

From national identity to political movement: The rise of the national self-awareness process of Azerbaijanis in Iran between 1921 and 1946

Yegana Aziz Hajiyeva*

Abstract: The aim of the study is to comprehensively examine the rise of the national self-awareness process of Azerbaijanis in Iran in 1921–1946 and the mechanisms of the transition of this process from national identity to political movement. The first half of the 20th century in Iranian history is characterized by political modernization, centralizing state policies, and the activation of regional forces. In this context, the development of the national consciousness of Turks living in Iranian Azerbaijan, the formation of their political positions, and attempts to organize on the basis of collective identity are of particular importance. The article analyzes the social, cultural, and political aspects of the process of national self-awareness, examining its interaction with general political changes in the region, international influences, and the policies of the central government. The research methodology is based on the principles of historicity and objectivity. Along with source and historiographic analysis, a comparative-historical approach, political-sociological analysis, content analysis, and historical-systematic methods were applied. This methodological framework has allowed the topic to be addressed with both factual richness and theoretical foundations. The scientific novelty of the results obtained is that the topic is interpreted not only on the basis of the chronological sequence of historical events, but also within the framework of national identity and political mobilization approaches. At the same time, the relationship between the internal political environment of Iran and the national movement of Azerbaijani Turks in the 1920s–1940s is examined for the first time using a systematic and comparative method. This approach allows us to clarify both the dynamics of the process of national self-awareness and the stages of its transformation into political organization. Results: The 1945-1946 South Azerbaijan National Liberation Movement demonstrated the national development of South Azerbaijanis under pressure in Iran and the degree to which ethnic

* Yegana Aziz Hajiyeva (✉)

Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Oriental Studies, Baku, Azerbaijan

e-mail: yeganahaji@gmail.com

identity, which is a key aspect of national formation, was preserved. The organization and activities of the national government clearly demonstrated the connection between the Azerbaijani language issue and socio-political issues with the Soviet Union and Northern Azerbaijan. The research conducted shows that the path from national identity consciousness to political movement during 1921–1946 was not only the product of local events, but also a complex and multifaceted process shaped by the influence of regional and international contexts.

Keywords: Iran, assimilation, national rights, national self-awareness, National government, Iranian Azerbaijanis

Introduction

The first half of the 20th century was a period of national revival and political struggle for the peoples of the Near East and Middle East. The national self-awareness of Azerbaijanis living in Iran occupies a special place in this context. Starting in 1925, with the coming to power of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, the policy of centralization was strengthened, and serious restrictions were imposed on the national identities of non-Persian peoples. The suppression of Azerbaijani Turkish from the educational and cultural environment, as well as administrative and economic pressures have led to a deepening of national consciousness. This process reached its peak during 1941–1946 with political movements and, in particular, the formation of the Azerbaijani National Government.

One of the main reasons for the defeat of the national-democratic movements in South Azerbaijan in the 20th century was the multifaceted interests and dual policies of the great powers. Currently, the attempts of major powers (USA, Russia, etc.), which are aiming to become unambiguously influential in the Caucasus and the Middle East, to use the South Azerbaijan issue as a means of pressure on Iran in solving the “Iran problem”, require a special approach to this problem. The issue of recognizing and ensuring the rights of the mother tongue, which has been put forward as a priority by all segments of Azerbaijanis living in Iran in recent years, also makes the topic under investigation relevant and necessitates new scientific research in this field.

During the research, the works of Iranian historians Zia Sadr, Ahmad Kasravi, and Cami were referred to. In their research, the national self-awareness and organizational attempts of Azerbaijani Turks were often presented as separatism or “centrifugal tendencies”,

and the problem of ethnic and linguistic rights was overshadowed within the framework of general “modernization”. Huseyn Omid (1981), Ziya Sadr (1999), and Jalal Ale-Ahmed (2006) note in their works that the activities of the Persian Pahlavi dynasty in the field of creating a unified nation led to the awakening and development of the national consciousness of non-Persians. In Soviet historiography, the topic was developed under the influence of ideological approaches. For example, M. Ivanov (1970), R. Seyidov (1985), and S. Aghayev (1987) characterized the national-political events that took place in Iranian Azerbaijan in the 1920s–40s mainly as an “anti-imperialist movement”, “struggle of progressive forces” or “people’s liberation movement”. The issue of national identity has often been left behind the concept of class struggle, with ethno-cultural factors given secondary importance. However, Soviet research is important in shedding light on the socio-economic contradictions of this period and the influence of international factors. In independent Azerbaijani historiography, starting from the 1990s, more objective and complex approaches to the subject have emerged. J. Vakilov (1991), V. Mustafayev (1998), J. Hasanli (1998), and A. Rahimli (2009) highlighted national identity, cultural rights, language policy and organizational processes, and evaluated the national government experience in 1945–46 as the culmination stage of the process of national self-awareness. In Western and international historiography, the topic has been studied mostly in the context of Iran’s modernization process, ethnic politics, and center-regions’ relations. In their works, W. Douglas (1951), R. Cottom (1967), G. Lenczowski (1968), E. Abrahamian (1982), David B. Nissman (1987), and S. Cornell (2012) analyzed the national movement not only in terms of regional identity, but also in terms of the influences of international politics (the USSR, Great Britain, and the USA). Western authors have particularly focused on ethnic diversity, national rights, and identity politics.

