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Исследовательская статья

Tahir S. Shahbazov
PhD in History, Assoc. Prof., Leading Researcher
A.A. Bakikhanov Institute of History and Ethnography
Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Baku, Azerbaijan
tshahbazov.65@gmail.com

THE SEARCH FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY IN AZERBAIJAN DURING THE LATE 19th CENTURY

Abstract. Contemporary scholarship distinguishes various forms of identity – ethnic, national, religious, and others. Among these, the issue of “national identity” has attracted the widest discussion, since both the nation and nationalism are products of modern era in which national states are born and formed. For this reason, the history of national identity search in Azerbaijan and the formation of the Azerbaijani nation are of great relevance. Historical-comparative analyses conducted based on archival, source and literary materials reveal that until the 1870s, Azerbaijanis did not have a clear idea about the nation they belonged, the language they spoke, and the religion they had been carriers for centuries. The founding in 1875 of Hasan Bey Zardabi’s newspaper *Ekinchi* – published under considerable hardship – together with later outlets such as *Ziya*, *Kashkul*, and *Kaspi*, introduced Enlightenment thought and stimulated the search for national identity. Led by a small group of Russian- and European-educated democratic intellectuals, this movement advocated the use of the native language and alphabet, the development of national education, and the establishment of a domestic press, thereby igniting an ethno-cultural revival in Azerbaijan. By the end of the nineteenth century, through the efforts of intellectuals such as M.Shahtakhti, A.b. Huseynzadeh, A.b.Aghaoglu, M.A.Rasulzadeh, A.b.Topchubashi and others, this movement had evolved into a mature national ideology with clearly articulated political goals and objectives. Finally, first democratic republic established in the Turkic-Muslim East against the backdrop of political, ideological, and national upheavals that began in the Russian Empire at early twentieth century – the Azerbaijan People’s Republic – can be considered the logical conclusion of the national identity search that began in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: primordialism; modernism; search for national identity; Yusif Akchura; *Ekinchi*

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ЭТНОГРАФИЯ

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Research paper

Шахбазов Т.С.

кандидат исторических наук, доцент, ведущий научный сотрудник

Институт истории и этнографии им. А.А. Бакиханова

Национальная Академия Наук Азербайджана, Баку, Азербайджан

tshahbazov.65@gmail.com**ПОИСК НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ
В АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНЕ ВО ВТОРОЙ ПОЛОВИНЕ XIX ВЕКА**

Аннотация. В современном научном дискурсе идентичность определяется как этническая, национальная, религиозная, возрастная, гендерная, расовая, региональная, межкультурная и т. д. Однако среди них вопросы «национальной идентичности» обсуждаются более широко, что обусловлено прежде всего тем, что понятия «нация» и «национализм» являются именно продуктами современного мира – новой эпохи, в которой возникают и формируются национальные государства. В этом смысле история поиска национальной идентичности в Азербайджане и проблема формирования азербайджанской нации также представляют большую актуальность. Историко-сравнительный анализ, проведенный на основе архивных, источниковых и литературных материалов, показывает, что до 70-х годов XIX века азербайджанцы не имели четкого представления не только о своей нации и родном языке, но и о религии, которую исповедовали веками. Лишь с 1875 года начали публиковаться материалы с просветительскими идеями на страницах газеты «Экинчи» Гасанбека Зардаби, а позднее в таких периодических изданиях, как «Зия», «Кешкуль» и «Каспи». Поиски национальной идентичности, также проявилось в борьбе немногочисленной передовой интеллигенции, получившей образование в России и Европе, за родной язык, алфавит, просвещение и национальную печать, что привело к своеобразному оживлению в азербайджанской этнокультурной среде. К концу века эта тенденция приобрел уникальную динамику в деятельности Мухаммада Аги Шахтахтли, Али-бека Гусейнзаде, Ахмеда бека Агаоглу, Мамед Эмина Расулзаде, Али-мардан бека Топчубаши и других, и достигла уровня общенациональной идеологии, содержащей конкретные политические цели и задачи. Именно в свете этой идеологии и на фоне политических, национальных и идеологических потрясений начавшихся в Российской империи в начале XX века, поиски национальной идентичности достигли своего логического завершения в 1918 году с созданием первого демократического государства на тюрко-мусульманском Востоке – Азербайджанской Народной Республики.

Ключевые слова: примордиализм; модернизм; поиски национальной идентичности; Юсиф Ачкура; Экинчи (Пахарь)

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Introduction

In recent years, the term “identity” has been widely used in academic discourse, journalism, and daily life. Despite its etymological roots in ancient and medieval texts, where it simply meant “sameness” or “that one”, the term acquired broader popularity and was transformed into a key social-scientific category only in the 1950s, largely due to the work of the American psychologist Erik Homburger Erikson. E. Erikson characterized identity as “a process that is ‘localized’ in the core of both individual and social culture, and determined the identity of both of them” and highlighted its features such as “individuality, identity or sameness and integrity, unity and synthesis, social solidarity and continuity” [1, p. 31].

