

# Ziia Buniatov and the Invention of an Azerbaijani Past



**Sara Crombach**

# **Ziia Buniatov and the Invention of an Azerbaijani Past**

## **ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT**

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor

aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam

op gezag van de Rector Magnificus

prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde  
commissie, in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit

op vrijdag 18 oktober 2019, te 13.00 uur

door

**Sara Gertrudis Crombach**

geboren te Kerkrade

**Promotiecommissie:**

Promotor: Prof. dr. M. Kemper, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Copromotor: Dr. M.M. Leezenberg, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Overige leden: Prof. dr. L.A. Bialasiewicz, Universiteit van Amsterdam  
Prof. dr. D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Brock University  
Prof. dr. W.G. Weststeijn, Universiteit van Amsterdam  
Dr. A.K. Bustanov, Universiteit van Amsterdam  
Dr. C.U. Noack, Universiteit van Amsterdam

**Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen**

This work is part of the research project “The Legacy of Soviet Oriental Studies: Networks, Institutions, Discourses”, financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).



Nederlandse Organisatie  
voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek

# Table of contents

Acknowledgments .....	5
Notes on translation and transliteration .....	6
Maps on the region .....	7

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>8</b>
– National identity construction in the Soviet context.....	9
– Soviet Oriental Studies .....	17
– Oriental Studies in Azerbaijan.....	25
– This thesis: stucture and questions.....	29
– The research questions.....	32

## **Chapter I: Rise and heyday of a hero-scholar:**

<b>Biography of Zia Musaevich Buniyatov (1923-1986) .....</b>	<b>34</b>
– Introduction.....	34
– Tagira Kurbanova (1924- 2016) .....	35
– A sacred genealogy (1923-1941).....	38
– The myth of a war hero (World War II and aftermath) (1941-1946) .....	42
– Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies (MIV) (1946-1954).....	51
– The budding young scholar, Baku and Leningrad (1954-1965).....	60
– Father of historiography, Baku (1965-1987) .....	63
– Conclusion .....	65

## **Chapter II: Historiography as a struggle for territory:**

<b>Buniyatov's works (1958-1987).....</b>	<b>68</b>
– Introduction.....	68
– A new discourse on Azerbaijani history: Caucasusian Albania .....	69
– Appropriating an Albanian Chronicle (1960).....	73
– Cementing the claim: Buniyatov's <i>Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries</i> (1965).....	82
– Enlarging the edifice: A trans-Caspian trilogy (1978-1986) .....	99
– Completing the continuity, consolidating the school.....	102
– On the defensive: Armenian aggression and Azerbaijani reactions .....	110
– Conclusion .....	113

**Chapter III: Resisting marginalization in times of change:  
Buniatov’s political gambling between the old regime,  
the Popular Front and the return of Aliev (1987-1997) .....117**

– Introduction.....	117
– Ziaa Buniatov and Geidar Aliev: an ambivalent relationship .....	119
– The escalation of the Karabakh conflict .....	125
– A domestic challenge to the regime and to Buniatov: the bidding scholars of the Popular Front .....	137
– The radicalization of the Popular Front and the rise of “Pan-Turkism” .....	148
– The Popular Front: from a radical movement to a torn party .....	154
– Making racism acceptable again: The History of Azerbaijan in Documents and Publications (1990) .....	158
– War, breakdown, and Aliev's return .....	162
– Buniatov’s return .....	168
– Exploring Islam for national identity.....	170
– Critiques of Soviet historiography .....	180
– The assassination of a national icon .....	184
– Conclusion .....	187

**Conclusion.....191**

Bibliography .....	197
Appendix: List of names .....	213
Summary .....	219
Samenvatting .....	221

## Acknowledgments

My foremost gratitude goes to Michael Kemper, who was the initiator of this research project, and even more my coach and source of inspiration. I also want to thank Michiel Leezenberg for his support and useful advice.

Many scholars at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of sciences were most willing to give me information and to share their views on the topic. I especially thank Farda Asadov, Esmeralda Agaeva, Irada Bagirova, Shahin Mustafaev and many others for their generous support.

The various talks with Buniiatov's widow Tagira and his niece Zifa Qurbanova gave me a rich and interesting impression of Buniiatov in his young years, and of the scholar in his private life.

A great source of inspiration were the interviews with former members of the Popular Front and others that had been involved in the political turbulence of the late 1980s. Leyla and Arif Yunus generously supported me with information and *samizdat* materials and they shared their memories on the *Perestroika* period. Zardusht Alizade, Hikmet Hajizade, Arzu Abdulaeva and Isa Gambar gave me crucial insight information in the political processes of Azerbaijan in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Altay Göyüşev, Roza Arazova, Hamlet Isakhanli, Vasim Mamedaliev, Eldar Ismailov, Dzjamil Gasanli and many others shared their valuable knowledge on Azerbaijani history and society. The priceless Azerbaijani hospitality was a great pleasure during all my trips to Baku and other parts of the country. Thank you Aynur, Zaur, Nurlana, and Ilkin.

My dissertation was written in the inspiring atmosphere at the department of European Studies and my special gratitude goes to my colleagues Amieka Bouma, Alfrid Bustanov, Tatjana Das, Dina Fainberg, Danis Garaev, Hanna Jansen, Artemy Kalinovsky, Joep Leerssen, Christian Noack, Sudha Rajagopalan, Erik van Ree and Nienke Rentenaar.

Last but not least I want to thank my mother, my sister Miriam, Joost Hillemans and my friends Bernd Brackman, Bart Prins and Aydin Ibrahimov for their never ending support.

## **Notes on translation and transliteration**

Transliterations from the Cyrillic alphabet adhere to the Library of Congress system, except for names and words widely known in English by other spellings.

Azerbaijani names are transliterated from Russian and not from Azerbaijani (e.g., Ziiia Buniiatov, not Ziya Bünyadov).

All translations from Russian are mine unless indicated otherwise or quoted from a published translation.

## Maps of the region



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Soviet\\_Caucasus\\_map.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Soviet_Caucasus_map.svg)



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Artsakh\\_Occupation\\_Map.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Artsakh_Occupation_Map.jpg)

## Introduction

In the USSR, historiography was enormously important for the creation of Soviet nations, and for the legitimacy of their USSR republics. As to the republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, the study of history was intrinsically linked to the discipline of Oriental studies. This work is about the Soviet post-World War II discourse on Azerbaijani history, which I study through the life and work of its major proponent, Ziaa Musaevich (Musaoglu) Buniatov (1923, assassinated in 1997). Celebrated as a World War II “Hero of the Soviet Union”, Buniatov rose to important positions in the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences and for several decades shaped the face of Azerbaijani Oriental studies and historiography. In this thesis I explore Buniatov's scholarly publications and his role in the development of an Azerbaijani national identity. I trace his historical writings from the late 1950s to the Perestroika period, and into the 1990s, when Azerbaijani nationalism gradually left the Soviet framework and became a factor of political destabilization, eventually culminating in the escalation of the long-standing territorial conflict with Armenia over Nagorny Karabakh. One goal of this thesis is therefore to establish in how far Buniatov, as a Soviet scholar, provided the basis for this escalation.

Next to studying his academic and popular writings, I also explore Buniatov's political role in society, his relations to the republican leadership and the nationalist opposition of the 1980s and 1990s. Of crucial importance is the construction of what I call the "Buniatov myth", that is, the heroic image that he himself, as well as his friends and colleagues and eventually the political establishment, created around his personality.

The present thesis contributes to the ongoing debate on the relationship between Soviet and Western (European) Oriental studies. Concerning the perceived division of Soviet Oriental studies into a “political” branch (centered in Moscow) and a more classical, less politicized division of scholars of manuscripts and historiography (concentrated in Leningrad), I will argue that Buniatov was able to use the allegedly “unpolitical” division of Soviet Oriental studies to produce highly political work. In contrast to most students of the overly political branch of Oriental studies, who had to prove themselves (and their loyalty to the Soviet fatherland and to the Party) by extended work abroad, in embassies and as translators, Buniatov did not have to go through this process because he had earned his

merits in World War II. Exactly this exceptional position provides both Buniyatov himself, and his works, with a mythological status that would become the basis for his significance for modern Azerbaijan.

## **National identity construction in the Soviet context**

Historians retrieve, maintain or actively produce the memories that feed national sentiment. There are several competing paradigms for explaining the power of nationalism. Anthony Smith, in his work on *Myths and Memories of the Nation*,<sup>1</sup> emphasized that the classical paradigms of primordialism or modernism largely fail to explain the immense power of national myths and memories.

According to the primordial discourse, as Smith explains, the key feature of the nation is its rootedness in kinship, ethnos, or in a genetic common origin. This perspective rejects the influence of history and migration, as well as the complex interaction and mixing between population groups; it also ignores the crucial influence of “national awakeners”, that is, of intellectuals who consciously arouse modern national sentiment.<sup>2</sup>

The modernist (or constructivist) paradigm is the dominant perspective of the last decades of the 20th century, and explains the nation as a modern product, resulting from the modernization of state, society, and economy, largely since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to the modernist view, the nation is not rooted in common kinship, ethnos, or other ancient factors, but a completely new category – and largely an instrument of political leaders and actors. Smith argues that also this vision is insufficient for grasping the phenomenon of nationalism as a whole, since it has too little regard for the power of cultural identity in the minds of the people. It has no explanation for the longevity of what is regarded as national character, and for the power of national practices performed by a respective group over very long periods. It also does not account for the enormous mobilizational capacities of nationalism, with regards to processes of excluding the "others" and, ultimately, waging war against them.

To explain the emotional appeal of nationalism Smith offers what he calls the “ethno-symbolic approach”, mainly in response to the failure of the modernists. According to the ethno-symbolist view, key constituents for the power of nationalism are "myths, memories,

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

traditions, symbols of an ethnic heritage, and the ways in which a popular living past has been, and can be, rediscovered, and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias."<sup>3</sup>

Smith argues that national identity is constantly reconstituted by every subsequent generation, responding to new political, economic or social challenges. In ethno-symbolism, particular themes and motives are the essential ingredients for nationalism. Common memory appears as a crucial condition for the survival of collective identity. This presupposes the formulation of a national past, preferably ancient, and a clear concept of ethno-genesis, that is, the idea of a common genetic base of the nation.

As Joep Leerssen argues, in this process the concept of identity, originally a marker of comparison (you identify with, and relate to, something else) has shifted from relation to essence.<sup>4</sup> National myths, images, heroes, or traditions morph into a static perception of identity, which, although constructed, is cherished as an intrinsic and immutable quality.<sup>5</sup>

Crucial in this process of identity-building is the work of historians and national intelligentsias – the central issue also of my work. This identity is personified in the image of national heroes, with historical personalities turning into mythological icons that shape the national identity. In my thesis, an important point is that the historian and Orientalist Buniatov not only produced or re-produced national myths, but that his own image obtained mythological proportions, and thus became subject and object of the process.

For grasping the mechanisms and goals of nation-building in the USSR it is important to understand the multinational character of the Tsarist Empire and the imperial policies towards national minorities. In the first place, the Russian Empire was a colonial state; the expansion of Muscovy into the Muslim areas of the Volga-Urals in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, and then into Siberia, was followed by expansions into the South (present-day Ukraine, 17<sup>th</sup> century) and into Kazakhstan and Central Asia (concluded in the 1880s). Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were conquered from Iran and the Ottoman Empire in several wars between 1800 and 1828. While Georgians and Armenians, as Christian nations, could easily be

---

<sup>3</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Joep Leerssen, "The Downward Pull of Cultural Essentialism," in: *Image into Identity. Constructing and Assigning Identity in a Culture of Modernity*, edited by Michael Wintle (New York, 2006), 31-52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 42-44.

integrated into the Russian colonial administration and the military, the Muslims of what later became Azerbaijan remained rather marginal in the imperial structure.<sup>6</sup>

The status of Russians (that is, of eastern Slavs) in the empire was rather ambiguous; on the one hand, also the Romanov dynasty and much of the elites were presenting themselves as Russian, and “Russianness” (in the form of “*narodnost*”, “folk character”) was, next to autocracy and Orthodoxy, regarded as one of the three pillars of the late Russian Empire, as formulated by Nicholas I’s education minister Count Uvarov (1786-1855) in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> At the same time most Russians were, before the 1860s, simply serfs with largely a religious (Christian Orthodox) identity. Scholars call this phenomenon “internal colonization”.<sup>8</sup>

The many minorities of the late Russian empire had different levels of prestige and status. Most prestigious were the “Western” nations (esp. Baltic Germans), and also, partly, Armenians and Georgians; least prestige was accorded to the various non-Orthodox ethnic groups inhabiting the “East”, from Buddhists and animists to Muslims; and also among Muslims we find that “Tatars” in Central Russia were privileged above the Muslims of the recent (nineteenth-century) acquisitions in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Especially nomads had a low status, pointing to a civilizational paradigm in which urban civilization stood above pastoralism.<sup>9</sup> The umbrella term for “Muslims of the East” (including Tatars) was *inorodtsy*, ‘foreign-born, allogeneous’.<sup>10</sup> Modern nationalism was emerging only slowly, also among the Russians as the empire’s leading nation. Even the Tsarist family was of very international origin, just like the elite in general; a “pure Russianness” was in fact a myth created in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Bolsheviks were confronted with the problem of how to deal with nationalism. Already before the October Revolution, Iosip Stalin emerged as the major Bolshevik authority on the “national question”. From 1918 until the final creation of the USSR at the

---

<sup>6</sup> Eva-Maria Auch, *Muslim – Untertan – Bürger; Identitätswandel in gesellschaftlichen Transformationsprozessen der muslimischen Ostprovinzen Südkaukasiens (Ende 18. – Anfang 20. Jh)* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 106-118.

<sup>7</sup> Sergei Semenovitch Uvarov, classical scholar, Minister of National Education at the time of Tsar Nicholas I, and President of the National Academy of Sciences (1818-1855) is considered the founder of the idea of Russianness in the first half of the nineteenth century. Cynthia Whittaker, “The Ideology of Sergei Umarov: An Interpretative Essay”, *Russian Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Apr. 1978), 158-159.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization. Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Malden, USA, 2011), 5-7.

<sup>9</sup> Alfrid Bustanov, *Soviet Orientalism and the Creation of Central Asian Nations* (New York, 2015), 38-39.

<sup>10</sup> Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: a Multiethnic History* (Harlow (Essex), 2001), 169-171.

end of 1923, Stalin served as Commissar of Nationalities and thus was the responsible person for organizing the emerging USSR into national units.<sup>11</sup> Acknowledging the power of ethnic nationalisms in Eastern Europe in general (and the Russian and Habsburg Empires specifically), Stalin advocated to incorporate nationalism into the future socialist state, and to use it as a building stone for socialism/communism; the idea was that if supported by the socialist government, nationalisms would eventually “exhaust themselves” and vanish.<sup>12</sup> Stalin's concept of the Soviet Union's republics as “national in form and socialist in content” had to facilitate and accelerate a process of modernization, urbanization, and secularization, which were the pillars of Sovietization. State support for national identity was also crucial to avoid the impression that the Bolsheviks simply continued the imperial and colonialist policies of their Tsarist predecessors.<sup>13</sup>

His definition of national identity Stalin had already given in his 1912 article “Marxism and the National Question”: “A nation is not a racial or tribal, but a historically constituted community of people”, according to Stalin, and the key factors defining a nation were “a common economy, language, culture, territory and history”.<sup>14</sup> This definition is broad enough to include both “primordialist” and “constructivist” elements; culture was obviously understood as something self-evident, and based in the past; at the same time the “national psyche” was formed over the centuries, and is not linked to a “genetic pool” in this definition. The “modernist” character of Stalin's concept of the nation is furthermore clear from the fact that Stalin's model encompassed active and conscious state intrusion to formulate and shape the given national identities. Important for our context is that the strong emphasis on a common history as key marker for the nation turned history into a highly politicized concept. Victor Shnirelman argues that history, as studied by Soviet historians, is not so much a product of the past, but rather a response to the demands of the present. History was a

---

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Smith, “Stalin as Commissar for Nationality Affairs, 1918-1922,” in: *Stalin, a New History*, edited by Sarah Davies and James Harris (Cambridge, 2005), 45-50.

<sup>12</sup> Erik van Ree, “Stalin and the National Question”, *Revolutionary Russia*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (December 1994), 230.

<sup>13</sup> Terry Martin, “Borders and Ethnic Conflict: The Soviet Experiment in Ethno-Territorial Proliferation”, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, Bd 47 (1999), 539.

<sup>14</sup> I. V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question, [1912]* (from I.V. Stalin, *Works*, Vol. 2 (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1954), 303-307.

representation of the past, which was strongly connected with the creation of a modern identity in the present.<sup>15</sup>

For Stalin, the Caucasus (from which he of course hailed himself, with Stalin having a very ambivalent relation to the Georgians) was an important arena for nation building; in his 1912 article, he wrote:

"The national question in the Caucasus can be solved only *by drawing the belated nations and nationalities into a common stream of a higher culture*. It is the only progressive solution."<sup>16</sup>

This quote demonstrates the intrinsic link between modernization and nation building; and it also shows that the Bolsheviks saw it as their major task to draw the apparently "backward" nationalities to the level of the "progressed" nations of the USSR.

This aspect of Soviet nation building has been emphasized by a number of Western historians, in the first place Ronald G. Suny and Terry Martin. These scholars argue that the Bolsheviks aimed to elevate the non-Russian peoples as part of a campaign of decolonization, thereby using the category of "cultural backwardness".<sup>17</sup> Terry Martin provocatively called this a policy of "affirmative action" for backward nationalities, and the USSR itself as an "affirmative action empire".<sup>18</sup> "Affirmative action" here stands for the policy of *korenizatsiia* ("enrooting", or "nativization" as Suny calls it), that is, the support of national cadres in the republics' administration and economy, in the Party branches, and in culture and education. *Korenizatsiia* thus encompasses the creation of nations, national political units, as well as national cultures, with Soviet support for national languages (including the creation of certain alphabets, orthographies, and dictionaries), literatures, theaters and orchestras, and schooling.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Victor A. Shnirelman, *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (Osaka 2001), 2-6.

<sup>16</sup> J. V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, 364.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past. Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford USA, 1993), 38-42.

<sup>18</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire, Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, London, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 102-106.

Also according to Francine Hirsch the Soviet Union aimed at a new, non-imperialist model of colonialism as a necessary means for successful modernization of the periphery.<sup>20</sup> Hirsch calls this model a “process of double assimilation” for the colonized (i.e. non-Russian) peoples of the Soviet Empire: a simple farmer from Tambov area, or from Ganja, would have to identify first with a given nation (Russian or Azerbaijani, in these cases), and secondly, these nations would have to assimilate into a common Soviet identity. We could add to this a third level of assimilation: in all of the newly emerging Soviet republics, populations of various ethnic origins and speaking various languages (in Azerbaijan, for instance, Turkic Azeris, the Iranian Kurds, Talyshs and Tats, the Daghestani Avars and Lezgins) would all have to identify with Azerbaijan, as the promoted republican identity. Minorities would sometimes get a subordinated (autonomous, in the best case) status within a given republic, often with co-ethnic brothers living in other republics (as was the case for Armenians in Nagorny Karabakh) or in neighboring states (as in the case for the Turkic-speaking Azeris, the majority of which live in North Western Iran). These three assimilation processes were meant to anchor the many population groups in the new state.<sup>21</sup>

This complex picture presented a huge amount of problems to Soviet historiography. Yuri Slezkine, in his ground-breaking article on the Soviet Union as a “communal apartment” in which nations and nationalities inhabit individual rooms that find themselves on various floors of prestige, argued that all titular nations were supposed to have “great traditions”, and that, if necessary, these traditions had to be invented.<sup>22</sup>

The key condition for a given nation to obtain the privilege of having an own territory, in the form of a Soviet republic or an autonomous republic or district, was, as the Soviet/Russian historian and ethnologist Victor Shnirelman has demonstrated, historical evidence of indigenesness. This brought the concept of autochtonism to utmost political importance.<sup>23</sup> Soviet historians - and especially those of the “ethnic” non-Russian minorities - were thus continuously asked to produce a past that could meet the political demands of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Francine Hirsch, "Toward an Empire of Nations: Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities", *Russian Review* 59 (April 2000), 202-203.

<sup>21</sup> F. Hirsch, "Toward an Empire of Nations", 204-205.

<sup>22</sup> Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism Authors(s)", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 53, No 2 (1994), 414-417.

<sup>23</sup> V. Shnirelman, *The Value of the Past*, 4-7.

present.<sup>24</sup> Shnirelman unravels the importance of ethnogenesis as part of historiography, giving the following definition: "The ethno-genetic myth is defined as a narrative of ethnic roots, the glorious life of remote ancestors and their feats, the ancient people being represented by a mighty warrior or even cultural hero."<sup>25</sup>

From this resulted the politically prestigious role of historians as architects and myth-makers of the nation. While the invention of a glorious past and the production of national identity were designed as effective instruments for Sovietization, it always entailed the danger that historians would use it in their rivalry with neighboring nations, especially over territory and resources. The party line changed several times, and periods of support for national historiography were interchanging with repression. Soviet historians thus laid the foundations not only of national identity and nationalism but over time also for ethnic conflicts that eventually undermined the USSR. Shnirelman argues that an ethnically based nationalist ideology, propagated by (non-Russian) historians, generated constant tensions between competing nations. Important to note here is that according to Shnirelman, "ethnic" scholars were certainly aware of the fact that their work was far from being purely academic, since "after all, they were both victims and executors of this approach".<sup>26</sup>

In the construction of national pasts, Soviet historiography made ample use of epic heroes. One paradigmatic case for the conscious re-introduction, and re-shaping, of historic personalities in the USSR was the period of High Stalinism and WWII, when a number of previously discarded or problematic Russian leaders of the past – from Alexander Nevsky to Ivan the Terrible and beyond – obtained a new Pantheon in Soviet historiography, to support the new form of Soviet Patriotism, for the purposes of "state-building and strengthening the legitimacy of the Party."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the Russian nation was projected as the role model for, and big brother of, the smaller nations of the USSR.<sup>28</sup> Similar national heroes were also re-introduced among non-Russian Soviet nations, as personifications of the desired versions of national identity, to enhance its popular appeal. Alfrid Bustanov mentions the contribution

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>25</sup> V. Shnirelman, "Politics of Ethnogenesis in the USSR and after", *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology* 30(1): 93–119 (2005), 93.

<sup>26</sup> V. Shnirelman, *The Value of the Past*, 383-385.

<sup>27</sup> D. L. Brandenberger and A. M. Dubrovsky, "The People Need a Tsar: the Emergence of National Bolshevism as Stalinist Ideology, 1931-1941", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 50, No 5 (July 1998), 874

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Platt & David Brandenberger, *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Wisconsin, 2006).

of Central Asian archeologists to the revival of Timur (1336-1405) and its significance for Uzbek nationalism.<sup>29</sup> In the case of Azerbaijan a similar campaign was initiated in the late 1930s to launch the Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209) as the national poet of Azerbaijan.<sup>30</sup> Tamazishvili argues that the initiator of this “Nizami Campaign” was First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party Mir Dzhafar Bagirov (1932-1953), in order to disconnect the poet from a Persian heritage, and driven by the desire to provide Azerbaijan with great national heroes.<sup>31</sup> After Stalin’s constitutional change of 1936 the Transcaucasian SSR was dismantled and the three Transcaucasian republics were assigned the status of Union Republics. The newly formed Azerbaijani SSR was in need of national heroes in order to define a clear national identity that was disconnected from Iran or from the Turkic peoples beyond the USSR.<sup>32</sup>

The program of *korenizatsiia* was never officially brought to an end; another issue is of course in how far non-Russian national representatives still felt the dominance of ethnic Russians. Khrushchev's *Thaw* enabled non-Russian elites to depart from some of the most offensive stereotypes of Stalinist historiography; in republics like Azerbaijan this entailed a revisiting of the "bourgeois" period before 1917, and a new appraisal for Muslim literature before the Soviets.<sup>33</sup> In 1958 the Azerbaijani Institute of Oriental Studies was established, which was, besides studying the Near and Middle East, responsible for investigating medieval Azerbaijan. The institute’s first director was the historian Abdulkarim Alizade, and Zia Buniatov was directly from the beginning employed at the institute.<sup>34</sup> One of the topics of interest was the reassessment of Azerbaijani enlighteners that had been banned from the historical palette during Stalin’s repression.<sup>35</sup>

This new return to national roots was circumscribed by the official dogma of the “Friendship of Peoples”, which was the guideline to maintain stability between the Soviet nations. In his 1968 monograph *The Great Friendship*, Lowell Tillett explains how in the late

---

<sup>29</sup> Alfrid Bustanov, *Soviet Orientalism and the Creation of Central Asian Nations*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com> (last accessed 25 September 2018).

<sup>31</sup> A. O. Tamazishvili, A.O., "Iz istorii izucheniia v SSSR tvorchestva Nizami Giandzhevi: vokrug iubileia – E.E. Bertel's, I.V. Stalin i drugie," in: *Neizvestnye stranitsy otechestvennogo vostokovedeniia*, ed. V.V. Naumkin, vol. 2 (Moscow, 2004), 173-198.

<sup>32</sup> Victor Shnirelman, *The Value of the Past*, 102.

<sup>33</sup> Dzhamil Gasanly, *Khrushchevskaia “ottepel’” i natsional’nyi vopros v Azerbaidzhane (1954-1959)* (Moscow, 2009), 137-159.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 495-500.

1950s the revisionist historians were shown their limits by a new public campaign against so-called bourgeois nationalism. The Russian colonial conquests in the Caucasus and Central Asia had to be depicted as processes of “peaceful joining” (*prisoedinenie*) the Russian empire, and historians were stimulated to downplay resistance and rebellion and to emphasize the long-standing friendly ties between the respective nation and the Russians. Equally important was to insist on the cordial ties between the own nation and the neighboring Soviet peoples, as was the case with Azerbaijan and Armenia.<sup>36</sup> Yet the official ideology often competed with the nationalist aspirations of scholars and politicians of the different republics. In the case of Azerbaijan and Armenia, the major bone of contention was the dispute over the region of Nagorny Karabakh, and on both sides historians provided scientific legitimacy to political claims. This conflict between scholars in both Baku and Yerevan is central in several chapters of the present thesis.

## **Soviet Oriental Studies**

Soviet historiography of the periphery was usually embedded in Oriental studies, an umbrella discipline with great prestige among students and the intellectual elite. The study of Oriental languages (and also of western languages, as auxiliaries) opened the door to, for example, professional careers in the diplomatic services, and thus to travels abroad. Next to that also purely academic studies of Oriental texts were highly respected in the Soviet Union. And for students from the Soviet republics of the South Caucasus and Central Asia (who might have some background in Oriental languages already from their preceding education) a career in Oriental studies was a clear form of upward mobility.

Important for any discussion of the place of Oriental studies in the Soviet Union, and of a particular Orientalist from Soviet Azerbaijan, is of course the critique that the concept of “Orientalism”, and Oriental studies, have received in the West. This western discourse on “Orientalism” goes back to the 1950s and 1960s, but has been most strongly marked by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a work with a huge impact on the humanities in general and Oriental studies in specific.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> L. Tillett, *The Great Friendship – Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 273-278.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978).

Said employs the term “Orientalism” in several meanings. On the one hand, he identified it as the academic study of the Orient: "anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient – and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian or philologist – either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism."<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>39</sup> While the first definition is limiting the use of the term to academic studies (and thus to “Oriental studies” as a broad umbrella for specific disciplines of research on and in the “Orient”), Said's second definition is much broader, and includes anything that is written or said or done with relation to the Orient. Both are directly connected to the establishment and exercise of Western power over the Orient. Said explains that the concept of the "Orient" is also a Western construction of an essentialist image of “the Other”, partly as an instrument to define itself. In his book Said offers an eclectic selection of authors and works – from Flaubert to Byron, and even Marx – who seem to corroborate his thesis. Said's provocative work - and the several addenda that he provided to it, like *Culture and Imperialism*<sup>40</sup> -provoked a huge number of responses, both by defenders of the virtues of "Orientalists" and by scholars who find Said's paradigm compelling.

The centerpiece of Said's argument is the translation of “Orientalist” images into political power – and it is in this respect that his work is also important to my thesis. Critics have pointed out that Said gave an oversimplified view of Western Oriental studies, by claiming that the discipline was mainly a manifestation of Eurocentric prejudice vis-à-vis the East. Jorgen Nielsen argues that Said's selective use of sources, his extreme arguments and adventurous interpretations give the book a strong polemic quality, and "an often disjointed line of reasoning."<sup>41</sup> Bernard Lewis (one of the Western Orientalists heavily attacked in Said's book) <sup>42</sup> responded by criticizing Orientalism for Said's lack of research on Russian,

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>40</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Jorgen Nielsen, “Orientalism and Anti-Orientalism: is there a Middle Way?”, *Ethnology of Sufi Orders: Theory and Practice, Proceedings of the British-Bulgarian Workshop on Sufi Orders* (19-23 May 2000), 339.

<sup>42</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 315-321.

German or Soviet contributions to the discipline; this negligence, so Lewis, completely refuted Said's interpretation. Also, Lewis claimed that Western Orientalism (or Oriental studies) emerged from humanism, not imperialism, and he rejected Said's allegation that all Western (French, British, US) Orientalists can be lumped together – and that in all cases knowledge was bound to power.<sup>43</sup> Said was inspired by Michel Foucault's concept of discourse, and had argued implicitly that a “Westerner” will never be able to escape “Orientalism” (and thus colonialism) because the discourse does not empower him to do so.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Said argues that Orientalists give the Orient “no voice” - but in his own book Said does not even contemplate about possible “Oriental” reactions to Orientalism and he does not reflect on Orientalism as a possible instrument of colonialism in the Soviet Union.

