

Pan-Turkism, Construction of Identity and the Formation of the Republic of Azerbaijan (1890-1920)

Elaheh Koolaee*

Professor of Regional Studies, University of Tehran

Maryam Nezami

PhD in Regional Studies, University of Tehran

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Abstract

The formation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic took place when nationalistic movements were at their zenith around the world. The Caucasus was amongst the regions that were heavily influenced by such movements. Independent states such as Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan came into being after the collapse of the tsarist empire. The establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic with the centrality of the M \ddot{u} savat Party triggered much attention in Iran. Selecting the name "Azerbaijan" for the region that was formerly called "Aran" was interpreted as a plot to split Iran's Turkish-populated Regions, consequently realizing the long-sought dream of panTurkists.

The main question of this article is as follows: what was the role of pan-Turkist intellectuals of Caucasus in the emergence and establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic? This article aims to respond to the abovementioned question by emphasizing on the "constructed" collective identities and utilizing the theories of intellectuals such as Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Miroslav Hroch, and Paul Brass, to analyze the process of national identity construction led by Azeri intellectuals. This article stresses that the efforts of three generations of Azeri intellectuals have played a major role in the emergence and formation of the central idea of an Azeri Nation-state. The three generations (1870 - 1918), in a gradual process along with political goals, were able to succeed in creating and spreading a national identity among Caucasian Muslims and utilizing it as the basis for the political action, during the political conflicts caused by the fall of the tsarist empire.

The people of the Muslim regions of the Caucasus, which before the Russo-Persian wars were considered to be a part of the Iranian society, in addition to political affiliations, possessed a historical, cultural and religious

* E-mail: ekolaee@ut.ac.ir (Corresponding author)

interconnectedness with Iran. 100 years after separation from Iran, the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was due to the newly found identity which emphasized on distinguishing itself from the Iranian culture.

The foundations of this transformation were shaped during the colonization of the region by tsarist Russia. With the outset of the Russian Rule, a gradual process of colonial modernization formed which did not pick up until after 1870. The discovery of oil in Baku was the factor that helped to increase the pace of these changes. The most notable achievement of such modernization was the creation of new intellectual groups amongst Georgian, Armenian and Muslim ethnic groups. The Caucasian Muslim intellectuals were a newly found group which formed the basis of a significant cultural change in the region. This article has analyzed the evolution of three generations of these intellectuals between the years 1870 and 1918. The first generation includes several figures, the most notable one being Mirza Fatali Akhundov. The main characteristic of this generation was the simultaneous interest in both Iranian identity and Russian modernization. Their most important role was initiating a culturally enlightened movement amongst the Muslims of the Caucasus and adopting the local Turkish language as the literary language. The second generation of intellectuals consisted of intellectuals who attempted to recover the language and the cultural heritage and share their recovery amongst the masses via media tools. A dichotomy towards Iranian culture existed amongst this generation. Even though groups such as Ahmad Agaiov have friendly tendencies towards Iran and some even supported Iranians during the Constitutional Revolution, but groups such as Yellow and Blue and Hossein Zadeh have had hostile propensities towards Iranian culture and Shiite identity. The third step was finally taken towards political conflicts. During the fall of the tsarist empire, with the intensification of the identity conflict in the Caucasus and Pan-Turkist objectives and its peak during the Ottoman Empire, the third generation of Azeri Intellectuals took the ethnically constructed identity from the cultural to political realms and set it as the basis for the establishment of their national unit.

This article emphasizes on the formation of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1918, as being an ideal example of a national unit that was shaped without any precedent in history before the 19th century, and immediately during political and social conflicts which led to the fall of the tsarists. During this process, the Turkish identity and the idea of Azerbaijan were segmented on the basis and through the utilization of modern public tools. During the process of the “constructed” identity, some identical elements became

prominent and were centralized as the definitions of identity (such as the Turkish language, Turkish myths, and the bound between the Caucasus and Anatolian Turks), and some were alienized (such as the Persian language, historical bonds between Caucasus and Iran) and some were marginalized and based on immediate goals were put on standby (such as Shiite elements). Through a gradual process, they turned the idea of “Azerbaijan Nation” from an obscure sense into a coherent idea and political plan. The occurrence of the First World War, the deterioration and fall of the Russian Empire and the peak of pan-Turkism in the Ottoman Empire were amongst significant and influential factors in the formation of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Perhaps the absence of any of the above factors would have hindered the efforts of Caucasian intellectuals towards forging the new identity and creating a national unit on its basis. However, the simultaneous occurrence of these factors synergized the efforts of these intellectuals in constructing a new identity for the Muslims of Caucasus and led to the establishment of the independent national unit.

Keywords: Construction of Identity, Notion of Nation, Pan-Turkism, The Intellectuals, The Republic of Azerbaijan.