

Azerbaijani Intellectuals during the Transition

Liaman (Leman) Rzayeva, Ph.D. student, Department of Sociology, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey, liaman_r@hotmail.com

Throughout the history of Azerbaijan, the entry and spread of Western ideas, the "channels of Westernization" as we would call them, seem to be a determining factor for various changes. They were also important for the development of the defining features and functions of Azeri intellectuals. In this report, I will briefly summarize the history of Azerbaijani intellectuals and then report on my own research which examines the contemporary attitudes of Azerbaijani intellectuals.

Before colonization by Tsarist Russia, the territory of Azerbaijan was divided into small feudal states, *khanligs*, who often fought with each other. With Russian conquest, the West entered into Azerbaijan and introduced modernization, industrialization, secularization, vernacularizing print media, and a standardized education system, even in the periphery. The newly introduced values and concepts were very different from the ones prevailing among the indigenous population. This gave rise to the first Azeri intelligentsia and determined its character: well educated, bound by common education, alien to its people, agitated by various issues, and not always understood by its people. Intellectuals viewed their people as backward and tried to help them with tools imported from Western terminology. Soon afterward, Azerbaijan experienced a period of independence, 1918-1920, the period of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. The ADR was headed mainly by the Tsarist colonial intelligentsia and was too short-lived to establish its own concepts and notions. Later, Azerbaijan was occupied by the Red Army and was integrated into the Soviet Union, which has always been seen as a continuation of Tsarist Russia, especially in respect to the non-Russian minorities.

The Soviet Union re-arranged the administrative boundaries on the basis of the idea of a nation as an entity with its own territory, language and culture. The administrative rearrangement was followed by cutting off all relations with the outside world. Script reforms were part of this policy. Together with this, all members of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia were silenced. The aim was to create a new Soviet identity: Russian speaking, passive, and submissive. The same

features applied to the intelligentsia. During the Soviet regime the West still entered into Azerbaijan through Russia, but this time it was Soviet Russia. Modernization policies, including industrialization, secularization, the spread of standardized education and Russification continued, although this time they had a socialist pitch in them. A new Soviet intelligentsia was created that had features closer to the Gramscian definition (Gramsci 1971).

Despite all the efforts, another perception of intellectualism among the Azeri intellectuals persisted. This perception was closer to Said's "vocation of representing" (1990) and Burbank's "culture of entitlement" (1996), which was common among pre-revolutionary intellectuals with their roots in the traditions of Western intellectualism. It was these features that allowed an explosion of intellectual activities in the late 1980's and early 1990's. But later the voices of intellectuals slowed down. Why? Was it due to the sharply deteriorating economic conditions, which first hit the intellectuals? Or was it due to a disappointment in the political regime? These are the reasons mentioned by the intellectuals themselves. Pre-revolutionary Azeri intellectuals did not work in very democratic and economically prosperous conditions. Their intellectual efforts often cost them years of prison, exile, repudiation, etc. Was it then a continuation of the Soviet habit of conformism and neutrality? Even though at first sight this seems to be the answer, the situation is not so simple.

The research I will briefly report on here was performed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters degree in the Sociology Department of the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. The goal of my research is to identify the specific features of Azeri intellectuals, or *ziyali*, to understand their role during the transition to independence, and to investigate how they perceive the changes in Azerbaijan in the last decades, particularly in the spheres of language and education. As I began to work on this research project, I consulted with Azerbaijani citizens living in Turkey, where I also lived, and I got a picture of two types of Azerbaijani intellectuals: the scientist and the activist. I decided to study both of these

types and reviewed the international literature on intellectuals. Then I prepared a questionnaire for semi-structured in-depth interviews, first conducting a pilot study with Azerbaijani professors living and working in Turkey. The fieldwork was conducted in Baku, Azerbaijan, in October-November 2000. Using a snowball-sampling technique, I asked people to refer me to other persons who would fit the scientist and activist categories I was looking for. Meanwhile, I followed all the main governmental and oppositional newspapers and TV channels, and met with relatives, friends and neighbors. I shared with them my research interests and tried to get opinions of as many people as possible.

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with thirty respondents, half of which were men and half women. Most of the respondents were in their 40s-50s. Most worked in universities and represented a variety of professions ranging from the arts to computer science, though 13 of the respondents (8 females) worked in the field of natural sciences. In the questionnaire, demographic items were followed by questions about education, language use, religion, cultural activities, and a set of questions getting at the respondent's image of the intellectual, their attitudes about current events and future prospects.

Based on these interviews, I argue that the idea of "channels of Westernization" sheds light on the issue of the roles of intellectuals in Azerbaijan today. After the collapse of the USSR and Azerbaijan's proclamation of independence, the West gained relatively independent and direct access to Azerbaijan. Whether entered directly, or through Russia or even Turkey (this study shows that positive attitudes towards Russia are based on the view that Russia is a source of Westernization, while Turkey is often viewed as a model of successful Westernization), the new channels do not bring new inspiration to the Azeri intellectuals because such new inspiration does not exist any more. That is, Western Europe is rather preoccupied with debates over the meanings of "specific" versus "universal," "intellectualism," and "fragmented truth," and there is no debate about the commonly accepted ideas making their voices heard in Turkey. This makes the Azeri intellectuals face a dilemma, as their particular situation, such as the Karabagh problem, assumes the undertaking of such roles. In fact, this explains their passiveness and withdrawal: they simply seem not to know what to do (though we cannot ignore the

above mentioned factors). They seem to be torn between their own necessities, "truth," and the changing realities. However, they are still "marginal men" (in Kedourie's [1960] terms), and elitist at the same time. They see their own society from the eyes of foreigners, considering their own society as backward and themselves, being different, as a potential force capable of helping to overcome the backwardness. This situation of being torn between the West and East also finds its expression in a feature not mentioned in any analysis of Western European intellectuals. The situation was reflected only in the Soviet official definition of intellectuals, which includes qualities such as moral purity, honesty, good reputation, etc. The next question is whether this feature reflects the Eastern roots of both the Russian and Azeri cultures, through which the Western European perceptions of intellectuals were assimilated in Azerbaijan.

A similar situation is observed in the attitudes among the *ziyali* towards Russia and towards changes in the society, including the changes in the script and educational system. These changes were introduced to reassert Azerbaijani independence, and were often interrelated. The difference in the perceptions is caused by the view of Russia either as a source of Westernization, which carries positive values, or as a continuation of Tsarist/Soviet Russia with its colonial ambitions. Thus, to understand the recent developments in Azerbaijan, it seems necessary to investigate the ways through which the Western models enter Azerbaijan and how they are incorporated into the Azerbaijani reality.

References

Burbank, Jane.

1996 "Were the Russian intelligenty organic intellectuals?" In: *Intellectuals and Public Life: Between Radicalism and Reform*. L. Fink, et al., eds. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Gramsci, Antonio

1971 "The intellectuals," In: *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, eds. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Kedourie, Elie

1960 *Nationalism*. London: Hutchinson.

Said, Edward W.

1990 *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York: Vintage.