With Ziya Buniatov we encounter a “Western” (Soviet, Moscow-educated) Orientalist (in the academic sense of the term) who is writing national historiography in a Western (Marxist, and nationalist) framework, at a Western (Soviet/Azerbaijani) Oriental studies institution. Central issues of the debate on Said are therefore re-occurring in my thesis: the knowledge-power relation, exemplified in the support that Buniatov's historical works provided to the legitimacy of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan, and later to independent Azerbaijan. Yet importantly, Buniatov belonged to the type of “Oriental” Orientalists, that is, secular scholars with a Muslim background who operated within the Soviet system, no matter whether we want to call the latter “colonial” (“the Soviet empire”) or “post-colonial”. Particularly “Soviet” in Buniatov's approach was his impetus to describe history “how it was”, that is, by thoroughly empirical studies, which, in his mind, were neutral and “rightful”, while his opponents – mostly the Armenian scholars (as “another Soviet Oriental nation”, albeit Christian) - were “wrong” in their assessments of Caucasian history. That is, I argue that Buniatov belonged to the sort of Orientalists who did not question the veracity of their political statements, and who did not question the political framework in which they operated, while at the same time insisting that he was adhering to the highest standards of empirical research. In the chapters that follow we will repeatedly challenge these claims of the scholars.

---

<sup>43</sup> Bernard Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism” (1993), *Orientalism: Reader*, ed. by A.L. Macfie (2000), 249-271.

<sup>44</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 94.

From this perspective, Buniatov appears as a typical Soviet Orientalist – a representative of a system that fused the Russian imperial tradition of Oriental studies with Marxism and with Soviet nationality policies.

The Russian imperial tradition of Oriental studies has only recently been subjected to theory-informed research. In their famous debate about Russian Orientalism, Adeeb Khalid and Nathaniel Knight came to contradictory evaluations about the usefulness of Said's paradigm for the Russian case: while Knight took the example of the Russian Orientalist Grigorev to demonstrate that Russian Orientalists had little effect on the administration of Russia's "Oriental" (Muslim) populations,<sup>45</sup> Khalid showed that another Russian scholar, Ostroumov, perfectly fitted the paradigm.<sup>46</sup>

In his article "Why are we marginal?" (2008) Vladimir Bobrovnikov gives a critical review of the first complete Russian translation of Said's *Orientalism*, which appeared as late as 2006. Bobrovnikov expresses his disappointment with the editors' apparent lack of understanding of the book's theoretical framework; in their introduction they ignored the fact that the target of Said's critique on Orientalism is the essentialist Western view of the Orient as "the Other": they take this as an attack only on the West and ignore that also Russia can have an essentialist view. For the majority of Russian/former-Soviet scholars, Said's work remained in the first place an anti-western manifesto of a westernized Arab, according to Bobrovnikov;<sup>47</sup> an application of Said's critique also to Russian Oriental scholarship has not yet appeared in Russia.

Also David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, in his detailed study of Russian Orientalism, produces a rather ambiguous picture. He argues that already before the Revolution of 1917 one could see an entanglement of political and academic interests.<sup>48</sup> The situation in Tsarist Russia however was, according to Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, much more complicated since the empire had ambivalent relations with both Europe and Asia; vis-à-vis Europe, Russia was itself part of the Orient, or had the East within its own borders. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye describes many Russian Orientalists as seriously driven by a

---

<sup>45</sup> Nathaniel Knight, "Grigor'ev in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?", *Slavic Review* 59 (2000), 74-100.

<sup>46</sup> Adeeb Khalid, "Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism," *Kritika* 1 (2000), 691-699.

<sup>47</sup> V. Bobrovnikov, "Pochemu my marginaly?", *Ab Imperio* (2/2008), 335-340.

<sup>48</sup> D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism* (London & New Haven, 2010), 4-10.

thirst of knowledge, and not as instruments of colonial politics of the empire. According to him, Russian Orientalism is rather a cultural phenomenon, more than political.<sup>49</sup>

Vera Tolz, in her work on late imperial and early Soviet Oriental studies, even demonstrates that some Russian Orientalists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century developed critiques of their discipline that foreshadow many of the points that Said made 50 years later; she suggested that Said took some of his inspiration from the Great Soviet Encyclopedia's entry on Oriental studies, which was written by the early Soviet Indologist Sergei Ol'denburg, and which Said was even aware of via an article of 1964 by Anour Abdel-Malek.<sup>50</sup>

Against this background, Soviet Oriental studies appear as a fundamental break with imperial Orientology, but also as a continuation of the above-mentioned critical trend within pre-Soviet Oriental studies. Michael Kemper argues that Oriental studies in the USSR were developed with a view to strong relations with the foreign Orient, mainly for the purpose of achieving hegemony in the former colonial world, in rivalry with the West.<sup>51</sup> A second but no less important task for Soviet Orientalists was to define particular Soviet cultural and historical identities in the domestic Orient.<sup>52</sup> Exactly this second branch of the discipline is the subject of this thesis: to what extent were Soviet Oriental studies an instrument of Soviet policy to dominate and transform the domestic Orient, in this case Soviet Azerbaijan?

To analyse the question of Soviet Orientalism it might be useful to start with the period when the Soviet infrastructure of Oriental studies was established. Early Soviet Oriental Studies was in the first place developed in relation to the foreign Orient, with regard to the processes of decolonization. The Orient was thus a field of competition between the Soviet Union and the Western world, as both were fighting for hegemony in the former colonized world. The initiative for the development of Marxist Oriental studies was taken shortly after World War I when the Bolsheviks proclaimed their support for anti-colonial revolutions in the Orient.<sup>53</sup> The Baku "Congress of the Peoples of the East" of 1920 was a

---

<sup>49</sup> D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*, 7-11.

<sup>50</sup> Vera Tolz, "European, National and (Anti-) Imperial: The Formation of Academic Oriental Studies in Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Russia", in: *Kritika* 9, 1 (2008), 53-82. Anour Abdel-Malek, "Orientalism in Crisis", *Diogenes*, No. 44 (Winter 1963), 104-112.

<sup>51</sup> M. Kemper, "Introduction: Integrating Soviet Oriental Studies", in *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, 2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

festive start of the new policy, and Muslims from the Middle East were invited to fight western colonialism and follow the example of the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup>

In response to this congress the Bolsheviks set up a “Communist University of the Toilers of the East” in Moscow in 1921, as a party-school for communists from Muslim countries.<sup>55</sup> In the same year the Moscow Narimanov Institute of Oriental Studies (MIV) was founded, a party-school for Oriental languages and history. This institute, which was built on the basis of the former Lazarev Institute, was, until it was closed down in 1954, the most important institute for training diplomats, translators and other specialists of the East who had to work in the foreign or domestic Orient.

The Lazarev Institute, the precursor of the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies, had housed the study of Oriental languages since 1815. Originally established by an Armenian merchant family as a school for Armenian pupils from trade backgrounds, over the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Lazarev Institute transformed into a major school for also training Russian and Georgian experts on the Russian Orient, who would later find employment in the administration or military; it thus responded to the colonial interests of the Russian empire.<sup>56</sup> Its main objective was the training of officers who would represent the Russian government in the Caucasus, especially after the annexation of the region by Russia in the 1820s.<sup>57</sup> Since its foundation the institute was under Armenian control until a complete reform was carried out after the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>58</sup> In the first reform of 1918/19 the Bolsheviks kept the institute under Armenian control, most likely to obtain the support of independent Armenia to join the Soviet Union.<sup>59</sup> But soon the Soviets found it more imperative to develop relations with Turkey, and to develop skills into that direction; the Lazarev Institute became from 1920 more focused on the Muslim world, and turned into a Soviet teaching institute, the Moscow Narimanov Institute of Oriental Studies (MIV, *Moskoskii Institut Vostokovedenie*).<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>55</sup> Masha Kirasirova, “Sons of Muslims’ in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the Foreign East, 1955-1962”, *Ab Imperio* 4/2011, 106-132.

<sup>56</sup> D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*, 176.

<sup>57</sup> A. Bazilians, *Lazarevskii Institut v istorii otechestvennogo vostokovedeniia* (Moscow, 1973), 191-197.

<sup>58</sup> M. Kemper, “Red Orientalism”: Mikhail Pavlovich and Marxist Oriental Studies in Early Soviet Russia”, in *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 50 (2010), 459.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 459.

From the 1920s the Marxist branch of Oriental studies was thus located in Moscow, and the contemporary foreign East was a new focus of research for the new generation of Marxist Orientalists. The pre-revolutionary classical branch, focusing on ancient history and traditional philology, continued in Leningrad, at the old Asiatic Museum. And thus Soviet Oriental Studies were from the beginning divided into a classical branch with a focus on the study of old manuscripts, based in Leningrad, and a branch in Moscow that focused on the modern, foreign Orient.<sup>61</sup>

Early Soviet Oriental scholars were in the first place responsible for providing the state with information and knowledge about the modern East, and so their new responsibility was quite different from their predecessors in Tsarist Russia, who had been focused on old manuscripts and history. Michael Kemper argues that Marxist Oriental studies used a clearly anti-Orientalist rhetoric, which means that they had the pretension to free the East from “bourgeois” imperialism and colonialism. At the same time however, also Marxist Orientalists employed classical “Orientalist” stereotypes and metaphors, and in spite of their anti-colonial rhetoric, they supported similar approaches towards the Orient as the “imperialist Western world”.<sup>62</sup>

An example of Soviet Euro-centrism (and thus “Orientalism”) is how in the 1920s Soviet scholars attempted to establish the “class character” of early Islam. Was Islam originally feudal, capitalist, or perhaps socialist *avant la lettre*? In the 1920s Marxist scholars still enjoyed a relative freedom to experiment with Marx and Islam, and many different views could coexist. This period ended with Collectivization, and with the Cultural Revolution: by 1932 Soviet writers could express only one view on Islam: Islam was a feudal movement, and as such counter-revolutionary. Many Orientalists who had voiced divergent ideas in the 1920s were persecuted, at the same time as almost all mosques and Islamic school were closed, since Islam was now labeled as “counter-revolutionary”.<sup>63</sup>

Around the same time the Bolshevists also established full control over the academic scholars that had not ventured into political writings. Oriental studies in Leningrad were often attacked for continuing the Russian “bourgeois” tradition, but the Soviet government confined to support them. The Bolsheviks must have understood the importance of traditional

---

<sup>61</sup> M. Kemper, “Introduction: Integrating Soviet Oriental Studies”, 3.

<sup>62</sup> M. Kemper, “Red Orientalism”, 435.

<sup>63</sup> M. Kemper, “The Soviet Discourse on the Origin and Class Character of Islam, 1923-1933”, *Die Welt des Islam*, vol. 49 (1) (2009), 30-33.

scholarship and, once the control over the Leningrad scholars was considered satisfactory around 1929, the Asiatic Museum was upgraded to the status of an academic institute, the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences (IVAN, *Institut vostokovedeniia akademii nauk*) in 1930. This institute was transferred to Moscow in 1950, with the manuscript collection of IVAN remaining in Leningrad lost as a branch of Moscow's IVAN. Thus for a few years there were two institutes of Oriental studies in Moscow: the party-school MIV and the academic IVAN. In 1954 MIV was abolished, with part of its teaching transferred to the Institute of Asia and Africa of Moscow State University (MGU).<sup>64</sup>

While Soviet Oriental institutions were thus in the first place responsible for research on the foreign contemporary Orient, they also continued to investigate the past and present of Central Asia and the Caucasus, the “Muslim” republics of the USSR. This second field of study was considered by many Soviet historians and Orientalists to be less political, more independent, and therefore more “academic” in character. This important issue will be revisited in the present PhD thesis, in the context of Buniatov's work at various institutions of Soviet Oriental studies. In the former Soviet Union, the politicization of Oriental studies is hardly ever discussed; scholars either took this politicization for granted, or they were - and perhaps still are - trapped in a Soviet-style discourse regarding the study of the past. This naivety may seem remarkable, especially since historiography had such enormous consequences for nationality policies, and in the 1980s for the escalating conflicts like the one in Nagorny Karabakh. The broader question whether Soviet Oriental studies was an instrument to dominate the Orient of course links us back to the question, briefly alluded to above, of whether the USSR can be seen as a colonial empire, having its colonies not overseas but within its own borders.<sup>65</sup>

The period from the 1930s to the early 1950s is thus characterized by repression of both Islam and of scholars working on Islam. Yet after Stalin's death in 1953 and with the start of Khrushchev's Thaw, the discipline entered a new stage of stability and even expansion, and was taken out of its Stalinist isolation from the West.<sup>66</sup> Khrushchev's active Third World policy and growing nationalism in the non-Russian republics asked for a comprehensive restructuring of the Oriental institutions, a process that was led by former

---

<sup>64</sup> M. Kemper, "Introduction: Integrating Soviet Oriental Studies", 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>66</sup> M. Kemper, "Propaganda for the East, Scholarship for the West. Soviet strategies at the 1960 International Congress of Orientalists in Moscow", *Reassessing Orientalism: Interlocking Orientologies during the Cold War*, ed. by Michael Kemper and Artemy Kalinovsky (London, 2015), 170-210.

First Secretary of the Tajik Communist Party, historian Bobodzhan Gafurovich Gafurov (1908-1977). It is in this era that Ziia Buniyatov started his career at the Oriental institute of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan in 1958. But before turning to Buniyatov, let us briefly look at the emergence and development of Soviet Oriental studies in Azerbaijan.

## **Oriental Studies in Azerbaijan**

In 1922 the USSR was established as a Union of national republics. The three south Caucasus states Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, which had all become independent states in 1918 and then occupied by the Bolsheviks in 1920/21, were turned into Soviet Socialist Republics; all three of them were then included into a new federation, the Trans-Caucasian SFSR, which existed until 1936.

One major bone of contention was the region of Nagorny Karabakh (the former province Elisavetpol' in Tsarist times), which had a majority Armenian population and an Azeri minority.<sup>67</sup> In July 1921 the Soviet leadership made Nagorny Karabakh part of the Armenian SSR but a day later Stalin changed his decision: the region should be part of Azerbaijan.<sup>68</sup> This change of assignment is mostly explained by the Kremlin's policy towards the Republic of Turkey: Lenin and Stalin saw Atatürk as a potential ally.<sup>69</sup> Within the Azerbaijani SSR, Nagorny Karabakh received the status of autonomous oblast', and its borders were determined in 1923.<sup>70</sup> In 1936, after the dissolution of the Transcaucasian SFSR, Nagorny Karabakh, with its status of autonomous region, remained part of the Azerbaijani Socialist Soviet Republic. The status of the Autonomous oblast' Nagorny Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan would be fiercely contested by the Armenians, who in the 1920s constituted 94% of the population.<sup>71</sup>

The creation of Soviet national republics in the Caucasus, with the various autonomous and semi-autonomous regions within a given republic, was part of the Kremlin's bigger project of nation-building for non-Russian nations and nationalities. This also

---

<sup>67</sup> R. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment. Russia, The USSR, and the Successor States* (New York & Oxford, 1998), 463.

<sup>68</sup> T. de Waal, *Black Garden*, 129-130.

<sup>69</sup> Dzhamil Gasanly, *SSSR-Turtsiia: ot neitraliteta k kholodnoi voine 1939-1953* (Moscow, 2008), 20-22.

<sup>70</sup> T. de Waal, *Black Garden*, 130.

<sup>71</sup> T. de Waal, *Black Garden*, 130.

demanding the construction of national historiographies, of new forms of collective memory. However, it also demanded a collective forgetting of the past: “folklorization” of culture was used against literate traditions, in order to bring about a break with the past, as Michiel Leezenberg argued in the case of Kurds and Armenians, who were isolated from their cosmopolitan cultural roots due to this policy.<sup>72</sup>

The construction of collective memories or historiographies required the establishment of research and teaching institutions. One of the main projects of the Bolsheviks was to educate and elevate the periphery to a higher level of social, political and cultural life. The first step was creating an infrastructure that could make this possible. Everywhere in the newly established Soviet republics emerged orchestras, opera companies, universities, conservatories or research institutions, on the basis of which republican Academies of Sciences were established. Moscow took the responsibility to educate the Soviet Orient, also with the goal of making a clear break with previous colonialism or imperialism.

The Baku State University had already been established in the short period of Azerbaijan's independence, between 1918 and 1920. After the fall of the independent republic, the Bolsheviks integrated the university into the Soviet system, “which created good conditions for the development of the humanities in Azerbaijan, particularly for Oriental studies”, as we can read in Baziiants’ standard work on Centers of Oriental studies in the USSR (Moscow, 1988), in which the part on Azerbaijan was produced by a team of scholars of the Azerbaijani Institute of Oriental Studies, led by Ziaa Buniatov.<sup>73</sup>

In 1922 the Faculty of Oriental Studies was established at Azerbaijan State University. The main topics of study were “the history, literature and ethnography of Turkic-speaking peoples, on the basis of the Marx-Leninist methodology.”<sup>74</sup> One of the first key events organized by the Oriental Faculty was the first All-Union Congress of Turkologists of 1926, on which the delegates stated their support for the introduction of an adapted Latin alphabet for the Azerbaijani language, replacing the Arabic script that had been in use until then.<sup>75</sup> This episode of course displays the close relationship between the new Soviet Oriental

---

<sup>72</sup> Michiel Leezenberg, “A People Forgotten by History”, *Iranian Studies*, 2Vol. 48, No.5, (2015) 748.

<sup>73</sup> Baziiants, *Vostokovednye tsentry v SSSR: Azerbaidzhan, Armeniia, Gruzii, Ukraina* (Moscow, 1988), 2-45.

<sup>74</sup> Baziiants, *Vostokovednye tsentry v SSSR*, 8-9.

<sup>75</sup> Jörg Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall* (München, 2003), 609-632.

studies in Azerbaijan and state/Party policies.<sup>76</sup> The Latinization (finally implemented in 1928) was meant to distance the Azerbaijanis from their Islamic past, and also to draw it from the Oriental world (where the Arabic script was common) into the orbit of the Western world; it was a move to radical modernization. The idea was that Latin was more suited to facilitate the spread of mass literacy. The choice of Latin, and not of Cyrillic, for the Azerbaijanis (as well as for most other Muslim nations and nationalities of the USSR) is usually interpreted as an attempt to avoid the impression that the Soviets were Russianizing, and continuing the colonial rule of the Tsarist period.<sup>77</sup>

Next to the university other institutions of research were established, which can be regarded as precursors of the future Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences. 1923 saw the creation of a Society of Research and Study, reorganized in 1929 into an Azerbaijan State Scientific Research Institute. Its Oriental department focused on the "coordination of education and research, and the training of scientific cadres of Azerbaijan."<sup>78</sup> The work of the scholars was devoted to the "study, systematization and publication of sources on philology, art, archaeology and ethnography of Azerbaijan." This Society was composed of sections for economy, history and ethnography, with subsections for Turkology, art and linguistics, and a Bureau that was concerned with the Foreign Orient. This Research Institute was transformed into the Azerbaijani Branch of the Trans-Caucasian Affiliate Organization of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, out of which the Azerbaijani Branch of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR was established in 1935. According to the Azerbaijani authors in Baziiants's work, this was a "huge step in the development of Azerbaijani humanities in general and Oriental studies in particular."<sup>79</sup>

By decree of the Council of Peoples Commissars of the USSR, in 1945 this Azerbaijani branch was transformed into an Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijani SSR. Before the war, only Ukraine and Belorussia had their own academies, in other republics the research infrastructure was still in development. Most republican Academies of Sciences

---

<sup>76</sup> Andreas Frings, "Cyrillization = Russification: Pitfalls in the Interpretation of Soviet Alphabet Policy", in: *Kampf um Wort und Schrift. Russifizierung in Osteuropa im 19.-20. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Zaur Gasimov (Göttingen, 2012), 125-137.

<sup>77</sup> Jörg Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall*, 609-632.

<sup>78</sup> Baziiants, *Vostokovednye tsentry v SSSR*, 8-10.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

were established during World War II, such as the Georgian Academy in 1941, and the Armenian Academy in 1943.<sup>80</sup>

In 1954 the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences established the Institute of History of Foreign Eastern Countries, with the aim to coordinate systematic research into the Orient. The focus was put on historical, political, economic and cultural development of the Near and Middle East.<sup>81</sup> In this institute Buniatov started his career as a senior scholar in the year of establishment 1954. Four years later this institute was transformed into a full-fledged Institute of Oriental Studies (which later, between 1967 and 1984, ran under the name “Institute of the Peoples of the Near and Middle East”).<sup>82</sup>

The first director of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Baku was Abdulkarim Ali ogly Alizade, born in 1906 in what would become later the Azerbaijani SSR. He had studied in the 1920s at the Leningrad Teaching Institute for Oriental Languages and was an Arabist-historian specialized in the Medieval history of Azerbaijan. In the 1930s Alizade had a teaching position at Leningrad University, but in 1936 he was transferred to the Institute of History of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, of which he became director in 1944. In 1958 he was appointed director of the recently established Institute of Oriental Studies in Baku.<sup>83</sup> Alizade represented classical Arabic and Persian studies, with text editions of Nizami and Arabic treatises on the art of scribe. Alizade was Buniatov’s direct superior in the late 1950s until he was replaced by Alisohbat Sumbatzade (1907-1992) in 1963.

The research was embedded in Marxist discourse and in Soviet policy towards the Orient. Despite the political focus on monitoring and investigating the “foreign orient”, the Oriental institute in Azerbaijan (as well as its equals in other Soviet republics) maintained a strong research line on national history. Within the official framework of the “Friendship of Peoples” dogma, the national Academy of Azerbaijan had to watch over the development of a collective past and identity that would not be too aggressive towards Azerbaijan's neighbors; this view also limited the scope of interpretations on historical subjects like the Arabic conquest of the south Caucasus. Scholars who would go too far faced the danger of being

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.,10.

<sup>81</sup> Directors of the institute were in succession: A. Alizade (1958-63), A. Sumbatzade (1963-1970), H. Arasly (1970-81), Z. Buniatov (1981-86 & 1988-91). Baziiants, *Vostokovednye tsentry v SSSR*, 10

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>83</sup> “Alizade, Abdulkarim Ali”, in S. D. Miliband, *Bibliograficheskii slovar' sovetskikh vostokovedov* (Moscow, 1975), 64.

accused of being chauvinists and bourgeois nationalists.<sup>84</sup> At the same time the scholars had to serve the national interests of their own republic, which would become even more significant with respect to the growing nationalism in the following decades. Among Azerbaijani historians and orientalists there were few open conflicts though; most of my informants argue that the scholars largely followed the official line, and there were no real dissidents among them.

When in 1977 Evgenii Primakov succeeded Gafurov as director of IVAN of the USSR Academy of Sciences the discipline further politicized, mainly as a reaction to new international challenges that confronted the Soviet Union. Traditionally two directions of Oriental Studies existed: a first trend that studied the internal Orient of the Turkic and Caucasian peoples of the Soviet Union and a second trend that studied the foreign Orient. Under Primakov this second trend became dominant, both in Moscow and in the republics.<sup>85</sup> In spite of this, Buniatov certainly belonged to the first trend and his priority was the ancient and medieval history of Azerbaijan and the Middle East. Still, his historical work would have strong political implications.

It seems that after 1977 the connections between Oriental Studies and the KGB, the Communist Party of the USSR, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs increased with far-reaching consequences also for the institute in Baku. More young Arabists from the AzSSR, including Buniatov's students, were sent to Arab countries and Afghanistan as translators. In this atmosphere of politicization the study of medieval history offered attractive possibilities to stay in the lee of political storm.<sup>86</sup>

### **This thesis: structure and questions**

In spite of the fact that historical studies were apparently less of a political priority Zia Buniatov made his field of study extraordinary prestigious, especially if we look at his contribution to the concept of a national identity closely connected with the ancient past of his country. In fact Buniatov's work would become of great political interest in the following

---

<sup>84</sup> D. Brandenberger, "...It is Imperative to Advance Russian Nationalism as the First Priority", *A State of Nations*, Oxford 2001, 275-289.

<sup>85</sup> The Institute of Oriental Studies of Leningrad would maintain the image of being focused on the classical tradition of the discipline (Interview with M. Usmanov, professor of Tatar history of the University of Kazan', conducted by telephone, Amsterdam, November 2009).

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Arabist Farda Asadov, who worked as a translator in Iraq from 1977 till 1979 (interview conducted by Sara Crombach, Baku, August 2009).

decades. What follows is an outline of the present thesis, in which I introduce the questions that I will address in the three chapters as well as the structure in which these issues are presented.

The first chapter describes the life of Buniiatov against the background of politics and society, between his birth in 1923 and the *Perestroika* period. Chapter two focuses on Buniiatov's contribution to Azerbaijani history-writing in the same period. The third chapter explores both biography and publications of the scholar during *Perestroika*, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh and in the early years of independence. This chapter also investigates Buniiatov's contribution to scholarship and politics in post-Soviet Azerbaijan after the return of Heidar Aliev as second president of independent Azerbaijan.

In the first chapter I analyze Buniiatov's youth, his experience in WWII, his later education, and his academic career to 1987. Buniiatov's trajectory will take us from a peripheral region of Soviet Azerbaijan to Baku, Berlin, Moscow, Leningrad, and again Baku. By chronologically revealing his biography from his birth in 1923 to his (temporary) downfall as a national icon in the late 1980s, I intend to deconstruct the many myths surrounding his heroic image, in order to get a better understanding of their function for national identity-building and nationalism. The late 1980s are a breaking point in the biography of Buniiatov. In the light of political reform Buniiatov risked losing his academic status and his immense popularity. After all, he represented the old socialist values that were no longer fashionable in the heyday of *Perestroika*.

The second chapter focuses on the period from 1958, when his first article was published, to 1987, i.e. until the outbreak of the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh. Which issues of research were important to Buniiatov and how did his work on these issues develop over time? The focus is on his source studies on the ancient Caucasus state of Albania, and on the significance of its heritage for the Azerbaijani nation. For Buniiatov, Caucasian Albania was the cradle of the nation, a theory that offered several politically important advantages, such as the idea of the Azerbaijani people as an ancient nation indigenous to the region. In this context Nagorny Karabakh had to be presented as an intrinsic part of Ancient Caucasian Albania, in order to defend the territorial policy of the USSR with regard to the region, namely its inclusion into Azerbaijan.

Chapter three continues the biographical trajectory of the scholar, and covers the period 1986-1997. It starts with the time when the Communist Party lost its legitimacy, with the nationalist Popular Front Party taking power. The USSR disintegrated, Azerbaijan regained independence, and the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh turned into war. Here I argue that issues such as the conflict, the rise and fall of the Popular Front, the disintegration of the USSR and subsequent independence had a tremendous impact on Buniatov, and that the scholar quickly adapted to the new circumstances.

In Azerbaijan, young Orientalists and historians of the Academy of Sciences in Baku, belonged to the most assertive activists that brought about political changes. The frustrations of these young scholars, combined with the hope offered by Gorbachev's *Perestroika*, led to the establishment of the Popular Front Movement: while it started as an elitist, liberal movement, the Popular Front ended up as a nationalist, populist political party.

How did Buniatov, as a defender of a clear nationalist agenda, but also as a representative of the older generation, relate to these junior scholars of the 1980s? What was the influence of Buniatov on the conflict and subsequent war with Armenians over NKAO? In 1993 former party-boss Geidar Aliev and the old Communist elite returned to power, ending the period of chaos and open war; how did Buniatov re-establish his place and authority?

Although Buniatov's work had always carried a political message, in the second half of the 1980s his political agenda becomes less veiled: in this period his publications are openly aggressive towards Armenia, and first of all meant to mobilize the nation with regard to the escalating conflict over Nagorny Karabakh.

Overall the argument of the present thesis is that Buniatov made a tremendous contribution to national pride by inventing a glorious past for the Azerbaijani nation that managed to reconcile several contradicting elements. His historical canon was, and still is, of great significance for the process of nation-building, first within the context of the USSR, and after 1991 for independent Azerbaijan.

Much of the present thesis is devoted to analyzing Buniatov's strategies in his life-long endeavour, and therefore to deconstruct the images he established. The official publications, as well as my interviews with Buniatov's widow Tagira and several of his disciples, construct the myth around Buniatov, whereas another group of sources (my

interviews with senior Orientalists in Moscow as well as with Azerbaijani intellectuals who knew him, as well as their writings) challenge the mythmaking.

It was almost impossible to get access to the archives in Baku, with few exceptions; even Buniatov's personal archive in the Institute of Oriental Studies was hardly accessible for research. The limited accessibility of archives in Azerbaijan defined the limits of my historical research; it also forced me to make full use of oral history. These interviews, both with Buniatov's friends and with his critics, are mostly very personal; they touch upon the interviewees' own political development and activities, as well as their personal stake in Azerbaijan. I interviewed most of the founders of the Azerbaijani Popular Front who played an important role in society in probably the most turbulent years of post-war Azerbaijan. In a way, my thesis therefore also contributes to the history of Azerbaijan in the turbulent first half of the 1990s, emphasizing the role of Orientalists in the political changes.

## **The research questions**

Overall, my thesis analyses the function of Buniatov's scholarly publications for Azerbaijani society in general and for historiography in particular. The process of mythmaking around his work and personality is a key topic of my research.

The first group of questions focuses on the scholarly publications of Buniatov. How did Buniatov, with his contribution to historiography, become a theoretician of national identity? Which issues of research were important to him and how did his work on these issues develop over time? How did the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, of which Buniatov was the director for many years, contribute to the creation of Azerbaijan's national identity? I look both at his professional years in Baku and his formative years in Moscow and Leningrad. What was the influence of his education at the "political" MIV, and later at the Leningrad Branch of the "academic" IVAN? Which scholarly and political networks did Buniatov establish in order to disseminate his ideological message? In which way has his work been reassessed after the break-down of the Soviet Union, and in today's Azerbaijan? It is my aim to place the role of Oriental studies, and Azerbaijani historiography as a part of it, within the context of politics and society. By analyzing Buniatov's major works I intend to illustrate the development of his discourse from the 1950s to the 1990s, and its relation to the socio-political events of these decades, such as growing nationalism, the end of the Soviet Union, independence, and the conflict

with Armenia over Nagorny Karabakh. In other words: what was, and perhaps still is, the political significance of Buniiatov's contribution to a new historical canon?

The second group of questions concerns Azerbaijani society, culture and politics. What is the interaction between the heroic image of Buniiatov, the mythological, heroic national past he invented, and modern Azerbaijani identity? From the rise of his star in the 1950s until the decline of Soviet Union in the late 1980s, Buniiatov was a highly respected scholar and Soviet citizen who supposedly enjoyed an unassailable status, in Baku and Moscow, while at the same time being regarded as an alleged dissident. What can we discover in this respect about his relationship with Azerbaijani party boss Geidar Aliev?