Growing interest in their native language and deepening national issue among Azerbaijanis in Iran

Beginning in 1918, extensive moral and ideological activity was launched in Iran on methods of strengthening the independence of the state, and a number of practical steps were taken. Intellectuals who had studied in Europe and were mainly active there fought for the restoration of ancient Iranian statehood traditions and the adoption of

European political values. This issue became even more urgent after the 1921 coup, as most proponents of modernization saw the basis of independence and development in the establishment of a strong central government in the country and its leadership in nation-state building. The course of the national liberation movement in Turkey (1918-1923) and the state-building process also had a significant impact on the resolution of future state-building issues in Iran. The proclamation of a Republic in Turkey at the end of 1923 led to the emergence of the idea of taking a similar step in Iran at the beginning of 1924. However, conservative forces prevented the realization of this idea. Nevertheless, the idea of creating a strong centralized government strengthened the belief in modernization. However, starting in 1924, modernization measures began to be implemented in Iran on the model of Europe, and in fact Turkey (Calendar reform). At the end of 1925, with the removal of the Qajar dynasty from power and the proclamation of Reza Khan as Shah, a new phase of reforms and modernization began in Iran. Reza Shah's government, composed of European-educated intellectuals, began extensive work towards building a new, modern state. State-building was based on two main principles: creating a single central authority and ensuring national unity and solidarity. The policy of centralization was implemented through military means. The creation of national unity was to be ensured through the unification of the legal, judicial, and educational systems in the country. In ensuring the principle of national unity, special attention was paid to the integration of non-Persian peoples. Since the country's economic, political, and cultural development process and level did not create conditions for the large-scale integration of non-Persian peoples, this process was artificially accelerated by uncivilized and violent methods.

It should be noted that the new generation of Iranian intellectuals devoted a large part of their state-building ideology to the issue of creating national unity. State-nation-building ideologists carried out large-scale activities to prepare and refine that ideology before and after Reza Shah came to power. The creators of that ideology were mainly Azerbaijanis. The magazine "Iranshahr", published by H. Kazimzadeh, one of the Azerbaijani representatives who developed this ideology, gave extensive space to articles promoting the Persian language and Aryanism as the basis for the creation of national unity (Mustafayev 1998, 84).

Books and articles were written to prove that non-Persian peoples in Iran were of the Aryan race. Ahmad Kasravi was one of those who

wanted to achieve this goal. His works, including “Azeri or the Ancient Language of Azerbaijan” published in 1925, later “Forgotten Shahriyars”, “Eighteen Years of Azerbaijan” and a number of articles, served to substantiate the ideology of Pan-Iranism, which has formed the basis of the domestic policy of the Iranian state since the time of Reza Shah to this day. In his first work, A. Kasravi (1945, 8) put forward a fictitious theory about the “Azeri” tribes who supposedly lived in those territories in ancient times and spoke Azerbaijani, and their mixing with Iranian speakers, in order to prove that the people living in North Azerbaijan and South Azerbaijan were different peoples. A. Kasravi, while also touching on the linguistic unity of the population in North and South Azerbaijan, claimed that the language of the inhabitants here became Turkic only after the arrival of the Seljuks in the 11th century. Therefore, although A. Kasravi, who drew attention to the role of the Turkish element in the formation of the Azerbaijani Turks, accepted the single linguistic unity, he completely denied the participation of these tribes in the formation of the Azerbaijani people in the subsequent period (Kasravi 1928, 61-83). He emphasized that Iran’s biggest problem is its linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity.

Persian nationalism entered a different phase thanks to the activities of Mahmud Afshar, an Afshar Turk, and his magazine “Ayende” (which began publication in 1925). He had formulated Persian nationalism into a systematic and orderly theory. M. Afshar had founded an association called “Anjumani-Irani-javan” which aimed to ensure national unity in Iran. The main theme of the magazine was the idea of “a centralized state and a unified national identity”. An article written by M. Afshar in the magazine “Ayandeh” stated:

It is our ideal and social duty to preserve and improve the national unity of Iran. What does the national unity of Iran mean? The national unity of Iran is the spiritual, social and political unity of the people living within the borders of the country. The national unity of Iran requires its political independence and territorial integrity. How can we achieve national unity? Let the Persian language spread throughout the country. Regional differences, including differences in dress and behavior, should be eliminated. All ethnic groups living in Iran should speak the same language. Without unity in language, culture, dress, and lifestyle, our political independence and territorial integrity will always be in danger. If we do not assimilate, that is, Iranianize, the different tribes and ethnic groups living in Iran, our future will be in danger. Iran's integrity will always be under threat. Persian should be spread in all regions of Iran, especially in Azerbaijan, non-Persian geographical

names should be changed, and people should be moved from border regions to the interior of the country. (Abrahamian 1982, 124-125)

Thus, Mahmoud Afshar views Iranianization as the foundation of development and independence, and diversity as the cause of conflict and backwardness.

Based on these theses, we can say that Persian nationalism was an ideology that combined the concepts of Iranism and modernization, based on the Persianization of other peoples. Persian nationalism is based on the historical hypothesis that the Aryan race was the first inhabitants of Iran and a people who created civilization. These “historical discoveries” of A. Kasravi and M. Afshar have been repeatedly repeated in one way or another by Iranian historians who came after them and who stand on the position of Persian-Iranian chauvinism, strengthening the theory of pan-Iranism.