Although ethnic, national, religious, and other forms of identity can be distinguished, national identity dominates discussions in modern Western academia. This focus arises mainly because the nation and nationalism are products of modernity – the era in which nation-states emerged and formed. Moreover, unlike ethnic identity, national identity is not considered primordial or innate. Its core components are generally understood to include individuals’ attitudes toward the material and spiritual heritage accumulated over time, a commitment to advancing national interests, and the capacity to mobilize collectively in order to forge mutually beneficial relations with other national and ethnic groups.

When discussing national identity, it is essential first to clarify the content and core parameters of the category “nation” itself. In contemporary scholarship, approaches to this concept are generally divided into two major theoretical trends: *primordialism* and *modernism* (postmodernism). Drawing on the works of German idealists – particularly, J.H. Fichte (*Rechii k Nemetskoi Natsii*. St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2009) and J.G. Herder (*Idei k Filosofii Istorii Chelovechestva*. Moscow: Nauka, 1977), the proponents of the primordial theory regard the “nation” as an element of nature subject to natural laws, like “ethnos”; they consider it a “broad community of related people” united with blood, common customs, religion, language and a single territory. Primordialism, incorporating sociobiological and historical-evolutionary strands, provided the theoretical groundwork for a number of twentieth-century ethnological schools, notably S. M. Shirokogorov’s and V. Muhlmann’s teaching about ethnos, Yu. V. Bromley’s dualistic theory, and L. N. Gumilev’s passionarity theory of ethnogenesis.

Within the theory of modernism, which approaches the “nation” from a completely different perspective, at different times *functionalism*, *instrumentalism*, *constructivism*, and other currents emerged and developed. The works of scholars such as Ernest Gellner (*Natsii i Natsionalizm*. Moscow: Progress, 1991), Benedict Anderson (*Voobrazhaemye Soobshchestva*. Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2016), Anthony D. Smith (*Natsionalizm i Modernizm*. Moscow: Praksis, 2004), Eric Hobsbawm (*Natsii I Natsionalizm s 1780*. St. Petersburg: Aleteiya, 1998), Geoffrey Hosking (*Rossiya: Narod i Imperiya*. Smolensk: Rusich, 2001), Miroslav Hroch (*Ot Natsionalnih Dvizheniy...* Moscow: Praksis, 2002), and others played a pivotal role in shaping modernist postmodernist approaches to the nation during the 1970s and 1980s. Thanks to the contribution of these authors, the dominance of the “primordial theory of the nation” was ended [2, p. 11].

Unlike the primordialists, the modernists see the “nation” as a historical or political phenomenon. According to the Czech historian M. Hroch, “nation” is an invention of the industrial era that emerged due to the strengthening of the state institution and the development of capitalism [3, p. 122]. British philosopher and anthropologist E. Gellner believes that “nations are the product of human beliefs, passions and tendencies. Ordinary groups of people (for example, the inhabitants of a certain territory or the speakers of a certain language) become a nation when the members of that group recognize the common rights and obligations of each other within the group of which they are members. No other extraneous quality that distinguishes this group from others, it is this mutual recognition that makes them a nation” [4, p. 35].

A. Smith, professor of the London School of Economics, proposes defining the “nation” primarily through the characteristic features that emerged during the era of nationalism. In his view, the nation can be understood as a product of both popular will and cultural tradition only when these specific historical conditions of the nationalist period are taken into account [5, p. 66].

The American scholar B. Anderson views “nation” as an imaginary community. He notes that “for even the members of the smallest nation will never know, meet, or even hear of the majority of the nation to which they belong. In everyone’s mind, only the ideas about their own community will live” [6, p. 47].

The Russian ethnologist V. Tishkov, based on the “zero version” of the problem, rejects the idea that the “nation” is an ethnic unity and tries to explain the problem in the context of the “nation-state” [7, p. 3].

Mammad Amin Rasulzadeh, one of the founders and ideologues of the Azerbaijan People's Republic (ADR), notes that “... Peoples who have common languages, customs, homelands, etc. form a nation. However, the transformation of a nationality into a nation depends on the establishment of common consciousness and collective (human) will. And this comes into being only with the formation of the body that sees the task of ‘public memory’ ... from the viewpoint of nationality, ‘Motherland’ is a geographical concept. However, from the viewpoint of the nation, which has consciousness and will, ‘Motherland’ expresses a political meaning” [8, pp. 29–31]. From this quote, we can see that M.A. Rasulzadeh is a man of ideas with modernist views.

One of the most, if not the most, important attributes characterizing the phenomenon of “nation” is language. As the prominent ethnographer M. Magomedkhanov wrote, “Language is the bearer of the spirituality of the people, their historical and cultural experience... Language is also the soul of the people and lives as long as even one person speaks it. With the fall of language into oblivion, this soul turns into mythological concepts that completely disappear from the consciousness of the people due to assimilation” [9, p. 14].

