



# Heydar Aliyev and the Foundations of Modern Azerbaijan

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M. Hakan Yavuz · Michael M. Gunter ·  
Shamkhal Abilov

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M. Hakan Yavuz  
Political Science  
University of Utah  
Salt Lake City, UT, USA

Michael M. Gunter  
Department of Sociology  
& Political Science  
Tennessee Technological University  
Cookeville, TN, USA

Shamkhal Abilov  
Azerbaijan Tourism and Management  
University  
Baku, Azerbaijan

ISBN 978-3-031-58264-6      ISBN 978-3-031-58265-3 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58265-3>

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Eldar Abbasov** earned his Ph.D. from the Lomonosov Moscow State University in 1988. In 1989–1991, he worked as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History of the National Research Technological University “MISIS”. In 1991, he was invited to the Department for the Service of the Diplomatic Corps of the Russian Foreign Ministry, where he worked until 1995. From 1996 to 2015, he worked in the field of business and simultaneously engaged in scientific activities. His research interests include the recent political history of Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia. He is fluent in the English and Turkish languages.

**Shamkhal Abilov** is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Humboldt University of Berlin and a researcher affiliated with Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University (ATMU) and the TLM – Initiatives and Projects Center in Azerbaijan. Abilov received his BA from the International Relations Department of Qafqaz University in 2008 and his MA from Leipzig University and the University of Vienna in 2011 in the field of Global Studies.

Abilov’s research interests are Azerbaijan, Conflict Studies, Caspian Studies (Caucasus & Central Asia), and to some extent, also Urban Studies, Ethnicity & Nationalism. He is the co-author of the recently published book *Insight Karabakh: Chronological Order of the Historical, Legal, and Political Aspects of the Conflict* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2023) and author of various academic articles and book chapters related to his research interests.

**Araz Aslanlı** received his bachelor's degree from Hacettepe University, a master's degree from Ankara University, and a Ph.D. degree from Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University. He worked in Turkish think tanks during 2004–2006. He is currently the vice-rector of the Azerbaijan University of Tourism and Management. At the same time, he is the Chairman of Caucasian Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies (QAFSAM). He is the author of 5 books, co-editor of 1 book, and co-writer of 12 books. He has published around 100 articles in Azerbaijani, Turkish, English, Russian, German, French, Arabian, and other languages. His publications examine the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, the nation-building, and the various aspects of the Karabakh issue.

**Aynur Bashirova** is a political scientist and communication consultant. As a political scientist, she specializes in security and defense, energy strategy, geostrategy, alliance building, Israel, post-Soviet space, and the EU. She has several publications, TV appearances, and presentations related to her areas of work. As a communication consultant, she creates strategic communication strategies, writes articles and other pieces on demand, does editing, and translation, and organizes media relations. Her other work experiences include fellowships at various institutes, such as TUSIAD, Rubin Center at IDC Herzliya, and RHID. She has an Advanced Master's degree from VUB in European Studies, Master's degree from the University of Kent in International Law, and a Bachelor's degree from VUB in International Affairs. She speaks Azerbaijani, Russian, Turkish, English, and French.

**Orhan Battır** is an Associate Political Science Professor at Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University, Department of Political Science and International Relations, in Karaman Province (Turkey). He received his Ph.D. degree in International Relations from Selcuk University. He has books, book chapters, and journal articles on multiple issues including Turkish foreign policy, the Middle East, international migration, international security, ethnic issues and terrorism, soft power, humanitarian diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and health diplomacy.

**Fuad Chiragov** is currently serving as the Deputy Director at the Center for Studies of the South Caucasus. Previously, he held the position of Head of the Regional Security Department at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR). With over ten years of experience in the think-tank industry, his research has encompassed a wide range of



topics, including the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Georgian foreign and domestic politics, U.S. foreign and national security policy, and regional security. He holds a Bachelor's degree in History from Baku State University and a Master's degree in International Affairs from both Baku State University and Columbia University in the United States.

**Michael M. Gunter** is a Professor of Political Science at Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville, Tennessee. He also is the Secretary-General of the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC) headquartered in Brussels. In the past, he taught courses for many years during the summer at the International University in Vienna, as well as courses on Kurdish and Middle Eastern politics, among others, for the U.S. Government Areas Studies Program and U.S. Department of State Foreign Service Institute in Washington, D.C. He is the author of 10 critically praised scholarly books on the Kurdish question, and editor or co-editor of 9 more books on the Kurds, among others, including two books and numerous articles on the Armenians. He has published numerous scholarly articles on the Kurds and many other issues including the Armenians in such leading scholarly periodicals as the *Middle East Journal*, *Middle East Policy*, *Middle East Quarterly*, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, *Orient*, *Journal of Armenian Studies*, *Orbis*, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, *Maghreb Review*, *Sociology of Islam*, *American Journal of International Law*, *International Organization*, *World Affairs*, *Journal of International Affairs* (Columbia University), *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*, *Current History*, *Third World Quarterly*, *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, *Insight Turkey*, *Turkish Studies*, *Terrorism: An International Journal*, and *Arms Control*, among numerous others. His most recent books are *The Kurds in the Middle East: Enduring Problems and New Dynamics*, co-ed., (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2020); *Kurdish Autonomy and U.S. Foreign Policy*, co-ed., (New York and Bern: Peter Lang, 2020); *The Kurds: A Divided Nation in Search of a State*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2019); *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, ed., (London & New York: Routledge, 2019); *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); *Kurdish Issues: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Olson*, ed., (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2016); *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst Publications, 2014);

and *Armenian History and the Question of Genocide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

**Rovshan Ibrahimov** has been a Professor at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (South Korea) since 2015. Between 1999 and 2014, he worked at Qafqaz University (Azerbaijan) where he had positions of Head of the Department of International Relations (2003–2013), Head of the Department of European Studies (2008–2010), and Vice-rector of External Affairs (2011). In the period between 2011 and 2014, he was the Head of the Foreign Policy Analysis Department of the Center for Strategic Researches under the President of the Azerbaijan Republic. He has published many books on the EU External Policy Towards the South Caucasus. He also worked on Azerbaijan's Energy History and Policy. He authored many articles and comments in various academic journals and books.

