

The Oil Deal: Nariman Narimanov and the Sovietization of Azerbaijan

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In the midst of World War I and on the heels of the Bolshevik revolution, the Russian Empire fell apart and in the spring of 1918 three new states in the south Caucasus—Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia—declared independence. Baku, Azerbaijan’s capital city and the largest producer of oil in the empire, fell under the control of the pro-Bolshevik Baku Commune. The Baku Commune collapsed, rather dramatically, within a matter of months, and by September 1918 the Ottoman Army, followed by the British Army, occupied Baku and the surrounding oil fields of the Absheron peninsula.

Despite these occupations, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) maintained its independence for nearly two years. In late April 1920, as the Red Army amassed its troops on the northern border of the ADR, Vladimir Lenin summoned two men to his office. One, Nariman Narimanov, was to head, first, the Azerbaijan Revolutionary Committee and subsequently, the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. The other, Aleksandr Serebrovskii, was put in charge of the newly formed Azerbaijan Oil Committee. Both men received mandates from Lenin. He charged Narimanov with ensuring connections between the oil city of Baku and the surrounding countryside, a move essential to the stability on which the shipment of oil depended.¹ Lenin gave Serebrovskii control of the oil industry and told him to restart production and begin shipment to Russia immediately.² From the beginning, Narimanov understood the connection between his mandate and the accessibility of oil. Indeed, he subsequently pointed out that he had developed the idea that Soviet Russia must bind Baku to Azerbaijan in order to “live in peace and use oil and oil products” strongly intimating that he had been responsible for Azerbaijan’s incorporation into the Soviet system.³

In the pivotal early years of Soviet power, Narimanov granted desperately-needed legitimacy to the Bolshevik presence in Azerbaijan among the majority Muslim population, as well as to the outside world.⁴ Although the Baku Commune only existed for a matter of months, from March-September

1. Jörg Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde: Stalinizm na Kavkaze*, trans. V. T. Altukhova (Moscow, 2010), 230–31, 264.

2. Serebrovskii's meeting with Lenin see, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki, (RGAE), fond (f.) 270, opis' (op.) 1, delo (d.) 8, list (l.) 53ob (Documents and recollections of A.P. Serebrovskii). For a copy of his mandate see, RGAE, f. 270, op. 1, d. 7, l. 17 (Documents on the activities of A.P. Serebrovskii identified by the fond TsGANKh SSSR).

3. Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-politicheskoi Istorii (RGASPI), f. 64, op.1, d. 90, ll. 19–20 (Stenographic record and protocol of the meeting of the first plenum of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijani Communist Party (b), August 1921).

4. Dzhamil' P. Gasanly, *Vneshiaia politika Azerbaidzhana v gody sovetskoii vlasti (1920–1939)*, vol. 2, *Istoriia diplomatii Azerbaidzhanskoi Respubliki: V trekh tomakh*, trans. I. N. Razaeva (Moscow, 2013) 13; Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 230.

1918, it had thoroughly alienated the local Muslim population.⁵ Thereafter, the Bolsheviks were associated with Russian and Armenian control of the city at the expense of the Muslim population. Narimanov emerged as a critical intermediary between the Bolshevik Party and the wider population of Azerbaijan, facilitating its sovietization.

Narimanov was part of the Russian Empire's Muslim cultural elite and promoted a socialist-inspired modernist vision of the future that sought mass education and political and economic liberation from Russian colonialism. In addition to sharing much in common with Bolshevik anti-imperialism, his aspirations were embedded in a long-standing Muslim reform movement that spanned the Russian and Ottoman Empires, as well as Iran.⁶ The political and social circumstances in the south Caucasus were in some ways unique, however. Thanks to Baku's oil industry, it had a multi-ethnic industrial base and a radical political tradition that was missing in both Russia's recently-acquired periphery of Central Asia, as well as the more established territories in the Volga. Men like Narimanov could navigate with acumen multiple cultural landscapes—from rural mullahs and Persian revolutionaries, to radical Russian and Armenian oil workers. The presence of Baku's oil on the borderland between Soviet Russia, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire, all worlds to which Narimanov to one degree or another possessed ties, was decisive in elevating him to a position of power by 1920.

In the upheaval of 1918–1920, Narimanov believed it was his responsibility to safeguard both the interests of the revolution and Azerbaijan. In the highly personalized politics of the early Soviet Union, Narimanov understood that ensuring the success of his policies depended on his direct access to power, thus making the distinction between whether he pursued power for its own sake or for the sake of his policies difficult, if not impossible, to parse. His goals were threefold. First, to shape Bolshevik modernizing policies in Azerbaijan among the Muslim population. Second, to mitigate the use of violence against the wider population, preventing a reoccurrence of the Baku Commune. Third and finally, to expand the revolution into Persia.⁷ It was not therefore a contradiction for him to agitate on behalf of the interests of Azerbaijan while seeking to elevate his own position because he believed the two were intimately tied together.

5. The most thorough treatment remains, Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Baku Commune, 1917–1918: Class and Nationality in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, 1972).

6. On Muslim communism and Narimanov, Leah Feldman, "Red Jihad: Translating Communism in the Muslim Caucasus," *Boundary 2* 43, no. 3 (August 2016): 221–49. On Narimanov's cultural milieu, see Aimee Dobbs, "Negotiating Modern Education for Muslims: Contestation and Compromise among Russian Imperial Bureaucrats, Local Administrators, and Azerbaijani Turkish Elites, 1867–1900," (PhD diss., Indiana University, forthcoming 2017). For the reformist movement in Central Asia, see Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 1998) and Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, 2015). Also see Alexander Morrison's review essay "Muslims and Modernity in the Russian Empire," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 94, no. 4 (October 2016): 715–24.

7. Narimanov's views on Soviet foreign policy toward the east in 1919, see "From a Report to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)" in Nariman Narimanov, *Izbrannyye proizvedeniya. Tom 2. 1918–1921* (Baku, 1989), 2:234–41.

Rather than seeking independence or power through claims to national identity or nationalism, Narimanov sought to secure Azerbaijan's future by leveraging Baku's oil. He understood that the Red Army was not simply going to walk away from Baku. It was too vital to winning the Civil War. In fact, he viewed a Bolshevik takeover, in some form or another, as both inevitable and ultimately desirable because he believed the Soviets were a modernizing force that would benefit Azerbaijan. Instead, he argued that for a renewed invasion of Baku to succeed in the long term, the Bolsheviks would have to maintain regional stability and avoid the violence of 1918 that bookended the Baku Commune.

In part, Narimanov gained his position by striking a deal with Vladimir Lenin in 1920, an arrangement that I am calling the oil deal. This deal lay the foundations of Soviet power in Azerbaijan. Officially, Lenin charged Narimanov with facilitating connections between the industrial stronghold of Baku and the rural countryside of Azerbaijan. In practice, Narimanov agreed to do what he could to help supply Soviet Russia with oil and Lenin put Narimanov in charge of the Soviet government of Azerbaijan (Sovnarkom) with the understanding that he would be granted significant leeway in cultural policies. In other words, Narimanov promised to provide the political and social stability in Azerbaijan necessary to maintain Soviet power and assure Russian access to Baku's critical oil reserves.⁸ Narimanov believed that Azerbaijan could walk a line where it was tightly bound to Russia out of both ideological affinity and economic necessity while maintaining a degree of independence in local and cultural affairs. For Narimanov, this meant toleration of public displays of Islamic worship and modes of dress, like the veil, and avoiding the use of force against the civilian population whenever possible. Just as importantly, he believed that local autonomy included some—although precisely what degree was never clear—control over the oil industry. Narimanov believed Soviet power would guarantee that Baku's resources would be used for the broader revolution, especially for spreading communism to the Muslim east and the development of Azerbaijan. Lenin, for his part, maintained that Narimanov was Moscow's only real link to the Muslim peasantry of the south Caucasus and that he was, at least initially, indispensable. The implication was clear: access to Baku's oil was an overriding concern to the stability of Soviet Russia. If the Bolsheviks took Baku, they would have to take all of formally Russian Azerbaijan.

Soviet policies vis-à-vis Azerbaijan encapsulated a larger trend that marked center-periphery relations in the Caucasian borderlands and Central Asia alike. Economic and international imperatives consistently undermined and often completely negated local political and cultural goals.⁹ In Azerbaijan,

8. Narimanov references his arrangement with Lenin frequently, for one just example, RGASPI, f. 64, op.1, d. 90, ll. 19–20; Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 230–31, 264–65. While there is a consensus that Narimanov had a particular mission in Azerbaijan from Lenin, it has not been discussed in terms of a deal or pact. There is a preponderance of evidence, however, that Narimanov understood his arrangement with Lenin as a deal and behaved as if that was the case.