We know that since the Middle Ages, the Azerbaijani language has played the role of a second mother tongue and a *lingua franca* not only for the peoples living in Azerbaijan, but also for all the peoples of the region, fulfilling a very important function as a communication, trade and literary language. There is enough evidence of this in written sources and literature. For example, the German traveler Adam Olearius, who visited Shamakhy in the 1630s, noted that the entire population here, including the khan himself, spoke the Turkish (Azerbaijani) language [10, p. 959].

The prominent Russian poet M. Lermontov, who was in exile in the Caucasus, writes “...I have begun to learn Tatar [Azerbaijani].¹ As important as it is to know French in Europe, it is just as necessary to know this language here [in the Caucasus] and in Asia in general” [11, pp. 523–524].

According to E.G. Weidenbaum, who traveled to the Caucasus in the 1880s, “the Azerbaijani Turks, often called ‘Azerbaijani Tatars’, constitute the main part of the population of Eastern Transcaucasia ... Its simplicity and ease of comprehension have made the Azerbaijani language an international language for the entire Eastern Transcaucasia” [12, p. 120].

August von Haxthausen wrote that “Armenians compose their songs not in Armenian, but in Tatar [Azerbaijani], since this language is the language of communication, trade and mutual intercourse between peoples in the south of the Caucasus. In this respect, it can be compared with French in Europe” [13, p. 52].

The prominent researcher of the life and culture of the peoples of the Caucasus, ethnographer G. Sergeyeva, notes that, “due to the critical importance of mastering the Azerbaijani language, mountaineers traditionally sent their children at an early age to live with Tatar [Azerbaijani] families. Proficiency in Tatar [Azerbaijani] had become one of the essential conditions for survival and success among the mountaineers” [14, p. 92].

The well-known ethnographer M. Magomedkhanov writes that “the Azerbaijani language was so widespread among the neighboring Tabasaran people that in some cases it even supplanted and eliminated their native language” [9, p. 42].

Similar ideas appear in the works of other Caucasian scholars as well [15; 16; 17]. From this perspective, the nineteenth-century Azerbaijani intelligentsia's attempts to establish a national press, alongside their struggle to preserve the purity of the Azerbaijani language by purging foreign elements and enriching its vocabulary, can likewise be interpreted as a concerted effort to forge and assert national identity.

It should also be noted that global processes such as democratization, economic integration, informational and cultural standardization currently prevalent all over the world are accompanied by profound transformations in national identity and, in effect, the erosion or “blurring” of cultural boundaries between nations. In particular, in Western Europe and North America, national identity is increasingly viewed and framed as a “problem that impedes progress,” a phenomenon widely described in the scholarly literature as a “crisis of national identity.”

¹ Hereinafter, all material enclosed in square brackets constitutes the author's additions to the original text.

From the history of national identity search in Azerbaijan

In contemporary scholarship, the forms of the transformation process of an ethnos into a nation are classified as centralization, unification, and national building. The first of these forms – centralization – was characteristic of European states such as Great Britain, France, Spain, and Portugal, where the main carrier of the process was the existing state apparatus. The unification model of nation-formation – achieved through wars and diplomatic efforts led predominantly by military elites and diplomats (as seen most clearly in the German and Italian cases) – was especially prevalent among peoples whose territories already possessed a high degree of cultural distinctiveness, above all in Central and Eastern Europe. The ethnologist A. Balayev, who argued that nation-building in nineteenth-century Azerbaijan, a colonial territory of the Russian Empire, took a form particularly suited to its socio-political and cultural conditions, observed that “in such cases, it is not statesmen or military leaders who come to the forefront, but active agitators – writers, poets, journalists, and the like – who devote their energies to studying the language, culture, social structure, and historical traits of the non-dominant group and strive to embed this knowledge in the consciousness of their compatriots.” [2, pp. 134–135].

From this perspective, it becomes evident that, until the 1850s–1860s, Azerbaijanis possessed no well-defined conception of their ancestry, national identity, or native language. Even though religious identity predominated over nascent national sentiment, their grasp of the Islamic faith they professed was limited, with the notion of “being Muslim” rarely extending beyond a formal adherence to Sharia prescriptions. The brilliant composer Uzeyir Hajibeyli vividly captured this complex situation in one of his satirical feuilletons:

“... If you ask a non-Muslim Arab, ‘Who are you?’, he will reply: ‘I am an Arab, my religion is Christianity, and my language is Arabic.’ Ask a Persian the same question and he will answer: ‘I am a Persian; my religion is Islam, and my language is Persian.’ The same holds for a Russian, an Armenian, and so forth. But ask one of us: ‘Who are you?’ The answer will simply be: ‘I am a Muslim.’

