

## **Independent Azerbaijan, 1918-1920: Call To Reevaluate History of Former Nation-State**

**Yasin Aslan** and Annette Bohr  
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Soviet sources have long condemned the Azerbaijani independent republic, which survived from 1918 to 1920, as "nationalist" and "bourgeois" in character. The Azerbaijani-Language cultural weekly *Adabiyat va Injasanat* recently broke this unwritten rule in startling fashion when it published an article by Mahmud Ismayylov, a corresponding member of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, urging historians to make an objective analysis of the history of the short-lived sovereign state, and "to acquaint the masses of readers" with its accomplishments.<sup>1</sup>

After posing the question of how the independent republic should be evaluated, Ismayylov stated: One thing is clear and beyond doubt, we should abandon our prior evaluations, and...Such phrases as "in Azerbaijan a reactionary Musavatist regime was created." We should call this polity...by its proper name--the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic.<sup>2</sup>

The Musavat Party, it should be noted, was instrumental in forging Azerbaijan's independence, and played the leading role in governing the nascent republic. It was able to gain grassroots support among Muslim Azerbaijanis with a highly nationalist platform that sought to strengthen ties with fellow Muslims and Turks.

Ismayylov stressed that historians must not ignore the positive aspects of the regime: Most important, instead of using such sweeping expressions as "it played a reactionary role" and "it was a puppet of Turkey," we should talk about the nature of the government, and of its domestic, foreign, social, economic, cultural, and other activities.

To be sure, independent Azerbaijan scored notable successes, even if it failed to solve the important issue of the system of land ownership. With the intelligentsia dominating the government, the teaching of Azerbaijani became obligatory in schools at every level, and the history of the Turkic peoples replaced that of Russia on the syllabus. Higher education became available for the first time with the opening of Baku University in September, 1919. <sup>3</sup> In the political realm, independent Azerbaijan became the first Muslim state to grant universal suffrage. <sup>4</sup> Any further successes it might have achieved were cut short by the advance of the Red Army into the Transcaucasus in April, 1920, which signaled the end of Azerbaijani independence.

While Ismayylov's statements break new ground, it will be interesting to see if Azerbaijani scholars respond to his call for more realistic historiography of independent Azerbaijan. So far, "...instead of doing this work," said Ismayylov, "to put it a little crudely, we haven't been able to go beyond the use of expletives."

### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. *Adabiyat va injasanat*, July 15, 1988.

2. The correct name, as used in the National Charter, is the Azerbaijani People's Republic (*Azerbaycan Halk Cumhuriyeti*), not the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic. See *Azerbaycan Yurt Bilgisi*, Vol. 3, No. 2, May, 1933, p. 1.

3. Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920*, London, 1985, p. 148.

4. Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia*, Birmingham, 1951, p. 222.