CONTEMPORARY AZERBAIJANI HISTORIOGRAPHY
ON THE PROBLEM OF “SOUTHERN AZERBAIJAN”
AFTER WORLD WAR II

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In an attempt to fill the post-Soviet ideological vacuum and to consolidate power, the leaders of the newly independent Azerbaijan turned to continuous search for nation-state identity and re-evaluation of the Azerbaijani historical past. The lost war against Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh (1988-1994), and the socio-economic crisis of the first half of the 1990s led to indoctrination through the public domain and education system and heavily influenced the new nation’s shaping identity.

Azerbaijani nationalism broke out with renewed force after the independence. Defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh sharpened the defensive feelings of the “small Azerbaijani nation”, suppressed and divided in former times by its great neighbours, Russia and Iran. Suffering from the post-war low morale, the Azerbaijani people demanded new, comforting and encouraging national concepts. Not only historians considered it their duty to write on the glories and tragedies of the Azerbaijani nation, but also intellectuals, publicists, scientists, and journalists from all sorts of backgrounds came together to furnish proof that Nagorno-Karabakh had belonged to the Azerbaijani people since time immemorial. The idea of ‘the great Azerbaijan state’ possessing territory in contemporary Iran, Armenia, and Georgia gained great currency.

One of the most popular themes, within the numerous branches of academia became ‘the question of Southern Azerbaijan’. Geographically the so-called Southern Azerbaijan is now in an area north-west of Iran (Iranian Azerbaijan) comprising two provinces of West Azerbai-

1 Originally the term Azerbaijan was the name of the Iranian historical province Āḏarbājān, or Azərbayجان (from older Atrpatakān) in the north-west of the country. This term, as well as its respective derivative, Azər (or, in Turkish manner, Azer), as “ethnonym”, was not applied to the territory north of Arax (i.e. the area of the present-day Azerbaijan Republic, former Arran and Shirvan) and its inhabitants up until the establishment of the Musavat regime in that territory (1918-1920). The population of these two regions, although sharing a common language—a group of closely related Turkic dialects—have mixed ethnic backgrounds: Turkic—in the north, and Iranian—in the south (see in detail P. Schwartz, Iran im Mittelalter nach den arabischen Geogra-
Iranian Azerbaijan, however, is not widely used in the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan for certain historical-political reasons that will be explained in this article in detail. The main idea is a conviction that the use of this term automatically signals the Azerbaijanis’ adjustment to Iran and thus, denies the historically deserved independence of this nation. The current Azerbaijani researchers go back in time to rediscover the separation of the nation at the beginning of the 19th century as a result of the Russian-Iranian wars. The historical records are re-interpreted as a constant struggle of the Azerbaijanis for their unity, and parallels are drawn to the present conflicts and claims of the Republic of Azerbaijan to Armenia, Iran, and Georgia. For the last fourteen years, history classes at schools and universities of Azerbaijan have been taught from this nationalistic perspective. The intellectuals and educators are pressured to participate in the nation-building project, sometimes compromising their trustworthy research.

Nevertheless, the main achievement of the current Azerbaijani historiography on the question of Southern Azerbaijan is utilisation of the previously unavailable documents from Baku and Moscow archives. Although there are obvious drawbacks in selectiveness of these materials and their interpretation, they do fill the lacunae in the international historiography on the Iranian-Russian conflict on the ‘Azerbaijani question’ after WWII. The recent post-cold war Western publications were mostly based on the British Foreign Office and the US Department of State data, as well as already published documents in the Iranian, the Soviet and the Western press. The absence of refer-

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2 On the basis of the author’s field research in Baku in May 2003 (see Irina Morozova, “Brains for Hire: Education and Nation-building in Contemporary Azerbaijan”, HIAS Newsletter, N 33, 3).

3 The cold war Western publications on the Azerbaijani nationalist movement contained not less ideology and myths than those in the Soviet Union (see, e.g. T. Swietochowski, Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920. The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community, Cambridge, 1985).