- What nationality are you?
- From the Muslim nation.
- What is your religion?
- From the Muslim religion.
- What language do you speak?
- Muslim language.

However, he is Turkish, his religion is Islam, and his language is Turkish. There is no Muslim nation, there is no Muslim language, and Muslim means a person who has adopted the religion of Islam. Religion and language are different things. Religion is different, nationality is different. There is no language in religion, and there is no nationality in religion” [18, 140–143].

Paradoxically, a similar situation prevailed not only among ordinary people but also in relatively educated families that produced prominent Turkic intellectuals and men of letters, such as Ahmet bey Ağaoğlu. In one of his autobiographical works, Ağaoğlu recounts the following about his father: “...My father lived a quiet life and died quietly. He was a deeply religious man. When asked ‘Who are you?’, he would reply: ‘Thank God, I am a Muslim. I follow Imam Ali; my father was Mirza Ibrahim, and his father was Hasan Agha of the Qurdeli clan.’ Yet it never occurred to him that he was a Turk” [19, p. 64].

In our view, one of the primary reasons for this bitter reality – and perhaps the most fundamental – was the weakness, or even absence, of secular education. For centuries, religious prejudices had branded secular learning as “unnecessary” and virtually “forbidden,” causing the overwhelming majority of Muslim Azerbaijanis to remain alienated from it. As a result, ignorance, intellectual stagnation, and unquestioning obedience became, with only rare exceptions, the entrenched “traditional way of life” for a nation that possessed far greater potential.

In the nineteenth century, the situation was further aggravated by the fact that education – one of the primary vehicles for fostering national identity – fell under strict oversight by the tsarist government. The Russian Empire pursued an explicit policy of Russification and Christianisation in its national peripheries, and all educational matters were now shaped and “resolved” in accordance with these imperial objectives. This approach was bluntly articulated by D. A. Tolstoy, Minister of Education in the 1870s: “The ultimate goal of

educating all non-Russians inhabiting our fatherland must unquestionably be their Russification and fusion with the Russian people" [20, p. 23].

The renowned Russian orientalist, missionary, and educator N. I. Ilminsky, who advocated that non-Russian peoples should be taught in their native languages by native-speaking teachers, yet always in the spirit of Russian and Christian enlightenment, wrote: "A fanatical Tatar who has received no Russian education and does not know the Russian language is preferable to a civilised Tatar who has been educated in Russian. An aristocrat is worse still; a university graduate is even worse" [21, p. 175].

We think that these ideas, which so vividly expose the true nature of tsarist educational policy, require no further commentary.

When examining the ethnocultural landscape of nineteenth-century Azerbaijan, the figure of Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh (1812–1878) cannot be overlooked. His literary and educational activities in the 1850s and 1860s, his struggle for a new alphabet, his open and sharp stance against religious fanaticism and ignorance, and his pivotal role in establishing a national theatre all represent the earliest embryonic stages of the quest for Azerbaijani national identity. It is true that some researchers demonstrate a slightly different position, based on the fact that the mentioned directions of Akhundzadeh's activity were not national-ideological, but only cultural in nature, which also causes certain disagreements around the problem in question. For example, the famous Tatar thinker Y. Akchura, who was one of the main figures of the Turkism ideology, admitted that M.F. Akhundzadeh had rendered great services to Turkism with his comedies written in Azerbaijani language and in European style, his selfless struggle for a new alphabet, and his participation in the creation of the first professional theater in the Turkic world; however, he sees him not a Turkist, but as a person striving towards the Turkist ideal. Y. Akchura observes that "... Yet I possess no substantial information concerning Mirza's [M.F. Akhundzadeh] ideas or discussions regarding Turkish nationalism. We know that he concerned himself with history, philosophy, and political science and that he published a philosophical treatise titled *Haqq al-Yaqin*. However, none of my sources reveal what positions Mirza took in that work" [22, pp. 32–33].

As the prominent Turkish literary scholar Yavuz Akpinar observes, "the revolutionary thinker [M.F. Akhundzadeh] has no real concept of 'nation.' He regards all Muslims as a single people. For him, there is no difference between an Iranian, an Azerbaijani, or a Turk. He appears either not to know, or not to care, that Anatolian Turks and Azerbaijani Turks share the same lineage. It is inconceivable that someone who spends his life as a translator of *Elsine-i Selase* would be ignorant of this fact. The more plausible explanation is that he considered it unimportant and therefore never raised the issue of 'nation'" [23, p. 54].

Unlike them, Ziya Goyalp, one of the greatest figures of political Turkism, recognizes M.F. Akhundzadeh as a genuine Turkist and highly values his contribution: "When Abdülhamid was attempting to halt this holy trend [Turkism] in Turkey, two great Turkists were emerging in Russia. The first of them is Mirza Fatali Akhundov, whose original comedies written in Azeri Turkish have been translated into all European languages. The second is Ismail Gasprinski [Ismail Gaspirali], who published the newspaper *Terjuman* in Crimea; his motto regarding Turkism was 'unity in language, thought, and action.' The *Terjuman* was read by Eastern, Western, and Northern Turks alike. The existence of this newspaper was living proof that all Turks were united in the same language" [24, pp. 6–7].

