



The Evolution of Oriental Studies in Azerbaijan during the Soviet Era

Sovet dövründə Azərbaycanada şərqşünaslığın inkişafı

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Xülasə. Məqalədə 1920-ci illərdə Sovet dövründə Azərbaycanda şərqşünaslığın təşəkkülü və inkişafı, onun institusionallaşma prosesi və ideoloji istiqamətləri araşdırılır. Məqalədə tarixi dəlillərə əsaslanaraq, Leninin Moskva Şərqşünaslıq İnstitutu, Leningrad Canlı Şərq Dilləri İnstitutu və Ümumrusiya Şərqşünaslıq Elmi Assosiasiyası da daxil olmaqla ixtisaslaşmış təhsil və tədqiqat müəssisələrinin yaradılmasına verdiyi dəstək təhlil edilir. Burada Sovet Şərqşünaslıq məktəbinin formalaşmasında görkəmli alimlərin və ictimai xadimlərin, xüsusən də M. P. Pavloviç və N. Nərimanovun töhfələrinə xüsusi diqqət yetirilir. Məqalədə Sovet Şərqşünaslığının həm elmi bir fənn, həm də Sovet millətləri siyasəti, sosialist quruculuğu və beynəlxalq inqilabi məqsədlərlə sıx bağlı olan ideoloji bir vasitə kimi inkişaf etdiyi iddia edilir.

Açar sözlər: Azərbaycan, Bakı, şərqşünaslıq tədqiqatları, Ümumrusiya Şərqşünaslıq Elmi Assosiasiyası, şərqşünaslıq elmi

Abstract. This study examines the formation and development of Soviet Oriental studies during the 1920s, emphasizing the process of its institutionalization and ideological orientation. Drawing on historical evidence, the article analyzes Lenin's support for the establishment of specialized educational and research institutions, including the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies, the Leningrad Institute of Living Oriental Languages, and the All-Russian Scientific Association of Oriental Studies. Particular attention is paid to the contribution of prominent scholars and public figures, especially M. P. Pavlovich and N. Narimanov, in shaping the Soviet school of Oriental studies. The article argues that Soviet Oriental studies evolved as both a scientific discipline and an ideological instrument closely linked to Soviet nationalities policy, socialist construction, and international revolutionary objectives.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Baku, Oriental studies, All-Russian Scientific Association of Oriental Studies, Oriental scholarship.

Резюме. В статье исследуются становление и развитие востоковедения в Азербайджане в советский период в 1920-е годы, процесс его институционализации и идеологическая направленность. На основе исторических данных в работе анализируется поддержка, оказанная В. И. Лениным созданию специализированных учебных и исследовательских институтов, включая Московский институт востоковедения, Ленинградский институт живых восточных языков и Всероссийскую научную ассоциацию востоковедения. Особое внимание уделяется вкладу видных ученых и общественных деятелей, в частности М. П. Павловича и Н. Нариманова, в формирование советской школы востоковедения. В статье утверждается, что советское востоковедение развивалось как как научная дисциплина, так и как идеологический инструмент, тесно связанный с советской национальной политикой, социалистическим строительством и международными революционными целями.

Ключевые слова: Азербайджан, Баку, востоковедные исследования, Всероссийская научная ассоциация востоковедения, востоковедная наука.

Introduction

A new stage in the development of Azerbaijani Oriental studies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was characterized by the active institutionalization of scientific and educational activities, the expansion of research into Eastern languages, literature, and history, as well as the formation of a professional community of scholars and educators. This period occupies a pivotal place in the history of national scholarship, as new educational practices emerged on the basis of Azerbaijan's rich cultural heritage, while scientific thought increasingly focused on the systematic study of the East.

Particular importance in the development of Oriental studies belongs to the outstanding representatives of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia of that era. Among them were poets, writers, philosophers, and scholars whose activities combined literary creativity, pedagogical practice, and academic research. Their contributions played a significant role in disseminating knowledge about the East and strengthening the national intellectual tradition.

Within the framework of the present study, it is necessary to examine in greater detail the principal directions of the creative and scholarly activities of selected prominent representatives of the scientific, pedagogical, literary, and philosophical thought of the period, with the aim of identifying and assessing their contribution to the formation of Azerbaijan's intellectual tradition.

