

Who Should Write National History?

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Who should write the best books on the history of Azerbaijan? For example, the Aqqyunlu state occupies a vital place in Azerbaijani historiography. Various aspects of the history of the Aqqyunlu have so far been explored in both Azerbaijani and foreign historiography. Abbasgulu Agha Bakikhanov was the first Azerbaijani to produce a study on the state. Following him were Shahin Farzaliyev and Tofiq Najafli who wrote books on the Aqqyunlu's common history, while Yagub Mahmudov wrote a book on the Aqqyunlu's foreign relations. Compared to domestic historiography, studies on the Aqqyunlu's history in foreign historiography are more specific and multidimensional. A few examples among the many are Daniel T. Potts's study of the social structure of the nomadic Turkic tribes, I. Lazzarini's work analyzing the foreign relations of the Aqqyunlu, F. Sümer's articles on Uzun Hasan and the history of the Aqqyunlu, S. Erşahin's study of the socio-cultural history of the Aqqyunlu, and V. Minorsky's article on the economic history of the Aqqyunlu.

For several months now, *The Aqqyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire*, a book by American historian John E. Woods, has been available in Azerbaijani at the Baku Research Institute (BRI). This book is certainly a remarkable study of the history of the Aqqyunlu, both in terms of the range of topics covered and the number of primary sources used. An Azerbaijani reader though might have this concern: Why has an American historian written an excellent work on the history of the Aqqyunlu and not an Azerbaijani historian who might consider this state part of their heritage? That is an interesting question, but I would like to approach the problem from a slightly different angle by avoiding this question and asking instead: Who should write national history: a national historian or an outsider?

What I mean by *national* history here is not historical literature to focus on the patriotic education of the younger generation, to promote and propagate the official ideology of the state and the authorities, but fundamental historical literature on the history of the country, written based on primary sources and scientific methodology. We often provide a simple answer to the question of why we study history: We cannot predict what lies ahead or understand our present without knowledge of the past. In his book *Why History Matters*, the English historian John Tosh argues that history is central to an informed and critical understanding of topical issues in the present.

What kind of scholar is a historian? A historian is a specialist who speaks the language of the sources of the period being studied, has the ability to analyze and compare them, and is soundly proficient in the methods and research methodology of history. A historian examines forgotten sources in the darkness of the past, connects the smallest details they find with one another to create a description of events on the basis of comparative analysis. In compiling this description, the historian must demonstrate a high degree of professionalism, be familiar with research methodology and maintain neutrality. But since the historian responsible for reconstructing the past analyzes not only generic abstractions but also events that took place in *specific territories*, they involuntarily also become a purveyor of national history. A well-known important social function of national history is the formation of social memory. Social memory creates a collective identity for society and ensures society's loyalty to generic abstractions. Thus, a historian creates an imagination of a particular nation by interpreting its past.

The only educational institution in Azerbaijan that trains professional historians is the Baku State University's History Department. Unfortunately, the curriculum of the faculty is not suitable for training historians. Firstly, specialized languages (for example, the classical Greek and Latin

languages, or medieval Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish) are not taught at the faculty. There are a small number of studies based on Persian and Arabic sources in Azerbaijan whose authors are usually graduates of the Department of Oriental Studies. Their linguistic skills enable them to work directly with primary sources. However, they are unable to write high-quality research because of their lack of knowledge of historical research methods. Secondly, the articles and dissertations written by most Azerbaijani historians are clear proof that the department does not teach research methods and methodology at the proper level. Thus, most of the dissertations submitted to the Higher Attestation Commission in the field of Azerbaijani history refer to the modern period and are descriptive and summary works rather than original research.

Nowadays, conducting high-quality research not only requires special knowledge and qualified skills but also an appropriate political environment for historical research. If a historian lives in a democratic state, they are more likely to have the opportunity to address fundamental problems of history on a scientific level. By a democratic state I mean a political system that ensures free and transparent elections, independent courts and free media, and freedom of speech. In non-democratic states, however, it is difficult to take the initiative to write history independently and in general be independent of the state. Authoritarian states believe it vital to keep historians under control because the authorities in such states communicate their message to the society they govern, and the ideology they choose, mainly through history. Historians in authoritarian states must adapt the history they write to the suggestions and requirements of the authorities. In most cases, this leads to a falsification of historical sources, processes, and, ultimately, scientific results.