The reasons for the emergence of such disagreements vary. It appears that the political and cultural milieu of Tiflis, Akhundzadeh's position within the imperial administration, and the Tsarist regime's hostility toward both Turkism and Turks in general prevented him from openly expressing his national sentiments. Perhaps for these reasons, Akhundzadeh has traditionally been recognized and studied within academic and social spheres not as a Turkist or nationalist, but rather as an educator, writer, and philosopher.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the formation of a new type of Azerbaijani culture, encompassing education, literature, and the press, marked the beginning of the search for national identity, acting, so to speak, as its "prelude." The organizer and driving force of this process, however strange it may seem, was the Azerbaijani intelligentsia, educated in Russia and Europe. This class had been created by the Russian government specifically to facilitate the colonial administration of the region. As the Russian historian and sociologist D. Furman observed, "the Azerbaijani intelligentsia, who assimilated the liberal values and ideas of European society through Russian culture, ultimately went far beyond the framework intended for them by colonial Russia" [25, p. 6].

Nevertheless, to formulate a definitive opinion on this topic, we find it necessary to re-examine the life and work of M.F. Akhundzadeh from a different perspective, aiming to uncover and study aspects of his

activity that may have remained obscured until now. Currently, the origin of the search for national identity in Azerbaijan is traditionally traced to 1875, marked by the publication of *Ekinchi* and the establishment of the national press.

National identity search and press

Thus, in 1875, the renowned intellectual and enlightener Hasan Bey Zardabi – along with his newspaper *Ekinchi*, and later publications such as *Ziya*, *Keshkul*, and *Kaspi* – achieved significant progress within the existing socio-political conditions. By disseminating ideas of enlightenment, they played a key role in helping the population, particularly Azerbaijanis, recognize their national identity and rights. *Ekinchi* laid the foundation for this enlightenment movement by regularly addressing critical issues such as alphabet, schooling, and general education. It provided a platform for these topics and urged the nation's leading figures and the national bourgeoisie to address them.² The very name of the newspaper, *Ekinchi* (The Ploughman), reflects the immense challenges Zardabi faced within the restrictive socio-cultural environment of Tsarist censorship. Zardabi described the strategy behind the name following a meeting with D.S. Staroselski, the military governor of Baku: “After I told him [Staroselski] about my problem, he advised me to name the newspaper *Ekinchi*. In other words, let it appear that only agriculture would be discussed in order to pass censorship. In this way, I submitted an application and received permission.”³

Through *Ekinchi*, our great intellectual addressed young Azerbaijanis who had studied in Russia and Europe but chose not to return to their homeland, preferring instead to work abroad for a better life. He implored them to serve their people and nation, writing emotionally: “Oh, you young people who are studying the sciences! It is true that it is difficult to get along with our countrymen; they do not understand what you are talking about, they will consider your work inconsistent with Sharia, and will hurt you by calling you a *kafir*... Do not be greedy for worldly pleasures, but encourage your brothers to do good deeds. Let the poets mock you, the mullahs curse you, and the public cast stones at you. Work hard for the nation, and in the future, when the nation's eyes are opened, they will consider you martyrs and pray for you.”⁴

However, the pages of *Ekinchi* sometimes included articles with socio-political content that criticized the difficult socio-economic situation, the illegal actions of Tsarist officials, and the colonial policies pursued by the Empire in the national borderlands. In order to divert the attention of the censors from such risky initiatives that were incompatible with the obligations undertaken by the newspaper, H. Zardabi employed veiled expressions and phrases whenever appropriate, and conveyed his ideas to the reader by changing time and place. For example, in the regular “Fresh News” section of the newspaper, one could often find articles with the following content: “The *Turkustan* newspaper writes that there were nomadic Kyrgyz under the rule of the Khogand [Kokand] Khanate; after Russia conquered Khogand, they settled in the Alay Mountains. Now that they have started a fight with Russia under the leadership of Abdullah Bey, General Skoblev has gone to disperse them. They say that Russia will also conquer the Alay Mountains.” Or, “The *Kavgaz* newspaper writes that a community established to Christianize non-tribes in the Caucasus converted 450 people from Abkhazia and Ossetia to Christianity last year.”⁵

A significant portion of *Ekinchi* was dedicated to promoting a new type of culture, encompassing fiction, art, language, pedagogy, textbooks, translation, book publishing, and library. In almost all issues of the newspaper, in order to raise the cultural level of the people, educate them and make their time meaningful, the newspaper advocated for the production of books in the mother tongue. It also called for foreign works to be translated into the native language and distributed to the population free of charge.⁶