**Vera Liubchak** received a specialist diploma in “Political Science” (Tomsk State University, Russia). In 2003–2006, she taught “Political Science” at Tomsk State Pedagogical University (Russia). In 2011, she defended her thesis “Specificity of the Russian Mentality in the Context of Peace-keeping Problems” and received the degree of Candidate of Philosophy. Since 2010, she worked in the Department of History, Political Science, and Cultural Studies of the Novosibirsk State Agrarian University (Russia) as an associate professor teaching “Political Science” and “Sociology”. In 2020, she began studying on the Ph.D. program in International Relations at the Eastern Mediterranean University (Famagusta, North Cyprus).

**Murad Muradov** graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Relations from the Academy of Public Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2011), a Master of Arts in Diplomacy and International Affairs from the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (2013), and a Master of Science in Comparative Politics from the London School of Economics (2015). He participated in several training programs, summer schools, and fellowships both in Azerbaijan and abroad, including the John Smith Trust Fellowship for Wider Europe (2017). His areas of expertise cover British politics, security, and geopolitics of post-Soviet countries and international political economy.

**Ceyhun Osmanli** is an Azerbaijani politician, analyst, and entrepreneur who served as a member of the 4<sup>th</sup> convocation of the Parliament of the

Republic of Azerbaijan. He founded and became the first chairman of the “İreli” Public Union from 2005 to 2012 and is the chairman of the Azerbaijan Greens Movement, founder, and director of TLM—Initiatives and Projects Center. He received his secondary education in Baku, and in 1999 was admitted to Baku State University and received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in 2003 and 2005, respectively. He later pursued his post-graduate education at Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) and received a Ph.D. in Economics in 2015. He is an associate professor.

**M. Cüneyt Özşahin** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Necmettin Erbakan University. He is also a Senior Fellow at the Istanbul Institute for Advanced Studies (ISTIAS). After completing his MA in political science at the University of Missouri-Columbia as a Fulbright Scholar, he received his Ph.D. in International Relations from Selcuk University. His research interests include theories of international relations, security studies, and Turkish politics. His publications have appeared in various edited volumes and journals, most recently in the *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, and *Europe-Asia Studies*. He is also a frequent contributor to Turkish media outlets writing on regional as well as domestic politics and security.

**Mehmet Fatih Oztarsu** earned his Ph.D. in International Relations from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. He completed his master’s and bachelor’s degrees in the same field in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. He works on regional studies with a focus on the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and ethnic/regional conflicts. He is a Young Turkey Young America fellowship program member at the Atlantic Council in Washington DC. He has written many articles and books in his field. He currently teaches Regionalism, International Politics, and Economics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in South Korea.

**M. Hakan Yavuz** currently a Professor of Political Science at the University of Utah, works on secularism, ethnic conflict, ethnic cleansing and genocide, transnational Islamic networks, civil society, and the public sphere. He has published two books on the Karabakh issue. He co-authored with Michael M. Gunter, *Karabakh Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Causes and Consequences* (New York: Palgrave, 2023). He also co-edited *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and*

*Political Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2023). M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of neo-Ottomanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2003); M. Hakan Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); M. Hakan Yavuz, *Toward and Islamic Enlightenment: The Gülen Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); with Bayram Balci, *Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup: What happened and why?* (University of Utah Press, 2017); with Peter Sluglett, eds. *Diplomacy and War: 1877–1878 Russo-Ottoman Wars and the Treaty of Berlin* (University of Utah Press, 2011); with Isa Blumi, eds., *War and Diplomacy: The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 and the Treaty of Berlin* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2013); with Feroz Ahmad, eds, *War and Collapse: World War I and the Ottoman State* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2015).



# Introduction

*M. Hakan Yavuz*

## KEY WORDS

Azerbaijan's historical narrative is intricately interwoven with the enduring legacy of Russian and Soviet colonialism. Following a series of wars between the Russian Empire and Iran, the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) delineated a new territorial frontier. Positioned as a perennial frontier state, Azerbaijan found itself at the crossroads of formidable empires—Russia, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire—each vying for dominance.

The nineteenth century witnessed Russia's invasion of the northern territories of Persia, where after the death of Nadir Shah in 1747, as a result of the collapse of the Safavid Empire, small Azerbaijani state formations appeared, such as the Baku Khanate, the Ganja Khanate, the Karabakh Khanate, the Nakhichevan Khanate, the Erivan Khanate, the Shirvan Khanate, the Sheki Khanate, etc. The Turkmenchay Peace Treaty split the Azerbaijani people, scattering them between Persia and Russia.