The third group of questions is related to the process of mythmaking around Buniiatov's personality. What is the interaction between national identity and the personal image of Buniiatov? Or: to what extent are the mythological features of Buniiatov perceived as intrinsic to national identity? Who are the actors in the process of myth-making, and which groups are addressed by the various heroic ingredients? What is the image of the scholar today? Is he still viewed in Azerbaijan as martyr, icon and perhaps even the conscience of the nation?

# **Chapter I:**

## **Rise and heyday of a hero-scholar:**

### **Biography of Ziaa Musaevich Buniatov (1923-1986)**

#### **Introduction**

The task of this chapter is to scrutinize the biography and personality of Ziaa Musaevich Buniatov (1923-1997), and how he became one of the founding fathers of Azerbaijani historiography. Just like his patron and Azerbaijani party-boss Geidar Aliev (1923-2003), Buniatov belonged to a specific generation – the first generation born in the USSR – and their biographies show remarkable similarities. Both were raised under Stalinism, made their careers during Khrushchev and Brezhnev, were demoted from their highest positions in the Gorbachev period, and made a successful comeback in the early 1990s when Azerbaijan became an independent country. The Azerbaijani Orientalist and historian Buniatov was a classic example of a Soviet scholar operating in the Soviet periphery and navigating between the ideological demands of Moscow and of Azeri nationalism.

In the introduction I gave an overview of the academic and political context in which Ziaa Musaevich Buniatov had to operate. The first chapter tells the story of Buniatov's life and career in this context, from his birth in 1923 until the decline of the Soviet system in the late 1980s. The last decade of his life, from 1987 until 1997, is analyzed in the third chapter of the present thesis.

Buniatov's personality, as presented in "official" (published) biographies, is full of contradictions. I argue that this production of his image as a "living legend" was a joint effort of himself, his widow, and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences in Baku. This heroic image is often at odds with memories of colleagues, former students, and other contemporaries, who nuance or challenge the carefully constructed hagiography of the Soviet hero. These oral testimonies add extra dimensions and depth to the life of a paradoxical personality. This chapter is therefore an attempt to deconstruct the mythological image of Buniatov, in order to understand the function of this myth for national identity in Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

Buniatov's widow Tagira (1924-2016) is certainly the most important source of information regarding the first decades of the scholar's life. Many biographic details on Buniatov's childhood, war memories and student life in Moscow that will be critically discussed below were first systematically formulated in Tagira's published memoirs *Ziia – moia sud'ba* ("Ziia – My Destiny", Baku 2002) as well as in several interviews that I conducted with her between 2009 and 2012.<sup>1</sup> As Party and State archives from Azerbaijan are largely closed for research, for shedding light on the first decades of Buniatov's life I almost exclusively had to rely on Tagira's records, supplemented with a few interviews and articles by Buniatov himself. This source of information is often self-sufficient, paradoxical and clouded by a romantic-heroic view on the past, and in any case practically impossible to verify. Unfortunately most other, supposedly official, biographical information is based on Tagira's testimony, and the same applies to part of the information given by several of my interview partners. In other words: Tagira Buniatova, the major source for this period of Buniatov's life, must be seen not as factual source of information but as an actor who provides interesting insight into the process of mythmaking around the "Father of Azerbaijani historiography". Precisely for this reason it is important to first appreciate the life and personality of our key informant: Buniatov's widow Tagira Geidarovna Kurbanova.

### **Tagira Kurbanova (1924- 2016)**



*Tagira Kurbanova (1924-2016) (Photo: Sara Crombach)*

The following portrait of Tagira's personality and life is completely derived from her own presentation of the past, either published in *Ziia – moia sud'ba*, or revealed in interviews.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", *Sil'nee smerti* (Baku, 2002).

Tagira Geidarovna Kurbanova (or in Azerbaijani: Tagira Heydar qizi Qurbanova) was born in Tashkent on 25 November 1924 to Geidar Kurbanov and his wife Azad Mirbaba Vezirova, both Azerbaijanis from Nagornyi Karabakh who were allegedly forced to flee to Central Asia in 1905-1906 as a result of the massacres between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the region. As we can read in Tagira's memoirs, Geidar Kurbanov was "a wealthy merchant of the first guild" who met his much younger wife in Ashkhabad.<sup>2</sup> After the wedding the couple moved to Tashkent where they had seven children. Tagira was number five. After the revolution Tagira's father lost his possessions and the family lived in great poverty, even more after the collectivization. Her father died of heart failure in 1933.<sup>3</sup>

Tagira's mother, Azad Mirbaba Vezirova, was originally from Shusha in Nagornyi Karabakh, which before the 1917 Revolution constituted the Elizavetpol' province. The Vezirov family was, according to Tagira's testimony, prosperous, art- and music-loving, with their seven children allegedly all excelling in music, poetry and the knowledge of foreign languages. The most successful of the children was Azad's brother Yusif Vezirov who studied law in Kiev. He was the first ambassador of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918-1920) in Turkey and is considered one of the greatest writers of Azerbaijan. Yusif Vezirov wrote under several pennames, including Chamanzaminli (meaning "the man from the green meadow"), and according to Tagira, it was he who authored Azerbaijan's most famous novel *Ali and Nino*. Here we should add that the authorship of this work is still contested to the present day. Tom Reiss, in his bestseller *The Orientalist* (2005), argued that the actual author was Baku-born Jew Lev Nussimbaum.<sup>4</sup> Although the authorship is still mysterious, Tom Reiss's theory is the most convincing so far (meaning that Azerbaijan's most popular novel was not even written by an (ethnic) Azerbaijani). In 2011 the American journalist Betty Blair – who has been acting as some kind of 'cultural ambassador' of Azerbaijan – claimed that Yusif Vezirov, under the pseudonym of Chamanzaminli, was the real author of *Ali and Nino*, a theory that was launched already several years before by Vezirov's children, Tagira's cousins.<sup>5</sup> Betty Blair's lobby for the new theory was quite successful since many Azerbaijanis now seem to believe that Chamanzaminli was the real

---

<sup>2</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 43.

<sup>3</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 43-44.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Reiss, *The Orientalist* (London, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Betty Blair (ed.), "The Core Author of Ali & Nino: does it really matter?", *Azerbaijan International* 15 (Baku, 2011).

author, despite the dubious evidence offered by Blair.<sup>6</sup> Allegedly, Chamanzaminli was arrested during the Great Terror in 1937 as an enemy of the people and sent to Siberia. His manuscript of *Ali and Nino* was supposedly confiscated by unknown people. Many years later, in the early 1990s, Buniatov wrote about Chamanzaminli's case in several Russian-language articles that were later compiled in his Azeri work *Kirmizi Terror* ("Red Terror"), dedicated to Azerbaijani victims of Stalinist terror in the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> This publication will be discussed in the third chapter of the present thesis.

In 1905, during the massacre of Shusha, Azad's father died and her brother Yusif Vezirov could bring his family to safety in Ashkhabad, where Azad Mirbaba Vezirova would several years later meet her future husband Geidar Kurban oglu.<sup>8</sup> When Geidar died in 1933, the young widowed Azad was supposedly awarded with the status of "Mother-Heroine"<sup>9</sup>, but it certainly was not easy to raise seven children in the Soviet Union of the 1930s.

Tagira went to a Tatar school in Tashkent, which she finished in 1942, a year after the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War. As a schoolgirl, she had an early career in the Communist Party, first as senior pioneer leader, and later as secretary of the local *Komsomol*. During the war, at the age of seventeen, Tagira assisted in the hospital of Tashkent where she nursed wounded soldiers. Her role as local *Komsomol* secretary enabled her later to study Turkish in Moscow; according to her own testimony, during the war she was the only Azerbaijani student at the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies (MIV). The student years are a central part of Tagira's book, and this is the period when she first met Ziia Buniatov, who entered MIV in 1946. She was introduced to the hero of the Soviet Union by two common friends, former soldiers who were nursed by Tagira during the war in the Tashkent hospital.<sup>10</sup>

Tagira and Ziia got married in 1947, and soon their first son Dzhamil was born. After her graduation from MIV Tagira did a follow-up as an interpreter for Turkish, which enabled her to work for the editorial board of the Turkish section at USSR State Radio. Reportedly Tagira was the breadwinner for the young family so that Ziia was able to devote himself to research, first as an *aspirant* (PhD candidate) and later as a candidate (post-doc).

---

<sup>6</sup> Surveys among more than fifty students from Baku State University and Baku Khazar University revealed, that almost all students were convinced of Vezirov's authorship. (This survey was conducted by myself, Baku November 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Ziia M. Buniatov, *Kirmizi Terror* (Baku, 1993) 199-204.

<sup>8</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 44-46.

<sup>9</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 46-47.

<sup>10</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 46-47.

In 1954 Ziia was offered a job at the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences and he moved to Baku, much to the dismay of Tagira, who loved her interesting job and life among friends in Moscow, and who had, in spite of her Azerbaijani roots, no connection at all with Azerbaijan. Tagira first remained in Moscow but in 1955 followed her husband to Baku.<sup>11</sup> While Ziia had a successful career at the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences in Baku, Tagira was offered a job as an interpreter at the Azerbaijani state radio. After Ziia was assassinated in 1997, Tagira was offered a job as an interpreter in the library of the Parliament of Azerbaijan in Baku. There she worked almost until the end of her life.

### **A sacred genealogy (1923-1941)**

When Ziia Musaevich was born on 21 December 1923, the Soviet Union was still a recent establishment. His place of birth was Astara, a small town in the south of Azerbaijan, near the Iranian border.<sup>12</sup> His family background reflects the ethnic complexity so characteristic for the Caucasus, but first of all it gave Buniatov a sacred genealogy that might have been very helpful for creating his heroic image. His father Musa (1895-1961) was allegedly a descendant of a Talysh family of famous sheikhs from Bibi Heybat.<sup>13</sup> The Talysh are an Iranian people, originally from the north of Iran and the south of Azerbaijan, who speak the Talysh language.

Bibi Heybat, now a suburb of Baku on the Caspian coast, served for many centuries as a pilgrimage center for Shi'a Muslims. The medieval mosque of Bibi Heybat was built near the tomb of Okuma Khanym, the daughter of the 7<sup>th</sup> Imam Musa al-Kazim (745-799 CE) and the sister of the 8<sup>th</sup> Imam Ali al-Reza (approx. 770 – 818).<sup>14</sup> Escaping from persecution in her homeland, Okuma Khanym found her refuge near Baku, where, according to the legend, she lived like a saint. Her tomb became a holy place for Shi'a Muslims and Sufi Sheikhs; in Russian sources the place is often referred to as Shikhovo. The mosque of Bibi Heybat, considered one of the most extraordinary monuments of medieval architecture in

---

<sup>11</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 114-120.

<sup>12</sup> Göhver Bakhshaliev, *Bibliografiia* (Baku 2004), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 116-120.

<sup>14</sup> Wilferd Madelung, "Ali al-Reza", *Encyclopedia Iranica* online, 2013 (originally published: December 15, 1985).

Azerbaijan, was destroyed by the Bolsheviks in the 1930s.<sup>15</sup> Sheikhs from Bibi Heybat had a special status among the religious population, and were considered to be morally superior, not to say holy.<sup>16</sup>

Besides allegedly stemming from a family of sheikhs, which gave him already a special authority in the eyes of the local population, Musa Buniatov was a professional military man. He served in the Tsarist army during World War I, and then sided with the Bolsheviks in the Civil War. After the Civil War, Musa Buniatov worked as a military interpreter in the Soviet Army, where he was of use because of his “phenomenal knowledge” of foreign languages.<sup>17</sup>

According to Tagira, Zia Buniatov’s parents, who besides Zia had one more son and three daughters, were sober and very disciplined. Zia's mother, Raisa Gusanova, was born in Lenkoran into a family of Russian Molokans, that is, of a community that the Russian Orthodox Church regarded as a heretical sect.<sup>18</sup> Zia therefore had a very complex ethnic and religious family background and a bilingual upbringing, Russian and Azeri (in spite of the Talysh roots of his father he did not speak any Talysh), with Russian as his first language. His father taught him Arabic, the language of the Qur’an.<sup>19</sup>

This family history is an important ingredient for the mythical reputation of Zia Buniatov. A background of holy ancestors, rooted in an ancient tradition and a father who initiated the scholar at a young age to the essence the Qur'an, provided Buniatov with useful tools to become Azerbaijan's founder of a new historical canon many decades later. As we will see in chapter two, Buniatov's mixed family background corresponds to some of the ideas that he developed in the 1950s and 1960s, in particular in his representation of Caucasus Albania, the predecessor of contemporary Azerbaijan, in defiance of a mono-Turkic origin of the nation. After all, Buniatov was not even Turkic himself.

Due to Musa’s profession, the family moved several times during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1939 the sixteen-year old Zia finished secondary school in Göyçay, a provincial

---

<sup>15</sup> Arif Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan* (Baku, 2004), 133-144. In the 1990s the Azerbaijani former president Geidar Aliev took the initiative to rebuild the mosque. The festive inauguration took place in 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Altay Göyüşev in an interview with Sara Crombach, Baku, November 2010.

<sup>17</sup> This information is based on an interview with Tagira Buniatova (Baku, Aug. 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Çakır Ceyhan Suvri, "Conflict and the Construction of Ethnic Identities: The Case of Ivanovka Village in Azerbaijan", *Forum of EthnoGeoPolitics*, Vol.2, Nr.2, Amsterdam, Autumn 2014, 34-46.

<sup>19</sup> This information is based on an interview with Tagira Buniatova (Baku, Aug. 2009).

town in the centre of the AzSSR.<sup>20</sup> This background, of a supposedly religious father in the service of the Bolsheviks, and a mother from a Russian sectarian background, is significant for the personal development of Buniiatov: After all: our protagonist, who would become the father of Azerbaijani historiography and national identity, was anything but a “pure” Azeri. A second significant factor is the mythological image of the father, who most probably was in the first place a military man. A similar paradox sticks to the son. While the father got the image of “religious”, and the son of “dissident”, both were in fact characteristic for Soviet elites in Azerbaijan at different historical junctions – the father as an example of a person of Tsarist formation who joins the Bolsheviks, and the son as a Soviet product.

In September 1939 Zia Buniiatov entered the infantry department of the military academy of Baku. As he was formally too young to enter the academy, Buniiatov decided to falsify his papers by forwarding his date of birth with two years.<sup>21</sup> Buniiatov explained his choice for a military career in conversations with his fellow-students shortly after the war:

"Since my early childhood I felt like a soldier. As a son of a military interpreter who had served before the Revolution as a soldier in Iran, I was raised with respect for everyone connected to the army: I imitated my father in his way of walking, his attitude, his accuracy and his laconic and precise way of formulating sentences. When my character was formed, in the 1930s, the whole atmosphere of society was self-sacrificing, with a spirit of enthusiasm and patriotism. Everyone wanted to serve his home country by accomplishing great deeds. Our country was surrounded by hostile forces and the soldiers who protected the fatherland were treated with respect. Strong, capitalist powers were prepared to destroy the Soviet Union, so to me a military education seemed self-evident. [...] As schoolchildren we always fought against imaginary enemies, and this memory was very much alive during the real war!"<sup>22</sup>

This fragment, narrated by Tagira, who claims to report Buniiatov's own words, adds a new ingredient to the mythical image, namely the fact that already the young Zia felt himself to be a soldier and patriot, with the capacity to distinguish between good and evil, friend and foe. According to Tagira, Zia Buniiatov told his fellow students at the MIV about his childhood and war memories. At one of these occasions Zia gave the following testimony about his school time:

---

<sup>20</sup> Göhver Bakhshaliev, *Bibliografiia*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Tagira Buniiatova, “Zia – moia sud’ba”, 63. Due to the falsification of his documents many biographies still give his birthdate as 1921 instead of 1923.

<sup>22</sup> Tagira Buniiatova, “Zia - moia sud’ba”, 57-58.

"I always wanted to excel, spent many hours developing my muscles, my physical condition, and the results were soon visible: I was recognized as a great sportsman, first at school, later in the whole town. [...] I was an excellent student, I only had failing grades for my often mischievous behaviour, and my father's immense library opened my eyes to the world of knowledge. [...] The patriotic poetry of Konstantin Simonov, Süleyman Rustam and Samed Vurgun contributed to my spiritual development, and the military severity of my father taught me discipline and self-control. [...] Through my favourite teacher, our military instructor Vakhiatdin Mirzoev, I developed a love for the military profession and knowledge about the army. I was his best student and we were both very happy and thankful to fight at the front and return to Baku, both as Heroes of the Soviet Union, awarded with the Gold Star."<sup>23</sup>

The writers Simonov, Rustam and Vurgun were in the first place icons of patriotism and prototypes of the Stalinist Socialist Realism of the 1930s. The message is clear: Ziiia Buniatov was supposedly always, even at a very young age, intelligent, a disciplined worker, patriotic, brave and headstrong, characteristics that would become his trademarks in adult life. At the same time he presents himself as someone who often had problems to obey, a prelude to the semi-dissident image he would later cultivate at certain occasions. Allegedly he loved Russian and Azerbaijani poetry, which makes him more than just a warhorse, and the poets he selected as his favorites were known for their patriotism, both Soviet and Azerbaijani. Konstantin Simonov (1915-1979) was a Russian/Soviet author, a well-known war-correspondent and poet. His war poems such as 'Wait for me' (Zhdi menia, 1943) were (and still are) immensely popular. Süleyman Rustam (1906-1989) was an Azerbaijani/Soviet writer and poet, famous for his patriotic poems written during the war. Before the war his poetry was often dedicated to politically colored subjects such as the Komsomol or the triumph of the Soviets in the Civil War. Samed Vurgun (1906-1956) was a patriotic Azerbaijani poet and play writer, who translated Russian literature into Azeri and worked as a literature teacher in Azerbaijani villages.

In May 1941 Buniatov graduated from the Military Academy of Baku with distinction and with the rank of lieutenant. Shortly after his graduation, he was sent to military service to the small town of Bendera on the banks of the Dniestr in Moldova.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia - moia sud'ba", 58-62.

<sup>24</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 63.

## **The myth of a war hero (World War II and aftermath) (1941-1946)**

A few weeks after the German attack on the Soviet Union, Buniiatov was enrolled as an officer in the Red Army. His baptism of fire took place in Bessarabia (Moldova), the region that was part of Romania until 1940 and then annexed by the Soviets as a result of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop-Pact.



*Zia Musaevich Buniiatov (1923-1997)*

*(Photo: [https://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziya\\_Bünyadov#/media/File:Ziya\\_Bünyadov.jpg](https://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziya_Bünyadov#/media/File:Ziya_Bünyadov.jpg))*

Tagira Buniiatova reported the war memories of her husband in 2002, allegedly based on an audio-registration of a conversation Buniiatov had with his fellow students in Moscow in 1946/47. Unfortunately we have only Tagira's testimony regarding the existence of such a recording. One may wonder how likely it is that a couple of students in the post-war Soviet Union were able to tape their casual conversations. We do not know whether his widow rendered his narrative faithfully or not.

Another document that could potentially shed light on Buniiatov's time in World War II is the book that Buniiatov co-authored with R. Zeinalov, "From Caucasus to Berlin" (*Ot Kavkaza do Berlina*, Baku 1990). Curiously enough, this work, dedicated to the "45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Victory of the Soviet People in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945", does

not contain any of Buniiatov's personal memories of the war.<sup>25</sup> This raises the question whether Buniiatov's contribution to this book comprised more than just giving his name to it. If he really had written parts of it then he would probably have given more information about his own contribution to the Great Patriotic War. In the preface the two authors explain the purpose of the work:

"In the book "From Caucasus to Berlin" we show the glorious road of the soldiers of Azerbaijan, who fought shoulder to shoulder with fraternal peoples of the USSR against the German fascists, and the contribution of the Azerbaijani workers to the victory over the evil enemy."<sup>26</sup>

Most remarkable is the fact that the work was published in 1990, when the ideal of "Friendship of Peoples" had already lost its charm, after the Azerbaijani pogroms against Armenians in Sumgait (February 1988) and Baku (January 1990). We get the impression that this work, written in a period of instability and decline of the Soviet system, was intended by the Azerbaijani authorities to revitalize the old Communist rhetoric. World War II was, in Soviet Azerbaijan in 1990, one of the last vital symbols of Soviet patriotism. The USSR as such was rapidly losing its legitimacy. In this respect the authors' conclusion is also significant:

"Under the guidance of the Communist Party our Soviet People has overcome the enemy, guaranteed freedom and independence of our socialist motherland, defended the cause of the Great October. Our people liberated the European peoples of the fascist yoke; therefore we were the saviours of world civilization.[...] More than 176.000 Azerbaijani soldiers were awarded with medals or orders. 129 of them, Russians, Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Jews, and others, were awarded with the order of 'Hero of the Soviet Union', people of different background or profession."<sup>27</sup>

Although the system was clearly waning in 1990, the "Friendship of Peoples" rhetoric was still in use and Buniiatov here appears as an excellent advocate for the old ideology. After all: he presents Communism as the direct opposite of fascism, with the absolute good opposing the absolute evil. Moreover the book emphasizes the multi-ethnicity of the Azerbaijani soldiers and the fact that they had different social backgrounds, as if the authors want to recall a fading moral system, a system in which Buniiatov himself was highly

---

<sup>25</sup> Zia Buniiatov and R. E. Zeinalov, *Ot Kavkaza do Berlina* (Baku, 1990), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Zia Buniiatov and R. E. Zeinalov, *Ot Kavkaza do Berlina*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Zia Buniiatov and R. E. Zeinalov, *Ot Kavkaza do Berlina*, 215-218.

esteemed as one of the icons. But still, in "From the Caucasus to Berlin", he refrains from drawing attention to his own war-time merits. When the authors provide a list of names of at least a dozen Azerbaijani "Heroes of the Soviet Union", that of Buniatov is missing, although he reportedly also held this highly symbolic status. We can read about Buniatov's first war-experiences only in his widow's memoirs, again in the form of Buniatov's direct speech:

"The first fight of my whole life I had within an hour after the beginning of the war. [...] I also had my first encounter with death, and a friend did not survive the attack, which was the first great loss I had to face. Many days would follow and the war soon became a regular working week. [...] The first battle, the first fascist that I killed, I looked in his face, trying to understand who he was, this animal that burnt my country, killed my people. It was in those days that my character was formed, 18 years old, I feared nothing, not even death. I was eager to fight, just like all of us. Our commander called me his son, from the very first day. He would always talk about the necessity to be cautious, but I was careless by nature. [...] In these early days of the war I had a remarkable encounter in Moldavia with a gypsy woman who predicted my future by reading my hand. She told me I would be seriously injured twice, but eventually my star would shine, until the end of my life!"<sup>28</sup>

This fragment is clear about the characteristics of our hero-to-be: Despite his young age, Buniatov was very brave, patriotic, driven by hatred of the fascists, and even chosen by destiny, as the story of the gypsy woman demonstrated. Striking is also that his report does not mention how badly the Soviets were beaten in Bessarabia. Most of Buniatov's war service in 1941 and 1942 must have been characterized by constant losses of the Soviet Army.

After the German attack on the North Caucasus in 1942 Buniatov had to fight in the Mozdok region in what is today Chechnya. The unusual courage he displayed in Mozdok drew the attention of his fellow soldiers, as we can read in the Army-newspaper *Red Star* of the spring of that year:

---

<sup>28</sup> Tagira Buniatova, "Ziia – moia sud.ba", 63-65.

The mentioning of the star is a clear reference to the future when Buniatov will be Hero of the Soviet Union and bearer of the highest military award: the Gold Star.

"Sly, swift as a tiger, officer Ziia Musaevich Buniiatov could clearly orient himself under most difficult conditions and in most complex situations. He was valued in the battalion not only for his courage, but also for his romantic soul and his literary erudition."<sup>29</sup>

In 1942 he became commander of a squadron that was part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Army, in charge of the defense of the Southern Caucasus. In the Caucasus Buniiatov was seriously injured twice. According to his widow, Buniiatov would suffer from severe headaches, as a consequence of his injuries and shellshock, until his death in 1997. After the liberation of the Caucasus the Red Army repelled the Germans further so that the front eventually reached the borders of the Soviet Union. According to his widow, by that time Commander Buniiatov had already been distinguished with several military awards, such as the Order of the Patriotic War, the Medal for Great Courage, and the Decoration of the Red Banner.<sup>30</sup>

### ***The Shtrafnoi Batalion***

Most likely in the second half of 1944, but in any case before January 1945, Buniiatov was transferred to one of the notorious *Shtrafnoi Batalions* (penal battalions) for criminals and violators of military discipline. This episode is completely clouded by myths, and it represents the most enigmatic element of Buniiatov's war record. These *shtrafbats* were created in the summer of 1942, obviously as an effort to increase discipline in the army, which in view of the heavy losses against Nazi Germany needed an extra impulse, according to Stalin. These penal battalions were populated mainly with "normal criminals", but also with soldiers who had disobeyed their superiors. According to Igor Mangazeev's study of one of these *shtrafbats*, in April and July 1942 the Soviets transferred one million men from the labor camps to these penal battalions. The *shtrafniki* served in the frontline of fire, often without any arms and equipment. More than eighty percent of these *shtrafniki* got killed in combat, a percentage that is very high even by Soviet standards.<sup>31</sup>

With regard to this period in the *Shtrafnoi Batalion*, we have access to an interesting source of information that partly complements and partly nuances Tagira Buniiatova's

---

<sup>29</sup> *Krasnaia Zvezda*, the newspaper of the Red Army, April 1942. Buniiatov's niece Zemfira Qurbanova, who manages the archive of the scholar in the Institute of Oriental Studies in Baku, made this article available to me for inspection. This article is also quoted in Tagira Buniiatova, *Sil'nee smerti*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> Tagira Buniiatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 76.

<sup>31</sup> Igor Mangazeev, "Soviet Wartime Penal Forces. A 'Penal' Corps on the Kalinin Front", in: *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 15, No 3 (September 2002) 121-122. According to this article in Resolution No. 1575ss, dated 11 April 1942, 500.000 men fit for service had to be drafted from the labor camps. On 26 July 1942 a second resolution (no. 227) was announced for a further 500.000 men. 122.

information in "Ziia – moia sud'ba". In 1989 the Soviet film-director Lev Danilov made the documentary *Shtrafniki - siuzhety iz prikaza № 227* ("Shtrafbat soldiers, subjects of prikaz no. 227"), with Ziia Buniatov, who was now celebrated as a hero and academic, as the main character.<sup>32</sup> This film is actually useful, since Buniatov himself is interviewed about his war memories; from these statements we can conclude that his widow has richly drawn from the information given in this film. One gets the impression that Tagira's account of the so-called recordings is largely based on this film, as many statements are almost word for word the same. Yet the film only reports on the end of the war, when Buniatov was *commander* of one of the penal battalions.

According to Tagira Buniatova, the reason why Buniatov ended up in the *shtrafbat* was due to the fact that he had ignored a direct order from one of his superiors, which led to a fight in which Buniatov shot an officer in his shoulder, or even killed him. In peacetime this would probably have led to the death penalty, but in times of war Buniatov was sent to the *Shtrafnoi Battalion*, where he was employed as a commander, since he had the relevant military training, war experience and several decorations.

Remarkably enough, this version of the "*Shtrafnoi Myth*", orally reported to me by his widow<sup>33</sup> and repeated by other interview partners, is not confirmed by the testimony of Buniatov himself, as recorded in Lev Danilov's documentary film *Shtrafniki* of 1989. In the film Buniatov recalls the event with the following words:

"Let me tell you how I became a commander of the *Shtrafniki*. One of my superiors summoned me to command a division, and he asked me the following question: 'We have the plan to appoint you as commander of a *shtrafnoi* squadron. What do you think? We give you twenty-four hours to make up your mind.' It was not an order, it was a proposal, and they even gave me time to think. A *shtrafnoi* battalion, however, was a deadly thing, full of criminals, recidivists, people without any hope or future who were doomed already, and who could only repay their debt to the homeland with their own death. And there were others, not criminals but victims of defamation. The request was unusual and I had to think carefully, knowing that the *shtrafniki* were always used at the most dangerous operations, as cannon fodder. In spite of my hesitation I immediately took a decision. 'Why hesitate? I don't need twenty four hours to think!' The general advised me not to take a hasty decision. 'Don't get excited', the general said, 'you have

---

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqt1DvHKqCk> (last accessed 19 January 2019).

<sup>33</sup> This information is based on an interview with Tagira Buniatova (Baku, Aug. 2009).

time to think about it. You can even refuse.' Nevertheless, I made my decision immediately."<sup>34</sup>

Quite contrary to Tagira's oral testimony Buniiatov clearly suggests that he actually had a choice, and there is no mention of any misconduct from Buniiatov's side that would have warranted his transfer. In Danilov's documentary *Shtrafniki* we see the hero in person talk about his memories of that time, adding an explanation why he actually accepted the "offer" of the general:

"I knew that if I did not agree, there would be many questions, such as: 'Do you want to serve at all in the army? Do you love the Motherland at all?' So I decided not to hesitate and I agreed the same day."<sup>35</sup>

Buniiatov thus suggested that it was an offer he could not refuse, but we still do not know the real reason for this transfer. However, the following account – again transmitted by his widow on the alleged basis of a recording - sheds more light on the matter. Here Buniiatov explains to his fellow-students from Moscow in 1946/47 what a penal battalion actually means:

"Do you actually know what a penal battalion is? These *shtrafniki* are no people, they are criminals, delinquents, murderers, and the war gave them one last chance: to defend their country. Yet I immediately accepted the offer. Let me tell you: the war made soldiers out of these former criminals. The war had given them the chance to do their duty as a citizen. [...] One of them was Vasilii, born in Krasnoiarsk region. He was unbelievable, I praised him several times, and saw how he changed as a human being. He was re-born, thanks to the penal battalion. [...] They all had their own fate, their own history, character, and they were used in the most risky operations, they all fought for life and death. [...] General Zhukov, who was in charge of the First Belorussian Front, explained, in the name of Stalin, to all commanders of the *Shtrafbats* the significance of the Operation Visla-Oder. As a commander of one of the penal squadrons I had an extremely risky task: We had to take a mined bridge over the Pilitsa, and for strategic reasons it was crucial to save the bridge, in order to advance further into Poland and finally Germany. [...] My own 123rd penal squadron contributed to this operation. Only 47 of our 670 soldiers survived the operation. And on 27 February 1945 I was awarded the order of

---

<sup>34</sup> Lev Danilov's documentary film *Shtrafniki (subjects of resolution no 227)* (1989), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqt1DvHKqCk> (last accessed 19 January 2019).