H.b. Zardabi, who argued that literature, including oral folk traditions, should serve the unity and progress of the nation, lamented that some indigenous songs and examples of musical folklore were meaningless, and being far removed from these ideals. He noted: “Every tribe has songs that comment on the bad and good days of the nation's past; these songs are heard, and the nation becomes united. But those who hear our songs

2 *Əkinçi*, September 20, 1875, № 5

3 Azərbaycan Milli EA, M.Füzuli adına Əlyazmalar İnstitutu. H.Zərdabi arxivi, inv. l03, vərəq 1

4 *Əkinçi*, June 11, 1876, № 11

5 *Əkinçi*, October 8, 1876, № 19

6 *Əkinçi*, March 29, 1876, № 6

must wonder who made them and why. Most of them, which the ignorant call for, have no meaning at all.” The author sought to justify this concern with concrete and vivid examples.⁷

H.b. Zardabi viewed internal divisions among Muslims, particularly sectarian conflicts, as the primary obstacles hindering development and the strengthening of national consciousness and national unity. He wrote: “Half of the Muslims living in the Caucasus are Shia, and half are Sunni. Shias are tired of Sunnis, Sunnis are tired of Shias. No one listens to each other. How can the union be formed?!”⁸

It is worth noting that when dedicating space to such writings, H.b. Zardabi often cited examples from the lives of other peoples who, despite the oppression they suffered, retained their national and religious identities. He wrote with a sense of envy regarding nations that always strove for unity and development; in doing so, he effectively illuminated the path of progress and the future for his own people.⁹

Regrettably, due to the articles and opinions published in *Ekinchi*, reactionary circles – especially fanatical religious figures – launched harsh attacks against the newspaper and its founder, H.b. Zardabi. They threatened to kill him and angrily called him “godless” and “urus in a hat” [26, p. 293].

As a consequence of these mounting pressures and periodic warnings from Tsarist censors, *Ekinchi* ceased publication in 1877. Instead, on January 14, 1879, a new native-language publication emerged within the ethno-cultural landscape of Azerbaijan: the newspaper *Ziya* (renamed *Ziyayi-Qafqasiya* in December 1880), founded by the Unsuzadeh brothers, Said and Jalaladdin. Unlike *Ekinchi*, *Ziya*’s ambiguous editorial stance often sparked discussion and controversy regarding the content it published. For instance, the publisher, S. Unsuzadeh, opposed alphabet reform initiatives, arguing that it was incorrect to attribute ignorance and backwardness to the complexity of the Arabic script. Noting that China and Japan had achieved progress without altering their writing systems, he suggested that the true solution lay in simplifying education and training methods rather than changing the alphabet [27, p. 721].

For this reason, both at that time and in later periods, allegations arose that he collaborated with the Tsarist authorities. For example, according to A. Zeynalzade, a researcher of Azerbaijani press history and the censorship activities of the Tsarist regime, “the censorship records allow us to conclude that the attitude of the Caucasian Censorship Committee toward the newspaper *Ziya* (*Ziyayi-Qafqasiya*) was moderate. The main reason for this was the fact that the editor belonged to the ecclesiastical class, was close to the Viceroy’s administration, and the ideology he promoted in the newspaper was compatible with Tsarist policy” [28, p. 174].

Yusif Akchura emphasized that the Unsuzadeh brothers served the cause of Islam more than that of nationalism. Describing them not as proponents of Turkism, but of Islamic unity, which was more relevant at that time, he noted that their connection to Turkish nationalism was limited strictly to the fact that they printed the works of Ismayil bey Gaspirali in their printing house [22, pp. 47–48].

According to the well-known educator Omar Faig Nemanzadeh, Said Unsuzadeh was constantly ridiculed, insulted and attacked by the public because of his overly liberal outlook. Yet, along with authors with a religious outlook in the newspapers *Ziya* and *Ziyayi-Qafqasiya*, bright intellectuals such as Hasan bey Zardabi, Seyyid Azim Shirvani, Najaf bey Vezirov, Jalal Unsuzadeh, S. Velibeyov, Adolf Berje, A.O. Chernyayevski and M. Shahtakhtli also wrote papers.¹⁰

Ziyayi-Qafqasiya operated for about five years before “closing” in June 1884 due to “economic difficulties” and a “lack of financial resources.” However, prior to this, another publication belonging to Unsuzadeh Press – the magazine *Keshkul* – had started to operate in Tiflis in January 1883. Issues such as the promotion of the ideas of national identity, criticism of the hypocritical clergy who exploited the common people under the guise of religion, the most important events in the world and the attitude of the Russian tsarism to those events¹¹ were more widely and fully reflected in this magazine. As noted by ethnologist A. Balayev, “*Keshkul* can be considered a pioneer in the search for national identity due to the wide scope of this type of writing on its pages” [2, p. 159].