Amidst this tumultuous period, the Azerbaijani Turks in Russia and Iran were profoundly influenced by concurrent modernization

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M. H. Yavuz (✉)

Political Science, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

e-mail: [hakan.yavuz@utah.edu](mailto:hakan.yavuz@utah.edu)

endeavors—state-driven and spurred by the emergent Azerbaijani merchant class. This synergy was the crucible for the nascent Azerbaijani social and political consciousness. The discovery of oil in Baku turned it into the third major industrial center of the Russian Empire after St. Petersburg and Moscow. Due to the rapid growth of the oil industry on the Absheron Peninsula, the influx of labor from the regions of the Russian Empire to Baku began, as a result of which, by the end of the nineteenth century, the ethnic composition of the city's population changed dramatically. According to the first general population census conducted in the Russian Empire in 1897, the population of Baku numbered 111,904 people. Of these, Azerbaijanis made up 36.78%, Russians—34.82%, Armenians—17.07%, Germans—2.2%, Jews—1.7%, etc.<sup>1</sup> Baku has become a center of economic and cultural vitality not only for the Azerbaijani-Turkish population but also for the Armenian, Georgian, and various nationalist intelligentsia. Economic development was accompanied by the formation of the Turkic identity. This, in turn, marked the beginning of the transition process among the South Caucasus Muslim population from Islamic political consciousness to Azerbaijani-Turkish nationalism. In this transformation, the new economic and cultural elite played a critical role.

While an independent Azerbaijani state had yet to materialize by 1918, a distinct Azerbaijani culture and collective identity had crystallized, stemming from their lineage to the Safavid state and their pivotal role in the canonization of Shia tradition in Iran. The late nineteenth century witnessed the ascendancy of a burgeoning bourgeoisie, catalyzing Azerbaijan's evolution into a bastion of Turkish nationalism. The intellectual basis of modern Turkish nationalism in Turkey originated in the crucible of Baku, the foundation of which was laid by Ali Hüseyinzade and Ahmed Ağaoğlu. However, it should be noted that other peoples, including the peoples of Caucasian Albania, played a role in the formation of the modern Azerbaijani nation along with the Turkic ethnos.

Under Russian dominion, the recalibration of mass education heightened literacy rates, and the emergence of a new bourgeoisie catalyzed the standardization of the vernacular Azerbaijani-Turkish language, making it the lingua franca of education. Miza Fath Ali Akhundzade, pioneer of the first play in the Muslim world, spearheaded the literary renaissance of Azerbaijani Turkish, sowing the seeds of a language-driven Azerbaijani national identity. Azerbaijani intellectuals championed westernization as the panacea for societal stagnation. A spirited exchange of ideas in

Azerbaijani newspapers fostered a secular elite that internalized the ideals encapsulated in Ali Hüseyinzade's mantra: "Turkify, Islamicize, Europeanize" ("*Turklashtirmek, Islamlashtirmek, Avrupalashtirmek*"). This rallying cry would later resonate in the early days of Turkish nationalism, ultimately evolving to prioritize radical Westernization under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Intellectual discourse in Baku, shepherded by Mehmet Emin Rasulzade, gave birth to the socio-cultural *Musavat* (Equality) movement in 1911. The strained relations between the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities over the rich resources of Baku precipitated a series of tensions and, tragically, even ethnic massacres. These pivotal conflicts played an indelible role in cementing the contours of Azerbaijani national identity.

During the collapse of the Russian Empire, Azerbaijani leaders joined Armenians and Georgians and declared the Federative Republic of Transcaucasian in 1918. When this experiment collapsed, the three republics declared their independence. Azerbaijan declared its independence on May 28, 1918. Unfortunately, the communist-controlled Baku with the Armenian troops' and only with the arrival of Turkish troops Azerbaijan fully became independent. It remained independent until the Red Army entered Baku on April 28, 1920, and marked the beginning of the Sovietization of Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic endured for a significant span of 71 years. Initially, it was an integral component of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, a union that persisted from 1922 until 1936. During this period, much like its regional counterparts, Georgia and Armenia, Azerbaijan witnessed a notable surge in economic progress, urban development, and industrialization.

Education in Azerbaijan received a boost, and the indigenous Azerbaijani population found itself increasingly occupying positions of authority within the republic. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that, despite these events, the reins of power were firmly held by Moscow, especially during the reign of Joseph Stalin, which lasted almost 30 years after Lenin's death from January 1924 to 1953. Stalin's viceroy in Azerbaijan was Mir Jafar Bagirov, who in December 1933 became the head of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. He became the conductor of Stalin's totalitarian policy in Azerbaijan.

Following Stalin's passing, a controlled wave of openness swept through the Soviet Union. This newfound atmosphere of change and

relaxation continued to prevail under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982). Brezhnev prioritized stability and sought to maintain the status quo, which led to a slowdown in economic growth and innovation. During this period, Heydar Aliyev, who led Azerbaijan from 1969 to 1982 as the First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, initiated major development projects in Azerbaijan. He became the most successful transformative leader. During his tenure, Aliyev oversaw a period of significant economic and cultural development in Azerbaijan. He implemented extensive infrastructure projects, including the construction of roads and bridges, which bolstered connectivity and economic productivity. Heydar Aliyev's tenure as the First Secretary saw a concerted effort to nurture and celebrate Azerbaijan's cultural heritage, contributing to the flourishing of arts, literature, and cultural expressions in the region. Aliyev's accomplishments in Baku were so impressive that he was subsequently appointed as the first deputy Prime Minister, entrusted with overseeing transportation and spearheading industrialization projects across the entire Soviet Union. His visionary approach left an indelible mark on the economic landscape of the region.

In the second half of the 1980s, the policy of restructuring the new leadership of the USSR in the person of Mikhail Gorbachev made it possible for Armenian irredentists to launch a separatist movement in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of the Azerbaijan SSR, where 75% of the population were ethnic Armenians. This movement bore significant implications for the political landscape and simmering tensions in the Caucasus.

Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh escalated into a hot phase, and the Armenians, with the support of the 366 motorized Rifle Regiment of the Soviet Army stationed in the administrative center of the autonomous region of Khankendi (Stepanakert), initiated a series of offensive operations both in Karabakh and in the surrounding areas of Azerbaijan. As a result, they established full control over Nagorno-Karabakh and occupied 7 districts. Approximately 20% of the territory of Azerbaijan was lost.

As the newly independent Azerbaijan teetered on the brink of potential collapse in 1993, it was Heydar Aliyev who emerged as the linchpin in averting a total state breakdown. Through a series of astute policies centered on state-building, Aliyev not only rallied the nation but also



undertook measures that would ultimately redefine and solidify the Azerbaijani state. It is this transformative era that many scholars attribute to Heydar Aliyev, hailing him as the visionary founder and mastermind behind the shaping of the modern Azerbaijani state. His legacy remains indelibly etched in the annals of Azerbaijani history.

This edited book is important because it will examine in detail Heydar Aliyev, the architect and founder of modern post-Soviet Azerbaijan, also called the Third Azerbaijan Republic. (The First Azerbaijan Republic was short-lived 1918–1920, the Second Soviet Republic existed from 1920 to 1991 until the collapse of the Soviet Union.) In their First War over Karabakh from 1992 to 1994, Armenia defeated Azerbaijan and occupied 20 percent of Azerbaijan including the bitterly disputed Karabakh. 4 UN Security Council resolutions—822 of April 30, 1993, 853 of July 29, 1993, 874 of October 14, 1993 and 884 of November 12, 1993, confirmed the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and called on the Armenian side to immediately liberate the occupied areas of Azerbaijan. However, Armenia refused to accept them. Finally, Azerbaijan itself began to implement all the above-mentioned resolutions of the UN Security Council and during the 44-day war in the fall of 2020 liberated its internationally recognized territory from the Armenian occupation. Thus, Azerbaijan has restored its territorial integrity and has become one of the world’s leading oil and gas-producing states and an increasingly important regional power.

The Turkish Studies Project at The University of Utah is assembling an edited volume of scholarly chapters, which variously examine Azerbaijan from 1993 to 2003 and immediately followed the end of the Cold War. The editors of the volume consider this decade a fateful period encompassing far-reaching consequences on Azerbaijan as a fully formed state and society and with implications for its political future and its twenty-first-century geopolitical strategy. This decade comprised the following key developments: (a) the institutional foundations of the current Republic were established; (b) a new form of nation-state national identity was adopted; (c) the concept of the Azerbaijani state was redefined; and (d) the security establishment (the military) was created to liberate occupied territories held by Armenia since it had won the First War (1988–1994) over Karabakh.

The architect during this fateful decade was Heydar Aliyev, who took a failed state and breathed new life into it. He played a profound role in the establishment of the Azerbaijani state as we currently know it and

articulated the boundaries between the state and society. Regarding Aliyev as the architect of the modern Third Azerbaijani Republic, this volume will focus on Aliyev's identity, ideology, and political skills to anchor the context of state and nation formation during this significant period.

Each chapter is designed to cover a specific aspect of this "fateful decade," extending to considerations of Azerbaijani political culture, economic development, trade policy, diplomatic relations, intellectual history, technology, military and security development, media and culture, society and community networks, education, and the country's foreign policy. Thus, this will be an important original and timely analysis that will contribute to the existing academic literature regarding Armenia and Azerbaijan's struggle over Karabakh with an analysis of Heydar Aliyev, the founder of modern Azerbaijan.

In Chapter 2, M. Hakan Yavuz delves into a comprehensive examination of Heydar Aliyev's policies, addressing critical questions that illuminate the shaping of the state and nation-building process under his leadership. The chapter probes into Aliyev's deliberate emphasis on Azerbaijani identity over Turkish identity, providing insight into his nuanced conception of national identity. Furthermore, it scrutinizes Aliyev's perception of the state and its pivotal role in the socio-political landscape.

Michael Gunter, in his contribution, undertakes a comparative analysis of Heydar Aliyev's legacy by juxtaposing him with iconic figures Charles De Gaulle and Abraham Lincoln. Gunter contends that despite hailing from a notably smaller nation, Aliyev stands tall in this esteemed company. All three leaders are lauded for their exceptional political acumen, with Aliyev's achievements garnering even more acclaim due to his ascent to prominence in vastly disparate political systems—the communist Soviet Union followed by the reinvigorated nationalist Azerbaijan. Each of these figures experienced periods of apparent setback, only to stage triumphant comebacks, ultimately emerging as their respective nations' revered saviors. Like de Gaulle's pivotal roles during World War II and amid the Fourth Republic's decline in 1958 and Lincoln's historic tenure during the US Civil War from 1861 to 1865, Heydar Aliyev's legacy endures as that of Azerbaijan's esteemed guardian.

Eldar Abbasov's chapter, grounded in extensive research within Russian archives, forms part of a broader biographical study on Heydar Aliyev. Abbasov contends that Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of perestroika and glasnost provided Armenian nationalists with favorable conditions for

the deployment of the Karabakh movement, the purpose of which was the annexation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of the Azerbaijani SSR to the Armenian SSR. One of the phases of this movement was a campaign by Armenian nationalists to discredit a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU, First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR Heydar Aliyev, whose goal was to remove him from the highest echelon of power in the USSR. Since Heydar Aliyev was considered a serious barrier to the Karabakh movement. The campaign of Armenian nationalists against Heydar Aliyev has failed. However, the process of updating the composition of the CPSU Central Committee and its Politburo, which accelerated after the January (1987) Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee, also hit Heydar Aliyev. In October 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev forced him to write a letter of resignation. Almost after the removal of Heydar Aliyev from the highest echelon of power in the USSR, Armenian separatists launched the Karabakh movement.