Reza Shah and his pro-modernization team began implementing a national policy based on the ideology of national unity in the country. Non-Persian peoples, including Azerbaijani Turks, were banned from publishing, receiving education, or even speaking in public. When Reza Khan was still prime minister, in 1923, in an instruction he sent to the Azerbaijan Provincial Administration, he ordered that only Persian be used as the spoken language in official institutions and as the written language in the preparation of documents, as well as the widespread use of this language in all provinces. According to this instruction, the publication of books in local languages was prohibited, and non-Persians who spoke their native language on the streets were subjected to persecution (Jiqalina 1996, 97).

After Reza Khan was proclaimed Shah, a special institution was established for the standardization and dissemination of Persian – “Farhangestan-e zaban ve adob-e farsi” (Academy of Persian Language and Literature). Serious “reforms” were carried out in all areas by eliminating terms in the Turkish language. For example, in 1925-26, a special commission established under the Ministry of War replaced a number of Turkish military terms with Persian terms (Qalunov 1936, 245). In addition, Reza Shah created an organization called “Development of Thought” in 1927 to eliminate cultural differences and expand Persianization.

In Azerbaijan, Kurdish regions, and Turkmensahra, schools in local languages were closed (in addition to providing Persian education in schools, fines were imposed on children who spoke their own language

during recess), books and old manuscripts written in these languages were destroyed, and the wearing of local (national) clothing belonging to any region was prohibited. The scope of the ban on the Turkish language had expanded so much that even saying a lament in Turkish at a funeral was considered a sin (*Dede Qorqud dergisi*, 1980, No.2, 24). The head of the Education Department of the Azerbaijan province had given the following order: “Yoke anyone who speaks Turkish and treat him very badly.” The governor of Azerbaijan, Mustoufi, said: “Azerbaijanis are Turks. They ate clover and got a Constitution, now let them eat straw and develop Iran” (Cami 2022, 25).

The next step in restricting the use of non-Persian languages was a bill approved by the Iranian Parliament in 1934. According to this document, “correspondence, cases, and applications in other languages were not accepted or considered” (Mustafayev 1998, 100). It was also noted that it was not necessary for the official to know the local language.

Reza Shah’s Persianization policy also began to seriously hinder the development of Azerbaijani theater. Seyid Jafar Pishevari wrote about the bitter consequences of that policy a few years later: “Before Reza Khan came to power and began his policy of dividing Azerbaijan, our national theater in Azerbaijan was progressing rapidly. The people were perfectly prepared for the performances and watched the works of our artists, and through this means, our nation continued to progress in terms of morality and spirituality.” However, as soon as the theater was forced to switch to Persian, “our theaters were forced to close; because the majority of our people were unable to understand this language.” (*Azərbaycan qəzeti №5* 1945). These facts are confirmed once again in the work “History of Azerbaijan” by Huseyn Umid, a researcher from South Azerbaijan. The author writes: “Until 1928, the stage language in Iran, including South Azerbaijan, was Azerbaijani. However, a few plays were written in Persian or translated from other languages into Persian and performed.” In that year, the Azerbaijani language was completely banned by the state in Iran.” (Omid 1981, 194)

Olga Jiqalina (1996, 97) describes Reza Shah’s policy towards non-Persians as “denationalization”. Reza Shah first eliminated the local elite by arresting and executing them, and then forced the “headless” people to become Persians. Richard Cottom (1982, 99) has shown this nationalism to be in the form of “nationalism devoid of liberalism.” Proposing the idea that Reza Shah Pahlavi’s modernization policy

alienated other non-Persian peoples of Iran from the Shah, Quds wrote, primarily referring to two non-Persian peoples: “Reza Shah’s Persianization policy ensured that Azerbaijanis and Kurds would gain their own national identities” (Yenisey 2009, 118).

Thus, a large-scale cultural and psychological struggle was being waged in the country to destroy the Azerbaijani language. While being Azerbaijani was considered an advantage during the Constitutional Era, it was perceived as a “degradation” during the Pahlavi era. This total cultural-psychological pressure aimed to distance Azerbaijanis from their national identity. Turkishness was denigrated, while at the same time it was claimed that Azerbaijanis were not Turks.

Starting from the era of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the emphasis on religious influences was encouraged. This situation also increased the influence of religion on the Azerbaijani language in Iran. The importance of this influence in terms of the continued existence of the Azerbaijani language should also be noted (Kafkasyalı 2010, 135). Just as oral folk literature and as hug literature were used in local ceremonies, religious ceremonies were also performed in the Azerbaijani language, and at the same time, laments were written regarding the Karbala incident (Ibid, 134). As a result of the influences we have mentioned, the position of the Turkish language in the oral sphere underwent little change in the first half of the 20th century. However, on the other hand, the common historical-cultural and religious values with the ruling people, namely the Shiite traditions shared by both nations, created conditions for their assimilation and hindered the national development of Azerbaijanis - the development of the Azerbaijani language and national consciousness. Thus, some Azerbaijanis identified themselves with a more generalized "Iranian" identity (Seidov 1985, 37). Shiism naturally ensured the unity of the peoples of Iran, including Azerbaijanis. The state did not officially pursue a policy in this direction. One of the main factors preventing the assimilation of the Azerbaijani people was the preservation of the native language in the provinces. This was due to the low level of literacy in the mentioned areas (Sadr 1999, 94).