7 *Əkinçi*, September 1, 1877, № 18

8 *Əkinçi*, January 18, 1877, № 16

9 *Əkinçi*, August 23, 1976, № 16

10 Azərbaycan Milli EA, M.Füzuli adına Əlyazmaları İnstitutu. Ö.F.Nemanzadə arxivi, N 4-5

11 Gürcüstan Respublikası MDTA, f.480, siyahı 1, iş 730, vərəq 2

Keshkul continued as a newspaper starting March 22, 1884, after publishing 12 issues as a magazine. It attempted to clarify such issues that prevented Azerbaijanis from realizing their national identity – why they are called “Tatars”, the reasons that impede the development of national consciousness and national language, the difference between the concepts of “ummat” and “nation”, etc.

For instance, in an 1891 issue, the newspaper published a short interview addressing the national identity of Azerbaijani Turks. The interview highlighted the fact that some Azerbaijanis do not even know the name of their country, repeatedly stating, “I am from Bijan.” This confusion, combined with the difficulty of self-identifying as an “Azerbaijani Turk,” “Azerbaijani,” or “Ottoman Turk,” stands as a vivid illustration of the ethno-cultural situation in the country at that time.¹²

However, it is well known within the scientific community that J. Unsuzadeh referred to the language of the population as both “Azerbaijani” and “Turkish” in a series of articles published in the newspaper, and in 1891, he even applied to the General Press Affairs Department in Tiflis for permission to publish a newspaper titled *Azerbaijan*. Indeed, the fact that *Keshkul* was subjected to harsher persecution by the Tsarist regime, and that many of its issues were confiscated at the request of the censors, was a direct result of such articles. It is no coincidence that during its publication, the paper often featured announcements stating that, “For reasons beyond our control, *Keshkul* was not published on time” [29, p. 178]. The presence of numerous uncensored or confiscated copies of *Keshkul* in the State Historical Archive of the Republic of Georgia serves as clear proof of this interference.

Finally, in November 1891, the publication of *Keshkul*, which had been in print for nearly ten years, ceased permanently. From that point until the beginning of the 20th century, no newspapers or magazines were permitted to be published in the Azerbaijani language. The prominent literary critic F. Kocherli noted with a heavy heart that ten years had passed since “the last newspaper, *Keshkul*, was published, and during this period we were left without a newspaper.”¹³

It is true that even after the closure of *Keshkul*, many national intellectuals attempted to publish newspapers in the Azerbaijani language. However, each time these attempts were hindered under various pretexts by the Head Department of Press Affairs of tsarist Russia and censorship. The response of M.P. Solovyov, Chief of the Main Administration for Press Affairs (1896–1899), to the prominent educator M. Shahtakhtinsky regarding his 1897 request to publish the newspaper *Tiflis* in Azerbaijani, is particularly telling: “I cannot give permission to publish a newspaper in the Tatar language. If you want, I will let you publish a newspaper in Russian. Let the Tatars take your example and learn Russian. You speak Russian very well... Why do people need newspapers? Let the intellectuals study in Russian, and let the ordinary Tatars [Azerbaijani] go and graze their flocks.”¹⁴

M.P. Solovyov’s official reply to M. Shahtakhtinsky read as follows: “The rapprochement of non-Russians and peoples of other faiths is possible only through the spread of education, and the instrument of this must be the Russian language. Otherwise, the establishment of an all-Muslim periodical press will not only fail to bring Muslims closer to Russian citizens, but will actually alienate them.” [29, p. 12].

The lack of objectivity and sincerity in this opinion is evident from the fact that, at that time, countless newspapers and magazines were published in the languages of non-Turkish and non-Muslim peoples within the Russian Empire – including Georgian and Armenian – and that schools and educational institutions were operating in these languages. Consequently, it requires no further proof to demonstrate that the Tsarist policy of persecution, prohibition, and discrimination was selectively applied to Turkish-Muslim peoples.

During the years when *Ziya* (*Ziyayi-Qafqasiya*) was in circulation, specifically in 1881, another publication, the Russian-language newspaper *Kaspi*, began operations in Baku. Reportedly, Viktor Kuzmin, the newspaper’s first editor and publisher, intended to print an Azerbaijani-language supplement to *Kaspi* titled *Chirag*, but the Caucasian Censorship Committee, as expected, denied the request.¹⁵

The newspaper’s primary focus was on culture, education, and enlightenment. Prominent intellectuals of the time, including M. Mahmudbeyov, N. Narimanov, M.T. Sidqi, M. Shahtakhtinski, H.b. Zardabi, T. Bayramelibeyov, A. Mahmudbeyov, A. Agaoglu, N. Minasazov, E. Sultanov, R. Melikov, F. Kocherli, M. Mahmudbeyov, N. Nezirov, S.M. Ganizadeh, J. Hajibeyli, U. Hajibeyli, N. Vezirov and others frequently contributed articles to its pages. At the same time, specific issues of the publication featured serious writings on