But how does political power give orders to historians? In the past, with official court historians, such orders were commonplace. The Safavid ruler Shah Ismail Khatai, for

example, commissioned the court historian Ibrahim al-Amini to sanctify his lineage by falsifying his genealogy. Al-Amini had to distort history and falsify sources to create a genealogy that connected Ismail to the Prophet Muhammad. In modern times, the state's instructions to historians can be seen from the excursions into history made in leaders' official speeches. For example, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly tried to link the Nagorno-Karabakh problem with the history of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic by accusing its founders of ceding the city of Yerevan (then Erivan) to Armenia. In a meeting with the editors of the National Encyclopedia of Azerbaijan in 2004, he gave an open message to historians on how he would like to see the history of modern Azerbaijan. In another example, Russian President Vladimir Putin falsified 13th-century events in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to justify the military intervention against Ukraine he launched in 2022 and to identify Ukrainians with Russians.

Why might a historian betray their profession by distorting history? The most harmless of these several reasons is that a potential historian might not receive their degree and academic title if they don't toe the government line. In order to receive their academic title and degree in Azerbaijan, a historian applies to the Higher Attestation Commission under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Commission, as its name suggests, protects the interests of political leadership and refuses to accept a research paper that contradicts official ideology. Academic titles and scientific degrees are a huge bonus for researchers. Historians whose research and scholarly views do not conform to the official ideology and rhetoric of leadership are denied access to university classrooms. Of course, this means that they can also be punished for practicing their profession, and such punishments can have serious repercussions on their own lives and the lives of people close to them. To avoid such punishments, historians adapt to the current conditions and are forced to comply with the orders of the authorities. This

is how most historians were coopted under the Soviet Union.

Returning to the question raised at the beginning, I want the reader to answer that question for themselves based on an example. The reader can compare the work of two historians who have written about the Aqqyunlu—American historian John Woods and Azerbaijani historian Yagub Mahmudov. There are several reasons why I chose Mahmudov for this comparison. First of all, like Woods, Mahmudov earned his degree for his research on the Aqqyunlu. Secondly, Mahmudov has been a leading historian in independent Azerbaijan for at least two decades. For many years, he served as the Chairman of the Defense Council and Coordination Council specializing in National History, as well as Director of the ANAS Institute of History and Head of the Department of Ancient and Medieval History at the Baku State University's Department of History. In short, for many years Mahmudov had the final say both on the determination of the topic of defended dissertations on national history and their admission to the defense stage. Most likely, greater powers were granted to him on the basis of his exceptional contributions to Azerbaijani history, excellent knowledge of the discipline, and high professionalism.

Mahmudov's doctoral thesis was entitled "Mutual Relations of the Aghgoyunlu and Safavid States with Western European Countries (*second half of the 15th century – beginning of the 17th century*)."

To conduct research on this topic, he should have known at least Latin and Persian because these languages are the languages of documents of that time, i.e. primary sources. Without knowledge of these languages, it is impossible to address an original research question and produce meaningful results. Mahmudov's thesis noted 594 references, none of which were a primary source. Mahmudov could not directly read the sources of the time that he studied. That is why he did not consult primary sources in his thesis, and instead used the work of historians and translators who were able to read and interpret these sources.

Because he did not know Persian, for example, Mahmudov was unable to read Bidlisi's work and instead turned to Vasileva's translation commentaries. And because Mahmudov did not know Latin, he could not read the travel notes by Giosafat Barbaro, the well-known diplomat and travel writer of the time, and again turned to another historian, Skrizhinskaya, who read and wrote commentaries on Barbaro's travel notes. Readers familiar with Woods's research undoubtedly noticed his numerous interpretations of primary sources provided on every page. The American scholar worked directly with sources written in Persian, Arabic, and Ottoman Turkish and created an original research work. Because of this, the reader will probably answer the question of who should write national history: a qualified professional or an Azerbaijani historian without the requisite skills.