A new stage in the development of Oriental studies

The development of Soviet Oriental studies would have been impossible without the fundamental theoretical and methodological works of V.I. Lenin, which significantly influenced the development of scholarly approaches and research directions in this field. V.I. Lenin occupied a prominent place in the history of Oriental studies. After the Revolution, the renowned scholar S.F. Oldenburg met with V.I. Lenin three times. A meeting held in Smolny in late November-December 1917 had a direct bearing on issues of Oriental studies. During this meeting, Lenin emphasized the importance of Oriental studies as a discipline essential to the Soviet state, possessing significant practical and strategic significance for its development. He supported the creation of the All-Russian Scientific Association of Oriental Studies, viewing it as an important step in the institutionalization of scholarly activity and the coordination of research at the national level. He assisted in the establishment of two educational Oriental studies institutes: the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies and the Leningrad Institute of Living Oriental Languages.

In October 1920, by decision of the Military Revolutionary Council of the Turkistan

Front, Military Courses in Oriental Studies were established, which were transformed in 1922 into the Higher Military School of Oriental Studies.¹ On October 27, 1921, the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee adopted a resolution "on the merger of all Moscow Oriental educational institutions into a single Higher Educational Institution" - the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies named after N. Narimanov, which was supposed to train workers in all areas of work in the East, as well as establish ties with the East.²

In 1921, at the direction of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, a new stage in the development of Oriental studies began in Soviet Russia. During this period, specialized Oriental studies universities were established to train specialists capable of deeply studying the political, economic, and cultural processes in Eastern countries. That same year, the All-Russian Scientific Association of Oriental Studies was founded, becoming the first major academic center to unite Oriental researchers from various fields. The renowned scholar and public figure M. P. Pavlovich played a significant role in its creation and development, seeing Oriental studies as an important tool for strengthening international ties and Soviet Russia's ideological influence in the East.

The Association was actively involved in organizing academic conferences, preparing and publishing fundamental research, and its publication, the journal "Novy Vostok," became a central platform for the exchange of ideas and the publication of cutting-edge works on Oriental studies. The journal covered the history, economics, literature, and religion of Eastern countries, and also analyzed the national liberation movements of the peoples of the East.

In 1922, the Oriental Pedagogical Institute was established in Kazan. The teaching of Oriental languages in Irkutsk, Baku, Tiflis, Tashkent, Kazan, Vladivostok, Kyiv, Kharkov, and other cities was usually limited to the practical needs of each center. Thus, in Kazan, Tashkent, and Baku, the primary focus was on the study of Turkic languages and peoples. The Communist University of the Toilers of the East played a significant role in training Orientalists and developing scholarly Oriental studies.³

Later, the "Research Institute for the Study of Colonial and National Problems" was established at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, continuing the work of the Scientific Association of Orientalists. This institute published monographs, collections, and specialized journals, among which "Revolutionary East" was particularly prominent,

¹ Газета «Известия». — 1923. — 28 января

² Архив АН СССР, Ф.68, оп. 1. д. 432, л. 578.

³ Отчет о деятельности Академии наук СССР за 1927 год. — Ленинград: Изд-во АН СССР, 1928. — С. 37

becoming an important publication reflecting the ideological and scientific trends of the era.

Leading Russian and Soviet scholars—historians, linguists, philosophers, and political scientists—participated in the work of the newly established centers of Soviet Oriental studies. Their research not only contributed to the development of Russian Oriental studies as an independent academic discipline but also laid the foundation for the formation of the Soviet school of Orientalist thought, which subsequently gained a prominent place in global scholarship.

On the idea of creating the Oriental Studies Institute in Moscow, Lenin wrote a resolution with the task for the People's Commissariat of Nationalities.⁴

Lenin paid a lot of attention to organizing the training of young orientalist personnel. M.P. Pavlovich wrote that V.I. Lenin “As Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, provided powerful assistance to the creation of two new educational institutes of Oriental studies”.⁵

Thus, in the 1920s, new Orientalist institutions began to emerge, including in the national outskirts. Leading Orientalist scholars contributed to the formation of national cadres, the development of the socialist culture of the peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus, the creation of valuable literary collections, and so on. At the same time, the need arose for a fundamentally new Orientalist center uniting Marxist Orientalists. The task of establishing such a center was entrusted to M.P. Pavlovich.