9. This observation was made by Benjamin Loring about Central Asia but it applies here as well, Benjamin Loring, "Colonizers with Party Cards": Soviet Internal Colonialism

this meant oil and borders. Due to a series of developments over the course of 1920–1922—from the peace and trade agreements with England, Iran, and Turkey to the foreign policy shift away from revolution in the east—Lenin’s deal with Narimanov became less pertinent to holding Azerbaijan. The impetus for maintaining the oil for cultural autonomy arrangement frayed, eventually collapsing altogether, culminating in Narimanov’s removal from the Caucasus by late 1923.¹⁰ In this article, I explore how Narimanov leveraged Baku’s oil in hopes of achieving peace in the south Caucasus together with his personal political power. I draw on archival documents from Russia and Azerbaijan, as well as a number of published sources that have been underused in English-language historiography. While the events outlined below were taking place in a much wider historical context, I focus on Narimanov and oil as a way to highlight both the agency of men positioned as he was, a so-called Muslim Bolshevik at the helm of power in his republic, as well as to show how easily his leverage was undermined when the international and domestic situation shifted.

After briefly outlining the strategic situation leading up to the Bolshevik invasion of Azerbaijan in April 1920, I focus on Narimanov’s role in the Soviet occupation of Baku and its aftermath. I then turn to the conclusion of the Civil War and the process of the unification of Transcaucasia that ultimately presaged the creation of the Soviet Union in December 1922. Finally, I look at Narimanov’s eventual denunciation of Soviet policy in his 1923 manifesto *Toward a History of Our Revolution in the Provinces* (hereafter, *History*) in which he rebuked Bolshevik policies in Azerbaijan, lamented Soviet foreign policy in the east, and accused Moscow of stealing Azerbaijan’s oil. His *History* sparked an investigation by the Central Control Commission (CCC) of the Russian Communist Party, the disciplinary body charged with ensuring party orthodoxy, and he was permanently transferred to Moscow.¹¹ I argue that Narimanov played a pivotal role in the early establishment of Soviet power in Azerbaijan by attempting to use Baku’s oil to secure prerogatives for Azerbaijan. In the end, he failed to turn these ambitions into lasting guarantees or to institutionalize his gains. His failure was linked to Azerbaijan’s strategic location, the importance of oil in international politics, and the increasing militancy, marked by generational divides, within the party.

Fuel Famine in the Civil War

In January 1920, Soviet Russia faced a crippling energy famine and the Red Army desperately needed to find even minimal deposits of oil or coal to continue fighting the Civil War. Railroad engines were converted to burn lumber, the only available fuel source, and were running at speeds of 3.5 miles

in Central Asia, 1917–1939,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no.1 (Winter 2014): 77–102.

10. Baberowski, *Vrag est’ vezde*, 270–71.

11. A copy of his manifesto can be found in RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, ll. 2–39 (On the history of our revolution in the provinces). First published version, Nariman Narimanov, *K istorii nashei revoliutsii v okrainakh* (Baku, 1990).

per hour.¹² Beyond the battlefields, without petroleum and kerosene, Moscow would freeze as well as starve. The tide began to turn when the Red Army took Grozny and its oil fields, followed by the coalmines of the Donbas in Ukraine. The Bolsheviks completed their resource coup when the 11th Division of the Red Army took Baku in April 1920. The army secured the oil fields, established a supply line that could sustain Soviet Russia to the north, fueled transportation networks to feed Russia's cities and, critically, support the Red Army in the Polish-Soviet war, which was renewed mere days before the invasion of Baku.

The leadership in Moscow and Baku grasped almost immediately that possession of the oil fields was not enough to guarantee economic recovery. The oil industry's infrastructure was tied to the infrastructure of its neighbors. For export, railroads and pipelines traversed the Caucasus, terminating in Batumi (then part of independent Georgia and occupied by the Ottomans), and domestic shipping in the Russian empire had relied on water transport from the Caspian to the Volga via Astrakhan, a route that the Bolsheviks would have to revive. If Soviet Russia was to control the oil industry, it would need to control the infrastructure.

Although the Soviet Red Army invaded Baku because it needed access to the oil fields on the outskirts of the city, this did not guarantee a long-term victory. There was a big difference between a military victory, holding the fields with the Red Army, and ensuring the success of the occupation, which involved restarting production and bolstering economic recovery. Acutely aware of this fact, most of the Bolshevik leadership, and Lenin in particular, had been hesitant to invade Azerbaijan. They wanted Baku's resources, certainly, but would have really preferred if the oil city had not been surrounded by hostile local peasants, unconnected to the oil industry, on the edge of the former Russian Empire, and cut off from the international market.¹³

Further, Bolsheviks in Moscow were apprehensive about seizing Baku because local Bolsheviks had already done so two years earlier in 1918 during the short-lived Baku Commune, which began and ended with tragic results.¹⁴ These Bolsheviks, led by soon-to-be immortalized Stepan Shaumian, took control of Baku but had failed to secure the rest of Azerbaijan, leaving the city open to occupation by British and Ottoman Armies, both of which had seized the oil fields over the course of Azerbaijan's short independence from

12. Aleksandr Alekseevich Igolkin, *Otechestvennaia neftianaia promyshlennost' v 1917–1920 godakh* (Moscow, 1999), 112–13.

13. That the oil industry was not connected to the countryside, Nicholas Lund, "At the Center of the Periphery: Oil, Land, and Power in Baku, 1905–1917" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2013); Suny, *The Baku Commune*, 293–300.

14. The Baku Commune was established on the heels of a series of massacres by Armenian nationalists against Muslims and marked by a series of massacres after its collapse by Muslims, aided by the Ottoman Army, against Armenians. Michael G. Smith, "Power and Violence in the Russian Revolution: The March Events and Baku Commune of 1918," *Russian History* 41, no. 2 (2014): 197–210; Solmaz Rustamova-Togidi, ed., *Mart 1918 g., Baku: Azerbaidzhanskie pogromy v dokumentakh* (Baku, 2009); Suny, *The Baku Commune*, 214–33; Dzhamil' Gasanly, *Russkaia revoliutsiia i Azerbaidzhan: Trudnyi put' k nezavisimosti, 1917–1920* (Moscow, 2011), 100–27.

Russia from 1918–1920.¹⁵ While the Baku Commune was largely composed of Russians and Armenians, there were several Muslim members in the Commune, most of whom belonged to the left wing of the social democratic *Hummet* (Endeavor) party, led by Narimanov.¹⁶

Nariman Karbalayi Najaf oğlu Narimanov was born into a poor family in Tiflis (Tbilisi), the present day capital of Georgia and the cultural and administrative center of the Caucasus in the Russian Empire. He attended the Russian-Tatar school at Gori seminary and after several years of teaching, earned a medical degree in Odessa. During the mid-to-late 1890s he became radicalized, frustrated by his experiences growing up in poverty and chagrined at having to rely on the charity of others to receive an education. He became a socialist connected with the Russian Workers Social Democratic Party at least by 1905 and was also a sometime leader of the Muslim Social-Democratic party the *Hummet*. The *Hummet* was only one of an array of political parties with which Narimanov was in varying degrees associated. Through the *Hummet*, he helped organize the Persian social-democratic party *Mujahid*, which was formed by constitutionalists in the Persian city of Resht to seek close ties with Russian revolutionaries to organize uprisings against the Shah in Iran during the Constitutional Revolution in 1908. Narimanov was also associated with the Persian social-democratic group the *Adalat*, which was composed primarily of Baku-based Persian oil workers. Alongside his political work, he concentrated primarily on teaching, advocacy, and play writing. Most of his political writings before the 1917 revolutions were broadly socialist, agitating for an 8-hour working day, social benefits, and workers' rights. By 1917, he was respected as a playwright, educator, and public intellectual.¹⁷

The period 1918–1920 was dominated by territorial conflicts between the nascent Azerbaijani and Armenian nation states, part of the larger regional reconfiguring after the collapse of the Russian Empire and the ongoing partition of the Ottoman Empire. Warring over multiple regions, each laying claim to Nagorno-Karabakh, Zangezur, and Nakhchivan. Angered by the use of force against civilians in 1918, Narimanov shifted the tone of his writing after the fall of the Commune, and began calling for accommodation toward local rights and Islamic social mores. It is unclear to what degree he viewed himself as promoting a type of Islamic socialism or National Communism.¹⁸ He remained firmly embedded in the Soviet system and did not publicly break

15. In September 1918, Turkish troops occupied Baku, leaving in November. British troops entered the same day (Nov 17) and stayed until August 24, 1919, A. A. Igolkin and Iu. Gorzhaltan, eds., *Russkaia neft' o kotoroi my tak malo znaem* (Moscow, 2003), 152–64. On the various interventions, see Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917–1921* (New York, 1951); Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905–1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), 129–64.

16. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 177, ll. 244–46 (A short history of the Azerbaijani “Gummet” party); Tadeusz Swietochowski, “The Himmät Party: Socialism and the National Question in Russian Azerbaijan, 1904–1920,” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 19, no. 1–2, (Jan–Jun 1978): 119–42.

17. For an overview of Narimanov's biography up to 1920 see, Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 219–34.

18. The *Adalat* directly tied socialism to Islam. Pezhmann Dailami, “The First Congress of the Peoples of the East and the Iranian Soviet Republic of Gilan, 1920–21” in

ranks like Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev. Never publicly targeted, Narimanov died in 1925 before the major national purges. What is clear, is that Narimanov believed that the Bolsheviks would never create socialism in the Muslim east without first acknowledging that policies must be attenuated to local tradition. Otherwise, the Bolsheviks would simply repeat the bloodshed of 1918 and alienate the Muslim population, this time permanently.

In a speech given not long after the fall of the Baku Commune, Narimanov blamed the collapse of Soviet power on the Bolsheviks' single-minded quest for oil and power.¹⁹ He argued that Russian behavior toward Muslims, which prioritized exploiting oil resources over seeking to engage the population, was primarily responsible for the fall of the Soviet stronghold. Narimanov further believed that the failure of the Bolsheviks to protect Muslims from attacks by Armenian nationalists during the March Days of 1918, when thousands of Muslim civilians were slaughtered, had alienated local support for the party. Bolshevik failure to protect Muslims, he asserted, led the government that took over after the Commune, the Musavat, to invite the Ottoman Army into the country and directly resulted in the loss of oil resources for the Bolsheviks.²⁰

A renewed Soviet invasion, Narimanov explained, would be no different if the Bolsheviks did not take into account the importance of local politics and the cultural traditions of the Muslim population. Achieving a lasting national peace between Armenians and Caucasian Muslims was also a prerequisite to achieving the stability the Bolsheviks desired. He pointed out that "[e]veryone was united in thoughts and ideas. At that time, from September to October of 1918, there was no discussion in Baku about the Soviet system; all anyone could talk about was Baku's oil."²¹ The Baku Commune had not taken the local population seriously, focusing instead on what the oil industry could bring to the Bolsheviks, ultimately leading to its downfall.

The fiasco of the 1918 Commune made the Bolsheviks cautious of Baku, but energy famine brought on by years of war overrode such concerns. By 1920, it was again oil that beckoned the Bolsheviks back to Baku. Although the Red Army needed Baku's oil, it was still not clear to the Bolshevik leadership that Soviet Russia wanted the complications that pacifying all of Azerbaijan would entail. In preparing for the invasion, the Red Army and the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs debated whether to occupy only Baku or all of the ADR.²²

Narimanov emerged as a champion for the occupation of all of Russian Azerbaijan, arguing that Baku could not be held without the rest of the

Stephanie Cronin, ed., *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran* (New York, 2004), 89. See also Feldman, "Red Jihad," 228–34.

19. Narimanov, *Izbrannye*, "Vzgliad na zakhvat kavkaza," 2:185–96; also see Narimanov, *Izbrannye*, "S kakim lozungom my idem na Kavkaz," 2:176–85.

20. Narimanov, *Izbrannye*, "Vzgliad na zakhvat kavkaza," 2:185–96.

21. Narimanov, *Izbrannye*, 2:189.

22. Richard K. Debo, *Survival and Consolidation: The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1918–1921* (Montreal, 1992), 179–80.

country, as the 1918 failure demonstrated.²³ He reiterated that Baku was an industrial island with a dramatically different demographic composition than the rest of Azerbaijan. Believing that Baku needed to be tied to the countryside or it would remain vulnerable and unstable, Narimanov likewise felt that the Azerbaijani countryside must be integrated into the economy and culture of Baku. Using his authority as a respected educator and politician, Narimanov believed that he was the person who could deliver the support of the countryside and in the process make the workers and peasants codependent.

Narimanov's lobbying efforts to ensure that the leadership of Soviet Russia, and Lenin in particular, would implement this vision of a unified Azerbaijan paid off. Having fled Baku for Astrakhan with the collapse of the Commune, nearly all of the Muslim social democrat *Hummetists* became members of the Commissariat for the Affairs of the Muslim Caucasus within the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (NKID) and worked to carry out revolution in Azerbaijan from across the border in Bolshevik-held territory.²⁴ Further, he argued that a Muslim-led political party *within* the Bolshevik party must implement sovietization.²⁵ Over the objections of several of his *Hummetist* comrades—including major figures in the future Azerbaijani government such as Dadash Buniatzade, Ali Haydar Garayev, and Mirza-Davud Huseynov—Narimanov sought the formal incorporation of the *Hummet* Party into the Bolshevik party. Succeeding where many others had failed, in July 1919, the Politburo agreed that the political party *Hummet* would be an autonomous Muslim wing of the Bolshevik Party.²⁶ As the Red Army prepared for invasion, Narimanov was appointed Commissar for the Affairs of the Muslim Caucasus.²⁷ Narimanov and his fellow *Hummetists*, now Bolshevik-*Hummetists*—all held posts in the new Soviet government.²⁸ He had convinced Lenin to follow his policy and Lenin sent him back to Azerbaijan with a specific mandate to facilitate the connection between the oil city of Baku and the overwhelmingly rural Azerbaijani countryside.

Stalled Recovery

Immediately after the invasion of Azerbaijan, a faction of Bolsheviks including Narimanov, Iosif Stalin, and Grigori (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze argued that taking Azerbaijan in isolation would not be enough to eliminate anti-Bolshevik activity along the borders, which was needed to ensure stability. They pushed

23. This was reiterated by Ordzhonikidze, RGASPI, f. 64, op. 1, d. 25, l. 1. (The correspondence of G.K. Ordzhonikidze with party committees, soviets, military organizations, Sept 1920–1921).

24. Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 229. Narimanov lobbied consistently for Moscow to pursue an active policy in Iran. See, *Izbrannye*, 239; 253–56. For more on this, see Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan*, 168–72; Dailami, "The First Congress," 91–94.

25. He advocated for Azerbaijan to become part of the RSFSR in 1919, but was overruled and seems to have changed his mind later. Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 229–30.

26. *Ibid.*, 232–33.

27. Narimanov, *Izbrannye*, 2:269. For more on how he viewed his role see, *Ibid.*, 253, 255, 257.

28. For the various posts see, M. I. Naidel', ed., *Dekrety Azrevkoma, 1920–21: Sbornik dokumentov*, (Baku, 1988), 13–14.

for the occupation of Armenia and Georgia.²⁹ They also argued that Baku's oil industry needed Georgia's infrastructure to ensure access to the market at Batumi on the Black Sea and further to international markets—economic ties already reflected in the infrastructure.³⁰ Georgii Chicherin, the Commissar of Foreign Affairs, opposed the imminent sovietization of the two states, fearing the retaliation of European powers and, with the backing of Lenin and Lev Trotskii, forbade Ordzhonikidze from invading either of Azerbaijan's neighbors for the time being.³¹ As late as November 1920, even Lenin feared the Entente was planning to use Georgia as a staging ground for retaking Baku.³² Ultimately, access to Baku's oil was an overriding concern to the stability of Soviet Russia.³³

Talk of invading Azerbaijan's neighbors, however, came to an abrupt halt on May 25–26, 1920, when the deposed Musavat government started a major counterattack against the Soviet occupation in Azerbaijan's second largest city of Ganja (Elizavetpol). The fighting lasted six days before the Red Army violently suppressed the Azerbaijani forces.³⁴ The Soviet Army killed as many as 4,000 Muslim civilians during the 6-day battle, most of whom were found dead after the uprising in gardens and in their homes and entryways.³⁵ The Musavat-led army killed around 1,500 Red Army soldiers. Inter-ethnic fighting between Muslims and Armenian soldiers also started as both groups attacked each other. In the midst of the uprising, a commander Gittis instructed the Red Army to intervene in the inter-ethnic clashes only if it did not interfere with holding the oil fields.³⁶ Although the Red Army largely quelled the Azerbaijanis by May 31 in Ganja, conflict continued at a lower level of intensity throughout the countryside. In a top secret letter to Lenin and Trotskii dated June 3, 1920, Ordzhonikidze reported that they had nearly lost all of Azerbaijan outside of the oil fields. He continued that the Red Army was the only thing keeping the former Azerbaijani Army from turning on Soviet power and that they still

29. These requests continued until the final invasions. For example, A.V. Kvashonkin et al., eds., *Bol'shevistskoe rukovodstvo: Peregovorki, 1912–1927* (Moscow, 1996), 174–75.