Tagira Buniiatova uses the same fragment, with some remarkable changes, in "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 76.

<sup>35</sup> Ziia Buniiatov in *Shtrafniki*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqt1DvHKqCk> (last accessed 19 January 2019).

Hero of the Soviet Union. Imagine, what did it take for a 22 year old Azeri boy to make the Russians say: Bravo!"<sup>36</sup>

What can we learn from this episode? It was certainly remarkable that Buniiatov, under these miserable conditions was awarded “Hero of the Soviet Union” and received the medal of the Gold Star for his merits in combat. In this passage Buniiatov presents himself first of all as a real hero, and even more, as someone who can bring out the best in his comrades-in-arms. Or was he in fact a commander who obeyed orders blindly and sacrificed his men, and then proudly got an order for this massacre? Probably it was a combination of both.

In the documentary *Shtrafniki* Buniiatov tries to erase the difference between himself and ordinary *shtrafbat* soldiers, arguing they respected him for his bravery, and perhaps indicating that some of them thought quite critically of the way how he threw them into slaughter:

"I was wondering how I will be received by my soldiers, who were thinking sceptically: 'You think you are so 'cool'. Let's see how cool you are in the next battle!' But they liked me after the first attack, because I was always fighting next to them, I did not hide, and this was the main criterion."<sup>37</sup>

The heroic myth was thus constructed by Buniiatov himself, and then carried further by Tagira Buniiatova, who even created a new version that put emphasis on another major quality of Buniiatov, namely his stubbornness and his inclination to disrespect superiors. When reading all the available sources together and trying to distill a plausible version of the past, the most convincing scenario would be that Buniiatov was punished as an officer for some smaller misconduct, or lack of discipline, and thus ended up as a commander of the penal battalion, which was certainly not the same as being a *shtrafnik* himself.

### ***Berlin (1945-1946)***

Another passage of Buniiatov's memories refers to the first year after the war, between May 1945 and May 1946, when Buniiatov reportedly served as deputy military commander of the Berlin district Pankow.<sup>38</sup> In Tagira's accounts we can read what Buniiatov supposedly said:

---

<sup>36</sup> Tagira Buniiatova, “Ziia – moia sud’ba”, 77-79.

<sup>37</sup>Ziia Buniiatov in the documentary *Shtrafniki*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqt1DvHKqCk> (last accessed 19 January 2019).

<sup>38</sup> This information is based on Buniiatov's later student, and current director of the Azerbaijani Institute of Oriental Studies in Baku, Göhver Bakhshalieva in her preface to Buniiatov's *Bibliografiia* (Baku, 2004).

"The Battle of Berlin was the largest operation of the war. [...] We realized: these Germans are no human beings, our enemy is inhumane and cruel. The fanaticism and bestiality of the fascists are unlimited. We, Soviet soldiers, were determined to save the Germans from their own *Übermenschen*. [...] The liberation of Berlin had taken the lives of 260.000 Soviet soldiers. The Soviet Union paid the price for eradicating the brown plague. Not one word evokes so many emotions as the word 'Victory'! We, Soviet men and women, are great, and we all passed the exam in love for the Motherland! [...] The Soviet Army never aimed at destroying the German people, and after the war they felt betrayed by Hitler's propaganda. Feelings of compassion made me decide to stay in Berlin and offer my support, when I was invited by the Soviet authorities. [...] I had to manage the reconstruction of social and cultural life. We rebuilt hospitals, shops, apartment buildings and schools. We gave the Germans their own great culture back: Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, Bach. They had all been brainwashed by fascist propaganda, so we created new schoolbooks, a new literature, a completely new historiography, since history needed to be known and understood truthfully."<sup>39</sup>

Reading this episode one would almost think that the phenomenal post-war reconstruction of the completely ruined country was the work of Buniiatov and his Soviet companions. It contributes to his image of not only an extraordinary military man, but also as a talented manager who was even able to organize the "Fritzen" (as the Germans are often called pejoratively by the Soviets). Reportedly, Buniiatov was offered a career as a professional military man after war, a career that certainly could have been glorious, judging from his impressive record in the war. Nevertheless, Buniiatov decided differently:

"At my horizon loomed a great military career, but somehow I missed something in the army. I wanted a different kind of life and I decided to get demobilized. This was a surprise for many, because I had an interesting job, an excellent ration, which was quit uncommon in the difficult years after the war, and a stable perspective. Nevertheless I decided to exchange all these privileges for an insecure, unstable life in poverty as a normal student. [...] The reason was simple: I had enough of fighting, and I wanted to forget the war. Thanks to the profound lessons of my father, since my early childhood I had an excellent knowledge of the Arabic language, so I decided to become an Arabist. I came here, to Moscow, to the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies, passed the entrance exam, and here I am, together with you!"<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Tagira Buniiatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 85-87.

<sup>40</sup> Tagira Buniiatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 87.

With these words Buniiatov allegedly finished his monologue. If this story is true then it might have been during his work in the military administration of Berlin that he understood the value of propaganda and history education for mass mobilization, and he learned some skills that he later used as a scholar in Soviet Azerbaijan. At any event, his knowledge of foreign languages, especially of Oriental languages, in combination with his military record opened up great opportunities for him to reach a high position in the Soviet *nomenklatura*. Language specialists enjoyed considerable prestige due to their importance for the foreign interests of the USSR.

The fact that Buniiatov chose to study at MIV, the prestigious and highly politicized party school of Oriental studies, confirms for this assumption. According to fellow students of Buniiatov, the field of Arabic Studies at MIV was in the hands of two leading figures in the discipline. The first was Vladimir B. Lutskii (1906-1962) who taught also at the MGU between 1938 and 1958, and the other was Evgenii A. Beliaev (1895-1964), Buniiatov's teacher at MIV.<sup>41</sup> In the 1940s and 1950s, until MIV was closed in 1954, Oriental studies at MIV were more focused on the study of the languages of the East, whereas the Oriental faculty of the MGU had a focus on history. Some senior Russian Orientalists therefore argued, in interviews with me, that the Oriental faculty of the MGU was less politicized.<sup>42</sup>

The creation and distribution of these war stories, partly as "records" and partly as mere hearsay, were important for the establishment of Buniiatov's reputation as a staunch and self-sacrificing patriot who does not avoid conflicts. Buniiatov's transfer to the *Shtrafnoi Batalion* and his later status as "Hero of the Soviet Union" were crucial factors that contributed to the mythmaking around his person. Although official documents are not available, all the eyewitnesses, who were at the time of Buniiatov's return to Baku in 1954 young students, are convinced of his heroism.<sup>43</sup>

The war experiences, including the fact that Buniiatov was wounded several times and traumatized, most likely influenced his later life, career and reputation. Allegedly he had, due to the war, in the eyes of many of his compatriots, the status of an unassailable human being,

---

<sup>41</sup> Sofia D. Miliband, *Bibliografichskii slovar' sovetskikh vostokovedov* (Moscow, 1995).

<sup>42</sup> Robert Landa, Isaak Fil'shtinskii and Bagrai Seiranian in interviews conducted by Sara Crombach in Moscow, respectively on 3 and 5 November 2010. All three studied in the 1940s-50s at the MGU and/or the MIV.

<sup>43</sup> Esmeralda Agaeva, one of Buniiatov's former students in Arabic language and history in the 1950s, interview (Baku, August 2009).

not to say a saint. This status later most likely contributed to a degree of immunity from criticism, which he seemed to enjoy as a scholar in post-war Soviet Azerbaijan.

### **Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies (MIV) (1946-1954)**

In September 1946 Buniatov entered MIV, the prestigious Moscow Nariman Narimanov Institute of Oriental Studies (not to be confused with the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, IVAN, which was established in Leningrad in 1930 and transferred to Moscow in 1950.)<sup>44</sup> This period of his life is less obscure than the previous years. Again, Tagira's memoirs form an important source of information, but this information can be supplemented with the interviews that I conducted with contemporaries and fellow students of Buniatov, including Robert Grigorevich Landa (1931), Ferida Mustafaeвна Atsamba (1921), Bagrat Gareginovich Seiranian (1931), Isaak M. Filshtinskii (1918-2013) and Sergei Grigorevich Kliashorny (1928-2014).

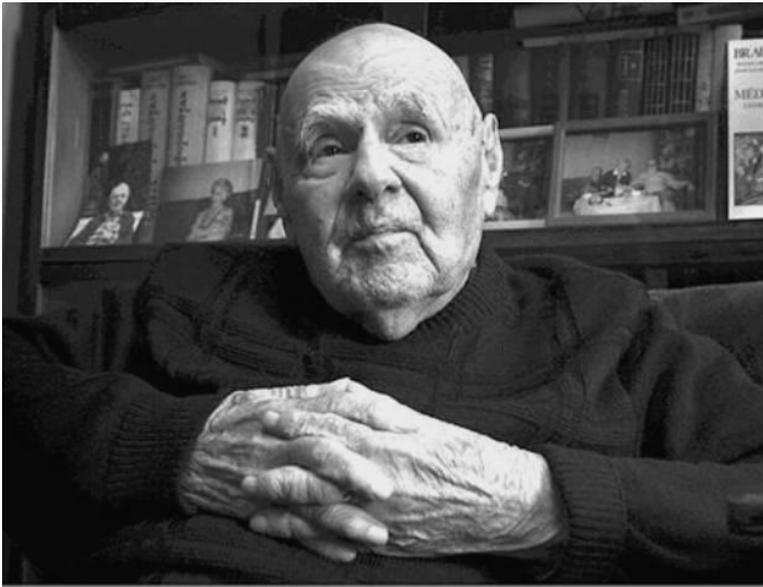
This generation, students in the late 1940s and early 1950s, benefited from the achievements of the Soviets in the realms of education and social mobility. For some of the young generation, Stalinism and patriotism, reinforced by the Great Patriotic War, might have served as substitutes for religion.<sup>45</sup> After the war life returned to normality and economic growth brought about a significant social mobility. The young students were optimistic about the future that finally dawned after several decades of extreme violence, social chaos and war. In this atmosphere of optimism Ziia met his fellow-student Tagira Kurbanova.

---

<sup>44</sup> For MIV and other Oriental institutions of the USSR see the introduction.

<sup>45</sup> Vlaslav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children. The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, 2009), 23-24.

### *Isaak Moisevich Fil'shtinskii*



*Isaak Moisevich Fil'shtinskii (1918-2013) (Foto: <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki>)*

One of Buniatov's contemporaries was Isaak Moisevich Fil'shtinskii (1918-2013), who repeatedly became a victim of political repression. Isaak Fil'shtinskii was born in Kharkov, but he moved in his early youth to Moscow, where his father, a mining engineer, was transferred to. In the late 1930s he entered the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History (*Moskovskii institut filosofii, literatury i istorii*, MIFLI) to study Arabic philology and archaeology in the history department.<sup>46</sup> The day after he finished his studies the war broke out and the Moscow leadership gave orders to train Turkish, Persian and Arabic interpreters. Fil'shtinski was trained as an interpreter at the Military Institute of Foreign Languages. After Stalin's death in 1953, on the orders of Khrushchev this Military Institute was, together with MIV, fused with MGU's Oriental department.<sup>47</sup> During the war the Military Institute was evacuated to Fergana in Uzbekistan, where Fil'shtinskii worked as an Arabic teacher. After the war he moved back to Moscow as an aspirant at MIV under the supervision of both Kharlampii Baranov (1892-1980) and Vladimir Lutskii (1906-1962).<sup>48</sup>

In his period of *aspirantura* at MIV, shortly after World War II, Fil'shtinskii met the protagonist of this dissertation, Ziiia Buniatov. From the words of Fil'shtinskii we must conclude that there were hardly any warm feelings between the two young Orientalists. "Yes,

---

<sup>46</sup> Ia. V. Vasil'kov and M. Iu. Sorokina, *Liudi i sud'by* (Saint Petersburg, 2003), 390-391.

<sup>47</sup> Isaak Fil'shtinski, interview (Moscow, November 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

I knew Ziia Buniatov, he was one of Beliaev's students, a war hero and a typical *Homo Sovieticus*, a careerist. Due to our very different natures we were not destined to become good friends."<sup>49</sup>

In 1949 Fil'shtinskii successfully defended his PhD dissertation (*kandidatskaia*) on the topic of "Egypt before Bonaparte's expedition", but the success was unfortunately not long-lasting. In April 1949, during Stalin's renewed reprisal campaigns, the young scholar was arrested for "dangerous cosmopolitanism", in an atmosphere where anti-Semitism was concealed by patriotism. On a so-called special trial of the Ministry of State Security of the USSR in August of the same year he was sentenced to ten years of forced labor camp and deprived of his academic title. Fil'shtinskii's sentence was remitted in 1955, due to de-Stalinization, and one year later he was officially rehabilitated. In 1958 he was appointed as a research assistant at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow, headed by former First Secretary of Tajikistan Bobodzhan Gafurovich Gafurov. In 1974 Fil'shtinskii was again briefly arrested, as a result of his involvement in a civil rights movement and for publishing the *samizdat* journal "Jews in the USSR". In 1978, after Evgenii Primakov (1929-2015) had become the new director of IVAN, Fil'shtinskii was dismissed from the institute for being a dissident. He then worked at MGU, where he became professor in 1992. In 1994 Fil'shtinskii, then at the age of 76, successfully defended his doctor's thesis (*doktorskaia*) on the "Socio-cultural function of verbal arts in medieval Arab-Islamic society".<sup>50</sup>

### ***Buniatov as a dissident? Fil'shtinskii's testimony***

Although Fil'shtinskii was never in close contact with Ziia Buniatov, his oral testimonies regarding the late 1940s at MIV, the period of renewed Stalinist repression, are certainly interesting.

In 1948 the Central Committee of the Communist Party launched a decree on "formalism in art". Many artists, including the great Soviet composer Dmitrii Shostakovich, were targeted by this new policy.<sup>51</sup> Not only artists, but also scientists were branded as

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ia. Vasilkov and M. Sorokina, *Liudi i sud'by* (Sankt-Peterburg, 2003), 390-391.

<sup>51</sup> Boris Schwarz, *Musik und Musikleben in der Sowjetunion 1917 bis zur Gegenwart*, Wilhelmshaven 1982, 408.

“enemies of the nation”. In Tagira Buniiatova’s memoirs the following fragment reports of her impressions of this time of renewed repression after the war:

"The years after the war were anything but easy. Stalin launched new repression. In 1948 the Communist Party took action against ‘formalism in music’, and every single worker was involved in this debate. The *Partkom* (Committee of the Party) of our institute expected all students to participate in the debate. We knew that heads must roll. [...] Our institute had to dismiss first-class scholars such as Evgenii Bertel’s, who was corresponding member of the Academy and had even been awarded the Stalin Medal shortly before his conviction.<sup>52</sup> For us Azeri students Bertel’s was highly respected for his great knowledge of the Azeri poet Nizami. Many others, mainly linguists, were convicted as ‘Marrists’, because Stalin had developed a new vision on linguistics.<sup>53</sup> One of the victims was our beloved professor Nikolai Iakovlev.<sup>54</sup> At the *komsomol* we had the personal case of Iulian Semenov, a case that drew the attention of many students. Everyone came to watch the trial. The *komsomol* intended to dismiss this ‘son of an enemy of the people’, and all students were supposed to openly convict the young student. As soon as Ziia entered the institute and heard what was going on, he got furious and started to shout at the jury and the public. ‘Who is the real enemy here? Have you ever seen an enemy in your life? This is just a good student, please let him go!’ The appearance of Ziia immediately changed the whole scenario. Due to this event Iulian (Semenev) and Buniiatov would stay friends for a lifetime."<sup>55</sup>

According to Tagira, Ziia Buniiatov was horrified by the excrescences of late Stalinist policy, and he was even courageous enough to express his feelings of displeasure.<sup>56</sup> The Soviet novelist and fellow-student Iulian Semenov (1931-1993), whose father had become a victim of Stalinist repression after the war, was most grateful for the fact that Buniiatov, as

---

<sup>52</sup> [Evgenii Bertel’s (1890-1957) was trained in Petersburg/Petrograd at the law faculty. In 1928 he was appointed professor at MIV, and in 1939 he became corresponding-member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Sofia D. Miliband, *Bibliograficheskii slovar’ sovetskikh vostokovedov*, Vol. 1 (Moscow, 1995), 162.]

<sup>53</sup> Whereas the linguist Nikolai Jakovlevich Marr (1864-1934) had been glorified by Stalin for his Marxist theory on languages and their alleged descent from one single proto-language, Stalin had changed his mind after the war. According to Marr all languages would finally merge into one common “communist language”, but Stalin strongly believed that language was not a matter of class but of a nation or a people. Linguists that did not distance themselves from “Marrist ideas” were prosecuted after 1949. Vladimir M. Alpatov, “Marr, Marizm i Stalinism”, *Filosofskie issledovaniia* (1993) No. 4, 271-288.

<sup>54</sup> [Philologist Nikolai Feofanovich Iakovlev (1892-1974) was professor at MIV between 1944 and 1951 and attached to the Institute of Linguistics of the Academy of Sciences as a specialist of Caucasian languages. S. N. Miliband, *Bibliograficheskii slovar’ otechestvennykh vostokovedov*, Vol. 1 (Moscow, 1995), 700.]

<sup>55</sup> Tagira Buniiatova, “Ziia – moia sud’ba”, 98-103

<sup>56</sup> Tagira Buniiatova, “Ziia moia sud’ba”, 99-101.

one of the very few, had the courage to openly criticize Iulian's removal from the *komsomol* as a son of an enemy of the state.

This information, which highly contributed to Buniiatov's "dissident" image and which comes up in almost every interview on him in Baku, was confirmed by the real dissident and Stalin victim Isaak M. Fil'shtinskii, who was one of Buniiatov's fellow students at the MIV. He related what happened with the following words:

"I remember that Zia Buniiatov was a student during the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign and he had shown resistance. Himself a representative of a minority, he knew that anti-Semitism could trigger other feelings of interethnic animosity. And in those years we had purges against all intelligentsia, not only Jews. Although we were never friends I remember his courage to protest in public. I had the impression that the status of war hero gave him a certain immunity."<sup>57</sup>

We can conclude that Buniiatov, who was, according to Fil'shtinskii, in many ways a "typical *Homo Sovieticus*, an opportunist and a careerist", also had another side that gave him a reputation as an independent spirit, already during the final years of Stalinism. This brought him later the reputation of a dissident, which in fact he was not.

### ***Immunity: Buniiatov's protection***

The affair of 1949 is one of the first examples of Buniiatov's courage to stand up against the regime, and later, after his return to Baku, similar incidents would follow. First of all, this paradoxical combination of opportunism and courage is an amazing aspect of his personality that we cannot simply play down as a result of mythmaking, in the light of the words of Fil'shtinskii. Secondly, we must wonder why his critical attitude never led to serious repercussions. His major protection in the late 1940s was most likely his status as a hero. Later, when he returned to Baku, Buniiatov had other sources of possible protection in Moscow, such as the fact that his future brother-in-law, the husband of Tagira's sister, Marshal Nikolai Fedorovich Shestopolov (1919-2006), was in the highest echelons of the Kremlin.<sup>58</sup> In addition to this, Buniiatov later developed a long-term friendship with the

---

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Isaak M. Fil'shtinskii (Moscow, November 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2010).

future Azerbaijani party-boss Heidar Aliev, who most certainly offered strong protection, both in Moscow and Baku.<sup>59</sup>

One of Buniatov's most influential professors in the department was Evgenii Aleksandrovich Beliaev (1895-1964). Evgenii Beliaev was born in a family of merchants and studied at the Faculty of Eastern Languages of the University of Petersburg/Petrograd. After serving as a volunteer in the Red Army during the Civil War he continued his studies and pursued a career at Moscow University. A famous and respected Orientalist, Beliaev published many works on Islam and the medieval history of Asia and the Middle East. Just like Buniatov he had been decorated with the status of hero of the Soviet Union, for his bravery during the Civil War.<sup>60</sup>

One of Buniatov's fellow students in the school of Beliaev was the future director of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow (IVAN) Evgenii Maksimovich Primakov (born 1929 in Kiev), a contact with Moscow that was reportedly of great importance later in Buniatov's life. Another fellow-student, though eight years younger than Buniatov and Primakov, was Robert Grigorevich Landa (born in 1931), who has been affiliated at the Institute of Oriental Studies (IVAN) in Moscow since 1957.<sup>61</sup> According to Landa, who began his studies at MIV in 1948, Buniatov was "a discordant, quarrelsome personality, certainly no diplomat or a saint, but his status of war hero gave him a certain immunity."<sup>62</sup> Landa, who still works at IVAN and at the Institute of Asia and Africa at the MGU in Moscow, recalls the time when Primakov was in charge of the institute, between 1977 and 1985:

"Buniatov came, as director of the Oriental institute of Baku, on a regular basis to our institute to meet his good friend, fellow student and colleague Primakov. The two scholars were very close, and it is certainly possible that Primakov was a useful link for Buniatov in Moscow. After all, Buniatov was a trouble-maker, and could use some protection."<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Sofia Miliband, *Bibliograficheskii slovar' otechestvennykh vostokovedov*, Vol. 1 (Moscow, 1995), 152.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Grigor'evich Landa was born in Moscow in 1931 in a family of officials. He finished the MIV in 1953, his PhD in 1958 and was appointed senior researcher at the IVAN in 1957. Landa published more than 70 works, mainly on national liberation movements in North Africa and the Middle East. S. D. Miliband, *Bibliograficheskii slovar' sovetskikh vostokovedov*, Vol. 1 (Moscow, 1995), 659.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Robert Landa (Moscow, November 2010).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Just like Buniatov and Primakov, Landa studied with professor Evgenii Beliaev at the MIV. According to Landa, Beliaev was one of the greatest Arabists of the Soviet Union, with an excellent knowledge of Islam and Medieval history of the Orient in general and the Arab world in specific.<sup>64</sup> Beliaev lectured on socio-historical processes in the Arab world with a focus on the Arab caliphate, also one of Buniatov's favourite topics. According to Landa, Beliaev was not only impressive as a scholar, but also as a human being. He was very supportive towards his students but intensely disliked laziness or careerism. One of his favourite quotes was, according to Landa: "neither Lenin, nor Marx had negroes to work for them," and: "there is no excuse for being lazy, a capitalist justifies his exploitation of the poor exactly in the same manner."<sup>65</sup> Both quotes certainly illustrate Beliaev's devotion to Communist ideology.

Next to Beliaev, Vladimir Borisovich Lutskii (1906-1962) was also considered one of the pioneers of post-Revolutionary Oriental Studies, according to several of my interviewees who in the late 1940s-1950s all studied in Moscow. Lutskii was born in 1906 in Berdiansk in a family of officials. He finished MIV in 1930 and after the successful defense of his PhD in 1935 he was appointed teacher of Arabic at the same institute. He was affiliated to the MIV until 1948. At the same time Lutskii had a teaching position at the department of Oriental languages of MGU between 1936-1958. He published more than 100 works, mainly on the modern history of the Middle East.<sup>66</sup>

One of Lutskii's students Bagrat Gareginovich Seiranian was born in 1931 in Tbilisi in an Armenian family of officials. He entered the Arabic department as part of the history faculty of Moscow State University in 1951. Seiranian's specialism was modern history of the Arab world, first of all Egypt. He worked as a senior researcher at IVAN since 1962, was appointed scientific secretary of IVAN under Gafurov in 1970 and published dozens of works on the national liberation struggle of Egypt.<sup>67</sup> According to Seiranian the situation in the early 1950s was as follows:

"MIV was closed in 1954, when I studied at Moscow State University (MGU) with professor Lutskii. We had only four hours of Arabic a week, and we specialized in

---

<sup>64</sup> Robert Landa, "Talant uchenogo i uchitelia. Vospominaniia o E. A. Beliaev (1895-1964)", in *Slovo ob uchiteliakh (moskovskie vostokovedy 30-60-kh godov)* (Moscow 1988).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Sofia D. Miliband, *Bibliograficheskii slovar' sovetskikh vostokovedov*, Vol. 1 (Moscow 1995), 697.

<sup>67</sup> Sofia D. Miliband, *Bibliograficheskii slovar' sovetskikh vostokovedov* Vol. 2 (Moscow, 1995), 378.

history. MIV focused on the language, the students had language lessons every day, and normally they became diplomats, interpreters, or were otherwise appointed to practice-based jobs. We, at MGU, had a more fundamental, more scientific education. In 1954 there was little interest in Oriental studies, that is why MIV was closed down. Most students of MIV were sent to the Oriental faculty of the MGU."<sup>68</sup>

What Seiranian here calls the "Oriental faculty" of MGU is in fact the Institute of the Countries of Asia and Afrika (ISAA), which was set up in June 1956; before that time Oriental studies at MGU were spread over several faculties (including the History faculty that Seiranian mentions here); after the closing of MIV, the Oriental units of MGU and parts of MIV were reorganized in the form of ISAA.

What we see from these testimonies is how former students perceived a different degree of politicization at the various Moscow teaching institutes. Also, according to Landa and Seiranian, Oriental studies at Moscow State University was, unlike MIV, more focused on the study of Oriental history and to a lesser extent on the study of languages; as language drill was a prerequisite for future diplomats, MIV was regarded as closer to politics.<sup>69</sup>

### ***Buniatov's aspirantura (1950-1954)***

After finishing his studies Zia Buniatov entered his *aspirantura* (PhD) also at MIV. Under the supervision of Evgenii Beliaev he wrote his dissertation (*kandidatskaia dissertatsiia*) on "Italian Imperialism in Africa" in 1954.<sup>70</sup> This topic of research was completely in line with the Soviet discourse of the 1950s, in which the study of Western colonialism was a focus area. Beliaev played an important role in the scholarly development of Buniatov, and between the young student and his older professor were feelings of mutual respect.

We can read about the warm relationship between Beliaev and his student in the memoirs of Beliaev's son Aleksandr Evgenevich Beliaev, published in the Buniatov memorial volume *Sil'nee smerti*:

"My father Evgenii Beliaev often invited his students to his home. One of them was Zia Buniatov, who in 1950 had become one of my father's PhD students. They were very close, partly because my father had a past as a war hero just like Buniatov. After

---

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Bagrat Seiranian (Moscow, November 2010).

<sup>69</sup> Interviews with Robert Landa and Bagrat Seiranian (Moscow, November 2010).

<sup>70</sup> Buniatov's work on Italian Imperialism was published by the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the SSSR in 1954.

fighting in World War I, my father had fought for the Bolsheviks in the Civil War and was decorated as War Hero. Buniiatov often spoke with irony about his Golden Star: 'This star often saved my life!' And indeed, Buniiatov was remarkably candid and critical towards superiors, yet he never got into serious problems with the authorities because of his hero status.[...] My father often said that Ziia Buniiatov was one of the best students he ever had."<sup>71</sup>

Meanwhile Tagira and Ziia were no longer just fellow students. In the beginning of 1947 Ziia proposed to Tagira and in May of the same year they married and started living together in one of the rooms of the Moscow student flat, as we can read in Tagira's memoirs:

"On the wedding of one of our mutual friends Ziia quite unexpectedly asked me to marry him. I was perplexed, had to think it over, I needed to ask permission from my mother who still lived in Tashkent.[...] Many of my classmates were amazed about my choice to marry Ziia, since there were so many candidates competing for my hand, and they were much wealthier, more successful than Ziia. However, we got married and started our family in the small student room. I was fourth grade, Ziia was still first-year student, but he passed the first- and second-year exams simultaneously, so in just a few months he became third-year student. [...] Parallel to his studies at MIV, Ziia studied part-time at the faculty of geography of Moscow State University, which was very convenient for his later research. He had a phenomenal knowledge of historical maps and, due to his experiences at the front, a tremendous precision in map-reading and topography."<sup>72</sup>

The information about Buniiatov studying geography will become of significance later in his career, when he starts writing about the history of Caucasian Albania in relation to the history of Ancient Armenia. With her statement above Tagira Buniiatova obviously intended to defend her husband from the critique of his opponents who held that many of his writings on the territorial divisions and historical geography of the Caucasus were just based on speculation.

After the birth of their first son Dzhamil in 1948, shortly after she had graduated from MIV, Tagira continued her education with a translation course for Turkish. Meanwhile, between 1950 and 1954, Ziia combined his PhD research with a job as an Arabic-Russian interpreter at the Supreme Court of the USSR, and at the Permanent Representation of Azerbaijan in Moscow. At the same time he still was, since his arrival in Moscow in 1946,

---

<sup>71</sup> Aleksandr E. Beliaev, "Vospominaniia o Z. M. Buniiatove", in *Sil'nee smerti*, Baku 2002, 458-459.59.

<sup>72</sup> Tagira Buniiatova, "Ziia – moia sud'ba", 88-92.

curator for Azerbaijani students in Moscow. He worked as a general advisor and was responsible for their scholarships.<sup>73</sup> After two years Tagira finished her translation course, and she was offered a job in the Turkey department of the main editorial office of the USSR Radio.<sup>74</sup>

### **The budding young scholar, Baku and Leningrad (1954-1965)**

In 1954 Ziia Buniatov successfully defended his PhD (*kandidatskaia*) at MIV. After his defense Buniatov was offered teaching positions in both Leningrad and Moscow, but according to Tagira he absolutely wanted to return to his motherland Azerbaijan.