On June 18, 1920, at a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks), attended by V.I. Lenin, it was decided to recall M.P. Pavlovich from Ukraine to Moscow. It was then that work began on establishing the aforementioned Scientific Association of Oriental Studies. A powerful impetus for the development of Soviet Oriental studies in Azerbaijan came from the First Congress of the Peoples of the East, convened at the initiative of V.I. Lenin in Baku in September 1920. The congress symbolized a new stage in the integration of scientific and political efforts in the study of the East and defined key directions for educational and scientific policy. In a letter to the Council for Propaganda and Action of the Peoples of the East, V.I. Lenin emphasized the strategic importance of engaging the working masses of the East for the future of Western civilization.

The congress's primary objective was to expose and criticize the colonial system in the East, which became one of the fundamental problems of Soviet Oriental studies. N.

⁴ “Известия” 14 – XII 1921 г.

⁵ Н.Н. Селихов, С.Л. Вельтман, В.И. Ленин и первые шаги Востоковедения – «Советское Востоковедение» 1958 г. №2 стр.23

Narimanov played an active role in the congress, and his works made a significant contribution to the development of Soviet Oriental studies and the study of the principles of Lenin's national policy in the East. In his speeches, Nariman Narimanov, Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of Azerbaijan, noted that the congress provided the first opportunity to discuss the moral and cultural problems of the East. Opening the congress, Nariman Narimanov said: "...Today, I have the good fortune to open the first congress, unprecedented, unheard of in the world—a congress of the peoples of the East."⁶

The Council for Propaganda and Action of the Peoples of the East, established at the congress, made an invaluable contribution to Soviet Oriental studies, particularly its publication, which operated in Baku in 1923. In his letter to the Council for Propaganda and Action of the Peoples of the East, elected at the congress, V.I. Lenin emphasized: "The fate of all Western civilization now depends to a tremendous degree on the involvement of the working masses of the East in political life." Baku was chosen as the seat of the Council.

Upon learning of this in December of that same year, the already seriously ill V. I. Lenin dictated his response to the letter, expressing confidence "...that the involvement of the best representatives of the Eastern workers will be advanced more urgently and widely thanks to your newspaper. The fate of all Western civilization now depends to a tremendous degree on the involvement of the Eastern working masses in political life."⁷. Thus, the views and political support of Vladimir Lenin played a key role in the institutionalization of Oriental studies in the USSR, closely linking its development with the objectives of the national policy of the Soviet state.

The establishment of educational institutions, the expansion of language studies, and the growing interest in the historical and cultural heritage of Eastern peoples created favorable conditions for the professionalization of Oriental scholarship. These processes were further accelerated after the establishment of Soviet power, when Oriental studies acquired strategic political, scientific, and ideological significance. The support provided by V. I. Lenin and the Soviet leadership facilitated the creation of specialized institutes, scientific associations, journals, and research centers dedicated to the systematic study of the East.

⁶ Первый съезд народов Востока, в Баку, 1-8 сентября. Стенографические отчеты, П.г. 1920 стр. 27

⁷ Известия Академии наук Азербайджанской ССР. Серия истории, философии и права. — Баку: Элм, 1988. — С. 56.

Conclusion

The development of Azerbaijani Oriental studies represents a continuous and multifaceted process that evolved from the rich intellectual and cultural traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into a highly organized academic discipline during the Soviet era. The foundations of this scholarly field were laid by prominent representatives of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia—poets, writers, philosophers, educators, and researchers—whose works contributed significantly to the study of Eastern languages, literature, history, and culture. Their intellectual legacy fostered the emergence of a national scholarly tradition and prepared the ground for the institutional development of Oriental studies.

Therefore, the history of Azerbaijani Oriental studies demonstrates the close interaction between national intellectual traditions and broader political and academic transformations. By combining centuries-old cultural heritage with modern scientific approaches, Azerbaijani Oriental studies developed into an influential field of scholarship that played an important role in the study of Eastern societies and cultures and left a lasting impact on the development of Oriental studies in the Soviet Union and beyond. As a result, Oriental studies established itself as an important scientific and ideological field, focused on the study of the peoples of the East in the context of socialist construction and international revolution.

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