Rovshan Ibrahimov's chapter delves into the astute state-building strategies of Heydar Aliyev. Specifically, it investigates how pivotal energy agreements, often referred to as the "deal of the century," played a transformative role in bolstering Azerbaijani independence. These agreements not only served as a catalyst for institution-building but also provided the necessary constitutional underpinnings for the flourishing of private enterprise within the nation. Moreover, this article offers a comprehensive analysis of Aliyev's contributions to reshaping the normative framework in Azerbaijan.

In their co-authored chapter, Ceyhun Osmanli and Shamkhal Abilov's comprehensive article focuses on one of the most pressing national security and foreign policy issues—the Karabakh conflict. They meticulously dissect Heydar Aliyev's calculated policies designed to temporize the resolution of this deeply rooted issue. The article examines the profound impact of the Karabakh conflict, which resulted in the loss of approximately 20 percent of Azerbaijani territory, and how it contributed to Aliyev's ascension to the presidency. It also presents an in-depth exploration of Aliyev's approach toward the Karabakh region and the ongoing conflict, offering a nuanced understanding of his commitment to resolving the issue within the territorial boundaries of Azerbaijan, underpinned by the belief that time and resources would ultimately favor Azerbaijan.

Azar Aslanli, a distinguished scholar in Azerbaijani foreign policy, takes a holistic view of Aliyev's foreign policy by scrutinizing both objectives and means. His analysis concludes that Aliyev consistently prioritized safeguarding Azerbaijan's political independence and preserving its territorial integrity by resisting external pressures from Armenia and its allies.

The concluding section of this comprehensive work sheds light on Aliyev's foreign policy toward key nations, including Russia, Iran, the United States, Israel, and Turkey. In Chapter 8, Vera Liubchak meticulously unravels Aliyev's foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia. This narrative probes the impact of Azerbaijan's pre-1993 foreign policy on the dynamics between the two nations, examines Aliyev's post-1993 efforts to strengthen Azerbaijani-Russian relations, and delves into the factors that influenced these relations from 1993 to 2003.

In Chapter 9, Fuad Chiragov and Murad Muradov offer an insightful analysis of Azerbaijani relations with the United States, with a particular focus on the implications of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act. The chapter scrutinizes Aliyev's adept balancing act among major global powers, maintaining a calculated distance to safeguard Azerbaijan's national interests.

Aynur Bashirova's contribution provides a detailed historical account of the evolution of Azerbaijani-Israeli relations during Aliyev's tenure. It illuminates the intricate political and economic drivers that underpinned this partnership, ultimately paving the way for one of the most strategic alliances between the two nations.

The final section of the paper shifts its attention to Azerbaijan's two major neighbors: Iran and Turkey. In Chapter 11, Mehmet Fatih Oztarsu embarks on an exploration of the sources and development of bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Iran during the Heydar Aliyev era. This research dissects the foreign policy challenges and implications faced by Azerbaijan prior to Aliyev's leadership, examines the influence of Iran's stance on the Karabakh conflict on Azerbaijani-Iranian relations, and offers insights into how Heydar Aliyev successfully cultivated strong ties with Iran.

In their co-authored chapter, M. Cuneyt Ozsahin and Orhan Battir delve into the depths of Heydar Aliyev's efforts to strengthen Azerbaijani-Turkish relations. Aliyev held Turkey in high regard, considering it a paramount ally. The authors meticulously explore the cultural, political, and, most notably, economic forces that motivated the close relationship

between Turkey and Azerbaijan. They shine a spotlight on the chemistry between Aliyev and Turkey's Suleyman Demirel, highlighting their instrumental roles in deepening these diplomatic ties. This chapter underscores how this collaboration aimed to protect the political independence of Azerbaijan while bolstering the economic prosperity and well-being of its citizens.

## NOTES

1. *Pervaya vseobshchaya perepis' naseleniya Rossiyskoy imperii 1897 goda. Tom. LXI. Bakinskaya guberniya. SPb. 1905. P. 2–3.* (The First General Census of the Russian Empire in 1897. Volume LXI. Baku province. St. Petersburg, 1905. P. 2–3).



# Heydar Aliyev: The Architect of State and Nation-Builder

*M. Hakan Yavuz*

“The facts may prove me wrong, ” Charles de Gaulle one day declared to Finance Minister Antoine Pinay, “but history will prove me right.”<sup>1</sup> To which M. Pinay replied, “But, mon Général, I thought history was written with facts.” At the centenary of his birth, Heydar Aliyev’s impact in Azerbaijani’s post-Soviet destiny has emerged as holistic, even if it is not yet fully appreciated in the international community. President Aliyev, just as De Gaulle accomplished, rescued his nation from collapse, reconstituted the state’s institutions, and set the course for his country to become aware of its potential. He crafted present-day Azerbaijan and its institutions, along with the memory and culture of his nation’s rise

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M. Hakan Yavuz is a professor of political science at the University of Utah. His most recent book, M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael Gunter, *The Karabakh Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Causes and Consequences* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2023).