30. Batumi was occupied by the Ottomans and then granted to the Bolsheviks by Kemal Ataturk after the Soviets guaranteed the Muslim population of the city autonomy.

31. RGASPI, f. 64, op. 1, d. 90, l. 53; RGASPI f. 85, op. 5, d. 52, ll. 35–39 (Report by comrade Ordzhonikidze at a meeting of Caucasian party workers). Also, Vladimir Genis, *Krasnaia Persiia: Bol'sheviki v Giliiane. 1920–1921: Dokumental'naia khronika* (Moscow, 2000), 77; On Trotskii see, Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington, 1994), 210.

32. Segvard Vagarshakhovich Kharmandarian, *Lenin i stanovlenie zakavkazskoi federatsii, 1921–1923* (Yerevan, 1969), 46–47.

33. RGASPI, f. 85, op. 5, d. 52, ll. 35–37.

34. The official report can be found in RGASPI, f. 85, op. 13, d.34 (Report to the representative of the Central Bureau of the Turkish Communist organization M. Subkhi to the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party with a copy to Ordzhonikidze on the results of the tour through Ganja, on the reasons for the uprising, etc.).

35. RGASPI, f. 85, op. 13, d.34, ll. 2–3.

36. RGASPI, f. 85, op.13, d. 26, l. 1 (Telegram from the Caucasian Command V. Gittis and others to the Head of the XI Army about the necessity of reliable supply and retention of the Baku region, oil fields and installations, etc.).

were in very real danger of losing both Baku and Dagestan.³⁷ Under the direction of the Azerbaijani Commissar of Internal Affairs, Hamid Sultanov, the Red Army executed an additional 4,000 suspected Musavat sympathizers in Ganja and Baku in the following days.³⁸

Narimanov's hope that a Bolshevik-led government would behave differently in 1920 than it had in 1918 was likely crushed as the occupying army brutally targeted the opposition and civilian populations. Within a month of the Bolshevik invasion, it was clear that Narimanov's influence over the population would be highly contingent upon circumstance. Although he likely played no direct role in the suppression, as a member of the now ruling Revolutionary Committee, Narimanov quickly released an article denouncing the uprising, the so-called "Ganja events," as a Musavat and Dashnak provocation.³⁹ Even as Narimanov proclaimed "Death to those who raised their weapons against the revolution!" he quietly ensured that his friends were spared execution at the hands of Sultanov's executioners.⁴⁰

The End of the War and the New Economic Policy

The Red Army invaded Armenia in December 1920 and Georgia in February-March 1921, incorporating the entirety of the south Caucasus into the Soviet sphere.⁴¹ In the midst of the occupation of Georgia, Lenin outlined a major policy shift at the 10th Party Congress in Moscow in March 1921. He announced that a mixed-market system known as the New Economic Policy (NEP) would replace the confiscatory policies of War Communism. The NEP ended grain requisitions and allowed free trade on a local level, but it kept the oil industry, as one of the so-called commanding heights of the economy, under state control.

With the invasion of Georgia and conclusion of the Treaty of Moscow (followed by the Treaty of Kars) with Turkey, the Bolsheviks finally secured access to the coveted markets in Tiflis and Batumi. The addition of the markets exacerbated rather than helped economic disputes between the newly Sovietized republics, however. The problem lay in the fact that each republic had a separate Foreign Trade Agency (Vneshtorg) to conclude deals at these markets. Rather than working together, the Vneshtorgs were undercutting one another and speculators, while foreign merchants drove up prices to play the official trade agents against one another.⁴² As a result, the incorporation of Armenia and Georgia did not solve the economic problems facing the Bolsheviks in the region.

37. RGASPI, f. 85, op. 13, d. 27, l. 6 (Telegrams to V.I. Lenin, Trotskii, and Kamenev on the suppression of the Ganja uprising, etc.).

38. Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 259.

39. Narimanov, *Izbrannye*, 2:286–89. "Provokatsiia Müsavata i Dashnakov," May 31, 1920.

40. *Ibid.* and Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 259.

41. The invasions of Armenia and Georgia have a different trajectory than that of Azerbaijan and are part of a wider history that involves several negotiations with Turkey.

42. RGASPI, f. 85, op. 5, d. 46, l. 6 (Transcript of the plenum of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijani Communist Party).

Institutional realities

In spite of Narimanov's success in positioning himself as head of Soviet Azerbaijan, he had no real institutional authority over the oil industry, which he resented.⁴³ In reality, his authority was rendered local even before he arrived in Baku, because Ordzhonikidze and Stalin had intervened and petitioned Lenin to ensure that Narimanov's influence be contained within Azerbaijan's borders.⁴⁴ This fact did not mitigate Narimanov's ambitions. Control over the industry fell under Aleksandr P. Serebrovskii's mandate, first in the Azerbaijan Oil Committee (Azneft'ekm) and later as the restructured and renamed Azerbaijan Central Oil Administration (the Azerbaijan Oil Trust, Azneft').⁴⁵ Azneft' had All-Union status, meaning it was subordinate to Moscow, not Baku. An earlier agreement from September 30, 1920, which affirmed a military-economic union between Azerbaijan and Russia and included an agreement that Baku's oil would be marketed by Moscow, remained in effect.⁴⁶

In spite of these limitations, Narimanov sought to assert some degree of control over Baku's oil through his position as Chair of the Azerbaijan Sovnarkom. Although directly subordinate to Moscow, Azneft' was also responsible to the Baku Soviet (Baksovet) and the Azerbaijan Sovnarkom. Azneft' had to negotiate continually its relationship to the city and the city's administration.⁴⁷ In October 1921, Narimanov spearheaded an agreement between the Azerbaijan Sovnarkom and Azneft' that established an Oil Fund (Neftefond). The Azerbaijan Sovnarkom was supposed to receive 15% of Azneft''s output per year and it earmarked the Oil Fund for the recovery of Azerbaijan's industry and economy. It could variously use the refined oil products as fuel, distribute the products to Azerbaijani state enterprises, use

43. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, ll. 28–29.

44. RGASPI, f. 85, op. 13, d. 12, l. 101 (Ordzhonikidze G.K., Kirov, S.M. Radiogram addressed to V.I. Lenin with reports about establishment of Soviet power in Baku, etc.); also, Gasanly, *Vneshiaia politika Azerbaidzhana*, 27. I should note that I disagree with Gasanly's interpretation of Narimanov's role. He believed that Narimanov had no influence and was merely a decoration for the Russians but this does not explain why Moscow supported and promoted him over a period of years. Nor does it explain the constant meetings, committees, petitions, and investigations surrounding Narimanov and the turbulence within the Azerbaijan Communist Party.

45. The Azerbaijan Oil Committee was actually made up of five members who worked in concert, despite Serebrovskii's mandate. He assumed full control over Azneft' in September 1921. Furthermore, he had no control over the distribution of oil products, giving him, according to Igolkin "no real economic power." The relationship was far more complicated than Narimanov appreciated, see Igolkin, *Otechestvennaia*, 118.

46. This was amended several times to give Azneft' and Serebrovskii more direct control over the industry, including the right to barter oil products for supplies and food. Igolkin, *Otechestvennaia*, 130–31.

47. *Krasnyi Baku. Organ Bakinskogo Soveta* (Red Baku. An organ of the Baku Soviet), Jan-Feb, No 1-2 (6-7) date unknown, either 1922 or 1923, 33–34; these disputes was addressed repeatedly in *Krasnyi Baku*, see, No 3 (8) 1924, 15-17; No 8 1924, 22-25 (although both volumes are marked No 8 1924 their contents differ); No 4 (9) 1924, 8-14; No 9, 1925, 5-11. This type of relationship would also have been present in such places as the Donbas, Ukraine SRR, where the Coal Trust Donugl' also had All-Union status, or in Central Asia with cotton production.

them as barter, or distribute them directly to the population.⁴⁸ While the creation of an Oil Fund seemed promising, other developments quickly overrode its significance and control of the Fund's resources did not remain under Narimanov's jurisdiction for long.