Dissatisfaction with the state's nationalist policy and the reaction of chauvinist officials was growing in Azerbaijan. However, these protests were mainly unorganized and manifested on an individual-emotional level. This was due to the ethnic homogeneity of the main components of the social structure, the dominance of a police dictatorship in the country, primarily the disorganization of the

activities of intellectuals, and the lack of democratic conditions, which were an essential condition for their organizational activity.

National revival during World War II (1941–1945)

As is known, by the end of the 1930s, Reza Shah's influence had begun to weaken significantly, and political activity in the country had increased. Some authors (British diplomats in the country) attribute this to "Reza Pahlavi's extreme nationalism and hostile attitude towards foreigners" (Aqayev 1987, 103). The processes taking place in the international world also influenced this issue. Iran's rapprochement with Germany on the eve of World War II later led to the country becoming an anti-Soviet arena for fascists. Using this as an excuse, the Soviet government deployed its troops to Iran, citing the Soviet-Iranian treaty of 1921. Then British troops entered Iran. The introduction of Allied troops into Iran led to the resignation of the government and the abdication of Reza Shah in favor of Crown Prince Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in September 16, 1941.

With the departure of Reza Shah Pahlavi from power and the weakening of the center's authority, left-wing forces became more active, and democratic circles began to operate legally. With the departure of Persian officials from the province, all restrictions that prevented the use of the Azerbaijani language were practically eliminated. The democratization of public life, the lifting of the ban on the Azerbaijani language, the free expression of national feelings, patriotism, and other such factors required that the spontaneous rise of Azerbaijanis' national feelings be directed in the right direction and organized politically and ideologically. The greatest service in this direction was rendered by the "Azerbaijan Society" and its press organ, the "Azerbaijan" newspaper, which was established in October 1941. Founded by Ali Shabustari and Ismail Shams, this Society stated that the fundamental problem of Azerbaijan was a national issue, and it put aside all sectarian and regional differences and advocated the necessity of unification under the Azerbaijani identity (*Azərbaycan qəzeti* 03.12.1941). The Society saw its main task as the restoration and expansion of the sphere of development of the Azerbaijani language. The newspaper wrote: "We are convinced that every nation should protect its national language and traditions, and manage its own affairs and issues related to its progress, and that interference by other nations in its language and other affairs is illegal and contrary to the law of freedom" (*Azərbaycan qəzeti* 15.12.1941). The Society reflected the

determination of broad democratic circles to fight for the rights of their native language and tried to mobilize intellectual forces for this struggle. The “Azerbaijani Society” implemented effective measures to revive the Azerbaijani nation in the fields of culture and language and to spread and deepen national consciousness among Azerbaijanis.

In 1941, the Azerbaijani branch of the Tudeh Party was established. Unlike the Tehran branches of the party, the branch tried to highlight ethnic and linguistic problems. There was no consensus on the national issue between the Tabriz branch of the organization and the Tehran leadership. The people of Tabriz considered Iran a multinational country, while the people of Tehran considered the Iranian nation to be an indivisible whole (Kəskin 2006, 3). The Tabriz branch demanded that Azerbaijan be granted the right to self-government and establish a provincial assembly, and that the Azerbaijani language be the official language in education, judicial affairs, and government offices in South Azerbaijan. In general, the protest against the socio-political environment had become a unified platform for the participants of the popular movement that arose in the 1940s. S.J. Pishevari’s response to those who denied the national existence, language, and culture of the Azerbaijani people in those years expressed the thoughts of all national intellectuals: “Dilə vətənpərvərliyin əleyhdarı kimi baxanlar, doğrudan da, cahil insanlar olmalıdırlar. Çünki bu, yeni deyil. İndi də məscidlərdə, minbərlərdə bizim xətiblərimizi Azərbaycan dilində təbliğ etməyə dəvət edirlər ki, xalq başa düşsün və öz dini borcunu yerinə yetirsin. / We ask those who oppose the mother tongue: what is wrong with this? Why can one language be used in the mosques, but not in madrasas?” (Bosnalı 2007, 84)

The USSR, especially Northern Azerbaijan, played a major role in the emergence and development of the liberation movement of Southern Azerbaijanis on a national basis. The entry of foreign troops into Iran in 1941 and the weakening of the central government's control over the regions created conditions for the Soviet Union to increase its political influence in this area, and in order to implement this political project, a special group was sent to South Azerbaijan at the initiative of M.J. Bagirov under the guise of assisting in the national-cultural and political revival in Iranian Azerbaijan (Həsənli 1998, 44). Soon, the newspapers “Vatan Yolunda” and “Qızıl Asgar” began to be published. “Vatan Yolunda” had subscribers in all the cities of South Azerbaijan, as well as readers in other settlements of Iranian Azerbaijanis. “Vatan Yolunda” was printed with a circulation

several times larger than most Iranian newspapers, namely 15 thousand copies. The “Poets’ Assembly” organized under the newspaper brought together more than 50 poets of Iranian Azerbaijan and closely supported their creativity (Vəkilov 1991, 47-48).