“Although Ziia was offered teaching jobs in Moscow and Leningrad, he was very decided to return to Baku. ‘I am Azerbaijani and I will always live and work in Baku’, he said categorically. For me it was different. I did not want to give up my interesting job, my friends, my life in Moscow. But Ziia had decided: in 1954 he returned to Baku, while I stayed in Moscow. He had left Baku as a young lieutenant in 1941, had been back in 1946, shortly before his studies in Moscow. From his first day in Baku he worked as a senior researcher at the Baku Institute of History, and he started his new research as a post-doc without hesitating. Because of our son, who missed his father terribly, I decided that I had to follow my husband to this country that I, although I was Azeri, did not know at all. I moved with Dzhamil to Baku and got to know Ziia’s parents whom I greatly respected. His strict and reserved father Musa Movsum oglu was a typical military man, who knew, thanks to his long-term experience as a military interpreter, five or six languages, and had taught his son Arabic and the Qur’an. His mother Raisa was sober, with very strict rules, an excellent housewife, who spoke Azeri very well, in spite of her Russian origin.”<sup>75</sup>

Tagira's narrative thus gives Azerbaijani patriotism as the major motive that brought Buniatov back to Azerbaijan. While that is perfectly possible, we should also consider that Baku offered a quicker career track for a scholar with Moscow diplomas, and with the status of a war hero.

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>75</sup> Tagira Buniatova, *Ziia – moia sud'ba* (Baku, 2002), 113-118.

### ***Buniatov in Baku: jump start (1954-1962)***

Tagira's information on this period can be complemented with statements by Buniatov's students from the late 1950s, such as Esmeralda Agaeva, Naile Velikhanli, Farda Asadov and many others, who are still affiliated with the Azerbaijani Institute of Oriental Studies in Baku.

Buniatov started teaching at Azerbaijan State University (a position which he held only for a year), and Esmeralda Agaeva, one of his very first students, related the following anecdote on Buniatov's first years as a teacher in Baku, at the Oriental faculty of the Azerbaijan State University:

"In 1958 [Veli Yusif oglu] Akhundov was First Secretary of the Communist Party of the AzSSR. One of Buniatov's students in 1959 was Akhundov's daughter, who did not pass her exams. Buniatov was unwilling to 'make arrangements' (as was usually done in such cases), which led to a scandal; he was dismissed from [Azerbaijan State] university in the same year."<sup>76</sup>

Esmeralda Agaeva wanted to emphasize that Buniatov was never prone to corruption, unlike most other teachers at Azerbaijan State University.

More important than this teaching position was certainly the position of senior scholar at the recently (in the same year of 1954) founded Institute of History of the Foreign Eastern Countries in Baku, which in 1958 became the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the AzSSR (from 1967 to 1984: Institute of the Peoples of the Near and Middle East).

After his return to Baku, Buniatov's research was no longer devoted to his former topic of 'bourgeois colonialism in the Middle East', but he turned to what would become his major mission as a historian: the ancient and medieval history of his home country.

In 1959 Buniatov published the first work on Azerbaijani history, which amounted to a new vision on the history of the region. In his article "New Material on the Location of the Fortress Sheki"<sup>77</sup> he analysed Arabic and Armenian sources from the 9<sup>th</sup> century which describe the exact location of Sheki, as a region that was ruled by Caucasus Albania. Since

---

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Buniatov's former student Esmeralda Agaeva (Baku, August 2009).

<sup>77</sup> "Novye dannye o nakhozhenii kreposti Sheki", *DAN AzSSR*, nr. 9, 869-872, 1959. This is actually the first article by Buniatov on the history of the Caucasus. Before 1959 Buniatov published a handful of articles mainly on colonialism in the Middle East.

this region was partly located in modern Armenia, Buniiatov's article created some commotion, both in Azerbaijan and in Armenia. Buniiatov presented his argument as "historical evidence", which Armenians interpreted as territorial claims. From this moment on Buniiatov started his work as a revisionist of Azerbaijani historiography. The scientific impact of this publication will be discussed in the second chapter.

In the early 1960s Ziia Buniiatov spent two years in Leningrad, working in libraries, archives and at the Institute of Oriental studies on his post-doc project *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. According to his widow, Buniiatov did not have a supervisor in Leningrad. He worked independently but still had a close relationship with his former teacher Beliaev.

In spite of the fact that Buniiatov was educated at the Moscow party school for Orientalists he obviously decided to continue his research in Leningrad. In other words: he switched his focus from modern Oriental studies (at MIV) to the historiography of his own nation on the basis of manuscript sources (at Leningrad's IVAN branch, with its huge manuscript collection). Exactly this makes him an interesting subject for research: he was trained in a prestigious party-school with obvious ties to politics and continued his work in an environment that was perceived to be less politicized, though in fact it was no less intertwined with politics. It is my hypothesis that especially this myth of "innocence" of historiography gave an enormous political significance to Buniiatov's publications.

Leningrad scholars give us a bit more background information on this curious stay in Leningrad. According to my interviews with Turkologist Sergei G. Kliashtorny and Arabist Robert Landa, Buniiatov met with serious problems at Leningrad's IVAN branch, and had a conflict with Il'ia P. Petrushevskii (1898-1977), a highly authoritarian Iranist and historian of the Caucasus. In the 1940s he had worked at IVAN in Leningrad, but since 1947 Petrushevskii held a professorship at the Oriental Faculty of Leningrad State University.

Other scholars, such as Buniiatov's future disciple Farida Mamedova, argue that Leningrad's IVAN had a strong "Armenian Lobby" which was unwelcoming to Buniiatov's use of historical sources for political claims. Kliashtorny and Landa are both not convinced of this alleged Armenian lobby, and argue that the conflict with Petrushevskii was purely about scholarly methods and the quality of Buniiatov's research, and in particular about a disagreement about one of the maps of Caucasian Albania that Buniiatov used. Anyway, due

to this conflict Buniiatov's defense had to take place not at IVAN's branch in Leningrad but at IVAN's in Moscow, a solution that was often proposed in politically sensitive cases.<sup>78</sup>

Ziia Buniiatov returned to Baku, with a completed post-doc thesis: *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, the work that would become his major breakthrough.<sup>79</sup>

### **Father of historiography, Baku (1965-1987)**



*Ziia Musaevich Buniiatov (Photo : [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bunyatov,\\_Ziya\\_Musaevich](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bunyatov,_Ziya_Musaevich))*

In 1964 Buniiatov was appointed professor and head of the newly established department of History and Economy of the Arab Countries of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Baku. Buniiatov remained in charge of this department until 1981.<sup>80</sup> The research of the department was dedicated to the modern and ancient history of Azerbaijan and the Near East, the Arab Caliphate and medieval history of the Arab world, and a whole new generation of specialists was trained under Buniiatov's supervision. Studies of the Middle Ages were a priority for the

---

<sup>78</sup> Interviews with Farida Mamedova (Baku, August 2009), Robert Landa (Moscow, November 2010) and Sergei Kliashtorny (Baku, May 2011).

<sup>79</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Baku, 1965.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Naile Velikhanli (Baku museum of history, August 2009).

scholars, and during Buniiatov's leadership they were involved in the research of the history of the various states of the Near East, Caucasus and the Arab Caliphate, their political development, and religious and social movements.

The Institute of Oriental Studies in Baku was divided into several departments that all had their own field of research. The department of History and Economy of Iran had as main task to investigate Iranian history and social, political and cultural problems of the country. The department of History and Economy of Turkey focused on Turkish history, economy and culture. Other departments of the Institute were occupied with Iranian, Turkic and Arabic philology, source study and the history of religious and social thought.<sup>81</sup>

With the publication of his second (habilitation) dissertation in 1965 Buniiatov was regarded in Azerbaijan as a leading specialist of medieval history of the country. In 1967 he was elected a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences of the AzSSR, and in 1970 he got the position of chief editor of the series of Social Sciences (today the series of History, Philology and Law) of *Izvestiia Akademii Nauk*, the journal of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. The series of Social Sciences was edited at the Institute of Oriental Studies.<sup>82</sup>

In 1976 he was elected full member of the Academy of Sciences of the AzSSR and in 1980 he became a member of the editorial staff of the Azerbaijan Soviet Encyclopaedia. In 1981 Buniiatov eventually became director of the Institute of Peoples of the Near and Middle East (the name of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the AzSSR between 1967 and 1984), and one year later he was awarded with the title "Honourable Scholar" of the AzSSR. Also in 1982 he was elected corresponding member of the Turkish History Society (Türk Tarih Kurumu), because of his contribution to the research of history of Turkic peoples.

Because of his contribution to Uzbek historiography he became Citizen of Honour of the Uzbek city Urgench, and also member of the Committee for Saving the Aral Sea in 1988.<sup>83</sup> For his scholarly achievements he was decorated with a silver medal in 1983, and two

---

<sup>81</sup> This information is derived from the brochure of the Institute of Oriental Studies.

<sup>82</sup> Göhver Bakhshalieva, *Bibliografiia*,

<sup>83</sup> This award was due to the publication of Buniiatov's third monograph "The State of the Khorezmshahs" in which he studied the literature and history of Khorezm, which was presented as the forerunner of Uzbekistan.

years later, at the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory of World War II, the medal of the “Great Patriotic War of the First Level.”<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

After the introduction gave an overview of the political, social and academic context in which Buniiatov had to operate, this chapter has presented the life of Ziia Buniiatov from his birth in 1923 up to 1987, when he found himself at the peak of his career. Due to *Perestroika*, in 1987 the political situation changed rapidly, and this had a strong impact on Buniiatov’s life and career. What consequences these political shifts had for his personal position and his academic work will be analyzed in chapter three.

Chapter one had attempted to describe in detail the elements of Buniiatov’s biography that contributed to his image as the “ideal Azerbaijani historian”, as the father of historiography and – in the eyes of many Azerbaijanis – an icon of the nation. In other words: this chapter has presented the ingredients that created the so-called “Buniiatov myth”. At the same time it has tried to deconstruct this mythical image, by showing how and by whom the image was created in the first place, and by understanding its function for national Azerbaijani identity.

One of the most influential people with regard to the construction of the “Buniiatov myth” was his wife (and then widow) Tagira. In particular, she was one of the few witnesses who could shape the perception of Buniiatov’s early life until the 1960s – the foundational period for the myth. Tagira’s account of this period was of great importance for Buniiatov’s later status as hero and “dissident”.

While his character traits of perseverance and assertiveness have been central in the image of Buniiatov, we can also identify a number of other elements that allowed for the construction of the “Buniiatov myth”. The first of these is his family background. His ancestors in the paternal line were allegedly Islamic sheikhs, meaning that they were honored for their devotion and high-standing morality. This provided Buniiatov with an aura of sanctity, and placed him in what was experienced as a strong and ancient Azerbaijani tradition. This would become of significance in the late 1980s and early 1990s when

---

<sup>84</sup> The biographic data are taken from G. Bakhshalieva (*Bibliografiia*, 2004), Dzhamil Buniiatov (son of Ziia) (*Izbrannie sochineniia*, 1999) and the brochure of the IOS of the Academy, completed with interviews (Baku, August 2009).

Buniatov contributed to the use of Islam as a replacement for the socialist ideals. Buniatov's sacred genealogy was an ideal starting point for a regained authority after the collapse of Soviet Union.

The second and most striking element is certainly the fact that Buniatov was a Hero of the Soviet Union. This decoration is even more remarkable as Buniatov reportedly gained it while fighting in a penal battalion. He demonstrated his courage in the fight against the evil of evils, in the perception of the Soviet Union: German fascism. Buniatov's status as a war hero turned him into a moral figure and gave him a large degree of immunity from criticism. As one can conclude after hearing Buniatov's own account on this period in the *shtrafbat*, he was not a simple soldier in the battalion but a commander of the troops with the responsibility to send his soldiers to the front.

During his period in Berlin, between May 1945 and May 1946, we again see him as a great patriot who was convinced of his contribution to a better world, and who now also worked for the bright future of the German nation. He allegedly strongly believed in having a mission as a representative of a "morally good system". A comparable mission apparently made him decide to leave the military world in 1946 (although "a great military career loomed at his horizon" as he described it himself) and to become a historian and orientalist. Allegedly, his new career choice was not inspired by opportunism but by the desire to become a scholar, although his decision to study at the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies was certainly a political choice. After all, the MIV was a guarantee for a high social status and a successful career.

This brings us to a third ingredient of the Buniatov myth: his status as a scholar. Although his publications were, already from the beginning, devoted to highly politicized topics, in Baku he was considered an objective and honest scholar with merely academic ambitions. His choice to continue his studies at the Leningrad branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, as well as his turn to ancient Azerbaijani history, indicates that his strategy was to operate in the lee of politics - while producing scholarship that was of great political significance for claims of contemporary Azerbaijan.

A fourth ingredient of the myth, resulting in part from his immunity as war hero, is the fact that he at times posed as a "dissident", someone who was always brave enough to challenge the authorities, even in the more repressive and authoritarian years of the Soviet era. However, the account by his colleague Isaak Fil'shtinskii nuances this dissident status.

Fil'shtinskii admits that Buniiatov indeed sometimes openly criticized some local authorities, for instance during Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign in the late 1940s, but he also calls Buniiatov a typical *homo sovieticus* who never posed a real challenge to the overall regime. Apparently Buniiatov had specific privileges, due to his status of a hero, or through people of high position who protected him; this allowed him to raise his voice now and then. Yet overall he was an opportunist who carefully operated within the limits of the system. This opportunism will be equally visible in our study of Buniiatov's acting in the period after the collapse of the USSR, in the third chapter.

A fifth element of the myth, which is connected to the above-mentioned, is Buniiatov's display of honesty and integrity in a system that was in general considered to be corrupted. From accounts of his former students, such as Esmeralda Agaeva, we can conclude that unlike most other university teachers, Buniiatov was indeed never prone to corruption. In this regard his contribution to historiography was even more appreciated since Azerbaijan was allegedly attacked by the Armenian enemies who had the ambition to undermine the country's status as ancient and indigenous nation in the Caucasus. In the eyes of his Azerbaijani readers, Buniiatov was the first and most important scholar to defend his nation against these attacks. At the same time his publications bore the appearance of innocence and exactly this gave them an enormous political significance.

Similar ingredients can be detected in his search for a new historiography, as we will see in chapter two. Since the 1950s Buniiatov published a number of major works that offered a new perspective on the medieval history of Azerbaijan. His main topics were the ethno-genesis of the Azerbaijani people (claiming the ancient Albanians as the direct ancestors of the Azerbaijanis), processes of state-formation, and territorial questions. His goal was to prove that the Azerbaijanis were the rightful heirs to the territory of the modern AzSSR, and that they continued an ancient civilization of equal value as that of their neighbours.

## **Chapter II:**

# **Historiography as a struggle for territory: Buniatov's works (1958-1987)**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I analyze the major works that Buniatov wrote between 1958 (when his first article was published) and 1987, the year when, during Gorbachev's perestroika, the political situation changed and Buniatov's work got even more politicized due to the escalating conflict with Armenia. The scholarly rivalry with Armenian colleagues was always underlying Buniatov's writings. I attempt to look at his writings in chronological order, discussing his choice of topics as well as his selection and interpretation of the historical sources. In doing this, I attempt at revealing the political and social significance of Buniatov's publications for Azerbaijani nation-building in general, and for a growing nationalism from the 1950s.

The difference of opinion between Buniatov and Armenian scholars concerning medieval texts from the South Caucasus boils down to the following: while the British scholar C.F. Dowsett and several prominent Armenian historians based their arguments on the cultural and linguistic features of the texts, Buniatov and other Azerbaijani scholars after him make their conclusions on the basis of territory – that is, medieval authors writing on the territory of contemporary Azerbaijan are by definition regarded as being Albanian, and thus in extension Azerbaijani because Azerbaijan is depicted as the heir of ancient Albania. This approach is considerably weaker than the Armenian position, also because the Azerbaijanis did not have an ancient literature in their own language and alphabet; this required them to make recourse to the Albanian heritage, and to emphasize that the latter was not Armenian (as Armenian authors would argue). But even Albanian literature has not survived; and Armenians claimed it was an Armenian who provided the Albanian language with an alphabet, and that the Albanian heritage was fused with the Armenian tradition.

I will present these different approaches by offering a close reading of Buniiatov's most important works from the period under consideration; these works would continue to be characteristic for the Azerbaijani approach to the history of the Caucasus also in the 1990s, when, however, Buniiatov's study shifted to more recent historical eras.

### **A new discourse on Azerbaijani history: Caucasusian Albania**

In 1959, five years after his return to Baku, Buniiatov launched the first work on Azerbaijani history. In his article "New Material on the Location of the Fortress Sheki"<sup>1</sup> he analysed Arabic and Armenian sources from the 9<sup>th</sup> century which describe the exact location of Sheki, as a region that was ruled by Caucasus Albania.<sup>2</sup>

The core of the article is his claim that there were two Shekis. Arabic sources (like Tabari) report on Sahl ibn Sunbat, a ruler of Shaki and Aran (in the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century). While most historians (including specialists of the region such as Agafangel Krymskii [1871-1942], Wladimir Minorsky [1877-1966], and Charles Dowsett [1924-1998]) identified this toponym with the present-day city of Sheki in North Azerbaijan (called Nukha in Soviet times), Buniiatov argues that the narration of historical events in these sources indicate that they speak about another region; and this he identifies with a place called Sheki that is located in Soviet Armenia, in the Sisianskii district. According to Buniiatov, close to the town of Sisian there are remnants of a medieval fortress, which he argues was this historical "other" Sheki; "these ruins are still waiting for their investigation".<sup>3</sup>

Buniiatov's claim – obviously based on mere surmise - in fact meant that parts of Soviet Armenia belonged to Arran, the Persian name for Albania – or at least that Sahl ibn Sunbat, as ruler over Arran, also ruled over parts of what later became Armenia. "We can thus

---

<sup>1</sup> Zia M. Buniiatov, "Novye dannye o nakhozhdanii kreposti Sheki", *DAN AzSSR*, no. 9 (1959) 869-872.

<sup>2</sup> Here Buniiatov mentions in a footnote an article of W. Minorsky, who argues that the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan roughly corresponds to Ancient Caucasian Albania. According to Minorsky, Albania was not able to survive as a consolidated state due to Arab and Khazar invasions into the regions, and also as a result of a dominating Armenian cultural influence. The majority of the Albanians were converted to Armenian Christianity, which was the end of Albania as a country and a civilization, a view that Buniiatov did not share. V. Minorsky, "Caucasica IV", *BSOAS* XV/3 (1953), 504-514.

Zia M. Buniiatov, "Novye dannye o nakhozhdanii kreposti Sheki", 869.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 869.

conclude that in the 9<sup>th</sup> century the territory of Arran (Sheki included) stretched westwards to lake Sevan,"<sup>4</sup> which means Buniatov extended the reach of Albania not only by including Karabakh but also the territories west of it, located in Soviet Armenia.

In principle, such constellations are possible, but they do not say much about whether this or that territory belongs historically to any other area that this or that ruler had in his possessions. However, in this case the message was explosive – the Sisian district is the Armenian land tongue between Nakhichevan (which belonged to Soviet Azerbaijan) and the Azerbaijani mainland.

The question of Caucasian Albania – its constituent parts, its borders, and its religion – had been a much-debated issue ever since; while some argued that Albania covered only parts of the South-Eastern Caucasus (or contemporary Azerbaijan), others held that the Albanian state extended up to the Terek river in the North Caucasus, de facto including not only the city of Derbent but most of Daghestan.<sup>5</sup> There have been also different opinions about whether Albania ever existed as a state, or as a federation of tribes under foreign (Byzantine, Iranian/Sassanid) supremacy.

Buniatov's article of 1959 on the Albanian past of the region of the "second" Sheki prepared the ground for his development of the thesis that present-day Azerbaijan must be seen as the heir of ancient Albania, and for the thesis that Nagorny Karabakh was a historical part of it. An ensuing article, "On the Location of the Medieval City-Fortresses Bazz and Sheki" (1961),<sup>6</sup> brought this argument further.

According to two of my interview partners, both former students of Buniatov and affiliated with the Institute of Oriental Studies, Buniatov's first article created a lot of commotion, both in Azerbaijan and in Armenia. Buniatov presented "historical evidence", which Armenians interpreted as implying territorial claims not only to Nagorny Karabakh but even to the Armenian Sisianskii region, the (Armenian) area between AzSSR and Nakhichevan. From this moment on Buniatov started his work as a revisionist of Azerbaijani

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 871.

<sup>5</sup> Omar M. Davudov, *Material'naia kul'tura Dagestana Albanskogo vremeni* (Makhachkala, 1996), 22-29.

<sup>6</sup> Zia M. Buniatov, "O mestonakhozhdenii srednevekovykh gorodov-kreposti Bazz i Sheki", *AN SSSR* (1961) 89-93.

historiography; in the AzSSR his "daring work was welcomed with feelings of pride and satisfaction".<sup>7</sup>

The reason for these feelings is obvious. Buniiatov saw himself confronted with a canon of historiography that was, in the eyes of most Azerbaijanis, completely dominated by "foreigners", such as Russians or Armenians; and the first Azerbaijani school of Jadidi-origin local historians that published in the 1920s, and pursued academic careers in various educational and research institutions in Baku, had been wiped out in 1937-38.<sup>8</sup> Several of these were rehabilitated starting in the mid-1950s,<sup>9</sup> but their names were still associated with "bourgeois nationalism". In the context of the Marxist-Leninist view on nationality, the Azerbaijani past had been defined during the first decades of the Soviet Union. In the USSR the different peoples of the Caucasus were seen as "brothers" who for centuries had struggled against Arab or Persian (that is: Muslim) invaders and overlords until the Russian "liberators" brought peace and progress, and, in the USSR, national self-determination.

In the following years, now in Leningrad, Ziiia Buniiatov published several articles, all on a revision of history and territory and based on "historical evidence". In an article from 1961 "On the Duration of Khazar Presence in Albania in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries"<sup>10</sup> Buniiatov refuted the dominant opinions on the presence of the Khazars in the region. According to the former interpretations, the Khazars brought an end to the state of Albania, with Albania splitting into more than a dozen of principalities ruled by foreigners. Buniiatov challenged this view and presented Albania as an integrated state even after the Khazars invaded the Western Caspian area, and as the historical forerunner of modern Azerbaijan. According to Buniiatov "the Khazars, in spite of almost one century of rule in Albania, always considered Albania as a country, albeit under almost uninterrupted Khazar control."<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Z. Qurbanova (niece of Buniiatov and co-editor of his bibliography) in an interview with Sara Crombach, Baku, August 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Ziiia Buniiatov would later become one of the first scholars of Soviet- (and Post-Soviet)-Azerbaijan to investigate the repression against Azerbaijani scholars in the period of Stalin's Great Terror 1937-38. Between 1990-1992 he published several articles in Russian in Soviet Azerbaijani newspapers. These articles were published in Azeri in 1993 in the book 'Kirmizi Terror'. Ziiia M. Buniiatov, *Kirmizi Terror* (Baku, 1993). See chapter three of the present thesis.

<sup>9</sup> Dzhamil Gasanly, *Khrushchevskaiia ottepel' i natsional'nyi vopros v Azerbaidzhane* (Baku, 2009), 42-50.

<sup>10</sup> Ziiia Buniiatov, "O dlitel'nosti prebyvaniia khazar v Albanii v VII-VIII vv," *Izv. AN AzSSR, ser. obshchestv. nauk*, 1 (1961), 22-34.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

According to his Armenian critics, Albania was never a consolidated state in the first place, and the country should not been seen as the forerunner of Azerbaijan, since the two nations do not have any linguistic or cultural similarities.<sup>12</sup>

In “Albanika III”<sup>13</sup> (1964) Buniiatov provided a list of Arabic sources from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that were connected to Azerbaijani history. This work was seen as an important basis for future studies on the historiography of the region. In Baku Buniiatov created an archive of manuscripts and historical documents which he made available for all scholars of the AzSSR.<sup>14</sup>

Several of my interview partners claimed that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was not pleased by Buniiatov’s historical revisionism, but his work was tolerated as a possible way of “dealing with national questions”.<sup>15</sup> Yet according to Dzhamil Gasanly’s study of the Thaw period in Azerbaijan, Party leaders of the AzSSR Mustafaev (1956-1959) and Akhundov (1959-1965) supported nationalistic aspirations;<sup>16</sup> and in an interview Gasanly told me that they also supported Buniiatov (but when I asked him whether Buniiatov’s turn to ancient sources while working in Leningrad might have been coordinated, or instigated, by Azerbaijani political circles, Gasanly expressed his doubts).<sup>17</sup>

One reason why the state and Party did not intervene, and why Buniiatov was not hindered in his revisionist historiography, might have been that he never challenged the official rejection of “Pan-Islamism” and “Pan-Turkism”; to the contrary, his argumentation was based neither on Islam, nor on Turkic ethnicity – in fact, “his” Albania was purely Caucasian and autochthonous, thereby still fitting the Soviet standards. This gave him the space for manoeuvring in this highly sensitive area.

---

<sup>12</sup> Paruir Muradian, *Istoriia pamiat' pokolenii* (Erevan, 1990), 53-75.

<sup>13</sup> Zia Buniiatov, “Albanika III”, *AN AzSSR* (1964), 87-92.

<sup>14</sup> N. Velikhanli (former student and director of the museum of Azerbaijani history) in an interview (Baku, August 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with Farda Asadov (August 2009), Altay Göyüşev (August 2009), Dzhamil Gasanly (August 2009) and Arif Yunusov (May 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Dzhamil Gasanly, *Khrushchevskaiia otpepel' i natsional'nyi vopros v Azerbaidzhane* (Baku 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Dzhamil Gasanly, Baku, August 2009.

## **Appropriating an Albanian Chronicle (1960)**

In 1960 Buniiatov enlarged his field of research on the South Caucasus by turning to a narrative source, the Armenian-language *Albanian Chronicle* by Mkhitar Gosh (d. 1213). As he had no access to the Old-Armenian original, Buniiatov's source was the English translation of Gosh's Albanian chronicle, published in 1958 by the British historian Charles J. F. Dowsett (1924 - 1998), Professor of Armenian at the University of Oxford from 1965 to 1991.<sup>18</sup> Buniiatov translated the chronicle from English into Russian and provided an introduction to it.<sup>19</sup> Especially this introduction to the volume was held against him, because, as Armenian scholars argued, also here he copied from Dowsett's argumentation but manipulated Dowsett's phrasing.

In this section I will first introduce the source itself, and discuss the relation between Gosh's chronicle and an older work that served as one of its major sources, the *History of Aluank* (or *History of Agvan*) (dating from the seventh to tenth centuries).<sup>20</sup> This part of the present chapter is above all based on Dowsett's research. In the part that follows we will see how Buniiatov discussed this source, and that he indeed manipulated Dowsett's publication of the Chronicle. The last part of this chapter is about the Armenian reproaches that Buniiatov earned for this exercise, which brought him the reputation, in the Armenian Academy of Sciences, of a "falsifier". For Armenians, Gosh's chronicle was a clear testimony to the ancient glory of their nation, and evidence for arguing that certain areas of the South Caucasus must be seen as Armenian.

### ***Mkhitar Gosh's Albanian Chronicle***

For Dowsett, Caucasus Albania (Aluank) was the easternmost part of the "Armenian sphere of influence"; he thus attributes Albania to the wider political and cultural area that was inhabited by Armenians, and that reached far beyond the Caucasus. It is this attribution that Buniiatov, as we will see, objects against.

---

<sup>18</sup> Charles J.F. Dowsett, "The Albanian Chronicle of Mxit'ar Goş", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* vol. 21, no. 1/3 (1958), 472-490.

<sup>19</sup> Ziiia Buniiatov, "Mkhitar Gosh. Albanskaia khronika", *AN AzSSR* (Baku, 1960), 27-37; the introduction to the volume was reissued in *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh, vol. I* (Baku, 1999), 447-449.

<sup>20</sup> The *Istoriia Agvan* by Moisei Kagankatvatsi (or: Daskhurantsi) was translated first from Old-Armenian into Russian by K. Patkanov (or Patkanian, St. Petersburg, 1861). C. J. Dowsett made an English translation, which was published in 1961 in London.)

As Dowsett explains, after the fall of the Bagratid kingdom of Armenia (which had its last capital in Ani, between 961 and 1045), the Armenian literary centre shifted from the Caucasus to Cilicia, where a group of writers formed an Albanian school of Armenian literature in the eastern regions. In this school Mkhitar Gosh (Mxit'ar Goş, c. 1130-1213) occupies a foremost place; the school was continued by his disciples Vardan Areveltsi and Vanakan Vardepet, and by the disciple of the latter, Kirakos Ganjaketsi. Most of what we know about Mkhitar Gosh is based on information that can be found in the *Concise History* of Kirakos, who can be called the spiritual grandson of Gosh.

Mkhitar Gosh was born probably between 1130 and 1140 in the capital of Arran, Ganjak (Gandzha in contemporary Azerbaijan), and he died "at a great age" in 1213. Ganjak, the place of birth of Gosh, was ruled by the Kurdish Shaddadid dynasty from 950 to 1075, and then in the hands of the Seljuq Melik Shah.<sup>21</sup> After studying under the *Vardapet* (the equivalent of an archimandrite in the Armenian Apostolic Church) Yovhannes of Tawus, Gosh received the title of *vardapet* himself and went to Cilicia for further study. Reportedly one motivation for leaving Ganjak was competition between various Armenian dignitaries, and "Turkish oppression"; the Albanian Catholicos Stepannos III (1155-1195) used the Seljuq overlords to repress his own enemies.<sup>22</sup> In or after 1184 Gosh settled in the monastery of Getik in the canton of Kayen (North East Armenia), where he stayed until an earthquake destroyed the monastery. With the support of one of the local princes, Vakhtang, Mkhitar Gosh built the monastery of Nor Getik (located in the Dilizhan region in Armenia), where he died in 1213.

Gosh wrote his *Albanian Chronicle* as an appendix to one particular copy of his principal work, the *Law Book (Datastanagirk)* (1184).<sup>23</sup> At the end of the *Law Book* we can find Gosh's introduction to the small chronicle that follows in the same manuscript:

"Glory to Our Saviour Jesus and with Him the Father and the Holy Ghost, Who caused us here to interrupt the Book of Laws; for although we said before when writing the short

---

<sup>21</sup> Dowsett, "The Albanian Chronicle of Mxit'ar Goş", 475. Dowsett mentions here the *Studies in Caucasian History* of V. Minorsky (Cambridge 1953). During the earthquake of 1139 Kara Sonkur, who had his residency in Ganjak, was emir of both Adharbaidjan and Arran. After his death in 1140/1 he was succeeded by Djawli, who died in 1146, and after him Rawadi is mentioned as ruler of Arran.

