). Historian and public figure Ali Aliyev wrote in his memoirs about the dual life of state, culture and simple professional people and the presence of supporters of independence among them (Aliyev 2004, 254). Even if you think this is some kind of exaggeration, the fact that mainstream intellectuals periodically address national issues confirms this statement to some extent.

Under Gorbachev, the policy of *perestroika* formed the basis for discussing issues considered taboo (Гасымов 2007, 174). The policies of *glasnost'* and *perestroika* proclaimed by Gorbachev led to critical approaches to political events in the press of Soviet Azerbaijan. These criticisms were made by representatives of those who changed and became a new type of intelligentsia at that time. The main feature of the new type of intelligentsia formed during this period was that it openly criticized the Soviet system, unlike the intelligentsia of the 1950s and 1960s. Although this political activity reached its highest level during the Karabakh events, it first started with discussions of the *perestroika* in the press. The new intelligentsia's criticism of the position of the Soviet press during the Karabakh events can be considered the first open protest against the mainstream Soviet intelligentsia. The protest was directed not only against the Soviet intelligentsia, but also against the Soviet central authorities and Armenian separatists. The scholarly debates of Azerbaijani historians regarding Armenian nationalists and separatists in Karabakh went beyond purely academic discussions and were conveyed to the press. The intelligentsia held discussions in official institutions and in semi-legal groups on the topics of history and literature (*Koroglu, Kitabi Deda Gorgud, Shahriyar's works*). Components of a new *alternative history and literary canon*, which opposed the Soviet versions, were able to reach a wider audience through political groups (associations, organizations) rather than through individuals. Hikmat Hajizade, one of the leaders of

the National Liberation Movement and a former Azerbaijani ambassador under Elchibey to Russia, claims that independent press and journalistic investigation was created during this period (2021, 183). For example, among the young cohort of journalists, we should note Najaf Najafov and Chingiz Sultansoy, who worked for the newspapers *Molodyej Azerbajana* (*Youth of Azerbaijan in Russian*) and *Ganjlik* (*Youth in Azerbaijani*), respectively. As a result of the relaxation of censorship, the printing of newspapers (for example, *Azerbaijan*, *Azadliq*) that were not directly affiliated with separate institutions of the Soviet system was also permitted. The principle of political pluralism, which was emphasized during *perestroika*, led to the official registration of new organizations and parties in Azerbaijan. For example, in 1987, the *Çənlibel* organization became an officially registered organization. In 1989, the Azerbaijani People's Front was registered as an organization (Yakublu 2018, pp. 377, 637). A number of other organizations and parties were also established, such as the Azerbaijan Revival Party and the Republic Party.

Prior to 20 January 1990, the Azerbaijani intelligentsia believed that the resolution of the Karabakh issue could be achieved within the framework of the Soviet system. Armenians were depicted as nationalists, in the Soviet meaning of the term, i.e., chauvinists, and were alleged to have used communism to achieve their own nationalist goals. An example of this is Arif Mansurov's 1990 *Белые пятна истории и перестройка* [*History's Blank Pages and Perestroika*] (Мансуров 1990). Furthermore, while the rehabilitation of victims of Stalin's repressions started under Khrushchev, it was in the 1980s and 1990s that historians extensively covered their lost contributions to national history in various publications. During this period, Ziya Bunyadov's series of articles, titled *The Archives Are Open*, were published (Bakhshaliyeva 2004, 55-57). Historical articles about the victims of Stalin's repression can perhaps be considered the first successful

attempt to transform how people understood Soviet ideology through the press. Apart from repressions, the language policy conducted in Soviet Azerbaijan, the Karabakh issue and the expulsion of Azerbaijanis from Armenia in 1947-1948 were also subjected to criticism. At the demonstrations, the intelligentsia and protestors persistently urged the removal of the names of Soviet figures of Russian and Armenian origin from the streets of Baku and Ganja (Tahirzadeh 2021, 92).

