It seems the study of the history and culture of the Talish people has recently become a hot issue among the academics of the region, especially of Iran and Armenia (for details and references, see Asatrian/Borjian 2005; Kirakosyan 2005; Asatrian 2007).

The Iranian historian Hosein Ahmadi’s monograph (a revised Russian edition of the Persian original) is most likely a new manifestation of this scholarly trend. Ahmadi presents his viewpoints on the history of the independent Talish Khanate during the 18th and 19th centuries, based predominantly on the works of Iranian researchers, with few occasional references to the Western publications having Persian translations. This is perhaps the reason why several substantial events and periods of the Talish history of the early 19th century are either missing or they are presented with visible lacunae, despite the sufficient amount of relevant documents and researches in Russian, English, Armenian, and Georgian.

Throughout the monograph, one could note the tendency to depict the Talish people as most persistent fighters against Russia’s intentions to annex Talish. That, however, is questionable, since the Talish rulers had been striving for thirty years to join the Russian Empire, willing to escape from the military and political anarchy that prevailed in Iran in the 1750s and 1790s. That was the time of intestine struggle between the Zand and Qajar dynasties.

The author discusses the number of Talishis in Northern Talish (pp. 19-20), which is currently a part of Azerbaijan Republic. According to provided data, there were 89,398 Talishis in the territory of the present-day Azerbaijan Republic in 1913, and in 1999 there were 77,323 Talishis; while the non-official Russian sources mention 100,000, although official reports from Azerbaijan Republic place the number at 21,200 in 1989 and 76,800 in 1999 (p. 19). The subsequent pages are dedicated to suppositions about the reasons of such notable difference in numbers. Ahmadi also cites the unofficial opinion of the Azerbaijani scholars, according to which there are possibly 500 to 800 thousand Talishis living in Azerbaijan Republic today (p. 20). Based on the official data from the population census in the USSR in 1937, which was first published in 1991 (54 years later!), there were 99,145 Talishis in Azerbaijan, while the 1959 census mentions only 100 of them all over Azerbaijan (sic!).
stranger things happened in the 1979 census of the USSR, when the Talishis disappeared completely from the list of peoples of the USSR and the Azerbaijan SSR (Isupov/Švarcer 1984: 102). Then suddenly in 1989, during a new population census, 21,169 Talishis appeared in Soviet Azerbaijan (Nacional’nyj sostav naseleniya SSSR, 1989, Moscow, 1991: 118). The Talishis themselves claim there are around 700,000 to one million of them in modern Azerbaijan Republic (Gummatzoda 2007: 127, 131) (similar numbers are also usually reported by Iranian scholars M. Rahnamai, A. Hashtpari, and S. Amanolahi et al). The Azerbaijani scholars unwillingly accept that, indeed, it is possible that the number of the Talishis “is not objective, but, according to the official census data of 1999, there were only 76,800 of them in Azerbaijan” (Yunusov 2001).

The author of the monograph tells about the struggle of Isma’il Safavi for the throne, with details on how he was hiding from Sultan Rustam-bek Aq Qoyunlu in Ardabil and Lahijan (1496-1500) and how Karkiya Mirza ‘Ali, the ruler of Biye-pish, wrote a letter to the Sultan saying that he has no information regarding his whereabouts (pp. 29-32). But it is a well-known fact that when the Sultan’s envoy came to Karkiya Mirza ‘Ali, the latter ordered to put the nine year-old Isma’il into a basket and hang on a tree and then swore with his hand on the Qur’an that Isma’il was not on the soil of Gilan. That episode is described by Sharaf Khan Bidlisi (Vaseil’eva 1976: 145-146). The same 16th century source informs that Isma’il was born in 1486, while Hosein Ahmadi writes that he was 12 years old in 1499, (p. 30). More probably, Isma’il was 13 at that time; then, at the age of 14, he led the struggle (spring of 1500) to seize power and the throne of Aq Qoyunlu. By the end of 1499, Isma’il besieged Ganja with several thousands of his yazïš, and then he spent that winter in Erzinjan hosted by the Qizilbash tribes of Ustajlu and Tekellu. Munejim-bashi and Khwandamir, the authors of that period, write that Isma’il and his army defeated the troops of Shirvanshah Farrukh Yassar and killed the latter. Sharaf Khan Bidlisi writes about the seizure of Tabriz in 1501 and about the young Isma’il being declared a Shahanshah. However, according to Hosein Ahmadi, it seems that even in 1502 Shirvanshah Farrukh Yassar was still alive and hiding from Isma’il’s yazïš in the Gulistan fortress (p. 35). That is not correct: Shirvanshah was dead for two years already in 1502.

On page 93, there is an assertion that in the 1740s, Nadir Shah restored the Iranian supremacy over Transcaucasia. Such view of the events provokes serious objections. It is enough to remember that Haji Çelebi (from the clan of Qara-keshish, “the black priests”, which had adopted Islam for the second time in the beginning of the 18th cen-