<sup>22</sup> Dowsett, "The Albanian Chronicle of Mxit'ar Goş", 473.

<sup>23</sup> Dowsett's research is based on two manuscripts of this Law book. The first one, No 1237, can be found in the Mekhtarist monastery of San Lazzaro, Venice and the second manuscript, No 8, is located in the Uniate monastery of Our Lady of Bzommar in the Lebanon. *The Albanian Chronicle* is only found in manuscript No. 1237. -- Mkhitar Gosh also composed parables and fables.

colophon “Here ends the Book of Laws”, it was not the end of it; rather we decided to make a pause, writing ourselves as much as possible, but not so as to hinder others who might wish to write and add thereto. Although in the year in which we began to write down all the laws which had been established, the writing of this memorial was delayed by reason of the persecutions, domestic and not foreign, which came upon us, we have considered it also essential to include the list of the Catholicoi of the Albanians in order to combine those we [already] have now with all these [that follow].”<sup>24</sup>

With this quotation the *Albanian Chronicle* opens. One problem with the *Chronicle* is that it is only found in one of the two manuscripts of the *Law Book* that Dowsett had at his disposal. The fact that in one copy the *Chronicle* is lacking had led an Armenian author, Akinean, in 1944 to the conclusion that the *Chronicle* was not authored by Gosh himself. Dowsett rejected this assumption. He argued that both manuscripts come from the same period (around 1200), but that the copy of the *Law Book* that lacks the *Chronicle* was written for the Catholicos of Cilicia, Grigor IV; it would not have made sense to add to it a chronicle on Caucasus Albania.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the copy that includes the *Chronicle* was dedicated to a prince in the Caucasus (Vakhtang of Khachen, a town in Karabakh that at that time was still independent from the Kurdish Shaddadids).<sup>26</sup>

Gosh’s *Chronicle* refers back to another major historical work, the *History of Aluank* (or *History of the Albanians*), which he attributes to Movses Daskhurantsi (Kalankatuatsi, tenth century).<sup>27</sup> The attribution of this *History of Aluank* to Daskhurantsi has been much debated (and we will return to this question later); Dowsett and other historians believe that this work is a compilation of several parts composed in the seventh to eleventh centuries.<sup>28</sup> At any event, Gosh’s work, written in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, was obviously designed as a continuation of Daskhurantsi’s work.

---

<sup>24</sup> Dowsett, "The Albanian Chronicle of Mxit'ar Goş", 473-474.

<sup>25</sup> Dowsett, "The Albanian Chronicle of Mxit'ar Goş", 474.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>27</sup> According to Dowsett, L. Alishan (who published a modern Armenian translation of the *History of Aluank* already in 1901) held that Kalankatuatsi and Daskhurantsi were in fact two different writers; N. Akinean (1953) assumed that there is only one historian, who was known under two different names. Dowsett sides with W.B. Henning, who equally argued that Movses Daskhuranci and Kalankatuatsi were one and the same. Kalankatuk was the name of a monastery where Kalankatuatsi resided, and Daskhuranci was his place of birth. We can find a similar confusion in relation to Mkhitar Gosh, who is sometimes called Ganjakeci after his place of birth, or Getkaci in connection with the monastery where he stayed, or Goş (beardless) ‘by virtue of a physical peculiarity.’ Charles Dowsett, "The Albanian Chronicle of Mxit'ar Goş", (1958), 476.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 476.

Gosh's Chronicle starts with a list of patriarchs of the country, then leading to the historical events that took place in Albania between 1130 and 1162. At this point the work stops abruptly. In the above-mentioned period Armenia and Albania were mostly in foreign hands. Although Armenian rulers had been able to maintain political authority in Siunik, Sasun and Tasir-Joraget, most of the region was ruled by the Kurdish Shaddadids. In Albania the region Khachen, which was part of Artsakh (Karabakh), was still independent. Dowsett emphasizes the importance of Arabic historiography for our knowledge of the political history of the region:

“All this is known from Arab sources, but the present Armenian [sic] chronicle supplies us with interesting details of the affairs of Ganjak, perhaps witnessed by Mxit'ar himself, and other information [...] which is not to my knowledge to be found elsewhere....”<sup>29</sup>

For Dowsett it was thus natural to attribute the Chronicle to the Armenian literary history; it was composed in Old Armenian, and by an author who wrote in the Armenian principality in Cilicia. The work was dedicated to an Albanian ruler, in “independent” Khachen (a part of Artsakh, today Nagorny Karabakh), and it was called an “Albanian” history; but Dowsett's obvious conclusion is that Albania has to be regarded as a part of the Armenian “sphere of influence”.

### ***Buniatov's translation of Gosh's Chronicle and the issue of plagiarism***

According to Buniatov the *Istoriia Agvan* was an Albanian work that was unfortunately manipulated by the Armenian *Catholicos* Ananii Okatsi (943-967). Ananii wanted to cover up that Albania had become a Christian state before Armenia. The Armenian *Catholicos*, deliberately or not, misunderstood the original work and stressed the fact that the Albanian church was subjected to the Armenian church, since the *Catholicos*es of Albania always received their religious ordination from the Armenian patriarch. The author of *Istoriia Agvan* is shrouded in mystery and the various testimonies about his life are often contradictory. While according to Dowsett, Moisei Kagankatvatsi and Moisei Daskhurantsi were one and the same, T. I. Ter-Grigor'ian carried the idea that the *Istoriia Agvan* was written by two different Moisei's: the first two parts of the work that describe the period until the 7<sup>th</sup> century were written by Moisei Kagankatvatsi, and the third part was added by Moisei Daskhurantsi. According to Z. I. Iampol'skii both options might be possible. Some critics see the work as a

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 475.

collection of materials that was compiled from various Armenian sources, but several scholars (such as a. o. N. Ia. Marr, K. Patkanov and K. Shakhnazarian) who had compared the work with other Georgian and Armenian sources, concluded that the *Istoriia Agvan* was the most important written source on the history of Albania.<sup>30</sup>

Just like Dowsett, Ziia Buniiatov begins his introduction to Gosh's *Albanian Chronicle* with an overview of ancient and medieval sources that preceded Mkhitar Gosh's work.<sup>31</sup> Buniiatov agrees that the *History of Agvan* is the most important source on the history of Caucasian Albania in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The author of this work, whom Dowsett refers to as Moses Kalankatuatsi, appears in Buniiatov's work as “Moisei Kagankatvatsi (Daskhurantsi)”; and while Dowsett calls the work *History of Aluank*, Buniiatov prefers to speak of it as *History of Agvan*. Both Agvan and Aluank are Armenian terms for Albania, or for the South Caucasian parts of it. Needless to say, the parallel use of three names for one author, and of two versions of the same work, is a recipe for confusion; obviously, Buniiatov wanted to set himself apart from the Armenian tradition. There are also Azerbaijani forms (Dashkhuranli, Kalankatli), which Buniiatov however does not employ.

As Buniiatov reminds us, the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries are described in the histories of Vardan Areveltsi, Kirakos Gandzaketsi, and by Arab historians like Ibn al-Asir and al-Isfahani. Gosh's work is important to Buniiatov because it covers the period in between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Mkhitar intended to continue Daskhurantsi's work, which had stopped around 1000 CE.<sup>32</sup> Buniiatov mentions that before Dowsett's English translation, it had been edited (and translated) in Armenian in 1901, by G. Alishan; and he also discusses the issue of the manuscript's attachment to the Law Book. Buniiatov's goal was to make the work accessible to Russian-speaking scholars, and he makes it clear that his translation is based on Dowsett's English translation.

Just like Dowsett, Buniiatov starts his introduction with the long passage that I quoted above, in which Gosh describes as his intention to provide “list of the *Catholicoi* of the

---

<sup>30</sup> Nikolai Marr had been the first to claim Nizami as an Azerbaijani poet, and in the 1920s he argued for a greater attention for Muslim contributions to culture on the Caucasus. In 1950 Marr was declared *persona non grata* by Stalin. Michiel Leezenberg, “Soviet Orientalism and Subaltern Linguistics” (Amsterdam, 2014), 103.

<sup>31</sup> Buniiatov, 'Mkhitar Gosh. Albanskaia khronika. Predislovie', 447.

<sup>32</sup> Buniiatov, 'Mkhitar Gosh. Albanskaia khronika' (Baku [1960],1999), 447. Z. I. Iampol'skii, *K izucheniiu letopisi kavkazskoi Albanii*, Izv AN AzSSR (Baku, 1957), No 9, 150.

Albanians in order to combine those we [already] have now with all these [that follow].”<sup>33</sup> Also Buniiatov’s explanation of the historical context in which the work was produced follows Dowsetts’s same line of arguments, and mentions the same names of scholars and rulers that the British scholar mentioned. Buniiatov also refers to the same political constellations.

Buniiatov’s reliance on an English translation earned him much criticism; and even more disputed was the fact that also Buniiatov’s introduction to his translation very closely resembled that of Dowsett. According to the Armenian historian of Armenian and Georgian literature Paruir Muradian (1933-2011), Buniiatov “copied several of the remarks of C. J. Dowsett, without mentioning so, and even without a proper understanding of the English language.”<sup>34</sup>

Let us have a closer look at both articles and see if Muradian was right. First of all, Buniiatov does not hide the fact that his Russian translation of the *Albanian Chronicle* is based on Dowsett’s English publication of 1958. He argues that Dowsett’s translation is the most reliable. He does not make clear whether he had the 1901 Armenian edition by Alishan at his disposal, but the formulation implies that he regarded the modern Armenian version as of lower quality. Buniiatov’s criticism might be justified, it is however not clear whether he could read it.

Buniiatov’s own "Foreword" to his Russian translation of Dowsett's English edition, however, is not presented as a translation of Dowsett’s but as an original contribution. The problem is here that he closely followed Dowsett’s introduction, in fact copying much from Dowsett.<sup>35</sup> This can best be seen in Buniiatov's discussion of historiography, of the political

---

<sup>33</sup> Buniiatov, "Mkhitar Gosh. Albanskaia khronika" ([1960],1999), 447.

<sup>34</sup> Paruir M. Muradian, *Istoriia – pamiat' pokolenii* (Yerevan, 1990), 156.

<sup>35</sup> To take as an example, Buniiatovs’ biographical information about Mkhitar Gosh is largely copied from Dowsett’s introduction.

Gosh was born in about 1130, in Giandzha and his teacher was Vardapet Iovkhanes Tavushkii. After he was appointed *Vardapet* himself, he continued his studies in Kilikia. Mkhitar returned to Giandzha and he attracted, since he had become a famous scholar, many students, for instance Vardan Areveltsi and Vanakan Vardapet. Vanakan’s student Kirakos Gandzaketsi left in his writings invaluable information, which is a great contribution to our current knowledge about life and work of Mkhitar Gosh. Being oppressed by the Albanian Catholicos Stepannos III (1155-1195), Gosh was forced to go to Khachen, where he stayed in the monastery Getik, until the earthquake of 1184. After that he founded, with support of the prince of Khachen Vakh tang, the monastery Nor Getik where he died in 1213. Mkhitar Gosh describes the historical events of Albania between 1130 and 1162, during Seljuq rule. Between 970 and 1075 (this means the time preceding the period described in the chronicle) Giandzha was ruled by the Shaddadids, until the Seljuq Melik Shakh conquered the region.

setting, of the manuscript situation, of the biographical information about Gosh's life and work, and the description of the contents of the chronicle.

Yet even more remarkable than these similarities are the differences that he introduces. As mentioned above, Dowsett starts his introduction with the argument that "Caucasian Albania, or Aluank, [is] the country that represents the most eastern part of *the Armenian sphere of influence*"<sup>36</sup> [emphasis mine]. Buniiatov drops these nuances and simply speaks of Caucasian Albania. Similarly, where Dowsett identifies historical personalities and scholars as "Armenian", Buniiatov simply drops this ethnic attribute.<sup>37</sup>

Whenever Dowsett uses the term "Armenian", Buniiatov either drops or replaces the term. The Armenian name of Movses Kalankatutsi, a medieval historian who is widely seen as Armenian, since he wrote in Armenian and described himself as Armenian, is replaced by Buniiatov by the (Albanian) name Moisei Kagankatvatsi. By doing so Buniiatov emphasizes that the ancient historian was in fact Albanian [implying: Azerbaijani]. Similarly, Dowsett's statement that "after the fall of the Bagratid kingdom of Armenia the Armenian literary centre shifted to Cilicia, where a group of writers formed *the Albanian school of Armenian literature* in the eastern regions"<sup>38</sup> is missing in Buniiatov's foreword altogether. Whereas Dowsett says that Mkhitar was forced to leave Ganjak due to *Turkish oppression at the instigation of the Albanian Catholicos Stepannos III*, Buniiatov only mentions the fact that the Catholicos *disliked and oppressed Mkhitar Gosh*.<sup>39</sup>

For the Armenian scholar Paruir Muradian, Buniiatov's use of Dowsett's work was mere plagiarism; and from this position of strong rejection Muradian does not even discuss Buniiatov's consistent omission of references to Armenian features mentioned in Dowsett's text. Muradian is insofar right as Buniiatov borrows his major arguments from Dowsett; and while Buniiatov acknowledges that Dowsett's English translation of the *Albanian Chronicle* was the basis of his own Russian translation, he does not make clear that also his own introduction to the text was to a large degree based on the arguments given in Dowsett's foreword. This handling of Dowsett, one might say, is at least very questionable; whether we

---

<sup>36</sup> Charles Dowsett, "The Albanian Chronicle of Mxit'ar Goş" (1958), 472.

<sup>37</sup> This is the case for the 'ancient Armenian scholars' (according to Dowsett) P'awstos Biwandaci, Lazar Parpeci, as well as for Gosh's students Arewelci, Vardapet and Ganjakeci.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Dowsett, "The Albanian Chronicle of Mxit'ar Goş" (1958), 473 (emphasis added).

<sup>39</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, "Mkhitar Gosh. Albanskaia khronika" ([1960],1999), 448 (emphasis added).

can call that an instance of plagiarism is a matter of opinion (and we must be careful not to use the standards of academic integrity that were developed, also in our countries, only over the past few years). What can however clearly be said is that by manipulating Dowsett's argumentation – excluding Armenian references - he uses the international prestige of the British scholar for his own cause, and creates the impression that also Dowsett did not treat Mkhitar Gosh's work as Armenian in origin.

### ***Plagiarism, part two***

In a 1965 article, Buniiatov turned to the other major Armenian historical source that I already mentioned, the *History of Agvan* of Moisei Kagankatvatsi.<sup>40</sup> In this piece he argues that the manuscript that has come down to us, and that served as the basis for Patkanov's 1861 translation into Russian,<sup>41</sup> has been confused; and he suggests to rearrange the individual chapters in order to re-establish the original chronological and topical coherence of Kagankatvatsi's work. While Buniiatov implicitly evokes the impression that he is familiar with the Armenian text, it rather seems he was working with Patkanov's Russian edition.

In Armenian and Western historiography, the author Moses Kagankatvatsi is usually referred to as Movses Daskhurantsi; and the work in question, the *History of Agvan*, is called the *History of Aluank*. In 1961 Dowsett published an English translation of this important source, under the title of *The History of the Caucasian Albanians*.<sup>42</sup>

Buniiatov's attempt to re-order the chapter has a curious pre-history. In 1964 the Armenian-American historian Robert Hewsen and the British Turkologist (at that time a retired civil servant and chairman of Pirelli!)<sup>43</sup> Sir Gerard Clauson (1891-1974) published a review of Dowsett's translation; Daskhurantsi's chronicle is, according to Hewsen and Clausen, "the only contemporary work on the history of Albania, and one of the most

---

<sup>40</sup> Zia Buniiatov, "O khronologicheskome nesootvetstvii glav "Istorii Agvan" Moiseia Kagankatvatsi", *DAN AzSSR*, No. 4 (1965), 65-67.

<sup>41</sup> K. Patkanov, *Istoriia Agvan Moiseia Kagankatvatsi* (translated from Old-Armenian) (Saint-Petersburg, 1861).

<sup>42</sup> *The History of the Caucasian Albanians*, by Movsēs Dasxurañi. Transl. by C. J. F. Dowsett (London Oriental Series, vol. 8) (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>43</sup> Robert Hewsen, born in 1934 in New York to Armenian American parents, studied with the Russian-born American historian and specialist of the Caucasus Cyril Toumanoff (1913-1997). Sir Gerard Clauson (1891-1974) was an English businessman and Orientalist. On Clauson's very unusual career, see the hilarious obituary by C.E. Bosworth, "Obituary to Sir Gerard Clauson (1891-1973)", *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, Bulletin*, 1:1 (1974), 39-43.

important sources on the origin of Caucasus Albania, its conversion to the Armenian form of Christianity, and its disappearance from the historical scene".<sup>44</sup> At the same time the two authors discussed the sequence of the individual chapters/books of the original manuscript – and here we find exactly the same ideas that Buniiatov voiced in his piece one year later.

That the two publications have to be seen in connection is obvious: not only the topic is the same (a re-arranging of Dashkhurantsi's chapters to make sense of his book from a chronological position), but also the individual solutions to the problem are the same (mainly a shuffling of several chapters). Even more, Buniiatov uses the same expressions as Hewsen and Clauson. And neither does Buniiatov refer to Hewsen and Clauson's publication, nor do they refer to Buniiatov.

The piece of Hewsen and Clauson was placed in issue 1 (1964) of the *Bulletin of the London School of Oriental and African Studies*; Buniiatov's article appeared in number 4 (1965) of *Dokumenty Akademii nauk Azerbaidzhanskoi SSR*. The publication dates clearly suggest that Buniiatov's piece is built on that of Hewsen and Clauson, over large parts translating the English text into Russian even word for word.

And again, Buniiatov changes the text where it suits him. Buniiatov doesn't copy Hewsen and Clauson's first paragraph, in which Hewsen explains that he bases his study on a new translation of the Armenian work into English, by C.J.F. Dowsett. Dowsett is not mentioned at all in Buniiatov's piece. Also the above-mentioned quote of Hewsen on the origin, conversion and disappearance of Albania is carefully left out by Buniiatov. And while Hewsen and Clauson write that "the [third] book [of the *History*] opens with a vivid account of a scheme to deliver the Albanian Church into the Catholic fold",<sup>45</sup> Buniiatov offers his political version of it: "The third book opens with chapter three, which is a lively account of the intrigues of the Armenian Catholicos".<sup>46</sup>

Buniiatov's plagiarism is somehow confused by the fact that Buniiatov's article that I have access to bears the note "submitted [to the journal DAN AzSSR] on 31 March 1964". If we assume the first issue of the *Bulletin of SOAS*, with Hewsen and Clauson's review in it, appeared in the first two months of 1964, then Buniiatov must have had immediate access to

---

<sup>44</sup> Robert Hewsen and Sir Gerard Clauson, "Notes and Communications on the Chronology of Movses Daskhurantsi", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 27 No. 1 (1964).

<sup>45</sup> Hewsen and Clauson, "Notes and Communications on the Chronology of Movses Daskhurantsi", 153.

<sup>46</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, "O khronologicheskome nesootvetstvii glav 'istorii agvan' Moiseia Kagankatvatsi", *DAN AzSSR*, No. 4 (1965), 65-67.

it, and quickly have appropriated its content and submitted his own version of it. Equally possible is, however, that the submission date (over a year before the publication) was manipulated, or, of course, that Buniiatov had access to Hewsen and Clauson's article before it was published. The alternative would be to assume that the plagiarism went the other way around – that Hewson and Clauson stole from Buniiatov. This cannot safely be excluded, but Buniiatov's manner of using Dowsett's work on Mkhitar Gosh, as seen above, in connection with the fact that the Hewson and Clauson's article appeared more than a year before that of Buniiatov, makes this highly improbable. Muradian accused Buniiatov of clear plagiarism in both cases. According to the Armenian scholar, Buniiatov simply translated Hewson and Clauson without mentioning their names, and he tried to do the same with Dowsett “without even a proper understanding of the English language”.<sup>47</sup>

### **Cementing the claim: Buniiatov's *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (1965)**

But this was only the beginning. All these articles were finger exercises for the first big work with which Buniiatov established his reputation as “father of Azerbaijani historiography”: his habilitation dissertation (*doktorskaia*) *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries* that he defended in 1964, and that appeared in print in 1965.<sup>48</sup> In this work Buniiatov made no attempt to conceal his anti-Armenian positions; in fact, the central argument is that Armenians have consistently repressed Caucasus Albania, by weakening its state, by incorporating its territory, by destroying its church, and by annihilating its literature and even its alphabet. And it is also in this work that Buniiatov for the first time explicitly portrays Caucasus Albania as the forerunner of modern Azerbaijan.

No wonder then that, as outlined in chapter one, this habilitation thesis was regarded as politically explosive, and that its defense was delegated from the Leningrad Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, where scholars were obviously highly critical of Buniiatov's claims, to the Moscow center of the Institute, where political control was meant to be more strict. Still, in Moscow Buniiatov successfully defended his work, which indicates that he was still operating within the parameters of what was possible within Soviet Oriental/historical studies. In what follows we will find some clues about what made this

---

<sup>47</sup> Muradian, *Istoriia - pamiat' pokolenii* (Yerevan, 1990), 156.

<sup>48</sup> Ziiia Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* (Baku, 1965) (1000 copies, published by the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan); Reissued in: Buniiatov, *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh, vol. I* (Baku, 1999).

provocative work still acceptable from a Moscow political point of view.

In *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Buniiatov analysed Arabic, Persian and even Armenian sources (although according to several interview partners Buniiatov had little knowledge of Armenian) in order to create a new vision of the social-economic and political situation of Azerbaijan in the period of the coming of the Arabs and the Khazar presence in the north. The work describes administration, landed property, infrastructure and religion in Caucasian Albania. Another issue of the book is research on liberation movements of local leaders like Babek (795/798-838) and the sect of the Khurramits.<sup>49</sup> We must assume that the struggle of these local leaders against the Arab invasion and against Arab Islam suited the general Soviet discourse, which often explained uprisings as expressions of the sentiment of the masses against foreign domination. In this context Soviet scholars struggled with the problem that these uprisings were led by local feudal elites.<sup>50</sup>

Buniiatov discusses historical events in order to illuminate the ethno-genesis of the Azerbaijani nation; for him, the people who lived at that time on the territory of Azerbaijan were direct ancestors of the current Azerbaijani people. This is how Buniiatov defines what he means by “Azerbaijan”:

"Azerbaijan we call both parts of the territory where the population speaks the Azerbaijani language. If necessary we specify which part of Azerbaijan we have in mind: the northern part is Aran or Albania, including the regions Shirvan, Siunik, Artsakh, Uti, Gardman, Shaki, Kabala, Derbend and Bailakan. The southern part includes Mugan, Bazz and Nakhchivan."<sup>51</sup>

This geographical definition of Azerbaijan is curious for two reasons. First, Buniiatov says Azerbaijan is where the Azeri language is spoken, which would of course include the territory of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan as well as the Iranian province Adharbaijan. The border between them goes back to the Russo-Iranian wars of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is therefore largely arbitrary. But then he turns to the historical division between Arran/Albania (obviously as "northern Azerbaijan", including here significant parts of the

---

<sup>49</sup> Babek was one of the main leaders of the Khurramit sect. This sect of Khurramits, or Khurramiyya refers in Islamic sources to various Iranian, anti-Arab, sects which developed under the impact of certain extremist Shi'a doctrines. W. Madelung, "Khurramiyya", *The Encyclopaedia of Islam (New Edition)*, Vol. V (Leiden 1986), 63-65.

<sup>50</sup> For the ambiguous Soviet interpretations of rebellions see Lowell Tillet, *The Great Friendship. Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 8.

<sup>51</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 28.

territory of Soviet Armenia as well as the Derbend region of Daghestan) and the territories south of the Araks river; but from these he only mentions Nakhichevan (in Soviet Azerbaijan), the Mugan Steppe (largely in Soviet Azerbaijan) and "Bazz", which is the historical fortress of the Babek/Khurram-din movement located in the Qaradagh-mountains (in contemporary Iran). But considerable parts of Iranian Adharbaijan (including Tabriz, its capital) are not mentioned – as if the historian was trying to not touch upon the issue of Iranian Adharbaijan, but focusing on the injustice that Azerbaijanis have suffered from the Armenians.

### *Azerbaijan before and after the Arab conquest*

As Buniatov explains, most of the Middle East was, until the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, divided between the powerful empires of Byzantium and Sassanid Iran. Northern Azerbaijan (also: Aran/Arran, Agvank or Albania) was a partly independent principality that was, apart from the aforementioned empires, also the object of invasions by the Khazars that came from the north. As a consequence of these continuing attacks Aran was most of the time politically and economically depending on one of its powerful neighbours. Southern Azerbaijan was incorporated into the Sassanid empire as a province (*kustak*) and was, like Aran, an almost permanent theatre of the Byzantine-Iranian wars. By the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century both Azerbaijan and Aran were incorporated into the Sassanid empire, where they formed, together with Iberia and Georgia, the so-called Caucasus *kustak*.<sup>52</sup> The Caucasian *kustak* included thirteen smaller units (Persian: *shahrs*), including Atrapatakan (Azerbaijan), Ran (Aran), Armenia and Iberia (Georgia).

Due to the numerous Khazar invasions it was of the utmost importance to reinforce the northern borders of the empire in Aran. According to Moisei Kagankatvatsi's *History of Agvan*, when the Persians fortified the Derbend Wall, the population was troubled by the division that this brought to Albanians, a blockade between the mountains of the Caucasus and the Eastern (Caspian) Sea. According to Buniatov, Azerbaijan had an important strategic position as a buffer towards the Khazars in the North and Byzantium in the West.

Another point of debate is how far Albania reached to the north, into what is today Dagestan in the Russian Federation. In Buniatov's conception, the south of Dagestan was also part of Albania, with Derbend as the most northern city on the Caspian coast. On the

---

<sup>52</sup> Buniatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 62.

map that Buniatov provided, the northern border of Albania was not far from Derbend,<sup>53</sup> which means that according to him only a small part of Southern Dagestan belonged to Albania.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, present-day Dagestan's foremost archeologist of the Derbend area, Murtazali Gadzhiev, states that much more of modern Dagestan belonged to Caucasian Albania. While he concurs that the exact localization of Albania is complicated, since the historical literature was often contradictory and unproven,<sup>55</sup> Gadzhiev uses Ptolemy and Strabo as sources, arguing that their information was confirmed by archeological research in the region since the 1980s. Both Ptolemy and Strabo included into Caucasian Albania the whole region up to the river Sulak, north of present-day Makhachkala. That would mean that almost all of modern Dagestan was part of Caucasian Albania.<sup>56</sup>

Gadzhiev does not mention the work of Buniatov, which indicates that he does not attribute much importance to Buniatov's ideological uses of Albania, and that Buniatov's discourse was more geared towards the confrontation with Armenia, not with Daghestani scholars.

Another difference of opinion between Buniatov and Murtazali Gadzhiev is related to the characterization of Albania's level of statehood. Whereas Buniatov tries to “prove” that Caucasian Albania was a strong consolidated state that could measure up with other states in the region, especially Armenia, Gadzhiev is less convinced of the level of Albania's consolidation as a state.<sup>57</sup> He follows Strabo, who stated that Albania was inhabited by 26 tribes, at first all with their own kings, later (in the first century CE) with one single ruling *tsar*, but with many different languages.<sup>58</sup> Based on structural, economical, ethnical, and linguistic features of the region, Gadzhiev comes to the conclusion that Albania was a confederation, also before the Arab invasion.

According to Buniatov Albania was a strong and consolidated state with its own script, a rich national literature, a national calendar, and national schools. "Based on both

---

<sup>53</sup> Buniatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), in the back cover of the work.

<sup>54</sup> Buniatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 70.

<sup>55</sup> Murtazali Gadzhiev, "Kavkazskaia Albaniia i Dagestan: istoriko-geograficheskie i administrativno-politicheskie aspekty", in: *Albania Caucasica* ed. by A.K. Alikberov and M.S. Gadzhiev (Moscow, 2015), 28-41,

<sup>56</sup> Gadzhiev, "Kavkazskaia Albaniia i Dagestan", 34.

<sup>57</sup> Gadzhiev, "Kavkazskaia Albaniia i Dagestan", 28.

<sup>58</sup> Gadzhiev, "Kavkazskaia Albaniia i Dagestan", 35.

written sources and archeological excavations", so Buniiatov, "we know that Aran had its own alphabet, with similarities with the Georgian and Armenian alphabets".<sup>59</sup> The only reason why this state could not survive was due to processes of Grigorianization and Armenization, caused by the arrival of the Arabs that brought an end to most aspects of the Albanian culture.<sup>60</sup> The Dagestani scholar Gadzhiev states that there was indeed an Albanian alphabet, but the Albanian language was only used in a local context. Gadzhiev rather stresses the importance of the Aramaic language and its alphabet also for the Caucasus, and argues that this was the lingua franca in the whole Middle East including Albania, Armenia and Iberia (Georgia).<sup>61</sup> In contrast, the Armenian scholar Paruir Muradian stated that the lingua franca in the Caucasus was Armenian.<sup>62</sup>

Another important aspect stressed by Buniiatov the emergence of local movements that fought against the Persian empire, the Arabs, and the Khazars. One of the freedom fighters in these turbulent years of Byzantine-Persian-Khazar invasions was, in Buniiatov's view, the 14<sup>th</sup> Catholicos of Albania, Viro. Buniiatov argued that Viro's enormous contribution to the consolidation of the Albanian state and its people has consistently been underestimated.<sup>63</sup> Yet the only source that mentions the anti-Sassanid uprising led by Viro is Moisei Kagankatvatsi's *History of Agvan*. This source describes Viro as the saviour and leader of the whole population of Aran, including Artsakh,<sup>64</sup> but the historical record does not allow Buniiatov to go into details.

In Buniiatov's interpretation, Aran had more or less its own economic system, with a great role for Christianity, and its situation was comparable to that of its neighbors Georgia and Armenia. The leading classes in Aran were the feudal princes and the clergy. Each prince ruled his own region and had an enormous power over the population. On top of the

---

<sup>59</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 79.