When discussing the emergence of a new type of intelligentsia in Azerbaijan, it is possible to identify two distinct factions: dissidents and the mainstream intelligentsia. Dissidents constitute a minority group that had gained significant experience in resisting political and ideological repression since the inception of the Soviet regime. According to Tahirzade, the majority of the mainstream intelligentsia, even if they were "loyal communists" until the events of 20 January, also tended to approach national issues in the framework of nationalism (2021, 14). Although there were elements of *alternative history and literature* in the works of the mainstream intelligentsia, they were not accused of pan-Turkism, which Soviet ideology held as anti-Soviet, and instead, they subtly expressed ideas against the existing system. Khudu Mammadov and Bakhtiyar Vahabzade can be notable examples in this regard. Vahabzade was persecuted for his poem *Gülüstan*, and therefore, he wrote the poem *Conversation with Lenin* as an apologia by demonstrating his loyalty to the ruling ideology (Yaqublu 2018, 211). Rafael Huseynov has analyzed the *Conversation with Lenin* as an implicit critique of the Soviet system (Huseynov 2017, 4). The mainstream intelligentsia, particularly those intellectuals teaching at universities, had a significant influence on their students. This is evidenced by the fact that student societies affiliated with universities were among the most active participants in demonstrations during the 1980s and 1990s. As I mentioned above, although the representatives of the mainstream intelligentsia refrained from openly criticizing

Soviet totalitarianism, unlike the dissidents, they gradually began to embrace nationalistic ideas following the Karabakh events. Dissidents opposed Soviet ideology before the mainstream intelligentsia, and did so consistently. However, dissidents' activities did not receive widespread support until their relationship with the mainstream intelligentsia. That is because the dissidents criticized the Soviet state more sharply, focusing on the aspects of totalitarianism. As a result of the Karabakh events and the frequent demonstrations and meetings, the political relations between the dissidents and the mainstream intelligentsia became more consistent and sustainable.

The times of Khrushchev (due to the exposure of Stalin's cult) and Gorbachev (due to *glasnost'* and *perestroika*) played an important role in the formation of the new intelligentsia. Although in these years the intelligentsia still remained within the framework of Soviet ideology, by bringing national issues to the agenda, the intelligentsia contributed to the revival of nationalism.

### **Intellectual sources of the National Liberation Movement**

The National Liberation Movement drew inspiration from two intellectual origins: history and literature. Given that the leaders of this movement were usually historians, orientalists or writers, the elements of national history and literature were evident in the names, charters, and activities of organizations which also coordinated demonstrations. The names of many organizations were taken from history and literature. For instance, we can mention the *Çənlibel* and *Mahammad Amin Rasulzade* associations, along with the Shah Ismail Scholarly-Literary Group. Clause 12 of the *Çənlibel*'s charter set the goals of protecting historical monuments and modifying toponyms (Yaqublu 2018, 406). Other organizations shared similar goals with regards to protecting cultural heritage. These organizations delved into political discussions under the cover of historical and literary topics. The samizdats



(independent, secretive publishing organizations), apart from publishing political literature, also disseminated literary and historical works to promote ideological enlightenment. Through samizdat and demonstrations, history and literature were integrated into political discourse with notions such as *people*, *nation* and *freedom*. However, the emergence of alternative historical concepts dates back to the 1960s. Historian Suleyman Aliyarov, in his dissertation *North Azerbaijan's Reunification with Russia and the Economic Situation*, argued that Azerbaijan's *reunification* with Russia was an invasion. Aliyarov, Mahmud Ismayilov, and Ziya Bunyadov were subjected to criticism for their ideas of this nature (Yaqublu 2018, 286). These historians can be considered the pioneers of alternative historical interpretations of the national past.

During the National Liberation Movement, the movement's intellectual appeal was manifested in its references to history and literature; it highlighted in particular the era of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920) and the intellectual legacy of opposition intellectuals and dissidents during the Soviet era. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic era became a source of intellectual and ideological inspiration for the intelligentsia leading the National Liberation Movement. The *resurgence* of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic as historical symbol commenced with the emergence of samizdat. Subsequently, in 1989-1990, original materials pertaining to the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic were also disseminated (including M. A. Rasulzade's *Contemporary History of Azerbaijan*, Mirza Bala Mammadzade's literary works and so forth) (Yaqublu 2018, 605-606). In 1991, Nasiman Yaqublu published his first book on Rasulzade (2013, 409).

