

## Azerbaijani Intellectuals Discuss Legacy of Alphabet Reforms

Yasin Aslan

A nation's alphabet and the literary works that are written in it are a part of the wealth of that nation and of its legacy to future generations. The history of the alphabet is inseparably linked to the history of the nation itself. After the October Revolution, within the space of a decade, the Arabic alphabet, which had been used for centuries as a medium of expression for Azerbaijani literature, was supplanted by the Latin alphabet, which was in turn replaced by Cyrillic, thus striking a double blow to Azerbaijani language, history, and culture.

### Historical Background

The replacement of Arabic by Latin script as a vehicle for Azerbaijani literature was proposed as early as the nineteenth century by a group of Azerbaijani intellectuals, including Mirza-Fatali Akhundov. In December, 1921-eighteen months after the establishment of Soviet power in Azerbaijan- the People's Commissariat of the .Azerbaijan Soviet set up a "New Alphabet Committee" that was instructed to prepare a Latin-based alphabet suitable for the Azerbaijani language. The committee presented its proposals for discussion one year later, in 1922, at which time it was planned to introduce the new alphabet in 1924. The question of switching from the Arabic to the Latin alphabet was raised by Kazakhs, Kirgiz, Tatars, Uzbeks, and others in 1922-23.

A recent article in the .Azerbaijani press claims that approval for the switch from the Arabic to the Latin alphabet was expressed at the Baku Turkological Congress in March, 1926 (at which Latinization of the Uzbek alphabet was also formally proposed <sup>1</sup>), but it was not until two years later, on July 2, 1928, that the final ruling was made on the transition in Azerbaijan to the New Unified Turkic Alphabet, which was intended for the various Turkic-languages of the Soviet Union. According to this ruling, beginning on January 1, 1929, all business was to be transacted using the new alphabet-in offices, schools, the media, and all other institutions. (A different slant is given by one of the participants at the Baku congress, the recently rehabilitated Kazakh political and literary figure Ahmet Baytursynov, <sup>2</sup> who accused the Azerbaijanis of holding fast to the Arabic alphabet, which he said they considered it "blasphemy" to change.<sup>3</sup>)

Ten years later, at a meeting of intellectuals convened by the Azerbaijani branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the Executive Committee of the Azerbaijan Writers' Union on May 8, 1939, the question was raised, at Moscow's instigation, of changing from the Latin to the Cyrillic alphabet-a development that also extended to the other Turkic languages that had recently gone over to Latin letters. In contrast with the extensive public discussion that took place prior to the transition from the Arabic to the Latin alphabet; the subsequent transition to Cyrillic was implemented on January 1, 1940-so precipitously that it subsequently proved necessary to modify the new Cyrillic alphabet since many of the phonemes existing in .Azerbaijani have no Cyrillic equivalent.

### Recent Criticisms of the Alphabet Reforms

Over the past year, under conditions of *glasnost*', .Azerbaijani intellectuals have begun to examine the extent of the damage inflicted on Azerbaijani culture since the 1930s. For example, Academician Ziya Buniatov, in a recent article in which he compares Soviet history under Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Chernenko with a woman of no morals, recalls how the .Azerbaijani intelligentsia was decimated in the 1930s under Azerbaijani Party First Secretary Mir Dzhafar Bagirov (a protege and spiritual clone of Lavrenti Beria), when such figures as Akhundov, Choban-zada, Mumtaz and others were executed as

"enemies of the people".

Noting that prior to the October Revolution more than 160 journals and newspapers were published in the Arabic script in Baku alone, Buniatov singles out the elimination of the Arabic alphabet as one of the gravest blows inflicted on Azerbaijani culture. Those who raised objections to the enforced alphabet change were accused of bourgeois nationalism and executed. Buniatov goes on to make the point that today, when historical opinions are being revised, Azerbaijani historians and sociologists once again have access to archival materials written in Arabic script. Yet, he says, because 95 percent of the scholarly personnel academic institutions and universities cannot decipher either the Arabic or the Latin script, they are faced with virtually insurmountable difficulties. Buniatov therefore urges that both alphabets, especially Arabic, should be taught again at universities and perhaps also in the upper classes of secondary schools.<sup>4</sup>

The same point is made by Doctor of Philological Sciences Islam Agaev, in an article entitled "*Perestroika* and History." Agaev contends that, since the Arabic script is not known, intellectual circles in Azerbaijan are deprived of the possibility of studying more than 150 various magazines and newspapers published in the years 1875-1928. As a result, in the Institute of Manuscripts of the Azerbaijan SSR Academy of Sciences and other libraries thousands of books remain without readers.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Candidate of Economic Sciences Ekber Kerimov, who works in an archive, writes that the number of persons able to read materials written in Arabic script is decreasing daily. Kerimov proposes that if it is not possible to teach the Arabic script from the fifth grade of secondary school, it should at least be taught in the humanities departments of universities.<sup>6</sup>

The question of the legacy of the two alphabet reforms is approached from a different angle by Aziz Mirakhmedov, a candidate member of the Azerbaijan SSR Academy of Sciences. In an article entitled "Our Writing: Yesterday and Today," Mirakhmedov criticizes the haste with which the Latin alphabet, which met all the needs of the Azerbaijani language, "was supplanted by Cyrillic, which had subsequently to be adapted. Even if the modified Cyrillic script now meets those needs, the damage inflicted on the classic literary heritage remains, and the relationship between today and the past is weakened or completely cut." Teaching the Arabic script would, Mirakhmedov continues, contribute to solving a further problem—namely, facilitating correspondence and exchange of publications with "our brothers and relatives on the other side of the Araz River" (i.e. Azerbaijanis in Iran and Turkey) <sup>7</sup>

Finally, it should be pointed out that the alphabet reforms were one of the grievances raised by the young people who assembled in thousands on Lenin Square in Baku in November and December of last year to demand, *inter alia*, that their real history be given back to them.<sup>8</sup>

1 see Edward Allworth, *Uzbek Literary Politics*, The Hague, 1964, p.170.

2 see Bess Brown, "Nationalist Literary Figures Rehabilitated in Kazakhstan," *Report on the USSR*. No. 6, 1989, pp. 1-4.

3 see Pervyt vsesoyuznyy ty. ukologichesky s'ezd (*Stenografichesky otchet*), Baku, 1926, p.168.

4 Elm va Heyat, No. 10, 1988, pp. 1-3. Uzbek intellectuals have likewise recently called for the introduction of the study of the Arabic script in secondary schools (see John Soper, RL 259/88. "Classical Central Asian Language to Be Taught in Uzbek Schools?") May 18, 1988.

5 *Adabtyyat va Injisanat*, September 16, 1988.

6 *Kommunist*, June 5, 1988.

7 *Kommunist*, June 25, 1988.

8 *Moscow News*. No. 49, 1988.