<sup>60</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 81.

<sup>61</sup> Murtazali Gadjiiev, "The Writing of Caucasian Albania. Facts and Falsifications", *Selective Remembrances: Archeology in the Construction, Commemoration, and Consecration of National Pasts*, ed. by Philip L. Kohl, Mara Kozelsky, and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (Chicago, 2007), 103-104

<sup>62</sup> Muradian, *Istoriia - pamiat' pokolenii* (Yerevan, 1990), 37-41.

<sup>63</sup> Ziiia Buniitaov, 'O deiatel'nosti katolikosa Albanii Viro 596-630', *Blizhnii i Srednii Vostok (sbornik statei)* (Moscow, 1962), 15-20.

<sup>64</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 70-74.

hierarchy was the Grand Prince (*velikii kniaz'*) or Tsar,<sup>65</sup> who also commanded the army, which was composed of a selection of troops of the different princes. The most powerful person immediately after the Tsar was the Catholicos, who was the only authority who could overrule the Tsar. The church was *de facto* on top of the hierarchy, and it had the power to ban princes who were not completely obedient, it could force the worldly leaders to relinquish land and property, and it could for instance adopt laws on family matters. The Catholicos and his bishops were the actual rulers of Aran.<sup>66</sup>

This insistence on the Christian character of Albania as a state is of course striking: what Buniatov here does is to use Christianity as a token of high civilization for the region that later became Muslim Azerbaijan. We can only guess whether this was intended as a move to elevate Azerbaijan to the same level as Armenia and Georgia in the mind of other historians, and perhaps more, on the level of the USSR – for it is common knowledge that the Soviet Union applied categories of "progressive" and "backwards" nations, whereby the Georgians and Armenians, as old Christian nations, fell into the first category and Azerbaijan, as a Muslim nation in process, into the latter.<sup>67</sup> The argument was certainly meant as a claim to the Christian heritage for the Muslim nation of the Azerbaijanis. We will come back to this issue later, in chapter three, where we discuss Buniatov's turn to Islam in the late 1980s, as another unifying factor for the Azerbaijani cultural heritage.

Back to Buniatov's chronology: with the invasions of Arab armies, followed by the immigration of tribal groups from the Middle East, Azerbaijan was incorporated into the Arab caliphate. The end of this period was characterized by the development of new independent, feudal states, such as Aran (which was located on the territory of modern Azerbaijan), and Atropatene (currently in the North of Iran, but often referred to as South Azerbaijan); in most cases, Buniatov simply speaks of Azerbaijan. This process of state-formation was typical for the whole caliphate and it reflected the further development of

---

<sup>65</sup> The use of these terms reminds us of the Russian historiography on the old Rus', and then the rise of Moscow's Grand Prince to Tsar. Whether such comparisons were intended by Buniatov remains a matter of speculation. Obvious is that a Soviet reader would be reminded of Russian medieval historiography, and this might have been intended in order to create acceptance for this reading of sources on Albania.

<sup>66</sup> Buniatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 86-93.

<sup>67</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca NY, 2001).

feudal relations in the Near East. Buniiatov thus shows that the local tradition of statehood continued also after the Arab conquest.<sup>68</sup>

### ***The subjugation of the Albanian Church***

For the Christian population of Aran (the Arab name of Albania), the incorporation into the Arab state brought a certain relief: in spite of a high burden of taxes, they remained free to maintain their religion. This policy towards Christianity had, besides a general Islamic tolerance towards the "Peoples of the Book", also strategic reasons, namely to counterbalance the impact of the Byzantine Empire. In spite of this, Islam would gradually reduce Christianity, although in Aran this process was certainly slower than in Southern Azerbaijan. In the Christian part of Azerbaijan the power of the clergy would continue, which led to numerous uprisings against the caliphate. Yet from the early 8<sup>th</sup> century the region was slowly converted to Islam by the Arabs, and the religion was at first adopted by the higher echelons of society, such as merchants and craftsmen.<sup>69</sup> While in the cities the spread of Islam went fairly quickly, in the countryside this process was accompanied with many anti-Arab uprisings. According to Buniiatov, at the beginning of the eighth century, Islam had become state religion of Azerbaijan (and here he speaks in general, not making a distinction between South or North).<sup>70</sup>

The Grigorian church of Armenia played, according to Buniiatov, a dubious role in the persecution of the Albanian church. The Armenian *Catholicos* relentlessly fought against what Buniiatov called the "Albanian heresy". This church struggle went on for several centuries. The Armenians wanted to subdue the Albanian church, at first with support from the Sassanid Empire and later from the Arab caliphate.<sup>71</sup> It should be added that long after its factual disappearance, the Albanian church would eventually be abolished officially in 1836, by decree of the Holy Synod in St. Petersburg.<sup>72</sup>

According to Buniiatov, many scholars live under the misapprehension that the Albanian church disintegrated due to its lack of consolidation, partly because Albanian was

---

<sup>68</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 93-94.

<sup>69</sup> Arif Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan* (2004), 30-35.

<sup>70</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 114.

<sup>71</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 116.

<sup>72</sup> Yo'av Karny, *Highlanders: a Journey to the Caucasus in Quest of Memory* (2000), 384.

not used as the colloquial language of the region. Buniiatov held that this view is a total distortion of reality. The Albanian church was the complete and utter victim of Armenian ambitions to enslave the church, and eventually also the rest of Albanian culture. Already during the Sassanid era, Armenians made frantic attempts to annex Albanian regions such as Siunik.<sup>73</sup> Here Buniiatov refers to the Armenian author S. T. Eremian, who argued that already from the 7<sup>th</sup> century the Albanian church was seen as part of the Armenian church. This was the start of the Armenization of Aran, Artsakh, Uti and all the other, traditionally Albanian regions. Buniiatov, however, stresses the importance of differentiating between “Grigorization” and “Armenization”. Although the Albanian church underwent a process of Grigorization that began in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural Armenization of the Albanian regions did not begin until the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>74</sup>

This issue became the cornerstone of Buniiatov's conflict with Armenian scholars. His major opponent at the time was Asatur Sh. Mnatsakanian, author of the monograph *On the Literature of Caucasus Albania*, which came out in Armenian in 1966 and in Russian three years later.<sup>75</sup>

Mnatsakanian also co-published (together with what was seemingly an Armenian poet, P. Sevak) a devastating book review on Buniiatov's 1965 book.<sup>76</sup> Buniiatov replied to these criticisms in a short polemical document (available online at the Ziia Buniiatov website maintained by his niece, Zamfira Qurbanova); whether this document was ever published, or just circulated in *samizdat* form, is unclear.<sup>77</sup> In this response Buniiatov continued his attacks on the Armenian scholars, arguing that their interpretation of Albanian history is not only a manipulation in favor of Armenian interests but also a defense of the missionary activities of the Armenian Church – Mnatsakanian and his Armenian colleagues indeed became missionaries themselves, Buniiatov held. In response, the Armenian scholars started to frame

---

<sup>73</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 115-116.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>75</sup> Asatur Sh. Mnatsakanian, *O literature kavkazskoi Al'banii* (Yerevan, 1969).

<sup>76</sup> Reportedly published in *Izvestiia AN Armianskoi SSR, Istoricheskofilologicheskaiia seriia 1*, 1967, 177-190. (I have no access to this review).

<sup>77</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, "Otvét moim kritikám i oppónentám" (1969?). See [www.ziyabunyadov.com](http://www.ziyabunyadov.com) (accessed on 1 February 2016).

Buniatov's mistaken views as "*Buniatovshchina*", that is, a pejorative name for a mistaken and despotic school.<sup>78</sup>

For Buniatov, the Armenian presence in the area only came after the Arab conquest: many Armenians migrated as newcomers into Albanian territory where they started to spread their cultural and religious influence. One of the testimonies he refers to is an early eighth-century letter of the Armenian Catholicos Il'ia to the Arab Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685-705), in which the Catholicos accused the Albanian clergy of conspiring with Byzantium against the Caliphate. This was, according to Buniatov, the reason why the Caliph appointed the head of the Armenian church also as Catholicos of Albania.<sup>79</sup>

As the Sassanid Empire was composed of more or less independent regions, it quickly crumbled under the onslaught of the armies of the Arab tribes. In Aran, where the central power was weak, the local leaders eventually decided to capitulate, realizing that resistance would only lead to the destruction of the country. After seven years of struggle against the Arab invasions, the Tsar of Aran Jevanshir (Dzhevanshir) finally chose to bargain and sided with the Arabs. The Persian troops were forced to retreat from Aran.<sup>80</sup>

The new geo-political situation did not bring stability, since the threats from the Khazars and Byzantines persisted. In fact, the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by constant attacks of foreign invaders on the territory of Azerbaijan. The Albanian leader Jevanshir realised that by far the best option would be to become a vassal of the Arab Caliphate, in order to spare his country further warfare. As Buniatov claims, the relation between Jevanshir and the Caliph was good, according to several Arabic sources, and the Caliph had an eye for the importance of Aran due to its strategic position. He allowed Jevanshir a certain degree of independence.<sup>81</sup> Buniatov emphasizes that the conquest of Southern Azerbaijan was accompanied by more severe resistance of the local population, although the different sources are contradictory in this respect.

---

<sup>78</sup> According to Buniatov the predicate "*Buniatovshchina*" was introduced by Mnatsakanian and Sevak in their 1967 review. Zia Buniatov, "Otvety moim kritikam i opponentam" (1969).

<sup>79</sup> Buniatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 116-117.

<sup>80</sup> Buniatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 95-98.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-103.

### *After Islamization: the Arab and Turkic components of Azerbaijani ethnogenesis*

In 681 Jevanshir was killed, and Caliph Yazid I (680-683) appointed Jevanshir's nephew Varaz-Trdat as the new Tsar of "Albania and Uti" (Uti being understood as part of broader Albania). Again the Southern Caucasus was plagued by Khazar invasions. Caliph 'Abd al-Malik concluded a treaty with the Byzantine emperor, which brought Albania, Armenia and Georgia again into the sphere of influence of both Empires. After this treaty Aran was forced to pay tribute to three different occupiers: the Caliphate, Byzantium, and the Khazars. After 704 Aran became a vassal of the Caliphate, and the country was now ruled by an Arab representative. The Albanian secular and religious leaders were now reduced to the role of "advisers".<sup>82</sup>

During Caliph Walid's rule (705-715) the Arab tribes penetrated further into the north of Aran, where they clashed with the Khazars. The first serious Khazar attack on the Arabs was in 717, which we can read in the testimony of the Arab historian al-Tabari: "in this year [99 *hijri*, or 717 CE] the Turks carried out attacks on Azerbaijan."<sup>83</sup> The clashes between Khazars and Arabs would persist 100 years. Although Aran was not constantly under Khazar influence, the Khazars were for many years a powerful factor in the country. Their invasions would continue until 796-799, according to Arabic sources.<sup>84</sup>

After the conquest of both Atropatene (South Azerbaijan) and Aran, the Arabs maintained the tax-system that had been introduced by the Sassanid and Byzantine Empires. The Christian population of Aran was obliged to pay two kinds of taxes: *jizya* (the poll-tax for Christians and Jews) and the *kharaj* land tax, an obligation from which the Muslim population got exemption.<sup>85</sup>

Buniatov emphasized that in several early medieval Arabic sources Aran is described as "the famous country that in the south borders Azerbaijan and in the west Armenia, and it includes the regions Artsakh, Shaki and Siunik."<sup>86</sup> He quotes the Karabakh nobleman Mirza Jamal Javanshiri (d.1853), who in his Persian-language *History of Karabakh* wrote: "Karabakh is that part of Aran which extends between the rivers Kura and Araks. The region

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 126-131.

<sup>83</sup> Buniatov, *Azerbaijanzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 132-140.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 132-140.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 142-164.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 166-167.

includes the cities of Gandzha, Nakhchivan, Ordubad, Barda'a and Bailakan.”<sup>87</sup> Albania is here equated with modern Soviet Azerbaijan, that is, without what is today Iranian Azerbaijan, or Atropatene. This suited Buniiatov’s intention to write modern Azerbaijan’s history back into antiquity.

Buniiatov continues his argument by explaining the administrative and political structure of the country under the rule of the Caliphate. Essential, according to Buniiatov, was the construction of military garrisons (*rabats*) at key points, especially at the northern borders of the empire. The maintenance of these garrison towns put a heavy burden on the population of Aran, which was exposed to the highest tax burden within the caliphate.<sup>88</sup> The sources also mention Barda'a, Derbend and Bailakan (Paitakaran) as “great” or “famous” cities, as they hosted assemblies of clergy, merchants and craftsmen. Of a second category were urban centres of production and trade such as Shaki, Kabala, Amaras, Shamkhor, Nakhchavan and Gardman. These cities were also strongholds where military troops were based. The last category are agricultural or “rural towns”, local centres of feudal regions that in the socio-economic sense did not form cities.<sup>89</sup> Buniiatov deplores the lack of systematic archaeological research, which had so far only been conducted in Mingechaur (a city of hunters) and Bailakan.

Both before and after the Arab conquests it was the trade routes that played a major role for the development of trade and economy. Already before the arrival of the Arabs Aran had connections with the north, and was engaged in trade with the Bulgars (on the Volga) and Slavic peoples. In particular during the Caliphate the infrastructure was improved, with Aran turning into a thriving crossroads. This brought great economic prosperity to the cities. These cities had a certain degree of independence, and they were administrative centres where senior officials of the caliphate resided. The ethnic composition of the cities was colourful: the indigenous population lived side by side with Arabs, Armenians, Jews and other groups. The native population often converted to Islam, in particular merchants and craftsmen, because of economic and financial reasons. Aran was tolerant towards religion, and the coexistence of churches, synagogues and mosques was quite common.<sup>90</sup> Buniiatov concludes

---

<sup>87</sup> Mirza Jamal Javanshiri, *Istoriia Karabaga*, translated into Russian by F. Babaev, Baku 1959 (without inspection); quoted in Ziia Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.*, 1999, 168.

<sup>88</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 170-171.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-174.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 176-190.

his argument with several testimonies of medieval geographers on the trade routes of Azerbaijan and their significance for international relations.

Important for our purposes is the fact that Buniatov makes clear that the early medieval territory of Aran is more or less comparable to modern Azerbaijan, perhaps even bigger. And secondly he presents Azerbaijan in that period as a consolidated political unity, albeit under Arab rule. According to Buniatov, immigration was initially limited to small numbers of Arabs who settled in garrison towns as a starting point for their military campaigns. At the end of a campaign, which normally took four years, they returned to the centre of the caliphate. A more large-scale immigration, which accompanied colonization, began only after the consolidation of Arab power in the newly conquered territories. Slowly but surely Arab tribes would settle in compact form in the country. In Atropatene (South Azerbaijan) these newcomers bought land and property and sometimes mingled with the local population. In Aran the situation was different. The Christian population was less willing to convert to Islam and to mix with the newcomers, and, even more important, the Arabs met serious resistance of the Khazars, who still attacked the country. The Arabs established military settlements in Aran and confiscated the best and most strategic locations in order to protect the conquered areas against Khazar attacks.

After the fall of the Umayyad dynasty in 750 the privileges of the northern Arab tribes came to an end. The Abbasid dynasty, based on the southern tribes, took over power, and the northern tribes were forced to leave Azerbaijan and Aran. In Aran violent encounters between the warring tribes were common.<sup>91</sup>

The former military settlements developed into colonies of Arab migrants. These former colonies can still be identified by their Arabic names. Even today we can see villages in the Azerbaijani SSR with names such as Arabi, Arabkhadzhi, Arabshamly, and Arabshaki. The locals call themselves still “Arabs”, and until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century they spoke Arabic dialects. Although Arabic was important for inter-ethnic communication, Georgian, Albanian and Armenian continued to be used locally, and were, according to Buniatov, equally important. After the Seljuq invasions, the Arabs of both North and South Azerbaijan were disconnected from the centre of Arab culture, adopted the Turkic language and gradually assimilated. So in fact the Turkization clouded the knowledge about the influence of the Arabs on the ethno-genesis of the Azerbaijani people.

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 196-200.

But the Turkic influence, according to Buniiatov, goes back to long before the advent of the Seljuqs in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Turkic element is not a latecomer but inherent in the ethnic mosaic that was present in the area ever since: “If we consider Turks as foreign elements on the territory of Azerbaijan, we wrongly deny the existence of indigenous Turkic tribes”.<sup>92</sup> The arrival of the Arabs had interrupted an already ongoing process of Turkization, and this interruption resulted in the misconception that the Turks were immigrants. When the Khazars invaded Azerbaijan and Aran, the Turks already formed a major component of the tribes in the region, as some Arabic sources indicate, in Buniiatov’s opinion;<sup>93</sup> and Turkization got another push by the Khazars themselves, since they were equally Turkic.

After the amalgamation of indigenous Turks with other Caucasian tribes and with Arabs, the Turkization was completed in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries under Seljuq influence, and with more Turkic tribes settling in the area. This brought about the formation of a Turkic-language Azerbaijani nationality that is still alive today.

By arguing that the Turkization of Azerbaijan started in the ancient past, long before the arrival of the Seljuqs, Buniiatov attempted to debunk the stereotype that the Azerbaijanis were only late intruders into the area: rather, the Azerbaijani nation emerged from a complex fusion of various ethnic elements since antiquity. This view responded both to the Azerbaijani nationalist claim to the territory and to the general goals of Soviet historiography to depict all nations living in the USSR not as immigrants but as *korennyye narody*, that is, “anchored” in the history of the given republic that the USSR assigned to them. At the same time Buniiatov's complex approach sharpened the conflict with Armenian visions on the ethnic history of the South Caucasus. Buniiatov thus navigated between three visions of the past – the Armenian view, Moscow dogmas, and his own Azerbaijani patriotism, to which he supplied a powerful historical paradigm.

---

<sup>92</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 201-202. This is a remarkable statement of the scholar. Pan-Turkism was still taboo in the Soviet Union of the 1960s, and the peoples of the Caucasus were carefully separated from their Turkic or Persian roots. Buniiatov developed this idea of the indigenesness of the Turks in Azerbaijan in his later works.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

### *Liberation from the Arab Yoke: Babek and the Khurramites*

How skillfully Buniatov employed the dogmas of Soviet internationalist and at the same time national historiographical approaches can be demonstrated with another issue that he interwove into his historical narrative, namely the topic of revolts by the local masses against the “feudal Arab rulers”. This was a stereotypical element of Soviet history-writing for two purposes: first, it described individual nations as struggling against feudal exploitation, and second, it contains the patriotic element of resistance against foreign rulers.

In Buniatov's narrative of Albanian resistance to Arab overlordship, one central personality is the above-mentioned ruler of Shaki, Sahl ibn Sumbat, about whom he already wrote in his very first article of 1959.<sup>94</sup> In his 1965 monograph, Buniatov refers to a paragraph in Moses Kagankatvatsi's *Istoriia Agvan* according to which in 822, Sahl ibn Smbatean-Yeranshagik (i.e., Sahl ibn Sumbat), together with leaders of the neighbouring regions, attacked the Arabs and beat them.<sup>95</sup> According to the extra fragment of *Istoriia Agvan* that Dowsett published (and Buniatov as well at the same time, as discussed above in the section "Plagiarism part two"), Sahl was a descendant of the *Albanian* family Zarmirikh [or Zarmihir], and thus, in Buniatov's reading, an Albanian, not an Armenian; in extension, also the Arranshah-dynasty that he started was thus Albanian, demonstrating that the Albanianness of what is now Azerbaijan survived the Arab invasion. Sahl ibn Sumbat acquired more power and finally ruled over almost all of Aran. This claim was countered by several Armenian colleagues in their book reviews on Buniatov's 1965 *Azerbaijan in 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. Buniatov's major adversaries were, it seems, again Asatur Sh. Mnatsakanian as well as a certain B. Ullubabov;<sup>96</sup> they argued for the Armenian origin of Sahl ibn Sahl and his dynasty.<sup>97</sup>

The character of Sahl is also important for constructing a genealogy of Albanian resistance against foreign rule; while the Armenian scholar T. I. Ter-Grigorian (who based his information on a different translation of *Istoriia Agvan*) claimed that Sahl ibn Sumbat got the upper parts of Armenia, Georgia and Albania because he had rendered a service to Caliph

---

<sup>94</sup> Ziia Buniatov, "Novye dannye o nakhozhenii kreposti Sheki", *DAN AzSSR*, no. 9 (1959), 869-872.

<sup>95</sup> Buniatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.*, 208-209, with reference to M. Kagankatvatsi, *Istoriia Agvan*, in Patkanov's Russian edition of 1961.

<sup>96</sup> See Buniatov's above-mentioned response to his Armenian opponents (written not earlier than 1968), [www.ziyabunyadov.com](http://www.ziyabunyadov.com) (accessed on 1 February 2016).

<sup>97</sup> Asatur Sh. Mnatsakanian, *O literature kavkazskoi Albanii* (Yerevan, 1969), 61.

al-Mutasim, Buniiatov argued that Sahl was acting in alliance with Babek, with the goal of liberating Albania from the Arab yoke.<sup>98</sup>

This brings us to the movements of Khurramis, which Buniiatov depicts as an Albanian grassroots-movement emerging out of conflict with the Arab caliphate. According to at-Tabari the movement started in 778. The Khorramis or Korramdinis were the adherents of a form of Iranian religion often identified as a survival or revival of Zoroastrianism, and particularly Mazdeism.<sup>99</sup> For Buniiatov the movement was first of all directed against the advent of a class society (through feudalism) and against the caliphate.<sup>100</sup>

Through its emphasis on class struggle, Buniiatov's anti-Armenian positions were thus embedded in a conventional Marxist framework. He referred to the famous quotes of Friedrich Engels, who stated that "all religious opposition against feudalism in Middle Ages was either camouflaged as mysticism, or openly pagan, or violent, but in all cases these opposition movements were in fact manifestations of class-struggle. Religion was merely an ideological cover".<sup>101</sup> As Buniiatov elaborated:

"We will never be able to understand the Khurramis led by Babek (or any other liberation movement) if we consider these movements to be of religious nature. The seeds in all these movements arose under the influence of the development of class differences in the caliphate, differences that were exacerbated as a result of the pressure of local feudal rulers."<sup>102</sup>

As Buniiatov explained, in its early stage the Khurrami movement was pacifist; its leader was Javidan ibn Sahrak who toured with his flock in the regions around Ardabil. The militant anti-Arab ideology of the movement was developed by Javidan's protégé Babek, who

---

<sup>98</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaijdzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 212-213.

<sup>99</sup> Patricia Crone, "Korramis," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2011, available at [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/korramis](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/korramis) (accessed on 16 August 2012).

<sup>100</sup> Zia Buniiatov, *Azerbaijdzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 247-260. The German Orientalist Bertold Spuler, in a 1967 review of Buniiatov's monograph, pointed out that the Soviet-Azerbaijani scholar has a typical Marxist interpretation of history, by classifying all religious uprisings as purely social movements. In general Spuler assessed Buniiatov's work as "difficult to read" but "interesting for specialists" and "an important contribution" to the early Islamic history of Iran. Bertold Spuler, review of Buniiatov's *Azerbaijdzhan v VII-IX vv.*, in *Der Islam*, Vol. 43 (1967), 321-322.

<sup>101</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaijdzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 308. "Die revolutionäre Opposition gegen die Feudalität geht durch das ganze Mittelalter. Sie tritt auf, je nach den Zeitverhältnissen, als Mystik, als offene Ketzerei, als bewaffneter Aufstand". Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Werke*, Volume 7 (Berlin, 1851), 344.

<sup>102</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaijdzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 308.

became the leader of the Khurramis in 816.<sup>103</sup> In Buniiatov's view, Babek struggled for an independent Azerbaijan, and for restoration of the pre-Islamic traditions and laws of the country. The peasant masses had always retained their old religion, and Islam was associated with oppression and heavy taxation. The majority of the Khurramis came from the peasantry, which was driven by a dislike of central authority.<sup>104</sup>

Babek's first revolt was in 816, when the central authority was plagued by internal power struggle. The centre of the movement was, for the next twenty years, the fortress of Bazz (or: Bazzain), which was probably located north-west of Ardabil. The amount of Babek's followers grew dramatically. After the liberation of Azerbaijan, the movement spread to neighbouring regions, and revolts followed in Bailakan, Dzhibal, Armenia, and even in Khorasan; also some Kurdish tribes from the mountains joined the "liberation movement".

Also Armenian scholars employed the paradigm of national resistance against foreign invaders; but they turned it against Babek. S.T. Eremian, who authored book on "The Struggle of the Armenian People against the Caliphate",<sup>105</sup> claimed that Babek lost support from the populations of Siunik and Artsakh [that is, in contemporary Armenia and Karabakh], who had to provide him with food and grain. When the population refused to bow to this burden, Babek allegedly used violence against them. As a consequence the majority of Armenians and Armenianized Albanians revolted against him, which eventually contributed to his defeat by the Arabs in 837. According to Buniiatov, not a single source confirms this idea of Eremian, although it was certainly true that the Armenian feudal lords did not support Babek, unlike the Albanian rulers from regions such as Siunik, Artsakh, Shaki, Bailakan etc.<sup>106</sup> Buniiatov also refers to another Armenian author, Ia. A. Manandian, who also emphasized Armenian revolts against the Khurramis.<sup>107</sup>

When the Arabs conquered his fortress of Bazz, Babek reportedly turned to the Byzantine emperor for support. However this request was in vain, and Babek was captured

---

<sup>103</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 261.

<sup>104</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 262-264.

<sup>105</sup> Referred to by Buniiatov as S.T. Eremian, *Bor'ba armianskogo naroda protiv arabskogo khalifata* (Yerevan, 1958).

<sup>106</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 276. With this remark Buniiatov hits two birds with one stone: First of all he explains that Armenian lords, unlike Albanian leaders, never supported the class-struggle of the population, and secondly, between nose and lips, he presents all the disputed regions simply as Albanian.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 276-277.

and executed after a brief interrogation.<sup>108</sup> Remarkably enough Buniiatov does not discuss the fact that the Christian Armenians might have regarded the Khurramis as alien to their faith.

Carefully interwoven into the narrative of national liberation are Christian heterodoxies, and in particular the Paulicians.<sup>109</sup> According to Buniiatov, this "broad, long-lasting and anti-feudal movement not only left its traces in Byzantine and Armenian history, as is generally well-known, but was also crucial for the Albanian past, a fact that is neglected until today".<sup>110</sup> For Buniiatov, the Paulicians (also called Bailakantsi or Balasakantsi after their centers Bailakan and Balasakan) were "a typical Albanian movement that had its origins in the regions of Gardman and Bailakan (Balasakan or Paitakaran)," and they were fighting on the side of Babek's movement.<sup>111</sup> The Armenian church supposedly feared these so-called heretical Albanian movements, and the Armenian Catholicos Il'ia pushed for the Grigorianization of the Albanians, with the support of Caliph Abd al-Malik. Threatened with Islamization and elimination, the Paulicians fled to Byzantium. A smaller part converted to Islam and assimilated.<sup>112</sup>

The Arabs had great difficulty in breaking the Azerbaijani resistance, and they could only manage with Armenian support. To demonstrate the long-term impact of the Babek movement Buniiatov also refers to an entry in *Istoriia Agvan* for the year 866, according to which all leaders of Albania and Armenia rebelled against the Arab oppression<sup>113</sup> -- a curious incident of Buniiatov constructing a medieval Armenian-Azerbaijani cooperation against foreign rule, certainly fitting the Soviet "Friendship of Peoples" dogma.

Buniiatov continued the topic of local revolts as liberation movements also with regard to the emergence of Azerbaijani statehood in Shirvan. The rulers of this first semi-independent emirate with its centre in Barda'a drew their genealogy back to the Arab tribe Rabi'a; composed of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Aran and Derbend, Shirvan's first important ruler

---

<sup>108</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 278-279.

<sup>109</sup> The Paulicians were Christians descendants of followers of Paul of Samosata living in Armenia in the fifth century. Ahmad Nazmi, "The Paulicians (Al-Bayāliqa) in Muslim Sources and Their Role in Wars between Arabs and Byzantines." (2001).

<sup>110</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 247.

<sup>111</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 249.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>113</sup> Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965], 1999), 213.

was Yazid ibn Mazyad al-Shaybani (d. 801). This dynasty was followed by the Sajids, descendants of Abu al-Saj, patriarch of a family of Turkic warlords.<sup>114</sup> Buniiatov claims that the Sajid ruler Yusuf (ruling for 27 years until he met a violent death in 928) united the whole territory of Azerbaijan (including Aran) in one independent state.<sup>115</sup> Buniiatov thus made clear that Azerbaijan was able to survive during and after the Arab presence, and continued to exist.

### **Enlarging the edifice: A trans-Caspian trilogy (1978-1986)**

In the subsequent years Buniiatov continued to write about the topics addressed in his 1965 *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, but the thrust of his work went into what I would like to see as a new trilogy – one that connects the South Caucasus to Central Asia. As this is a sideline in Buniiatov's oeuvre, I will only give a brief discussion of these works.

In 1973 he published *Shihab al-Din Muhammad al-Nasawi: Life Description of Jalal al-Din Manqburni*.<sup>116</sup> This book comprised Buniiatov's Russian translation and analysis of an Arabic-language biography of a ruler of Khwarazm, the Khwarazmshah Sultan Jalal ad-Din Manqburni (killed in 1231); this biography was composed by Shihab al-Din Muhammad al-Nasawi, the sultan's court secretary. The Khwarazm-Shahs were expelled from their home base in what is today Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (and parts of Kazakhstan) to the South Caucasus, where they in turn brought an end to the state of Atabeks of Azerbaijan and slowed down the Mongol expansion in the Caucasus.<sup>117</sup> This work thus covered the socio-political and cultural history not only of Azerbaijan, but also of other parts of the Near and Middle East.<sup>118</sup>

---

<sup>114</sup> According to Buniiatov, most of Armenia, Aran and Azerbaijan was included in this state, in the early 10th century. Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965],1999),239-243.

<sup>115</sup> Buniiatov mentions the fact that Yusuf, making use of mutual antagonism between local princes of Armenia, was able to conquer Armenia in 909. The Armenian prince Ashot II turned to the Byzantine emperor in order to get support to separate his country from Aran/Azerbaijan. Ziia Buniiatov, *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IX vv.* ([1965],1999), 231-239.