Historians authored books about the Azerbaijan People's Republic, and the unfavorable depiction of this era in Soviet historiography was discarded. Movsum Aliyev, one of the first scholars to scrutinize this epoch, played a momentous role in the history of the republic. According to Zaur Gasimov, Manaf

Suleymanov's acclaimed book *What I Heard, What I Saw, What I Read* can be deemed one of the innovative works that illuminate the enigmatic aspects of Azerbaijan's history. This is because the chapters about Baku city, messenats, and Rasулzade were devoid of Soviet rhetoric (Гасымов 2007, 174). In general, in the works of this period, the leaders of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic were presented as the founders of an independent state, and attention was paid to the policies they implemented in the country, including democratic reforms. The events of 28 April 1920 were now directly referred to as a Bolshevik invasion of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. Aydin Balayev's work titled *Azerbaijan's National Democratic Movement (1917-1920) [Азербайджанское национально-демократическое движение (1917-1920 гг.)]* can be cited as an exemplar of this transition from Soviet ideology to nationalist ideology (Балаев 1990).

And in the field of literature, Aydin Mammadov can be mentioned as a bearer of alternative ideas with great influence. Mammadov, the founder of the *Ana Dili Birliyi (Mother Tongue Association)*, researched Turkism (Yaqublu 2018, 358-359). Alternative publications included *Odlar Yurdu* and *Qobustan* magazines which covered subjects and published stories written in fashions not typically permitted in Soviet discourse prior to the 1980s.

### **The National Liberation Movement's ideology**

Since the ideology of the National Liberation Movement is a broad subject and requires the use of many resources, an explanation of the initial ideological formation will be given here. The activity of ideologues, particularly their texts and speeches made at demonstrations played a major role in the formation of the ideology of the National Liberation Movement. The decline of Soviet ideology is associated with changes stemming from *perestroika*. After attempts to reform the Soviet system (the Khrushchev Thaw, Andropov's reforms), *perestroika* gave impetus to the weakening of Soviet ideology. If at first

*perestroika* was carried out under the slogan of returning to Leninist norms, then Lenin's role in history itself became an object of controversy, and the attitude towards Lenin in Soviet historiography and journalism began to change. This became more evident during the celebration of the 120th anniversary of Lenin's birth. The delegitimization of the party's ideological control over the USSR was one of the main reasons for the destabilization of the Soviet system during the further period of *perestroika*. As a result, on 7 February 1990, Article 6 on the leading role of the CPSU was removed from the Constitution (Hobpy3OB 2019, 136-138).

The demonstrations held in the 1980s served as the only direct form of communication between the people and the intelligentsia. Because of political pressure, intellectuals did not have wide access to the press and television. One could say that the potential political power of the Square Movement (17 November-5 December 1988), which was the culmination of the demonstrations of the 1980s and gathered large masses around it, was in the hands of intellectuals. The slogans and statements made at these demonstrations played a key role in ideological matters. In their speeches at demonstrations, intellectuals made excursions into history when discussing current politics, sought the reasons for the current situation in the past, and linked mistakes with the Soviet leaders (e.g., Stalin, Shaumyan, Mikoyan, Gorbachev). Representatives of the humanist intelligentsia who led the demonstrations complained that their works on national issues that did not fully coincide with Soviet ideology were not published, were censored, or were published in limited editions. The demonstrations actually turned into *alternative history and literature* lessons for attendees. The status of the Azerbaijani language in the Azerbaijan SSR, the issue of South Azerbaijan, the deportations of Azerbaijanis from Armenia, the relocation of Armenians from Iran and Ottoman Empire to South Caucasus after the Gulistan (1813) and the Turkmenchay Treaties (1828), the glorification of the founders

of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, and other national topics delivered to the people through demonstrations gradually led to the collapse of Soviet ideology in the imagination of ordinary citizens.

After the Karabakh issue, careful consideration should also be given to the scope of the issue of South Azerbaijan, as it played a major role in the formation of nationalism in the ideology of the National Liberation Movement. This issue should be thought of as a source of the movement's political and ideological activity. The demonstrators at the first rallies at Lenin (currently *Azadlıq* or Freedom) square were not demanding independence, but rather chanted slogans about unification with South Azerbaijan, and this fact shows that the issue of South Azerbaijan was at the ideological origins of the National Liberation Movement. The slogans "Tabriz" (the major city of Southern Azerbaijan) and "Siyamek" (a nickname of Nasir Rahbari, a Southern Azerbaijani political prisoner) can be cited as an example. A number of persons originating from South Azerbaijan were also represented in the organizations (*Çənlibel*, Yurd Union, *Birlik* Society, *Varlıq* Center) that were active in the first demonstrations. Since South Azerbaijanis have political experience, they (e.g. Ismail Terigpeyman) were tasked with the organizational work (Yaqublu 2018, pp. 369, 386, 415). During the demonstrations, *Heydər Babaya Salam* (Greetings to Heydar Baba), a poem by Shahriyar, as well as the hymn called *Səttarxan* were read and signed (Yaqublu 2018, 548). Historical books devoted to the Hiyabani, Sattarkhan, and Pishavari movements were also published (see: Cheshmazar 1986; Taghiyeva 1990). The issue of South Azerbaijan was added to the charters of many organizations (Yaqublu 2018, pp. 369, 395). Mahammad Hatami, originally from South Azerbaijan, is considered one of the dissidents who created the first opposition organization (*Çənlibel*). Isfandiyar Choshkun, who became one of the famous figures of the time, was also from South Azerbaijan. As a result, the 31 December 1989 events of the border movement