On the Road to Unification and the Marginalization of Narimanov

Several concurrent developments spurred the push for the economic and political unification of the Transcaucasian Republics. Major military and political changes at the top—the Red Army's invasion of Georgia beginning in February 1921 and the New Economic Policy announced at the 10th Party Congress in March—combined with consistent and ongoing local supply crises, made economic unification more likely. Several proposals intended to alleviate economic strains were circulating. On March 1, Narimanov, via his deputy Beibut Shahtakhtinski, suggested making Transcaucasia a constituent part of Russia while the Georgian Communist Party proposed the unification of railroads.⁴⁹ On March 16, 1921, the Azerbaijan Central Committee sent a proposal on unification to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, which formed a commission to discuss the issue, although it came to no firm resolution.⁵⁰ Then, on March 18, Ordzhonikidze suggested to Narimanov and the Azerbaijani Bolshevik Mirza Davud Huseynov that they create a unified foreign trade organization, as well as coordinate the administration of the railroads, and asked both of them for their opinions on the matter.⁵¹

In early April 1921, oil workers in Baku went on strike to protest chronic shortages and miserable working conditions.⁵² On April 7, Ordzhonikidze informed Lenin: “The strike has been liquidated, but if the food situation among the workers does not improve there is absolutely no guarantee that the strike will not repeat itself with a good deal more force and a good deal more undesirable consequences.”⁵³ Two days later, in the wake of the strike,

48. Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Arxivi (State Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan) (ARDA) f. 411, op. 1, d. 98, l. 12 (Protocol of the meetings with VES about forming an oil committee 1922). The agreement was frequently amended and updated. In December 1923, the Azerbaijan Sovnarkom conceded the rights to the Oil Fund to the Transcaucasian Federation Ekonompredstavitel'stvo. For more on the origins of the Oil Fund see, Farhad Jabbarov, *Bakinskaiia neft' v politike sovetsoi Rossii (1917–1922 gg.)* (Baku, 2009), 139–49.

49. Kharmandarian, *Lenin i stanovlenie*, 96–97, 127.

50. Avtandil Mikhailovich Menteshashvili, *Bol'shevistskaia pressa Zakavkaz'ia v bor'be za obrazovanie zakavkazskoi federatsii i Soiuzu SSR (1921–1922 gg.)* (Tbilisi, 1972), 22. The details of the proposed unification are not listed, but was likely economic in basis. There is a large literature on the unification, to name only a few: Gevorg Bagratovich Garibdzhanian, *V.I. Lenin i bol'sheviki Zakavkaz'ia* (Moscow, 1971); Kharmandarian, *Lenin i stanovlenie*. For an overview see, Stephen Blank, “Bolshevik Organizational Development in Early Soviet Transcaucasia: Autonomy vs Centralization, 1918–1924,” in Ronald G. Suny, ed., *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* (Ann Arbor, 1983), 305–38.

51. Kharmandarian, *Lenin i stanovlenie*, 127.

52. RGASPI, f. 85, op. 5, d. 46, l. 1. As last as January 1921, Ordzhonikidze was still unsure that the Red Army could hold Baku; Kvashonkin, *Bol'shevistskoe rukovodstvo*, 178–79.

53. RGASPI, f. 86, op. 5, d. 46, l. 1.

Lenin replied that Baku was too far away and the problems faced by Soviet Russia too great for Azerbaijan to receive any significant financial or material support from Moscow. The Caucasus Bureau (Kavburo), the body in charge of implementing the Central Committee's policies on the ground, would have to figure out a way to manage by itself. Lenin also instructed Ordzhonikidze that the Transcaucasian republics should "create a regional economic body for the whole of Transcaucasia."⁵⁴

The following day, April 10, 1921, the Central Committee (CC) of the Azerbaijan Communist Party met with the Kavburo to discuss how to interpret the decree on coordinated action between the republics.⁵⁵ It was only on April 14 that Lenin instructed the Kavburo to coordinate the economic policies of the Transcaucasian republics with the RSFSR, later viewed as the first official step toward the creation of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (TSFSR) in March 1922. Lenin hoped that economic unification would alleviate several problems, beginning with helping to mitigate the confusion at the markets in Batumi and Tiflis, outlined above. He also tied coordination directly to the oil industry. He urged A.P. Serebrovskii, the head of Azneft', to get as much of Baku's oil to Batumi as soon as possible so that it could be traded abroad for heavy equipment and food, a task that required a unified policy to be effective.⁵⁶

Given later developments, historians assumed that there was no discussion of Lenin's decree in Baku and that the Politburo hammered it out in Moscow and sent it whole-clothed to Azerbaijan.⁵⁷ This was not the case. The history of the unification did not originate with Lenin, although Soviet-era histories certainly give that impression. The south Caucasus had briefly emerged as an independent state, the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (or the Transcaucasian Commissariat), from February-May 1918 and Party circles had been discussing the status of the republics since 1917. It is safe to assume that unification of some sort was on Moscow's agenda before the Red Army ever set foot in Azerbaijan and the leadership of the republics were aware of this.⁵⁸ How this would be implemented was still up for debate, however.

54. Menteshashvili, *Bol'shevistskaia pressa*, 21. He is quoting Lenin's telegram to Ordzhonikidze. The transcript of the telegram can be found in RGASPI, f. 85, op. 5, d. 46, ll. 1–31.

55. RGASPI, f. 85, op. 5, d. 46, ll. 1–31. A copy of Lenin's decree can be found in D. B. Guliev, ed., *V.I. Lenin ob Azerbaïdzhane* (Baku, 1970), 215.

56. Also, Kharmandarian, *Lenin i stanovlenie*, 124–25. Quoting Lenin: "The conversation is about the unification of the Caucasian republics in one economic center: Georgian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian. Azerbaijan produces oil, it is necessary to transport it through Batum through Georgian territory, so it will be a one economic center."

57. There is virtually no literature on the role of these Muslim elites in the invasion. For an exception see, Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917–1923*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 267; and Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford, 1992), 109.

58. In May 1919 the Kavkraikom decided the economies should unify; Kharmandarian, *Lenin i stanovlenie*, 30–31. During the invasion of Azerbaijan, on May 4, 1920, Ordzhonikidze and Kirov sent Lenin a telegram stating: "We will carry out military-economic unification with Soviet Russia. Experience requires us to supply the Sovnarkom

Furthermore, there *had* to be discussion of Lenin's decree because the Kavburo could not carry out Moscow's policies without active support from the local leadership. It simply did not have the resources or the support of the local population to do so alone. In Azerbaijan, Ordzhonikidze could not act without the agreement of the Azerbaijan Central Committee because it could, and in the early 1920s often did, simply refuse to carry out Moscow's orders.⁵⁹

The joint meeting between the Kavburo and the Azerbaijan Central Committee from April 10, 1922 centered on economic questions, primarily access to western European goods and the question of social and political stability.⁶⁰ In response to Ordzhonikidze's request from March 18, Huseynov had written a proposal to create a confederated foreign trade agency between the republics that would make contracts contingent on joint decisions.⁶¹ Ordzhonikidze, in contrast, pushed for a formal union that would eliminate the individual Vneshtorgs and form one unified (*ob'edinennyi*) foreign trade council in Transcaucasia.⁶² It was Huseynov's proposal and Ordzhonikidze's counter-proposal that set the parameters for discussion about how to implement Lenin's decrees in Azerbaijan.

During the discussion, Ordzhonikidze pointed out that while each republic in Transcaucasia had national borders that roughly reflected the ethnographic make-up of the republics, the railroad, completed in the 1870s–1880s, had not been built with those divisions in mind. It had not been constructed with the idea that these republics would someday be ripped apart by war.⁶³ The railroad, he argued, and the economy more broadly, did not accommodate national distinction. By implication, if they wanted to save the economies of the Transcaucasian republics then they had to unify, regardless of national sentiment. This was a tall order after years of inter-ethnic infighting. The logistics of the oil industry were much like those of the railroad—the pipelines, the location of the refineries, the ports, were all built to serve an integrated economy in the Russian Empire and only bolstered Ordzhonikidze's argument.⁶⁴

The Azerbaijan Central Committee (CC) agreed in principle that foreign trade and the railroads needed to be administered jointly and ultimately voted in favor of Ordzhonikidze's proposal. Oil was a different matter, however. Despite the fact that Moscow was already in charge of regulating international oil shipments from Baku's petroleum industry—Azerbaijan and Russia signed a treaty in 1920—it still had to be produced locally.⁶⁵ The members of the Azerbaijan CC and Narimanov in particular understood that oil was the key to Azerbaijan's political future.

with authority over all of Caucasia and further. . . . Don't give Narimanov that kind of authority." RGASPI, f. 85, op. 13, d. 12, l. 10.

59. Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 234.

60. RGASPI, f. 85, op. 5, d. 46, l. 1.

61. *Ibid.*, l. 9.

62. *Ibid.*, l. 2; The delegates also discussed the unification of the railroads, with parallel proposals on coordination from Huseynov and formal unification from Ordzhonikidze.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, l. 28.

