

Founder of Independent Azerbaijani Republic Rehabilitated

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Until very recently, the three independent republics that existed in Transcaucasia following the October Revolution were treated by Soviet historians in a consistently derogatory manner. A monograph on Georgian history published in 1982, for example, dismissed the founding of the independent Georgian republic as "an attempt to separate Georgia from Russia by force" and maintained that its Social-Democratic government was neither independent nor democratic.¹ Similarly, Azerbaijani sources dismiss the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (which existed from May, 1918, until April, 1920) as nationalistic and bourgeois in character.

In both Soviet Georgia and Soviet Azerbaijan, these viewpoints have been modified over the past year as the process of *glasnost* and "filling in the blank spots in history" gains momentum. In April and May of 1988, shortly before the seventieth anniversary of the declaration of Georgian independence on May 26, 1918, articles appeared in the Georgian press arguing that that event had represented "the restoration of Georgian national sovereignty."² A few months later, in July, 1988, Mahmut Ismayylov, a corresponding member of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, published an article in the Azerbaijani cultural weekly *Adabiyat va Incasanat* calling for an objective reevaluation of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic and the achievements of its Musavatist government.³

The need for a new approach to the period of Azerbaijani independence was similarly stressed at a discussion by professional historians several months later. An account of this discussion, entitled "*Glasnost*' and Our Past, enumerated the following progressive" achievements of the independent republic: the use for the first time of the term "Azerbaijani Republic"; the opening of Baku University; the declaration that the Azerbaijani language was the state language of the republic; the preparation of a draft law on the nationalization of schools; and the creation for the first time of a parliamentary system.⁴

As a first cautious step towards a rewrite of the history of the period of independence, in November, 1988, *Adabiyat va Incasanat* published an article providing biographical information about the political activist and philosopher Mehmet Emin Rasulzade, one of the founders of the Musavat Party and the president of independent Azerbaijan, concentrating on Rasulzade's relations with Stalin.⁵

By far the most substantive information about the evolution of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic in general, and Rasulzade's role in particular, to appear to date is a six-page article by Movsum Aliev, published in the issue of the monthly journal *Azerbaijan* for March, 1989. In the course of a detailed biographical account, Aliev provides information about Rasulzade's political and literary activity and includes the story of how he saved Stalin's life in 1905.

The son of a mullah, Mehmet Emin Rasulzade was born in 1884 in what is now Baku. Sources differ on whether he received a religious or a secular education. His political career dates from 1904, when he became one of the founders of the first Muslim Social-Democratic organization. In 1905, Aliev writes, when Stalin incurred the wrath of oil

moguls in Baku by inciting oil workers to strike, Rasulzade intervened to save Stalin's life. In 1909 Rasulzade traveled to Persia to participate in the revolutionary movement there, but because of pressure from the Tsarist government he was forced to move to Istanbul, where he came into contact with such prominent Azerbaijani political figures as Ali Beg Husein-Zade and Ahmet Agaoglu, and embarked on his journalistic career. In 1913, taking advantage of the amnesty proclaimed in Russia in connection with the tercentenary of the accession of the first Romanov to the throne, Rasulzade returned to Baku, where he swiftly assumed a leading role within the Musavat (Equality) Party, formed the previous year. The party's program was mildly Socialist but highly nationalist, in that its main aim was the unity of all Muslim peoples, their liberation from imperialism, and their economic and social development, and it swiftly gained grass-roots support among the Azerbaijani population, emerging in 1917 as the major political force in Russian Azerbaijan.

At the All-Russian Muslim Congress held in Moscow in May, 1917, Rasulzade was the main advocate of territorial autonomy for the Turkic peoples of the Russian Empire. Following the collapse in May, 1918, of the Democratic Federal Republic of Transcaucasia, on May 27 an Azerbaijani National Council, including deputies from various Muslim factions, was formed, and Rasulzade was elected its chairman. On the following day, May 28, the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic proclaimed independence—an act that, as Aliev writes, “demonstrated to world public opinion that the Azerbaijani nation has the right to live freely within its own frontiers as do the other free nations of the world.”

Azerbaijani independence was crushed after less than two years by the advance of the Red Army into Transcaucasia in April, 1920; Rasulzade and other prominent political figures were arrested and later transferred to Moscow. (It was Stalin, whose life Rasulzade had saved fifteen years previously, who arranged Rasulzade's release from prison.) Rasulzade escaped to Finland and traveled from there to Turkey, where he died in exile in 1955. Aliev's account of Rasulzade's political career concludes with a tribute to his role in resuscitating “the Azerbaijani spirit”, which will live for centuries, as long as this nation exists.

FOOTNOTES

1 see Akaki Surguladze, *Progressivnye posledstviya prisoedineniya Gruzii k Rossi*_ Tbilisi, 1982, p. 210.

2 See Elizabeth Fuller, RL 2S1/88, "Georgian Historians Reassess 1918 Declaration of Georgian Independence," June 12, 1988.

3 See Annette Bohr and Yasin Aslan, RL 377/88, "Independent Azerbaijan, 1918-1920: Call to Reevaluate the History of the Former Nation-State,," August 18, 1988.

4_ *Kommunist (Azerbaijan)*, December 10, 1988.

5 *A.dabiyat ve incanasat*, November 15, 1988.