The gradual transition of processes in South Azerbaijan to the national level did not meet the interests of the Soviets. Even though A. Smirnov appealed to the USSR Commissariat for Foreign Affairs about the closure of the newspaper “On the Path to the Homeland”, M. J. Bagirov expressed his objection to the closure of the newspaper (Həsənli 1998, 64-65). The working group sent to South Azerbaijan returned to Baku after six months of operation due to conflicts with Soviet diplomatic representatives. As the situation on the German-Soviet front gradually changed in favor of the Russians, Moscow returned to the issue of South Azerbaijan in 1944 and sent a new working group from Soviet Azerbaijan to Iran. A favorable environment was also created in Iranian Azerbaijan for the activities of national-democratic circles. The activities of closed publications were resumed. Periodicals such as “Şahin”, “Vatan Yolu” (Tabriz), “Gizil Asgar” (Urmiya), “Azerbaijan”, “Sitareye Azerbaijan”, “Xavere no”, “Yumruq”, and others began to operate. During these years, periodicals operating, especially the “Azerbaijan” newspaper, waged an ideological struggle to ensure the national interests of the people. The “Shahin” newspaper demanded respect for the native language of Azerbaijanis and considered it necessary to open a higher education institution in Azerbaijan to relieve Azerbaijanis who were forced to go to Tehran and were discriminated against during admission to higher education in the capital. The “Soviet House of Culture” in Tabriz and the “Tabriz Branch of the Soviet-Iranian Cultural Communication Society” played a major role in the creation and development of a democratic press and literature in the native language in Azerbaijan (Vəkilov 1991, 64).

In total, 21 newspapers were published in Azerbaijan over a period of 4 years, from October 1941 to September 1945. The topics published in these periodicals were aimed at promoting Soviet socialist ideology and educating the local population (Məmmədli 2009, 89). In order to educate the masses, those publications published articles reflecting Azerbaijani culture, literary figures from the classical and modern periods of Azerbaijan, the history of language and literature, the tragedy of a divided people, their feelings and emotions, as well as examples of world literature. The Azerbaijani-language press of this

period almost accelerated this process by publishing materials with socio-political and national-cultural content that were important for the deepening of national consciousness. These mass media outlets reflected the determination of broad democratic forces to fight for the equality of their native languages, and sought to unite intellectual circles in this struggle.

It is very important to note one fact in our opinion, the role of the events taking place in Soviet Azerbaijan (In the years 1920-1936, they witnessed the establishment of the concepts of “Turkish language”, “Turkish nation”, and “Azerbaijani culture”, the nationalization and development of the education system, the purity of the national language, and innovations in the development of national literature and culture) in shaping the public political views and national feelings of Iranian Azerbaijanis who emigrated to Northern Azerbaijan at various times and later returned to Iran (forcibly deported) and were at the forefront of the national struggle is undeniable. During World War II, when northern Iran was occupied by the Soviets, among the political and ideological activists who came with the army were Iranians who were in exile in Soviet Azerbaijan. Under the instructions of the leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, M.J. Bagirov, these individuals served in establishing and harmonizing contacts and relations with the local population (Nissman 1987, 31-32).

It should be noted that at that time, the movement was not demanding independence, but autonomy within Iran. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper (in 1941-1942) gave special attention to the promotion of the idea of autonomy. In a demonstration organized by the communists in 1944, the Azerbaijani nation’s right to autonomy and its own language were openly discussed (Bosnalı 2007, 82). In fact, this movement was born from the language issue. Since the issue of the mother tongue was one of the important problems of Azerbaijan and had a strong impact on Persian-Azerbaijani and central-Azerbaijani relations in those circumstances, the issue of ensuring the rights of the mother tongue came to the fore. According to the Democrats, resolving this issue would not only resolve the national issue, but also ensure the integrity of the Iranian state (Azərbaycan qəzeti 03.12.1941).

However, the entry of Soviet troops into Iran and the activities of a special group sent from the Azerbaijan SSR played an important role in bringing the issue of independence to the agenda. Let us draw attention to one of the letters of the head of the Azerbaijan SSR, Mirjafar Bagirov, to Stalin: “Considering the strong influence of the

clergy among the population of South Azerbaijan, especially among the villagers, we have taken a number of measures in this direction". The anti-fascist appeal to all Muslims, adopted at the recent congress of Transcaucasian clergy and believing Muslims held in Baku, was sent to Iran by us and distributed among the population in 5,000 copies in Azerbaijani and Persian. The Iranian clergy and population have welcomed this appeal with great enthusiasm. In addition, the newly elected religious administration of Transcaucasian Muslims, headed by Sheikh-ul-Islam Alizadeh, is establishing personal contacts with religious figures of South Azerbaijan in order to further strengthen our influence (Məmmədov 2006, 30). During the visit of the Caucasian Sheikh-ul-Islam Akhund Agha Alizadeh to Iran in May 1945, his religious speeches in Turkish in many mosques had a certain impact on the development of the national thought of Iranian Azerbaijanis (Bosnalı 2007, 81). As can be seen, the propaganda of Soviet Azerbaijan, which covered all areas, played a serious role in the national awakening of Iranian Azerbaijanis and actualized the ideas of independence.

Thus, as a result of the natural backlash against the assimilation policy implemented by the Reza Shah dictatorship and the influence of external factors (The entry of British and USSR troops, the Soviet Union's activities in northern Iran to realize the idea of the independence of Southern Azerbaijan in order to expand its sphere of influence), a new movement was formed in South Azerbaijan as a result of the rise in the status and prestige of Azerbaijani Turkish and the awakening of national consciousness.