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M. H. Yavuz (✉)  
Political Science, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA  
e-mail: [hakan.yavuz@utah.edu](mailto:hakan.yavuz@utah.edu)

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H. Yavuz et al. (eds.), *Heydar Aliyev and the Foundations of Modern Azerbaijan*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58265-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58265-3_2)

to independence. The formation of the Second Republic and the eventual Azerbaijani military victory in Karabakh in 2020 have composed the nation's foundations and pillars. Just as De Gaulle had to address the divisive war in Algeria, Aliyev had to deal with the Karabakh War. He astutely found the breathing space he needed to revamp the nation's institutional infrastructure. Ordinary Azerbaijanis were not yet adequately prepared to fight and win against Armenia-cum-Russian military power, as the concerns of achieving economic viability in a newly independent republic became the urgent priority. Aliyev sought to find the ideal path for saving his country's face and pride in ending the First Karabakh War without making concessions to the Armenians that might humiliate and demoralize the Azerbaijani people. He made a difficult yet courageous decision. To extend the time and space for ensuring Azerbaijan's nascent yet fragile state as an independent republic, he found a narrow path to end the war without a conclusive peace agreement by negotiating a ceasefire that would not cede the rightful claim of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. As history had manifested, his unwavering stance that Azerbaijan could only be whole with Karabakh territory included, as the facts of history had sustained, proved prescient.

This chapter examines the historical contexts that compelled Aliyev to carry forward his certain idea of what Azerbaijan should become in its formative years as the Second Republic of Azerbaijan. Aliyev was astute enough to realize how prophetic his leadership challenges were regarding expectations of a military victory in Karabakh which discounted the probabilities that Armenia would prevail. He told Süleyman Demirel, then president of Turkey after the defeat in the First Karabakh War, "Yes, we lost the battle but I am sure this defeat will lead to the rebirth of a powerful Azerbaijan since time and justice are on our side and we will win." As de Gaulle did when he went into temporary exile in London after France fell to the Nazis, Aliyev spoke up for Azerbaijan, reviving the essential honor that his country's citizens would need in rebuilding their spirit of nationhood.

The first section of the chapter summarizes Aliyev's biographical details and his orientation of the worldview, along with his rise to power. The remaining section provides an overview of the key strategies Aliyev deployed in his efforts of nation- and institution-building.

## LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY

Aliyev was born on 10 May 1923 in Nakhchivan. He studied at the Nakhchivan Pedagogical School and graduated in 1939. He went on to study at the architectural department of the Industrial Institute of Azerbaijan (now known as the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy) but World War II conditions prevented him from finishing his education. In 1941, he became a civil service employee and worked for the state security agencies of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1944, he was sent to work in the channels of state security, which became the base for his steady rise in professional and administrative reputation. Aliyev eventually was promoted to the post of deputy chairman of the State Committee of Security, and in 1967 became its chair. Leading up to this period, he earned the military rank of lieutenant general and received higher education training as a promising public official in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). In 1957, he graduated from the department of history of Azerbaijan State University.

Aliyev was elected as the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan in 1969, thereby becoming the most powerful political leader in Azerbaijan. He transformed the Azerbaijani economic and transportation systems between 1969 and 1982, the years of his tenure. During this period, he also built extensive networks with the nation's diverse sectors, while cultivating his unique brand of Azerbaijani republicanism. In 1982, he was elected as an alternate member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and appointed the first deputy chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of the USSR. Aliyev had entered the highest-ranking inner sanctum of the Soviet Union leadership. For twenty years, he served as a member of parliament of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and for five years as deputy chairman of the Supreme Soviet. In 1987, he was forced to resign from the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party because of irreconcilable disagreements with the policies of then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

After his removal from the Politburo, Aliyev returned to Nakhchivan, where he resolved to pursue his nationalistic desires and make his homeland independent. The events of Karabakh and the Soviet massacre in Baku fortified and solidified his own identity as an Azerbaijani Turk. He never hesitated to defend Azerbaijan's claims to territorial integrity, as he spoke against the massacre in Baku and used fast-moving events of the



time to nurture and strengthen the distinct symbols of Azerbaijani republicanism which ultimately would be enshrined in the political memory of future generations of Azerbaijani citizens and the nation's governing philosophies. As President, Aliyev pursued a balanced foreign policy so as not to anger the Russian Federation but yet never compromise the historically validated sovereignty of Azerbaijan. For instance, he consistently refused to allow Russian military bases in the country, even though some of his fellow political figures suggested that it could help Azerbaijan to free Karabakh from occupation conclusively.<sup>2</sup>

Even what might have seemed like small events in Aliyev's life became consequential for the evolution of his political thinking, especially to understand that revolutionary republican values could speak to ordinary Azerbaijanis looking for alternatives to those of Soviet communism as framed by the Russians. Aliyev had set out to brand socialism in a purely Azerbaijani frame. From his experiences in Nakhchivan, Baku, and Moscow, one then can flesh out a portrait of Aliyev as the founder of the Second Republic of Azerbaijan. Aliyev was a product of the experiences of the clash between Russian imperialism and Azerbaijani nationalism, not just ephemeral ideals but organic ones that would certainly grow under the imposing presence of Aliyev. He had the political instincts to perform the complex geopolitical dance with his dual formative loyalties, ensuring he would never set aside his Turkish roots in Nakhchivan. Crafting his own brand of Machiavellianism, he could stand reliably as a Soviet recruit while keeping the fight going for the rights of his people and for preserving the cultural roots of Azerbaijani society. Only when he was a member of the Politburo did Aliyev realize that what Soviet/Russian imperialism had inflicted upon Azerbaijani bodies paled in comparison to the phenomenon that has done to Azerbaijani minds. He was acutely aware of the squalid ideological surrender that had endured for many decades and recognized how to treat the symptoms and rehabilitate a genuine essence of national honor for his people in the project of the Second Republic. Aliyev's emerging legacy was a product of multilayered conflicts: imperialism and nationalism, socialism and nationalism, war and peace, and equality and supremacy.

