Ethnic Profile of Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

I. Introduction

Following the breakdown of the USSR, interethnic conflicts and rising self-identification processes in many nations were among the most serious problems that emerged within the territory of the former superpower. Azerbaijan not only failed to avoid these processes but, due to various circumstances, found itself at the forefront of the standoff. It was in Azerbaijan that the first interethnic conflict in the former USSR started between Armenians and Azeris over Nagorno Karabakh in the late 1980s. This conflict is still unresolved and remains a stumbling block, not only for the relationship between the two Caucasian nations, but also for stability in the entire region.

Azerbaijan is a multiethnic country and the progressing ethnic self-identification trends have become a baseline for the emergence of ethnic secessionism within the republic. All these processes have occurred against the background of an independent nation-state construction in Azerbaijan, where the Azeris are the indigenous/titular people. The interethnic conflict with the Armenians over Karabakh, the construction of the nation-state and the upsurge of self-identification movements among the many ethnicities of Azerbaijan are all processes that are occurring simultaneously and significantly affect other developments unfolding in the republic. How have these processes been developing and what shapes are they going to acquire in the future? What measures have the republican government been applying to solve the minority issues in Azerbaijan? These are the focal issues addressed in this article.

II. Ethno-linguistic Situation in Azerbaijan before the Dissolution of the USSR

The roots of the current ethnic conflicts and interethnic collisions within the territory of Azerbaijan lie in the distant past when, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Russian empire conquered the South Caucasus and started pursuing a policy of reshaping the region’s existing ethno-confessional profile. Not only in Azerbaijan, but also on the territory of neighbouring Armenia, Muslims constituted the majority of the population. Such a demographic situation did not suit the authorities of the Russian
empire and the decision was made to expel the Muslim peoples and settle Christians in their place. This decision primarily applied to Azerbaijan where, according to the official Russian statistics of 1807, the Turkish-speaking Azeris, as well as Persian-speaking Kurds, Tats, Talysh, etc., were the overwhelming majority of the 560,000 population.1

It was natural that the Turks, constituting the majority of the South Caucasian population, were expected to be expatriated first. A Russian population was to replace them in the region. The first group of Russian settlers in Azerbaijan, comprising the so-called sectarians or Raskolniks (Molokans, Subbotnics, Dukhobors, Baptists, etc.), began to appear in Azerbaijan after 1832 and settled in rural areas. As the political situation stabilized these groups were followed by Orthodox Christians. As a result, Azerbaijan had about 107 Russian settlements by 1912. In the late 1880s, as Baku was turned into an industrial centre of the South Caucasus, the country was flooded by a third surge of Russians. Consequently, the Russian population grew from 9,000 (slightly over 1% of the total country’s population) in the middle of the nineteenth century to 250,000 (166,000 Orthodox Christians and 84,000 sectarians).2

Other Christian peoples followed the Russians to settle in Azerbaijan. As early as 1818, 1,600 Germans were resettled there to establish their colony of Yelenendorf (today’s Khanlar) near the town of Ganja. By 1916, about 16,000 Germans (0.4% of the country’s total population) lived in four colonies.3

More Christian peoples (Greeks, Ukrainians, etc.) appeared in Azerbaijan during the same period, although in extremely insignificant numbers, which meant that the Russian Empire relied more on the Armenians, the major Christian group in the region, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century. Another factor that played an important role was that a small group of Armenian-speaking peoples had lived in the mountainous parts of Karabakh for a significant period, with more living in Turkey and Iran. With their shared Christian heritage, these peoples might become reliable supporters of Russian policy in the region. This was why Tsar Nikolai I issued a decree on the establishment of a separate, so-called Armenian, oblast within the territories of the Irevan and Nakhchevan Khanates, conquered after the Russian-Turkish and Russian-Persian wars in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.4 Later, the Russian authorities started the resettlement of Armenians from Turkey and Iran. This time the resettlement process took place on a much larger scale. In this regard, it is edifying to refer to the information provided by Russian officials at the beginning of the twentieth century: as Mr. N. N. Shavrov pointed out in 1911, more than 1,300,000 Armenians living in the South Caucasus at that time belonged “to the native population of the region and were settled by Russians”.5 A sizeable number were resettled in the former

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2 See details in ibid., 236-245.
3 Ibid., 224-226; see also, Gamarshakh Djavadov, National Minorities and Minor Ethnicities of Azerbaijan (Elm, Baku, 2000), 319-323 (in Azeri language).
4 For an overview of the history of the Armenian people, see Collected Acts, Part 1 (Moscow, 1833), 278-279 (in Russian language).