From national identity to political movement: 1945–1946

In the summer of 1945, the socio-political conditions were favorable for the creation of a national organization. On September 3, 1945, a group of 77 people in Tabriz issued an appeal announcing the establishment of an independent political party in Azerbaijan - the ADP, and its goals and objectives. One of the main tasks was to grant the Azerbaijani people internal freedom and autonomy, and to have classes in Azerbaijani and Persian in schools. Announcements in Azerbaijani about the establishment of the Party were posted on the walls of all cities in the Azerbaijani region. One of the announcements read: "Azerbaijan, known in history as a defender of independence, can no longer remain under the pressure and oppression of the Tehran government. The Azerbaijani people have a special native language,

and this language must be used in schools and offices. Azerbaijan must be industrialized and the riches of our homeland must belong to it” (Həsənli 1999, 304). From the very first days of its activity, the ADP began to pay special attention to the improvement and development of the Azerbaijani language. On September 5, 1945, the first issue of the ADP’s organ, the “Azerbaijan” newspaper, was published with two pages in two languages - Persian and Azerbaijani. At the meeting of the Azerbaijan National Congress on November 20, 1945, S.J. Pishevari’s letter of appeal addressed to the chairman of the Iranian parliament and the prime minister stated that Azerbaijanis are a nation with a language, customs and traditions, and that national autonomy is not directed against the unity and integrity of Iran (*Azərbaycan qəzeti* 27.11.1945). The National Committee began holding elections to the Milli Majlis and completed that campaign between November 27 and December 1, 1945. On December 12, the Azerbaijan National Government (ANG) was organized at the first session of the Milli Majlis. S.C. Pişəvəri hökumətin başçısı təyin olundu. At the meeting of the National Government of Azerbaijan on 16 Dey 1324 (6 January 1946), the Azerbaijani language was declared the official state language (Rəhimli 2009, 217). According to this decision, which consisted of ten articles, the Azerbaijani language was declared the official state language in South Azerbaijan. Correspondence in all state bodies and departments, teaching in schools, and publishing work were to be conducted in Azerbaijani. Non-Azerbaijanis were provided with opportunities to learn Turkish and use it in practical activities, and a grace period was set for learning the state language. Minorities in South Azerbaijan were given the right to freely use their languages in education and other areas. However, learning the state language was entrusted to them as a civic duty. The National Government declared the Azerbaijani language the official state language, ensured its functioning in all areas, and resolved the issue of the mother tongue (Rəhimli 2009, 133). Many Azerbaijani teachers, who had been deprived of the opportunity to teach in their native language for many years, began teaching lessons in Azerbaijani based on existing Persian textbooks with the consent of the Ministry of Education, without waiting for the publication of books in the national language (Rəhimli 2003, 94). During that period, a 7-volume methodological textbook called “Mother Language” was prepared, which was used to learn the Azerbaijani language, albeit secretly, in later periods (Bosnalı 2007, 65).

The National Government of Azerbaijan organized special classes under the slogan of combating illiteracy for the development of science and education, which is one of the important issues for the formation of the nation. The number of schools was increased. Estimates from that period indicate that about 400 schools were built and renovated in Azerbaijan within a year. The funds allocated to Azerbaijani education for the last three months of 1946 were twice as much as the annual budget allocated by the Iranian state for education throughout the country. For the purpose of caring for orphaned children, 500 thousand tomans, the currency of the time, were allocated from the state budget. With this money, orphanages were established in seven major regions of Azerbaijan - in the cities of Tabriz, Urmia, Ardabil, Maragha, Zangan, Khoy and Ahar (Rəhimli 2009, 94-95).

In June 1946, the first national university was opened in Tabriz. Initially, the university had three faculties: medicine, agriculture, and pedagogy. The pedagogy faculty taught history, language, literature, philosophy, law, physics, mathematics, and biology. Richard Cottom (1967, 131) notes that lectures at the university were given in Turkish, and since students were not accustomed to writing in their own language, they translated the lectures into Persian.

Literary figures who went to South Azerbaijan in the ranks of the Soviet army played an important role in the revival and direction of the literary process in South Azerbaijan in 1941-46. The establishment of the Writers' Union called "Azerbaijani Poets' Assembly" in January 1946 became an important event in the national literary process there. Theater troupes, supported financially and morally by the National Government, began operating in all cities of Azerbaijan in 1946. The main themes of the theater performances staged in the Azerbaijani language were national patriotism, enlightenment, getting rid of ignorance and superstition, morality and culture, and the problem of women.

For the first time, an attempt was made by Azerbaijani intellectuals to create a national concept of the historical past in response to racist ideology. In his book on the ancient history of Azerbaijan, F. İbrahimi wrote in 1946, he tried to educate Azerbaijanis in the spirit of their cultural superiority over the Persians, and to instill in his people the idea of the independence, uniqueness, and autochthonousness of ancient Azerbaijanis (İbrahimi 1946, 43-58).

Necessary conditions were created for Armenians, Assyrians and Kurds living in Azerbaijan to publish in their native languages.

Between 1941 and 1946, the number of newspapers and magazines published in South Azerbaijan was more than 40 (Məmmədli 2009, 89). The press of this period fully reflected the extremely complex and contradictory history of South Azerbaijan, rich in political and social events, and played the role of a national-ideological center.