65. Igolkin, *Otechestvennaia*, 130.

The Azerbaijan CC feared the population would protest if it realized how the Soviet government was distributing oil products.⁶⁶ The Bolsheviks considered Baku's oil collective property that they would distribute to those points that would most benefit the overall economy of the Soviet republics.⁶⁷ If Moscow believed that Nizhnii Novgorod or Samara needed Baku's oil more than Astara, then that is where it would be shipped. The only thing that was visible to the larger population was the flow of goods and resources to Baku in a time of severe shortage. The Azerbaijan CC feared this would lead Georgia and Armenia to accuse Moscow of favoritism vis-à-vis Baku and Azerbaijan.

On the other hand, after supplying the Red Army and oil industry, Moscow planned to distribute the products and profits of the petroleum industry to Armenia, Georgia, and the Mountain Republic in the north Caucasus in the form of food and supplies.⁶⁸ The allocation of the fruits of Baku residents' labor to their recent enemies, the Azerbaijan CC warned, would lead the population of Azerbaijan to accuse Moscow of stealing its natural wealth and dispensing it to its neighbors. While the Bolsheviks controlled Transcaucasia militarily, the communal peace that held remained precarious and the distribution of oil products could easily spark conflicts.⁶⁹ The Azerbaijan CC feared another uprising.

Ordzhonikidze's proposal provoked opposition within the Azerbaijan Party, although not about unification per se. Narimanov feared that the Kavburo was moving too fast and, just as importantly to him, believed that the center of any unified Transcaucasia—both economic and administrative—should be in Baku.⁷⁰ He understood that relocating the center of power to Tiflis would diminish his own position, that he would have far less leverage over Baku, as well as the neighboring states of Turkey and Iran, if the seat of power was moved from a Muslim capital. Nevertheless, in a public speech delivered shortly after the closed-door discussion, Narimanov explained the necessity of binding Azerbaijan, and now Georgia, to Soviet Russia, justifying unification thus: "Comrades, you have to get it into your heads [*vbit' v golovu*] that when I say the life of Azerbaijan depends on the life of Soviet Russia these are not empty noises." He pointed out that Azerbaijan's oil had already played a vital role in forcing the British to negotiate with Russia, claiming ". . . [w]ithout question, it was oil. When we announced that our oil belongs to Soviet Russia, it was a trump card in the hands of Soviet power. This, comrades, revolutionaries, and communists is how you should reason: what is more important to us—the life of Soviet Russia or oil?"⁷¹ This quote also contains a thinly

66. That is, the remaining oil that was not shipped to Moscow.

67. RGASPI, f. 85, op. 5, d. 46, l. 15.

68. The Mountain Republic was a state formed after the collapse of the Russian Empire and subsequently captured by the Bolsheviks and incorporated into the USSR as the Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, see, Alex Marshall, *The Caucasus under Soviet Rule* (New York, 2010).

69. RGASPI, f. 85, op. 5, d. 46, l. 13.

70. Akhundov and Huseynov, despite other disagreements, initially agreed with Narimanov that unification was moving too quickly. Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 247–48.

71. Narimanov, *Izbrannye*, 489. From "Rech' na tret'em zasedanii 1 vseazerbaidzhanskogo s'ezda sovetov rabochikh, kresti'ianskikh, krasnoarmeiskikh i matrosskikh deputatov" May 8, 1921.

veiled threat. Narimanov was making it clear that Soviet Russia would not simply walk away from Baku's oil and that it would be better for Azerbaijan to try to get what it could out of the situation.

Factions in the Party

There was fierce infighting in the Azerbaijan Communist Party beneath this front of public support. The period from May–October 1921 was dominated by factional strife between a group loyal to Narimanov and a coterie of more militant, and much younger, Bolsheviks led by Huseynov, Ruhulla Akhundov, and Ali Heydar Garayev, who were backed by Sergei Kirov and Sergo Ordzhonikidze (and by extension Stalin).⁷² Both Huseynov and Akhundov played major roles in the Azerbaijan Communist Party throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Mirza Davud Huseynov was born in 1894, making him only 26 when the Red Army occupied Azerbaijan (Narimanov and Lenin, in contrast, were born in 1870). A member of *Hummet* by 1919, Huseynov was elected Chairman of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party in 1920 and served as both the Commissar of Finance and Foreign Affairs, first of the Azerbaijan SSR and later of the Transcaucasian SSR. Ruhulla Akhundov was even younger, born in 1897. He was a left Social Revolutionary after the 1917 revolutions and joined the Communist Party in 1919, at Anastas Mikoian's urging. He took various posts after 1920, including the Secretary of the Baku Committee, Secretary of the Azerbaijan SSR Central Committee, Commissar of Enlightenment, and editor of the newspaper "Revolution and Nationality."⁷³ In general, Narimanov's faction supported accommodation to local circumstances while the latter sought centralization of control and power through the party apparatus.⁷⁴

The push to unify the Transcaucasian republics exacerbated these underlying tensions. One illustrative example about the sharp divergence between the two approaches was in the treatment of worshippers commemorating the Shiia holy day of Ashura, which marks the martyrdom of the Imam Huseyn. On the Day of Ashura, a procession, called the Shakhsei-Vakhsei in Russian, made its way through the streets of Baku as participants cut themselves and engaged in self-flagellation. Many members of the Azerbaijan CC wanted to ban the procession but Narimanov insisted that the Party should not antagonize the participants. Narimanov's position prevailed in 1920 and 1921 when he was in Baku, but in his absence in 1922, Kirov and Levon Mirzoyan proposed a ban on the Shekhsei-Vakhsei, which ultimately resulted in Red Army

72. Narimanov's faction: Sultan-Masjid Afendiev, Dadash Buniatzade, Mirbashir Kasumov, Teymur Aliev, Gazanfar Musabekov, Mustafabekov Shirvani, Movsum (Israfilbekov) Kadyrli. Versus: Ruhulla Akhundov, Mirza-Davud Huseynov, Sarkis Sarkisov, Anastas Mikoian, Levon Mirzoyan, Sergei Kirov, (Aleksandr Ivanovich) Egorov, Alihaidar Garayev, Beybut Shakhtakhtinkii (switched sides, former friend of Narimanov). For factions, see Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 272.

73. Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 224–34.

74. On centralization, see, Blank, "Bolshevik Organizational Development." This is a simplified breakdown of the factions, and much more work remains to be done on the topic.

soldiers firing on participants. This episode further discredited Soviet power in the eyes of the Muslim population and was precisely the kind of behavior that had led to the 1918 fall of the Baku Commune.⁷⁵

As disagreements mounted, Narimanov repeatedly petitioned Lenin to remove his opponents from Azerbaijan, successfully securing the transfer of Sarkis Sarkisov, Mirzoyan and others he viewed as a threat. In October 1921, Narimanov sought an audience with Lenin. They met in Moscow to discuss the factionalism within the Azerbaijan CP. As a result of the meeting, Lenin reaffirmed his support for Narimanov's approach for the implementation of cultural policies in Azerbaijan and on October 17, 1921, the Politburo instructed Stalin to detail its policy toward Azerbaijan, this time in writing. The result, "Directives from the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (b) to the workers of Azerbaijan" was a vindication of Narimanov's policies.⁷⁶ The directive instructed the Party to consider carefully the "national and religious" features of the Muslim population before pursuing policies or hasty actions that could "cause discord among the working class and undermine the unity between workers and peasants."⁷⁷

Lenin then summoned Huseynov and Akhundov to Moscow to clarify Moscow's policy in Azerbaijan on the national question, that is, Narimanov's position.⁷⁸ Despite the Politburo decision siding with Narimanov, and Lenin's meeting with Huseynov and Akhundov, on November 1, 1921, just days after these discussions, Ordzhonikidze sent Lenin and Stalin a telegram warning them that Akhundov and Huseynov could not be trusted as their ultimate goal was to remove Narimanov from power. If Lenin wanted to keep Narimanov, he would have to transfer Akhundov and Huseynov from the Caucasus.⁷⁹ Ultimately, this is what happened. In December 1921, Akhundov and Huseynov were both transferred to Moscow, where Huseynov worked under Stalin as the Deputy Commissar for Nationalities.⁸⁰ Not even these transfers stabilized the situation, however. In January 1922, Narimanov was chosen to attend the forthcoming Genoa Conference and in April, he was sent to Italy. In his absence, many of his supporters were transferred from Baku and on his return, Narimanov was himself transferred to Tiflis as part of the new presidium for the newly formed Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic.⁸¹ Narimanov, rightly, viewed this as an exile.

75. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, ll. 33–35. Narimanov's account. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 177, l. 25 (Report on the Central Control Commission [CCC]) favoring a more aggressive approach than Narimanov's. On the impression this created, see RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, l. 83. Akhundov accused Narimanov of "to a certain extent supporting Shekhsi-Vekhsi," RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, l. 76.