Aliyev's political philosophy acknowledged and synthesized seemingly disparate threads—some ideological and sociocultural and others more pragmatic, technocratic, and administrative. He was an impassioned socialist and a humanist as a public servant. He understood the dualistic realities, protective of Azerbaijani roots while keeping fidelity to the

Soviet Union's existence and viability. An Azerbaijani, Turk, and Muslim (at least secularly and culturally if not strictly religious), he envisioned a role that superseded his bureaucratic obligations, where he would take on the role as the liberating guide for the citizens after the sobering losses and destruction that Azerbaijan suffered in the hostilities before, during and after the First Karabakh War. Becoming a politically regal figure just as de Gaulle had done in France, Aliyev knew enough how to judge and evaluate the political tempers of Azerbaijanis to ensure that any opposition would have to be so motivated and loud as to be heard while comforting and guaranteeing to the people that he always was the empathetic protector who guaranteed the lives of ordinary Azerbaijanis would not be disrupted to the detriment of the public welfare. He understood the dynamic of making the concert the political art of the willed.

Aliyev ensured that he had a ubiquitous presence in Azerbaijan, which allowed him to reconcile deftly the perceptions of a politically stable Azerbaijan with an eye toward westernization that would fit nicely into the fabric of his country's society. He never felt at home in the USSR and for him, Azerbaijani identity was less a position than a movement toward the realization of his country's empowerment as an independent state that would set the path to thrive economically and politically. In rehabilitating the country's fragmented institutions, he understood the power of charisma permitted a justifiable opportunity to blend in myth with the factual undercurrents of history, primarily as a mode of instilling pride and confidence in a people who were dejected by the twin events of military defeat and a socialist economy on the verge of collapse. To enhance his power, he sought to disarm the power of parties in parliament, especially those which romanticized nationalistic ideals but who also failed to consider the pragmatic necessities of technocratic administrative projects to strengthen the country's governing core. As with de Gaulle, Aliyev stood out from the political opposition because he comprehended just how vital a constructed sense of national dignity was to the project of national renewal.

His life became a case study for the resilience of social Darwinism, as he understood that victories only came from the perseverance of overcoming struggle after struggle in an endless stream where a vanquished opponent would be shortly replaced by yet another who would seek to dilute and neutralize Aliyev's political legitimacy. He rose to the top of the Soviet central bureaucracy with his uncannily instinctive skills in networking,

coalition building, and convincing displays of trust and fidelity. His political ego certainly was complicated, as he chose the moments when he could be most vindictive against his opponents but only in combination with a message that he believed that millions of Azerbaijani citizens were optimistic that their society could be humane and peaceful. He preferred to be loved but if that was not possible he wanted to be feared as well. He was perhaps the only successful political leader in the Caucasus who understood how to strategically incorporate Machiavellianism.

When he took over the collapsing state of Azerbaijan, he moved to encircle his country with the friendship of its neighbors so that he could focus on domestic affairs. He emphasized *rapprochement* between Russia and Azerbaijan, Iran and Azerbaijan, and even between Armenia and Azerbaijan. There was little room for sentimentality in his foreign policy. Even in his relations with Turkey, he wanted to make sure Ankara stayed on the side of Azerbaijan, bypassing the pipelines over Turkey and making Turkey dependent on Azerbaijani energy resources. As a long-serving member of the KGB and the Politburo, he also appreciated the contributions of culture and nationalism to foreign policy formulation. He concluded that Turkey needed Azerbaijan as much as Azerbaijan needed Turkey. To have access to Central Asia and have a powerful footprint in the Caucasus, Turkey desperately needed Azerbaijan. Demirel recalled that “spending time with Heyday Aliyev is having a full course on international relations.”<sup>3</sup> Turkey and Azerbaijan, as two states and one nation, share the same fundamental interests. Therefore, they have always been intertwined for their respective geopolitical existence.

Aliyev once said, “Our people and our elite, unlike Russians, have a very narrow view of their life and the world they live in. Their main concern is how to improve their standard of living. There is no big idea or a big cause. We need a bigger vision than ourselves and a bigger goal than improving our standard of living. The Karabakh, in that sense, has become a blessing to rebuild the soul and have a national cause to rally and unite the people.”<sup>4</sup> Aliyev’s main goal was to rebuild the state and galvanize the nation for liberating the lost territories. Aliyev’s analysis of contemporary Turkey is significant:

It was a country that lives in the greatness of its past and there is a deep sense of will among the ordinary people to become great again. The history for Turkey is not passé but rather the vision of the future.<sup>5</sup>

Aliyev did not believe in Azerbaijan as it had existed, because it was a fragmented and defeated country. In order for it to become a stable and prosperous nation with a restored sense of security, such a realization would be impossible if the occupied territories were not freed from Armenia's incursion. Aliyev knew how to be simultaneously utopian and realist. No different than what De Gaulle had accomplished in postwar France, Aliyev knew the country needed a symbolic history of an exclusively Azerbaijani character to instill pride in the citizens so that he could get on with the pragmatic politics of rehabilitating the governing institutions and, most urgently, the military so that it would protect and recover the country's legitimate territorial integrity. His experience in the Soviet bureaucratic service did not go in vain. Perhaps, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, if the USA had considered the value of pride for the Russian people as opposed to the pragmatic facts of the collapse of political structure and hierarchy, the sense of humiliating plunder would not have been so evident. Instead, Russians could have been granted their own myth of believing in their own liberation.