The fall of the National Government and the aftermath of the movement

The reactionary, anti-democratic ruling forces of Iran, some Azerbaijani circles serving Pahlavi policy, with the help of foreign states and by force of arms, suppressed the national-liberation and democratic movement of Azerbaijanis at the end of 1946. It should be noted that before the fate of the movement in Azerbaijan was decided, S.C. Pishevari went to the signing of the June 13 agreement as the last resort to resolve the national issue, mainly the problem of the Azerbaijani language. As a result of long meetings between Pishevari and the Central government representative, Muzaffar Firuz, an agreement was signed on June 13, 1946 (Rəhimli 2009, 154). The Pishevari government was able to establish some of its language demands in Articles 12 and 13 of this 15-article agreement. Article 12 adopted Persian and Azerbaijani as the official languages of the region, and provided for the teaching of both languages in primary and secondary schools. The local government, in accordance with the requirements of Article 13, was required to ensure that Kurds, Armenians, and Assyrians living in Azerbaijan were provided with the opportunity to receive education in their native languages until the end of the fifth grade. This agreement, supported by leftists and criticized by center-rightists and nationalists, remained in effect only until the central government army entered Tabriz and put an end to the existence of the democratic movement in December 13. This agreement can be considered a certain success for the national government. Ismail Shams, a participant in the movement, believed that S.J. Pishevari's greatest achievement was this agreement he signed with the central government. Firstly, it was important in terms of providing education in Azerbaijani language in schools, and secondly, it was important in terms of transferring the administration of cities and villages in Azerbaijan to local councils (Yenisey 2009, 143). G. Lenczowski (1968, 302) also highly appreciated this agreement, noting that all of Pishevari's wishes had come true. Tehran's authority over

the province was only nominal, and it was clear that almost all powers had passed to the Azerbaijani regime.

After the entry of Iranian government forces into Tabriz on December 13, 1946, this agreement was violated by the central government and repressions were carried out against the Azerbaijani democratic forces. Both the Iranian leftist and foreign press reported that there were many extrajudicial killings and arrests during this period. In his book, V.O. Douglas (1951) reports on these events, which included “the theft of livestock, the looting of houses, the burning of villagers’ beards, and the rape of girls and women”. Even in schools, students were pressured. Reza Barahani (2006, 19) writes that when the Turkish language was banned after the collapse of the national government in 1946, he was forced to publish a wall newspaper in Turkish at school, which was then banned.

Understanding the strategic goals of the internal reaction and their foreign patrons, S.C. Pishevari knew that without the support of the great powers, this freedom could not last long. On December 29, 1945, in a conversation with the US Consul in Tabriz, Robert Rosso, Pishevari touched on this point and stated: “The Azerbaijani people want real guarantees for their legitimate demands, which can be made possible with the help and protection of all democratic states, including America” (Rəhimli 2009, 135).

Some Western authors write that the national struggle necessary for the establishment of a National Government does not exist, and that this is possible only as a result of foreign intervention (Cottom 1967). However, Russian authors, on the contrary, note that the autonomous republic, on the one hand, demonstrated a high level of national consciousness, and on the other hand, the possibility of resolving key national issues under a democratic regime (Ivanov 1970, 112). In fact, as S.E. Cornell (2012, 310) noted, although the Soviets’ aggressive policy towards Iran was important for the formation of the National Government, the creation of such an institution was impossible without the emergence of a very strong Azerbaijani National Movement within Iran.

Conclusion

The South Azerbaijan National Liberation Movement of 1945-1946 demonstrated the national development of the South Azerbaijanis under pressure in Iran and the degree to which ethnic identity, which is a key aspect of national formation, was preserved.

The emergence and fall of the national government, followed by the tightening of pressure and bans on the Azerbaijani language, showed that the rights of the mother tongue are closely linked to the interests of the broad middle and lower classes, and are outside the sphere of interest of the Azerbaijani upper classes and the political representatives and intellectuals who represent their interests. Ensuring national interests and the rights of non-Persian languages is possible in a democratic environment.

The activities of the national government also showed that the real defenders of the Azerbaijani language were left-wing forces, thereby confirming that the language issue constituted one of the main objects of political activity and struggle.

During the activities of the national government, the expansion of the functions of the Azerbaijani language, the high level of organization of its sphere of activity as an official language created an experience, stimulus, and foundation for the next stage and convinced Azerbaijanis of the possibility and advantage of reading and writing in their own language. This was a serious impetus to the deepening of their national consciousness. At the same time, it somewhat slowed down the assimilation of the Azerbaijani language.

Since the Azerbaijani language functioned as a national language in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, it was considered a transmitter of leftist, radical, and Bolshevik ideas in Iran. Iran's proximity to the Soviet Union and its constituent part, the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, formed the basis for the emergence of the same negative attitude towards the Azerbaijani language in Iran and in the upper circles of South Azerbaijan. The organization and activities of the national government clearly demonstrated the connection between the Azerbaijani language issue and socio-political issues with the Soviet Union and Northern Azerbaijan. This movement, through the historical lessons it gained by trying out one of the ways to resolve the Azerbaijani issue, once again proved the treacherous role of Russian imperialist circles against Azerbaijanis. This also influenced the formation of the Azerbaijani national ideology and the subsequent development of the national liberation movement.

References:

Abrahamian, E. 1982. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Universiti Press.