¹² *Kəşkül*, 1891, № 22

¹³ *Şərqi-rus*, 1903, May 9, № 17

¹⁴ Gürcüstan Respublikası MDTA, f.480, siyahı 1, iş 1358, vərəq 3

¹⁵ Gürcüstan Respublikası MDTA, f. 480, siyahı 1, iş 418, vərəq 3

topics such as women's freedom and rights, Islam's attitude toward education and science, alphabet reform, and the status of Muslims within the empire. During A.M. Topchubashov's tenure as editor of *Kaspi* (1898–1907), the publication of articles addressing national relations and national issues became an established tradition [30, pp. 57–62]. In this context, Muhammad Agha Shahtakhtinsky's article, "How to Call Transcaucasian Muslims?", published in an 1891 issue of the newspaper, is particularly noteworthy. He emphasized that the so-called "Muslim" population of the Transcaucasus region was, in terms of ethnic origin and language, neither Tatar nor Persian, but Turkic. He argued: "In everyday usage, it is inconvenient to express the name of the nation and its language with two words: for example, Azerbaijani Turkish or Aderbeidjani Turkish. Therefore, it would be appropriate to call Transcaucasian Muslims 'Azerbaijanis,' and the Transcaucasian Turkic language the 'Azerbaijani language' rather than the 'Tatar language'."¹⁶

Conclusion

Thus, based on the discussion above, we can trace the initial search for national identity and the awakening of national consciousness in Azerbaijan to the 1870s, coinciding with the establishment of the national press. However, since these efforts were not widespread and remained somewhat individual in nature, their immediate impact was limited. As A. Balayev noted, "H.b. Zardabi's views, as well as the coverage of national identity issues on the pages of the newspapers such as *Keshkul* and *Kaspi* during the 1890s, could not become a common and mass trend. This was because these views were not shared by the general populace, but rather by only a small fraction of the intelligentsia" [2, p. 179].

One of the main reasons for this was undoubtedly the weakness of secular education, or perhaps its absence. For centuries, the religious superstition promoted secular education as "unnecessary" and almost "haram" (forbidden by shariat/prohibited), which led to the vast majority of Azerbaijanis shun from school and education. Publicity, ignorance, unquestioning obedience to injustice and slavery had almost become the "traditional way of life" of a great nation. On the other hand, the situation was aggravated by the fact that education was under the control of Russian tsarism, which considered national awakening in the Muslim peripheries a "serious threat" to the empire.

Moreover, until roughly the 1880s, the Islamic religion and a pervasive Muslim worldview continued to constitute the primary basis for self-identification in colonial Azerbaijan. The prevailing belief was that Islam rejected the division of Muslims based on national characteristics, even viewing such distinctions as a "great sin." As researchers have noted, "Muslim doctrine recognizes not a national, but only a unified Islamic religion – the idea of the unity and brotherhood of all Muslims worldwide, regardless of nationality. Thus, in Islam, the concepts of 'religion' and 'nation' hold practically the same content and meaning." [31, p. 5].

However, towards the end of the 19th century, we witness that discussions on "Turkishness," "Azerbaijaniness," and "Muslimness" took on a broader scale. As the renowned Turkish historian Refik Turan noted, "despite the absolute dominance of those who accepted the idea of *Ummah* (unity of the Muslim community/coreligionist) in the middle of the century, we can say that towards the end of the century, the idea of 'Turkism' had gained greater acceptance among Azerbaijanis." [32, p. 434]. Ali Bey Huseynzadeh (1864–1940), Ahmed Bey Agaoglu, Alimardan Bey Topchubashov, and others – who would become known as the founders of political Turkism not only in Azerbaijan but throughout the entire Turkic world – made unparalleled contributions to this cause. Although their ideas crystallized into a formal ideology in the early 20th century, the first seeds began to sprout at the end of the 19th century. Thus, by the end of the century, A. Huseynzadeh was writing poems under the pseudonym "A. Turani," glorifying Turanism and Turkism. Similarly, after meeting the renowned sociologist Ernest Renan and the famous pan-Islamist J. Afghani in France, A. Agaoglu's views shifted significantly toward Turkism. Beginning in 1898, Alimardan Bey Topchubashov – as publisher and editor-in-chief of the Russian-language newspaper *Kaspi*, owned by the great philanthropist Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev – made significant contributions to the awakening of national identity. It was thanks to their efforts, alongside the emergence of national publications in the early 20th century such as *Shargi-Rus* (1903–1905), *Hummet* (1904–1905), *Heyat* (1905–1906), and *Fuyuzat* (1906–1907), that the concepts of Azerbaijanism, Turkism, and Turanism became the leading political ideologies defining the ethnic and socio-cultural landscape of Azerbaijan.

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