Aliyev fully understood this, in rallying the people of Azerbaijan to the cause of liberation. His rallying point became the liberation of the occupied territories, especially the city of Shusha. Aliyev succeeded because he understood completely the distinctions between patriotism and nationalism. More often a patriot than nationalist, he was the most credible purveyor of the symbolic myth the people needed to embrace the agenda of national dignity.

President Aliyev made his hajj in July 1994, as a sign of his rebirth as a Muslim who had recommitted himself to his religious roots. About his pilgrimage experience, he said, "It is a great honor for us to visit the holy city of Mecca, touch the holy Kaaba stone and pray there. I thank God that I could fulfill my intention. I also thank my dear brother, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, for his help. We are very pleased with this pilgrimage on the first day of our visit to Saudi Arabia."<sup>6</sup>

### THE FAILED STATE (1991–1993)

Ayaz Mutallibov (1938–2022), who was the Communist Party leader at the time, declared independence for Azerbaijan on August 30, 1991. The proclamation came easily but the goal of sustaining and enhancing independence proved to be more complex than what many realized at the

time. The Communist Party was dissolved and within a week a presidential election took place and the old communist elite ensured that Mutallibov was elected president. Yet, three forces threatened the fragile transformation to independence over the next several years. The onset of the First Karabakh War rode on a fresh wave of Azerbaijani nationalism but the economy was struggling to gain traction in the shift from tight state control to flexible market conditions. The security establishment, notably the military, was mired in a state of insufficient funding, lack of cohesion in the structure, and loss of commitment by units and divisions in the institution. In their place, private militia groups gained an upper hand but were too fragmented to coordinate and control. The Karabakh War and a string of defeats, combined with a sudden surge of large numbers of internally displaced populations, produced a decline in those willing to accept the state authority as legitimate and led to societal fragmentation that verged on a loss of control.<sup>7</sup>

The only dynamic force that seemed to supersede the growing state of chaos in the country was the ethno-nationalism-based Popular Front of Abulfaz Elchibey. Although Azerbaijan is located on the periphery of the Turkic world, its intellectuals have played a formative role in cultivating strong sentiments of Turkish nationalism. One cannot write about the intellectual origins of Turkish nationalism without acknowledging the role of Azerbaijani intellectuals such as Ali bey Huseyinzade (1864–1940), Ali Merdan Topcubasi (1863–1939), and, especially, Ahmed Agaoglu (1869–1939).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, despite its comparatively smaller population, Azerbaijan had long prided itself on its secular and creative enlightenment. The first Muslim Republic was Azerbaijan; the first opera to come from the Muslim world included the libretto cast in Azerbaijan; and it has supported widespread appreciation for European music.

Moreover, due to its location near or at the nexus of major regional roads and access points, Azerbaijan's geostrategic location is vital in linking Europe and Asia. It has a long-land border with two rogue states: Russia and Iran.<sup>9</sup> As security threats continue from Iran and Russia, Azerbaijan's sustainability as a stable state has become more urgent.<sup>10</sup> The ongoing crises involving Russia and Iran have brought Azerbaijan more attention from global powers. As a result of the international community's embargoes against Russian oil and gas due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, Azerbaijani's abundance of energy resources has been highlighted as an appealing factor in supporting the global economy.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, there were several identity crises in Azerbaijan. Immediately, a vacuum or void emerged as the population wavered, alternated, and was confused about how to define and embrace a distinct Azerbaijani identity when many had only been familiar with a pan-Soviet identity for many decades. But, the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict and the Russian occupation of Baku in January 1990 galvanized Azerbaijani-Turkish identity under the leadership of Elchibey's Popular Front. It was this ethno-territorial conflict between Azerbaijanis and Armenians and the massive ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijani Turks from Armenia that forged a centripetal force to embolden a coherent and shared Azerbaijani-Turkish identity.<sup>11</sup>

With the conveniently expressed intention of preventing massacres of Armenians during the Karabakh conflict, Soviet troops attacked Baku and opened fire on the civilian population. Known as Black January (*Qara Yanvar*), the massacre, according to official estimates of Azerbaijan, left 147 civilians killed, at least 800 people injured, and at least five went missing. The attacks reinforced Azerbaijani nationalism against Russians and Armenians. Aliyev returned to the political arena in 1990 by publicly protesting against Black January and resigned from the Communist Party.<sup>12</sup> Aliyev spoke at the Azerbaijan Representation in Moscow on the next day, condemning the massacre and calling for those responsible for the crime committed against the people of Azerbaijan to be prosecuted. He also quit the Communist Party, citing the Soviet Union's refusal to account for all sides' views and claims in the Karabakh conflict.

Aliyev's resignation went public in July 1991, signaling his break from the Soviet Union's agenda, especially in Karabakh. Aliyev was extremely disappointed with Gorbachev's policies and concluded that the Soviet system was not going to survive. When Moscow organized a referendum to keep the union intact in March 1991, Aliyev, then speaking for the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, rejected the referendum and expressed his desire for Azerbaijani independence. In 1992, at the constituent congress of the New Azerbaijan Party in Nakhchivan, Aliyev was elected chairman.<sup>13</sup>

At the time of the Black January massacre, Mutallibov's presidency was not seen as legitimate when Azerbaijan declared its independence in 1991. While state institutions were in the hands of the corrupt Azerbaijani elite, nationalism gained a foothold initially against the corrupt elite and then against Russia and Armenia, as both of those respective nations sought to tie their allegiance tighter in the post-Soviet era. The