- Azərbaycan qəzeti / Azerbaijan Newspaper*. Tabriz, 1941-1945.
- Aqayev, S. 1987. *İran mejdü proshlim I budushim / Iran between the Past and the Future*. Moskva: Nauka.
- Bərəhəni, R. 2006. Pişəvəri böyük bir nümunədir / Pishevari is a great example. *Bakı-Təbriz*, No. 3: 15-22.
- Bosnalı, S. 2007. *İran AzərbaycanTürkcesi / Iranian Azerbaijani Turkish*. İstanbul: Kitap Matbaası.
- Cami. 2022. *Qozashte cheraqe rahe ayande ast: Tarixe Iran der fasileye do kudeta 1299-1332 / The past is the beacon of the future: History of Iran between the two coups of 1299-1332*. Nashere Qoqnus.
- Cottom, R. 1967. *Nationalism in Iran*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Cottom, R. 1982. Nationalism and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, Vol. 9, No. 2.
- Cornell, S. 2012. *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*. https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2012/MVZ208/um/35586974/Small_Nations_and_Great_Powers__A_Study_of_Ethnopolitical_Conflict_in_the_Caucasus__pdf. [accessed: 27.09.2025].
- Dede Qorqud dergisi / Dede Gorgud Journal*. 1980-1981.
- Douglas, W. 1951. *Strange Lands and Friendly People*. London: Harper and Brothers.
- Həsənli, C. 1998. *Güney Azərbaycan Tehran-Bakı-Moskva arasında (1939-1945) / Southern Azerbaijan between Tehran-Baku-Moscow (1939-1945)*. Baku: Diplomat.
- Həsənli, C. 1999. Moskvanın qərarları və Güney Azərbaycan / Moscow's decisions and Southern Azerbaijan. *Türk Dünyası Araşdırmaları*, No. 121.
- İbrahimi, F. 1946. *Azərbaycanın qədim tarixindən / From the Ancient History of Azerbaijan*. Tabriz.
- Ivanov, M. 1970. *Iran. Natsionalnie prochesi v stranax Blijneqo i srednoqo vostoka / Iran: National Processes in the Countries of the Middle East*. Moskva: Nauka.
- Jıqalina, O. 1996. *Etnosotsialnaya revolyutsiya İranskoqo obshestva / Ethnosocial Evolution of Iranian Society*. Moskva: Vostochnaya Literatura.
- Kafkasyalı, A. 2010. *İran Türkləri / Iranian Turks*. İstanbul: Bilgeoğuz.
- Kasravi, A. 1928. *Şahriārān-e Gōmnām / Anonymous Princes*. Entesharate Neqah.
- Kasravi, A. 1945. *Azeri ya zebane Azərbaycan / Azari or the Ancient Language of Azerbaijan*. Tehran.
- Kəskin A. 2006. Güney Azərbaycanda milli hərəkatın tarixi təməlləri / Historical Foundations of the National Movement in South Azerbaijan. *Bakı-Təbriz*, No. 3: 34-39.
- Lenczowski, G. 1968. *Russia and the West in Iran (1918-1948)*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Məmmədov, A. 2006. MircəfərBağirov və Cənubi Azərbaycan, F№1, siy. №90, iş №71 ÜİK (b)PMK İ.V.Stalin yoldaşa Cənubi Azərbaycanda vəziyyətlə bağlı bəzi məsələlər” / Mirjafar Bagirov and South Azerbaijan, F №1, no. №90, case №71 “Some issues related to the situation in South Azerbaijan” to Comrade I.V. Stalin, UIC (b)PMK. *Bakı-Təbriz*, No. 4.
- Məmmədli, P. 2009. *Cənubi Azərbaycan mətbuatı tarixi / History of the South Azerbaijan Press*. Baku: Elm.

- Mustafayev V. 1998. *Cənubi Azərbaycan Milli Şüuru (XX əsrin I yarısı) / National Consciousness of South Azerbaijan (first half of the 20th century)*. Bakı: “Əbilov və Zeynalov oğulları”.
- Nissman, D.B. 1987. *The Soviet Union and Iranian Azerbaijan: The Use of Nationalism for Political Penetration*. Westview: Avalon Publishing.
- Omid, H. 1981. *Tarixə farhəngə Azərbaycan / History of Azerbaijani Culture*. Tehran.
- Qalunov, R. 1936. Reforma yazika v Irane / Language reform in Iran. *Materialiponachionalno-kolonialnim problemam*, No. 34: 243-247.
- Rəhimli, Ə.(Bije) 2003. *Güney Azərbaycanda milli-demokratik hərəkət (1941-1946) / National-Democratic Movement in South Azerbaijan (1941-1946)*. Bakı: “Meqa”.
- Rəhimli, Ə. 2009. *Seyid Cəfər Pişəvəri / Seyid Jafar Pishavari*. Bakı: Nurlar.
- Sadr Z. 1999. *Kesrate qomi ve hoviyyate melli İraniyan / Ethnic Minority and National Identity of Iranians*. Tehran: Endisheye.
- Seidov, R. 1985. O nachionalnom formirovanii azerbaydjanchev v Irane / On the national formation of Azerbaijanis in Iran. In *Voprosi nachionalno-osvoboditelnoqo dvijeniya na Blijnem i Srednem Vostoke / Issues of the National Liberation Movement in the Middle East*, pp. 36-89. Bakı: Elm.
- Vəkilov, C. 1991. *Azərbaycan respublikası və İran; 40-cı illər / Azerbaijan Republic and Iran; 1940s*. Bakı: Elm.
- Yenisey, G. 2009. *İrandaetno-siyasi hərəkətlər (1922-2004) / Ethno-Political Movements in Iran (1922-2004)*. Bakı: Qanun.