(*Sərhəd hərəkatı*) can also be considered as a point of political apogee, which led to these processes.

### **Leaders in the National Liberation Movement**

The leaders of the National Liberation Movement—Khudu Mammadov, Hikmat Hajizade, Mahammad Hatami Tantekin, Abulfaz Elchibey, Bakhtiyar Vakhbade and others – acted as the main ideologues of the movement. Mammadov can be considered one of the pioneers of the new intelligentsia. With no specialization in the humanities, Mammadov often emphasized the notions such as *folk*, *nation* and *homeland*. He noted the importance of the public role ordinary citizens played in society, and sought to articulate this role while participating in semi-legal organizations. In his philosophical works (*The Double Wing* and *The Memory of Patterns*), the traces of mystical or romantic nationalism can be found (i.e. an attempt to find traces of Turkic peoples in ancient motifs). Mammadov's approach to social problems based on his commitment to the people and homeland is evidence of his attempt to distance himself from the *proletariat* and *class* concepts of Soviet ideology. Emphasis on the link between science and art and the association of these spheres with love for the homeland contradicted the positivist approach of Soviet ideology, which prioritized the economic well-being of the society and the development of technology.

Hatami, who began his dissident activity in the 1960s, can be considered one of the first ideologues of the concept of *Bütöv Azərbaycan* (United Azerbaijan) because the statutes of the organizations and parties he founded (*Qızılbaşlar* and *Qurtuluş*) clearly traced the formation of North and South Azerbaijan as a single (unified) and independent state (Yaqublu 2018, 503-507). On the other hand, Elchibey, who wrote about a unified nation and state existing since ancient times, can be considered a primordial nationalist. He also played a crucial role in popularizing the idea of *Bütöv Azərbaycan* by politicizing the issue.

Hajizade played a special role in shaping the political theories of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan which has been pivotal in the National Liberation Movement. The concepts of *civil society* and *rule of law*, which the PFA program, developed with his participation, identified as the ultimate goal, were the classic political language used in international politics (Hajizade 2021, 43), and these universal principles emerged during *perestroika* (Hobpyzob 2019, 137).

## **Conclusion**

I argued that the intelligentsia that became the leaders of the National Liberation Movement was not homogeneous, that is, it consisted of dissident and mainstream intelligentsia, pointing to the importance of political transformations under Khrushchev and Gorbachev in the formation of an independent intelligentsia composed of dissidents and mainstream intelligentsia alike. The intelligentsia functioned in a nationalistic background during Khrushchev's rule, with the 1960s being remarkable for its ideological relaxation. The mainstream intelligentsia then was not politically active, but played a role in the periodic inclusion of Karabakh, South Azerbaijan, the state language and other national issues in the political program. The intelligentsia formed during Gorbachev's rule began to show some political activity. It manifested itself in its criticism of the Soviet system and discussion of the Karabakh issue. Topics related to history and literature were discussed by the intelligentsia, which created many organizations, and an alternative history and literature that contradicted the Soviet ideology became increasingly popular.

The humanitarian intelligentsia, comprised of dissidents and the mainstream intellectuals, played a major role in the National Liberation Movement, with the former criticizing Soviet totalitarianism from the very beginning. On the other hand, the mainstream intelligentsia was politically active

under the Soviet regime, but began to lean toward nationalism because of the Karabakh events and other national issues. Since those who led the movement were mostly representatives of humanitarian intelligentsia, history and literature dominated intellectual sources. National history and literature became the ideological source of the organizations that led public rallies. Speeches and samizdat at rallies played an important role in the ideology of National Liberation in the late 1980s. The Karabakh and South Azerbaijan issues occupied a special place in the ideology of the National Liberation Movement.

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