76. Kharmandarian, *Lenin i stanovlenie*, 78. Ordzhonikidze claims he requested the directive, not Narimanov. RGASPI f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, ll. 63–64 (Protocol of the meeting on the Commission on the investigation into the report and petition of com. Narimanov).

77. *Ibid.*

78. Kharmandarian, *Lenin i stanovlenie*, 76–78.

79. *Ibid.*, 79; RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, l. 64.

80. *Ibid.*; Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 274.

81. Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 276–77.

National Deviation and the Central Control Commission Investigation

In April 1923, the 12th Party Congress met in Moscow and introduced a new approach toward the non-Russian nationalities within the USSR, the policy of *korenizatsiia*, or indigenization, which sought actively to train and promote non-Russians for party work.⁸² Following on the heels of the Party Congress, in June 1923, the Fourth Conference of the CC RCP (b) met in Moscow with representatives of the national republics and non-Russian regions. During the conference, Stalin unleashed the now infamous attack on Sultan-Galiev. These two meetings marked the beginning of the campaign against so-called national deviation. It was at this time that the Presidium of the Central Control Commission (CCC), the disciplinary body of the Central Committee, opened an investigation into Narimanov.⁸³ A few months earlier, Narimanov had written his wide-ranging manifesto, *Toward a History of our Revolution in the Provinces*, in which he outlined his grievances toward Soviet policy in Azerbaijan. He sent his manifesto to Stalin, with copies forwarded to Trotskii and Radek. The CCC ostensibly wanted to discuss the accusations in his manifesto, although the transcripts make it clear that it never took Narimanov's claims seriously. Instead, it was afraid his accusations could damage the party. Further, the CCC and the Politburo were alarmed because Narimanov had clandestinely distributed his *History* within Party circles and, significantly for the investigators, they found a copy with Sultan-Galiev when he was arrested.⁸⁴

The commission first met in Moscow on June 13, 1923 to discuss Narimanov's accusations. Many of those singled out in his *History*, including Ordzhonikidze, Kirov, Akhundov, Huseynov, and Anastas Mikoian were in attendance. The transcript of the meeting exposed the bitter in-fighting and personal grudges that carried over into Party life and poisoned the political atmosphere in Azerbaijan.⁸⁵ Having successfully petitioned Moscow in the past, Narimanov likely expected support from the CCC. This time, however, Lenin was not there to defend him and the outcome was very different. The Chair of the CCC warned that, after the 12th Party Congress: "Even the smallest

82. There is a robust literature on nationalities policy. To name only a few: Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, 2004); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001).

83. The commission was composed of members of the CCC Presidium Emel'ian Iaroslavskii, Matvei Shkiriatov, Janis Rudzutak, Abdullo Rakhimbaev, and V. Ibragimov. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 177, l. 9.

84. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 178, ll. 50–51. Iaroslavskii claimed there is little in common between Narimanov and Sultan-Galiev but they had to make sure "*net li zdes' i v doklade Narimanova kornii Sultangalievshchiny*" (that there are no roots of Sultan-Galiev's ideas in Narimanov's manifesto). Narimanov's relationship to Sultan Galiev remains unclear.

85. A copy of the original manifesto and Control Commission transcript can be found in RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, ll. 2–49 and 58–86, respectively. Further supporting materials can be found in, RGASPSI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 177, 178, 179. These debates are extensively covered, from a different angle, by Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 217–302.

mistakes in these [border] republics can lead to adverse results.”⁸⁶ Narimanov, it turned out, had been denounced by his comrades, most significantly his former deputy Shahtakhtinski.⁸⁷ From the beginning of the Moscow meetings Narimanov believed CCC investigation was a pretense whose outcome was predetermined and designed to remove him from a position of influence.⁸⁸

Narimanov’s *History* was not simply a chronicle of events. It was both his last effort to hold on to his position and a political declaration about the increasingly polarized atmosphere in Azerbaijan. He wrote it, by his own admission, for the archives and with posterity in mind. He divided it into two sections: one, Eastern Policy and, two, the situation in Azerbaijan. He leveled extensive accusations against the Transcaucasian Regional Committee or Zakkraikom (formerly the Kavburo), the Baku Communist Party, and a host of individuals. He claimed that Muslim workers were being pushed out of positions of responsibility and out of the Party and that Mikoian, together with the prominent Bolshevik Sarkis Kasian, was carrying out a systematic plan to favor Armenians over Muslims. The Party in Transcaucasia, he argued, was decaying.⁸⁹ He further attacked the direction of the Politburo’s Eastern Policy (what he saw as the betrayal of the east) and levied personal attacks against Kirov, Ordzhonikidze, Mikoian, and Akhundov, all of whom he claimed bullied and bribed their way to power.

While there is not space here to delve into the intrigue that ultimately led to the investigation and ouster of Narimanov, it is clear from the CCC interviews that there was a deep intertwinement of conflicts on everything including national identity, generational divides, possession of oil, the meaning of the revolution, and personal animosity. Both the *History* and the CCC investigations were highly inflected with debates about the future of the Soviet project and who had the right to rule on what terms. It was a classic *kto-kogo* (who, whom?) scenario. In a process that was replicated throughout the Soviet Union, generational splits overlay national disputes and vice versa as various factions vied for control.⁹⁰

86. RGASPI f. 588, op. 2, d. 178, l. 49.

87. Baberowski says it was revenge. This is possible but when Narimanov accused Shahtakhtinski of stealing, Shahtakhtinski did not get into any trouble. In fact, Ordzhonikidze told the CCC committee that it was not an offense at all and that “*takie veshchi u nas praktikuiutsa*” (we practice such things) so he would not have had much reason to seek revenge, RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, l. 66.

88. One indication that Narimanov believed that the process was rigged was his refusal to engage his accusers on any real level verbally. Instead, he submitted written reports to be added to the record after the investigations, much as Shliapnikov and Medvedev did leading up to the “Baku Affair” in 1926. As Barbara Allen notes, this went against standard procedure, which relied on discussion. Barbara Allen, “Transforming Factions into Blocs: Alexander Shliapnikov, Sergei Medvedev, and the CCC investigation of the ‘Baku Affair’ in 1926,” in Donald Filtzer et al., eds., *A Dream Deferred: New Studies in Russian and Soviet Labour History* (Bern, 2008), 138. Also, RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 177, l. 192.

89. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, l. 58.

90. *Ibid.*, ll. 58–86. These transcripts support the argument of Blank’s “Bolshevik Organizational Development.” Adeeb Khalid notes a generational divide in Uzbekistan as well, Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*.

Narimanov's opening sentence in his *History* was that Georgi Chicherin, the Commissar of Foreign Affairs, did not understand Eastern Policy.⁹¹ The core of this claim centered around the Soviet abandonment of revolution first in Persia and then throughout the Muslim east over the course of 1921. The CCC did not even engage Narimanov's accusations, dismissing the charges completely: "For the CCC the only thing that is important is whether the NKID's policies were those of the TsK RKP [the Russian Central Committee]. . . ."⁹² The CCC was more concerned with Narimanov's personal attacks on members of the Central Committee than with questions of policy. He had accused Ordzhonikidze of working to isolate him. Ordzhonikidze countered that he had acted as a buffer between Narimanov and his opponents, namely the younger generation of Baku Bolsheviks led by Huseynov and Akhundov. Ordzhonikidze reminded the CCC committee that he shielded Narimanov not because he liked him, but because he understood that Narimanov was an important public figure in Baku and because Moscow (Lenin) wished it.⁹³ These generational disputes, which also had a significant national component, reflected a larger conflict about the culture within the party between the older group of revolutionaries who had spent years and often decades in the tsarist era working on literary and cultural programs, and the younger, more radical generation which favored action, violence, and a growing dogmatism.⁹⁴

In the case of Azerbaijan, the division had as much to do with experience in the underground as age. The split was between those who stayed in Baku through the occupations of 1918–1920 and those who fled to safety or were ordered behind the lines (Narimanov was recalled to Astrakhan and Moscow). Legitimacy was increasingly associated with actions during wartime. Narratives of Civil War experience became vital to political legitimacy throughout the Soviet Union and this held true in Azerbaijan as well.⁹⁵

During the CCC sessions, Narimanov's opponents focused on his absence from the underground. Ordzhonikidze claimed: "When Narimanov wasn't in Baku, not in the Caucasus, it was already decided that we should use the slogan about an independent Azerbaijan;" Narimanov removed all of the comrades from Baku "who bore the burden of the underground on their shoulders"; and "Com[rade] Narimanov stigmatizes c[omrade] Akhundov because Akhundov was a SR and Guseinov a Musavatist. Both of these comrades worked energetically with us in 1918."⁹⁶ Mikoian was the most aggressive and his statements elucidate both the emerging values and his bitterness at having been left behind after the fall of the Commune:

91. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, l. 3.

92. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 177, l. 32.

93. Mikoian echoed the sentiment: "We viewed Narimanov as a *starik* [old man] and knew that he wouldn't be able to lead the masses. But let him do his work. We needed him/ He was necessary for us. . ." RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, l. 69.

94. Narimanov's faction was exclusively Muslim while Akhundov and Huseynov's faction was more ethnically diverse and had the backing of Stalin's faction. See footnote 81 for the members of each faction.

95. For example, Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Civil War as a Formative Experience," in Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites, eds., *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington, 1985), 57–76.

96. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 76, ll. 61, 66.

When I went underground, in Baku no one wanted to come with me, I didn't ask Narimanov, he's an old man [*starik*], but they were all cowards . . . no one came. When no one was left in Baku, I alone stayed in Baku during the savagery of the Turks, the English, and all the rest. I worked in that difficult time among the Muslim workers, I hid with them, in the Muslims regions. We broke Shauiman out of jail and at that difficult time com[rades] AKHUNDOV and GUSEINOV started working with us. I was the one who first came up with the slogan: "Long live Soviet Azerbaijan!" I raised the question about the necessity of attracting Muslim workers at a time when Narimanov wasn't in the Caucasus.⁹⁷

Akhundov's SR past, Huseynov's association with Musavatists, Mikoian's nationality were less important than the fact that they stayed behind and bore the burden of fighting for Bolshevik power when it was most dangerous. Within party circles, Narimanov's years of work for education and social reform did not carry the same weight as it did with the wider Muslim population. Having proven oneself in the fires of revolution and war signified belonging to this young generation of Bolsheviks. All of these disputes, regardless of their origin or of their actual content were now filtered through the idiom of the national question. This extended to Narimanov's view of the oil industry as well.

Oil and the National Question

Narimanov claimed that the degree of Azerbaijan's independence from Soviet Russia was the fundamental source of conflict between himself and Ordzhonikidze. In contrast, Ordzhonikidze claimed that Narimanov was misstating the nature of their disagreement. Their dispute was not about independence, but about whether Azerbaijan or Russia would enter the foreign market "as the owners of Azerbaijani oil." Ordzhonikidze explained: "The principle disagreement was about Azerbaijani oil. Comrade Narimanov, and also at that time comrade Guseinov, were both against Soviet Russia, rather than Azerbaijan, going on the foreign market as the owners of Azerbaijani oil." If Russia was the owner, Azerbaijan would lose credibility in the Muslim east and, by association, any chance of carrying out revolution in the east. Ordzhonikidze, mitigating his accusation, added, ". . . I think it is important to point out that comrade Narimanov never objected to the release of oil to Russia for internal use."⁹⁸

Despite Ordzhonikidze's claim, oil was tightly connected to independence. The deal between Lenin and Narimanov tied the two inextricably together. For Narimanov, the distinction between internal and external ownership of Baku's oil remained vital. He supported the shipment of Baku's oil through Astrakhan to Russia proper and propagandized among the Muslim population to ensure limited opposition to the policy. However, he had supported Russian ownership of Azerbaijan's oil only as long as the RSFSR pursued

97. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, l. 69. Mikoian was the only surviving Commissar from the so-called 26 Commissars of the Baku Commune.

98. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 176, l. 62.

policies he agreed with, and inasmuch as he felt he had a say over the course of policy. As policy shifted over the course of the early 1920s and his personal influence waned, so too did Narimanov's view of Azerbaijan's relationship to Russia change.

In the idiom of the 12th Party Congress, Narimanov now linked the oil question to the national question. He argued that oil and the national question were different expressions of the same problem: Moscow's exploitation of Azerbaijan. Narimanov, like many non-Russians, believed Soviet power had become hostile. His view resonated with a wider population and he insisted in his *History*: "Soviet Azerbaijan voluntarily declared that oil belongs to the laborers of Soviet Russia . . . every worker and peasant has had it explained to them what oil means for Soviet Russia. In the first year, Azerbaijan gave not only oil but also paid from its own state treasury the salaries of [oil] workers. That is what creates national deviation."⁹⁹ National deviation was rooted in material inequalities, both actual and perceived, as much as ideology. As far as he was concerned, the Azerbaijani people had upheld their end of the arrangement—they had sent oil north to Russia and let the Red Army into their country. In return, Narimanov had expected the profits and prosperity of the oil industry to lift Azerbaijan out of chaos.

If Narimanov had been seduced by the simplicity of the oil-for-cultural autonomy arrangement in 1920, such a view was no longer possible by late 1923. Azerbaijan had been twice stripped of its autonomy, first in its subordination within the Transcaucasian SFSR and then again with the incorporation of the TSFSR into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in December 1922. The CCC concluded that Narimanov's policies were dangerous and forbade him from returning to Azerbaijan.¹⁰⁰ It recommended that he be prevented from interfering in the work of the Azerbaijan party organizations. The commission noted that Narimanov's punishment should be harsh (*strogii*) "even more so because he himself is a candidate member of the Central Committee."¹⁰¹ Yet he remained in his post in Moscow as co-Chair of the Executive Committee of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1925.¹⁰² There was no press coverage of the internal investigation, no public denunciation, and no hint found in correspondence between the Central Committee and the local Party organizations about the investigation into Narimanov. The Politburo suppressed the entire episode because it feared that publicly condemning Narimanov could have wide repercussions.¹⁰³ In the end, amid crowds and fanfare, members of the Presidium of the Soviet Communist Party gathered in Red Square to pay their respects to the "leader of the revolution in the East" and inter his remains in the Kremlin wall.¹⁰⁴

99. *Ibid.*, ll. 25, 27–28.

100. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 177, ll. 33–34.

101. RGASPI, f. 177, op. 2, d. 177, l. 37.

102. RGASPI, f. 588, op. 2, d. 177, l. 193.

103. Baberowski, *Vrag est' vezde*, 270.

104. *Izvestiia*, March 20, 1925, 1; March 22, 1925, 1–2; March 24, 1925 page illegible; *Pravda*, March 24, 1925, page illegible.

A focus on Azerbaijan demonstrates that the need to secure and hold energy resources—and the infrastructures that support them—was critical to the formation of the Soviet Union. Geopolitics and the exploitation of natural resources were major concerns for the Bolsheviks and their role and importance needs to be integrated into our understanding of the establishment of the Soviet state. This was not only a matter of colonialism and ideology. The need to possess and harness natural resources—especially sources of energy—is not exclusive to empires or to imperialist or colonialist agendas. It is a necessity common to all states. If states do not directly own these resources, they require access to them or their state will not be viable in the long-term. Explaining the overriding importance and connection between the Bolshevik drive to possess Azerbaijan's oil is not, therefore, an automatic endorsement of the idea that the Soviet Union was an empire or a colonial project, that assertion requires more than state-expansion.

I am sympathetic to the view that the Soviet Union was a modernizing state that sought to transform and incorporate the non-Russian regions of the Soviet Union into a common state, but with some caveats.¹⁰⁵ The Soviet project was undoubtedly a socialist civilizing mission via Russian tutelage, whatever the original intention. The initial takeover of Baku was motivated by military and geostrategic goals—namely to secure energy. And the Soviet presence in Azerbaijan in 1920 was a military occupation. But this does not extend to the entire Soviet project or to all territories and it was always more complicated than the extraction of resources for the center.

Understanding the role of the south Caucasus in Soviet history, then, is also understanding how the extraction and use of oil and other natural resources were entangled with more familiar questions of nationalities policy and identitarian politics. Oil changed Azerbaijan's status. Whether a similar situation—one in which Soviet legitimacy among a border population hinged on the credibility a pre-revolutionary native *intelligent* who was in a position to leverage access to a critical resource in a geostrategic and ideologically sensitive area—existed elsewhere is a compelling and open question.

The degree to which Narimanov wielded any effective power is also unclear but there is no doubt that the leadership in Moscow believed his participation was critical to securing the support of the Azerbaijani population and legitimating the Soviet presence in Baku internationally. Thus, preserving Moscow's access to Baku's oil was tied to Narimanov. Neither he, nor the younger generation of radicals like Huseynov and Akhundov, fall into the neat categories of national-communist versus Moscow-communist. There were many iterations of Muslim communism, and looking at state-building, natural resources, and geopolitics can complicate the way we think of the revolutionary narrative and point to the broader transformation from local tsarist politics of reform to the militant politics of the Soviet Union.

105. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*; Adeeb Khalid, "Between Empire and Revolution: New Work on Soviet Central Asia," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 865–84; Adeeb Khalid, "Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective," *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 231–51.