<sup>116</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, *Shikhab ad-Din Mukhammad an-Nasavi. Zhizneopisanie sultana Dzhahal ad-Dina Mankburny*, Baku 1973 (The preface is reissued in *Izbrannye Sochineniia v trekh tomakh, Tom II*, Baku 1999).

<sup>117</sup> J. A. Boyle, *Encyclopaedia of Islam (New Edition), Vol. II*, Leiden 1986, pp. 392-393.

<sup>118</sup> Solmaz Tohidi, "History of Central Asia in the Works of Ziia Buniiatov", offprint presented by the author, Baku 2004.

Buniatov's next monograph came in 1978: *The State of the Atabeks of Azerbaijan 1136-1225*.<sup>119</sup> Building on Buniatov's 1973 work on the Khwarazm-Shahs, he now explored their predecessors, namely the Atabeks who ruled in the area that we now call Azerbaijan in the 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>120</sup> For Buniatov, the Atabek state was crucial for the continuation of statehood in Azerbaijan, and for the country's political, social and cultural development. Buniatov described the rule of the Atabeks as an Azerbaijani Renaissance – a Golden Age of development in the arts and sciences. Again the work contained numerous attacks on Armenian scholars who, as he phrased it, "falsified" the history of Nagorny Karabakh and Nakhichevan (the first an autonomous region and the latter an autonomous republic of the AzSSR). In Azerbaijan, by contrast, Buniatov's work on the Atabeks fell on fertile ground: in 1980 this book was awarded with the State prize of the AzSSR.

The third monograph of this cycle came in 1986, with Buniatov's *The State of the Khorezmshahs-Anushteginids, 1097-1231*.<sup>121</sup> This time the focus is not on Azerbaijan but back to where he started his trilogy, the medieval history of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The Khwarazmshahs are portrayed as strong rulers, and it was them who transferred sophisticated statehood to Azerbaijan. "Uzbek" heroes were presented as national heroes who defended their territory against Mongol expansion. This time his monograph was praised not just in Azerbaijan but also in Uzbekistan. Eventually, in 1988, Buniatov became citizen of honor of the Uzbek city Urgench, the center of Khwarazm in the Middle Ages.

There is no space here to go into detail concerning these works, but it is appropriate to reflect on why Buniatov came to emphasize the connection with Central Asia in his historical writings of the 1970s and of the first half of the 1980s. At first sight, it seems like Buniatov turned to another area in order to escape the heated debates in the Caucasus; and one can surmise that this turn was welcomed not only in Moscow but also in Central Asia, an area where at that time Arabists were still rare, and where Buniatov's "strong state" approach must have fallen on fertile ground. But the Central Asia excursion of the 1973 book on

---

<sup>119</sup> Ziya Buniatov, *Gosudarstvo Atabekov Azerbeidzhana 1136-1225*, Baku 1978.; Reissued in *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh*: Vol. 2 (Baku, 1999).

<sup>120</sup> The Atabeks were vassals of the Seljuq sultans, who were de facto rulers in the region that is currently Azerbaijan. Several local rulers of western Iran adopted the title Atabek as well. C. Cahen, "Atabak", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (online edition, 2008), available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/atabak> (accessed on 29 February 2016).

<sup>121</sup> Ziya Buniatov, *Gosudarstvo Khorezmshahov-Anushteginidov, 1097-1231*, Moscow 1986 (published in Uzbek in 1998). Reissued in *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh*: Vol.3 (Baku, 1999).

Manqburni led him back to Azerbaijan, and the 1978 book was again a sharp contribution to the disputes with the Armenian colleagues – only to be followed again by a monograph on the Khwarazm-Shahs in the historical era before their escape to the South Caucasus.

Perhaps we can better see these three volumes as indicating a new approach in Buniiatov's work. The first of these approaches is a return to Arabic philology, in the form of the translation of Nawawi's biography of Manqburni. In his 1965 work on Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries the scholar was struggling hard for supremacy in the interpretation of sources written in languages that he was not in command of – namely Armenian – and that brought him into dependence from Armenian authors who translated them into Russian (like Eremian) and who might have manipulated the texts; and he equally depended on Western scholars, as seen above with the article of 1960 in which Buniiatov in fact copied Dowsett to the degree of plagiarism (and similarly with the case of Hewsen and Clauson, whose agenda and arguments Buniiatov simply made his own). Paradoxically, with Arabic sources on Central Asia, Buniiatov must have felt more at home.

The second change in direction with these three monographs can be described as a turn to dynastic historiography, and in fact to local ruling houses. *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Century* was still a broad overview, with no strong focus; but with the intruding Khwarazm-Shahs and the local Atabeks, Buniiatov designed his work around neatly defined ruling houses whose regional supremacy largely coincided, in the scholar's view, with what he understood as "Azerbaijan". He could have turned to the Seljuqs, but this would have meant to present Azerbaijani history in the context of a huge empire. The choice of smaller houses may thus appear as excursions, but they were also an attempt to avoid the discussion of the region within a larger empire in which Azerbaijan would be marginal.

And lastly, both the Atabeks and the Khwarazmshahs were Turkic dynasties, though with a court culture in various languages, especially Persian and Arabic. With his analysis of this period Buniiatov thus followed up on the research question, posed already in his 1965 *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Century*, how to evaluate the Turkic elements in Azerbaijani ethnogenesis. Within Soviet scholarship, this trilogy still stands out for its "Trans-Caspian relations" – hardly anywhere else do we find monographs that deal with issues on both sides of the Caspian Sea (and this also accounts for post-Soviet historiography up to the present time, where Caucasus studies are still neatly separated from Central Asian studies, even if in the West the two fields are sometimes lumped together for the sake of convenience).

## Completing the continuity, consolidating the school

### *Historical Geography of Azerbaijan (1987)*

The volume *Historical Geography of Azerbaijan*<sup>122</sup> that Buniatov edited, and contributed to, in 1987 was a further continuation of his former efforts to reconstruct Azerbaijani history. The title of the work is emblematic: the sub-discipline of "historical geography" serves as an instrument to fortify contemporary claims to territory. Works on historical geography had been en vogue in the 1970s and 1980s, and one work of Armenian historical geography, by T. Ch. Akopian, had appeared as early as 1968. A Georgian work appeared in 1979.<sup>123</sup> The Azerbaijani historians were obviously a latecomer to jump on that trend in scholarship, in 1987.

By the 1980s, this approach was obviously mainstream, and no longer open for nuances: history (and thereby historiography) cements the present, and is embodied in historical monuments as landmarks of ethnical belonging. In result, "who gets the past"<sup>124</sup> also wins the arguments for present-day territory. And historical changes – migration streams, conversions, cooperation – are either ignored or used as arguments against the scholarly competitor.

While continuing Buniatov's earlier line of reasoning, the 1987 booklet also marks a new phase in his outreach, and in his rise to prominence: his previous work is now serving as the basis for further explorations conducted by his disciples, under his wings. He had created a school. And these new studies enlarge the scope of his work also in chronological terms, for they bring his approach up to the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

We must assume that the papers collected in this volume had been prepared over a certain period of time, and that they reflect Buniatov's leadership as director of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Baku. Yet we should keep in mind that at the time of publication, Buniatov had already been removed from directorship; in January 1986 he lost the position, reportedly due to a conflict between him and Geidar Aliev (as discussed in chapter 1). A year

---

<sup>122</sup> Zia Buniatov, *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbeidzhana*, Baku 1987.

<sup>123</sup> T. Ch. Akopian, *Istoricheskaia geografiia Armenii*, Yerevan 1968. In neighboring Georgia the first historical geography was published by the Georgian Academy of Sciences in 1979. Davit Muskhelishvili, *Istoricheskaia geografiia drevnei Gruzii*, Tbilisi, 1979.

<sup>124</sup> Victor Shnirelman, *Who gets the Past*, Washington, 1996.

later Gorbachev "retired" Geidar Aliev from his membership in the CP USSR Politburo, and this paved the way for the return of Buniatov, in 1988, to the director's chair at the Institute. The volume thus stems from this brief hiatus in his career; but for our analysis of the contents of the 1987 volume this does not play a significant role.

The publication is clearly envisaged as a document testifying to the rise of a new and independent Azerbaijani school of historians, with their own approaches and their own conceptual framework. In his preface to *Historical Geography of Azerbaijan*, Buniatov reiterates his claim that so far, it was Georgian or Armenian scholars who dominated scholarship on the Caucasus. They can look back to a long history of Georgian and Armenian historical research, and they have the advantage of having a huge corpus of historical (medieval) sources in Georgian and Armenian at their disposal;<sup>125</sup> and as we already saw from his discussion in *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Buniatov argues that Armenian authors shamelessly claim historical works of Albanian authors, like Movses Kalankatuvski's *History of Aluank (History of the Albanians)*, as part of the Armenian tradition.

While the Armenians were thus enjoying privileged access to medieval sources in Armenian, Azerbaijani scholars had nothing comparable to field in the struggle about the past. Whereas Armenians could build upon a great tradition, "the lack of a historical and geographical tradition as well as the absence of the scientific notions established, make the problem under consideration extremely difficult."<sup>126</sup> All they could do was to challenge Armenian colleagues on their own turf (as Buniatov did with regard to the *History of Agvan*, as seen above) and to use the significant corpus of medieval Arab and Persian geographers in their favor.<sup>127</sup>

The domination of Armenian and Russian historians means Azerbaijani historians were fighting an uphill battle for which, however they were well-equipped now:

"...The current researchers of Azerbaijan have the most difficult task to struggle against the impact of canonized visions of our traditions and past. The modern Azerbaijani historians fulfil all the necessary conditions to deal with these problems..."<sup>128</sup>

The 1987 collection of articles gives, as Buniatov says in his preface, "insight into the

---

<sup>125</sup> Ziaa Buniatov, "Ot redaktora", *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, Baku 1987, 4.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>128</sup> Buniatov, "Ot redaktora", *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, Baku 1987, 4-5.

historical geography of the country between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries."<sup>129</sup> One innovation is that here a distinction is made between Northern Azerbaijan and Southern Azerbaijan (south of the Araks River), that is, the booklet also includes what became the Adharbajjan province of Iran. In his previous work the Iranian part of Azerbaijan was not very prominent; rather, the debate raged about Armenian and Azerbaijani claims and counter-claims, leaving South Azerbaijan largely for what it was. One possible explanation for this neglect of South Azerbaijan was that in the preceding decades, the Soviet framework of historiography left no room for what would lead to conflicts with Iran - rather, each Soviet nation had to be pleased with what it had obtained within the USSR. By 1987, this Soviet framework was obviously no longer binding.

Buniatov's work on Albanian sources of late antiquity was pushed further, along the same lines, by his disciple Farida Mamedova (b. 1936). Her contribution to the 1987 volume was entitled "On some questions concerning the historical geography of Albania, 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to 8<sup>th</sup> century CE" (pp. 7-45), and was a systematic refutation of the views she found in the works of Armenian authors. In several steps she rejects the claim that parts of Albania (in particular Artsakh [Nagorny Karabakh], Utik [Otena, according to Latin sources] and Paitakaran [or "Kaspiana", as the Caspian littoral was called]) had "originally" been parts of Armenia in antiquity (as had been argued by Mnatsakian and others). She also brushed aside those sources of antiquity that claimed these areas had been conquered by Armenian kings. This boils down to a fundamental critique of Greek and Roman sources – and in particular Strabo. Mamedova makes skillful use of the eminent Russian (Baltic German) historian Vasilii V. Bartol'd (d. 1930), who in an article on the Caspian region in Muslim historiography warned that Greek sources are often presented in research only in a fixed interpretational framework, leading to compilations of bits and pieces that have been selected according to the intention of the scholar.<sup>130</sup> Also Roman historians and emperors had little information on the region, which they knew only from short military campaigns: Rome subdued Armenia, according to Mamedova, for the whole period between the first century BC and the second century CE; but it did not occupy Albania. This tradition of inflating Armenia, and of claiming that Armenia expanded, is countered with a reference to Moses

---

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>130</sup> According to Bartol'd "Greek sources often represent a compilation of information that was put together without any critical view, so they have to be treated with great care." He mentioned this in one of his lectures at the Azerbaijani State University in Baku, in 1924. Vasilii V. Bartol'd, "Mesto prikaspiskikh oblastei v istorii musul'manskogo mira", *Sochineniia II* (1963), 650- 663.

Kalankatuiskii, who is seen as a local Albanian historiographer by Mamedova, who thereby cements Buniiatov's interpretation.

Important is that Mamedova had formal training in the classical Armenian language and experience in the study of Armenian sources. In her work, she significantly enlarged the scope of Armenian sources that Buniiatov's school could muster for their battle with Armenian colleagues. She also draws on Favstos Buzandatsi (5<sup>th</sup> century) and an "Armenian History" of Ananii Shirakatsii (7<sup>th</sup> century), who in her eyes both exaggerated the territory of Armenia and propagated the "tendentious idea" of Armenia as a coherent religious and political unit in their eras, by including Artsakh, Utik and Gradman. Interestingly, one of the witnesses that Mamedova draws upon to cement her view was a Russian scholar, A.P. Novosel'tsev. She quotes the latter's book review of V.D. Arekelian's 1983 Russian translation of Moses Kagankatvatsi, in which Novosel'tsev supposedly held that "in the early medieval period, Albania encompassed the territory of the contemporary Azerbaijan SSR, plus parts of Armenia, Daghestan and Eastern Georgia".<sup>131</sup>

And finally, Mamedova also attacked Georgian authors, in particular the historian and member of the Georgian Academy of Sciences David L. Muskhelishvili (b.1928), who in a 1982 book<sup>132</sup> had argued that Sheki was the eastern province of Georgia. This, Mamedova countered, was based on a superficial reading of the sources and a misplaced identification of place names, and the only author who correctly established the borders of Albania in the 7th to 10th century was, in Mamedova's eyes, Ziaa Buniiatov.

It should be mentioned here that there was a huge scholarly scandal around the work of Mamedova at the time. In 1986 -- one year before the publication of *Istoricheskaia geografiia* -, the defense of her PhD thesis in Leningrad, on the history of Caucasus Albania, turned into an eight-hour dispute, and in the end she was not granted a doctorate. As she told me in an interview, it was "the Armenian lobby" in the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in Leningrad that attacked her so fiercely. In the 1960s Mamedova had studied with the (Armenian) historian/Orientalist and Byzantinist Karen Iuzbashian (1927-2009). Iuzbashian was one of the opponents of Ziaa Buniiatov when the latter wanted to defend his thesis *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Centuries* in 1964. According to Mamedova, Iuzbashian strongly opposed Buniiatov due to his "theory that excluded Nagorny Karabakh from the Armenian

---

<sup>131</sup> Farida Mamedova, *Politicheskaia istoriia i istoricheskaia geografiia Kavkazskoi Albanii* (Baku, 1986), 116-150.

<sup>132</sup> David L. Muskhelishvili, *Iz istoricheskoi geografii Gruzii* (Tbilisi 1982).

historical palette". This was allegedly the main reason for the Leningrad Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies to not accept Buniiatov's habitation thesis for defense. For Mamedova, Iuzbashian's clash with Buniiatov was obviously enough reason to break with her first teacher and supervisor.<sup>133</sup>

When more than two decades later also Mamedova's thesis was rejected, in 1986, Mamedova "understood the political sensitivity of her work and the fact that her dissertation had actually been written from an Armenian position, due to a strong influence of 'the Armenian lobby'", as she explained. She rewrote her monograph and eventually defended her PhD in Baku, after independence.<sup>134</sup> Buniiatov, thus Mamedova, always supported her with utmost enthusiasm,<sup>135</sup> while Buniiatov's major Armenian counterpart, Paruir Muradian, continued to bash Mamedova.<sup>136</sup>

The next article in the 1987 volume on historical geography is a chronological continuation of the work of Buniiatov and Mamedova. One of Buniiatov's first disciples, Naile Velikhanli, provided an analysis of the period shortly after the Arab invasion in the Caucasus.<sup>137</sup> In her article "The changes of the historical geography of Azerbaijan as a result of Arab invasion", Velikhanli explains that the Arabs invaded both parts of Caucasian Albania, that is, Azerbaijan and Aran. According to Velikhanli the Arab sources, on which she based her research, mention that there were two main languages in usage in Albania, namely Azeri (obviously meaning Turkic) in Azerbaijan, and "Arani" in Aran; what kind of language this latter "Arani" was (Albanian?) she does not explain. In addition, the Arab sources mention numerous local languages, mainly used by the mountain peoples, and a general knowledge of Farsi and Arabic.<sup>138</sup> Yet, as the author explains, unlike sources from antiquity, the Arab sources do not go into detail with the names of the different tribes of

---

<sup>133</sup> Farida Mamedova in an interview with Sara Crombach, Baku, 20 August 2009.

<sup>134</sup> Mamedova, *Politicheskaia istoriia i istoricheskaia geografiia kavkazskoi Albanii* (Baku, 1986). (Although Mamedova's thesis was published already in 1986, she successfully defended her work a few years later, when Azerbaijan had become an independent country).

<sup>135</sup> Farida Mamedova in an interview with Sara Crombach, Baku, 20 August 2009.

<sup>136</sup> Muradian, *Istoriia pamiat' pokolenii* (Yerevan, 1990). In the first chapter of this publication, Muradian described what he called "Farida Mamedova's the dubious way of history-writing". 9-52.

<sup>137</sup> Naile Velikhanli, "Izmenenie istoricheskoi geografii Azerbaidzhana v rezul'tate arabskogo zavoevaniia", *Istroicheskaia geografii Azerbaidzhana*, ed. by Z. Buniiatov (Baku, 1987), 46-88.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* 47-48.

Albania and Aran.<sup>139</sup> The Arabs had only one criteria of differentiation: the population was either Muslim or *kafir*.<sup>140</sup> The cities were the first to be Islamized, and the Albanian non-Christians were forced to adopt Islam. The Christian Albanians slowly became Armenianized or Georgianized.<sup>141</sup> The beginning of the ninth century was dominated by rebellions against the Caliphate which brought about a reawakening of the local peoples, according to Velikhanli.<sup>142</sup>

Another important issue which is discussed by Velikhanli, completely in the footsteps of Ziiia Buniiatov, is the Armenian conspiracy with the Arabs, due to their common enemy, the Byzantine Empire. From the beginning of the eighth century the Arab sources started to call most parts of the Caucasus, including Aran and parts of modern Dagestan and Georgia, Armenia. The other name that was used in some cases was Azerbaijan. Due to this Arab administrative management, which had nothing to do with the factual historical geography, the Arabs assigned parts of Aran, Georgia, Shirvan, Dagestan, Nakhichevan to Armenia, only for the sake of simplifying their administration.<sup>143</sup>

According to Velikhanli, many modern Armenian scholars base their ideas about the historical territory of Armenia on a misreading of the Arab sources.<sup>144</sup> Similarly, Georgian scholar D. L. Muskhelishvili, in his research on the historical geography of Sheki, falsely concluded that Sheki was part of East Georgia.<sup>145</sup>

Velikhanli, who is still generally considered to be the best and most important student of Buniiatov, thus contributed to the idea of an "Armenian conspiracy" with the Arabs, just like Buniiatov did in his first monograph. But in 1987, these accusations had more direct political implications than Buniatov's monographs of the 1960s.

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. 49.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 49.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 50-51.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. 53-57.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. 60-65. The conflict with Georgian scholars on these issues is beyond the framework of this work. However, we know that there were more instances where disciples of Buniiatov (including Rashit Gouushev, the late father of scholar Altai Gouushev) clashed with Georgian Soviet scholars over the distribution of territories between ancient Albania and Georgia. This information is based on an interview with Altai Gouushev, conducted by Sara Crombach, Baku, August 2009.

The next article of the volume, "The feudal states of Azerbaijan in the 9th-12th centuries in the works of M.Kh. Sharifli" is written by Sharifli's daughter Tamara Mamedali qizi Sharifli.<sup>146</sup> She argues that the development of the feudal states of Azerbaijan in the 9th-12th century have huge implications for the history of the USSR and the Near East.<sup>147</sup> Mamedali Khalil-ogly Sharifli (1909-1969), so his daughter, made a significant contribution to the "reconstruction of the territorial borders of Azerbaijan", demonstrating that also parts of Dagestan, South Azerbaijan (in modern Iran), Nagorny Karabakh, and even parts of Georgia belonged to historical Azerbaijan. In other words, the territory expanded beyond the boundaries of modern Soviet Azerbaijan, into all directions.<sup>148</sup>

Buniatov's own contribution to this volume, "The ethnopolitical borders of Azerbaijan in the period of Ildenizid rule", is a continuation of his second monograph *The State of the Atabeks of Azerbaijan 1136-1225*.<sup>149</sup> The scholar argues that under the Ildenizid Atabeks, all Azerbaijani territories consolidated into one state.<sup>150</sup>

In 1987, Buniatov was more explicit than in 1978 when his Atabek monograph was published. According to Buniatov, the "origin of the Azerbaijani people that still live in all regions of the Armenian SSR, and in some parts of Eastern Georgia, never changed, in spite of the many territorial changes that took place in the many centuries after Atabek rule."<sup>151</sup> The Azerbaijani nation thus had a strong historical foothold in neighboring republics, and remained undivided.

The 13th-15th centuries are covered by another Azeri scholar, V.Z. Piriev.<sup>152</sup> Piriev follows Buniatov in arguing that Azerbaijan comprised "both the territories of the Azerbaijani SSR and of Southern Azerbaijan, since all these regions were in ethnic, political, social-economic and cultural respect, part of the historical unity of Azerbaijan."<sup>153</sup> But for

---

<sup>146</sup> T.M. Sharifli, "Feodal'nye gosudarstva Azerbaidzhana IX-XII vv. v rabotakh M.Kh. Sharifli", *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, ed. by Z. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 88-92.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. 88

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 88-92

<sup>149</sup> Buniatov, *Gosudarstvo Atabekov Azerbeidzhana 1136-1225* (Baku 1978).

<sup>150</sup> Zia Buniatov, "Etnopoliticheskie rubezhi Azerbaidzhana v period pravleniia Ildenizidov", *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, ed. by Z. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 93-97.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 93.

<sup>152</sup> V.Z. Piriev, "Ob istoricheskoi geografii Azerbaidzhana XIII-XV vv.", *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, ed. by Z. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 98-110.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. 98-99.

Piriev, Aran, as part of Azerbaijan, included "the whole region from Derbent in the North East to Tbilisi in the West, up to the Araks in the South and South-West."<sup>154</sup> In other words: also huge parts of Dagestan and of Georgia were now included in historical Azerbaijan.

The chapter on the 15th and 16th centuries – that is, the period of the Shirvanshahs in Shirvan and the Khans of Sheki - was written by O.A. Efendiev.<sup>155</sup> According to the scholar this period was crucial for the history of Azerbaijan, since the country "liberated itself definitively from foreign rule."<sup>156</sup> According to him, "at the beginning of the 16th century, thanks to its social-economic development, Azerbaijan was a huge country, including Armenia, East-Georgia, the eastern regions of Asia Minor and almost all of Iran."<sup>157</sup> Obviously the author appropriates the territory of Safavid Iran and simply calls this "Azerbaijan".<sup>158</sup>

A.A. Rakhmani, in his contribution on the 16th and 17th centuries,<sup>159</sup> argued that the state borders of Azerbaijan had changed at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century due to Turkish and Persian invasions, and offered a list of place names of those periods, and where they were located. The last contribution to the volume is F.M. Aliev's article "Azerbaijan in the 18th century".<sup>160</sup> According to Aliev, the most important element that would be of great importance for the further destination of the Azerbaijani people, was the Iranian-Turkic rivalry for dominance in the Southern Caucasus. A second factor of importance was the economic and political ambition of Russia to get control over the region, especially in Azerbaijan. Turkish-Iranian wars in the 18th century destroyed many parts and even whole cities in the region. In the first half of the 18th century Azerbaijani territory was divided into three spheres of influence: Iran, the Ottomans and Russia. The local populations of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia "were united in their brave struggle against Turkish

---

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. 99

<sup>155</sup> O.A. Efendiev, "Territoria i granitsy Azerbaidzhanskikh gosudarstv v XV-XVI vv.", *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, ed. by Z. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 110-119.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. 110.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>158</sup> The Safavids ruled Persia from 1501 until 1722 and the territory of the Safavid Dynasty included parts of modern Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, Rudi Matthee, "Safavid Dynasty", in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (last update 28 July 2008) <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/safavids-ii>

<sup>159</sup> A.A. Rakhmani, "Azerbaidzhan: granitsy i administrativnoe delenie v kontse XVI-XVII vv.", *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, ed. by Z. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 120-128.

<sup>160</sup> F. M. Aliev, "Azerbaidzhan v XVIII v.", *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, ed. by Z. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 129-138.

occupation”, according to Aliev.<sup>161</sup> This is a curious defense of the Soviet framework of the “friendship of peoples” dogma, and of the taboo to present Tsarist Russia as an occupier – at a time when Buniatov had already distanced himself from such political correctness. Azerbaijan gradually lost its independence and became the victim of Ottoman and Persian ambitions; but “the Russian troops, sent by the Tsar in order to save the region from Iranian and Ottoman occupiers, were welcomed by the local population with gratitude.”<sup>162</sup>

In his summary Buniatov recapitulated the importance of the volume. While Armenia and Georgia have a long tradition of studying historical geography, for Azerbaijan this booklet is a first attempt to study all aspects of the country's historical geography.<sup>163</sup> Azerbaijani historians thereby “have to overcome the impact of canonized views of the previously established traditions.”<sup>164</sup> For Buniatov, this pioneering work must be seen as a first and important contribution to the knowledge of Azerbaijani statehood from early Middle Ages until the late eighteenth century.

From hindsight, this volume was a firework of aggressive territorial claims hidden behind a selective reading of particular sources, with no room for a critical approach, and certainly without taking into account scholarship that questioned the link between sources and territories.

### **On the defensive: Armenian aggression and Azerbaijani reactions**

In Armenia the process of reassessing the past – and claiming territory - had started already earlier. One of the most striking examples, according to many of my interview partners, was the work *Ochag* ("Hearth"), written by the nationalist historian and journalist Zori Balaian.<sup>165</sup>

This utterly provocative work was published in Armenian in 1981, and in 1984 a Russian translation appeared. Soon it led to a storm of protests in Azerbaijan.<sup>166</sup> According to Zardusht Alizade this work was perceived as the actual beginning of the

---

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. 135.

<sup>163</sup> Zia Buniatov, *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana* (Baku, 1987), 144.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>165</sup> Zori Balaian, *Ochag* (Yerevan, 1984).

<sup>166</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 142-143.

conflict.<sup>167</sup> It is this Russian translation that spurred debates among Azerbaijani scholars; with hindsight, they argue that the revision of historiography during perestroika in Azerbaijan was in the first place an attempt to counterbalance Armenian nationalism and the accompanying territorial claims as expressed in Balaian's work.

Zori Balaian, an influential novelist and journalist in Armenia, designed his *Ochag* as a travelogue in which the author reported on his travels through supposedly historic Armenia.<sup>168</sup> Main topics of the work were the loss of "Great Armenia" and the old enmity with the Turks. In Balaian's account, regions belonging to Soviet Azerbaijan, such as Nagorny Karabakh, Nakhichevan, and the river Araxes, are historically all Armenian, and he presents the Azerbaijani people as Turkic newcomers that are the ultimate enemy of both Russians and Armenians.<sup>169</sup>

In the preface, Zorii Balaian explains his main intention for publication: the celebration of the "150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Unification of, at least a part of, his Motherland with Russia."<sup>170</sup> He remembers the painful history of his people, but "we always had one blessing: our northern neighbors, the Great Russian people. This people could bring revolution and save the Eastern part of Armenia. Long live the USSR, and long live the great Russian people!"<sup>171</sup> A second blessing was, according to Balaian, Christian culture that was always kept alive, and both the Russians and the ancient roots of the nation saved the Armenians from the "Turkish criminals."<sup>172</sup> The rest of the work is largely meant to claim huge parts of (Soviet) Azerbaijani and Georgian territory as historical parts of Armenia, emphasizing the enormous cultural-historical contribution of Armenians to these regions, whereas "barbarians always tried to destroy these monuments of Armenian civilization."<sup>173</sup> In this rather exalted work, Balaian is steeped in feelings of love for his "Blut und Boden", admiration for the great Russian people and the great Revolution, and especially also in hatred for the "Turkic vandals".

---

<sup>167</sup> Zardusht Alizade in an interview (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>168</sup> Zori Balaian, *Ochag*.

<sup>169</sup> Zori Balaian, *Ochag*.

<sup>170</sup> Zori Balaian, *Ochag*, 5.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. 9-10.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 15-17.

When someone brought two or three copies of Balaian's book to the Academy of Sciences in Baku, the Azerbaijani intelligentsia was alarmed. Zardusht Alizade formulates the feeling with these words: "We certainly realized that something bad was going to begin". In a conversation with me, Alizade implied that Balaian's publication was possible because censorship had relaxed either in Armenia, or at *Glavlit* in Moscow; but this is difficult to find evidence for. Anyhow, a publication of this aggressive tone must have had support from at least Armenia's leadership.<sup>174</sup>

Azerbaijani scholars felt seriously provoked by the publication and demanded an adequate reaction. One of Buniiatov's employees the historian and Arabist Isa Gambar, (later one of the leaders of the Popular Front), wrote a response in which he refuted all arguments of Balaian with (as Gambar claimed) "scientific evidence", completely in line with the scholarly tradition that was initiated by Buniiatov.<sup>175</sup>

In 1985, Isa Gambar attacked Balaian's work as "an attempt to prove the purity of the Armenian people, to falsify the ancientness of Armenian history, and to present territorial claims disguised as historical facts."<sup>176</sup> Another issue of concern for Gambar was the fact that Balaian repeatedly presents the Armenian people as a civilized Christian nation with an ancient culture as opposed to all non-Christian barbarian peoples of the Soviet Union. And indeed: Balaian's work is without any doubt a racist plea for the greatness of the Armenian people. Striking though is the fact that both Gambar and Balaian claimed to defend the strong unity of the USSR, and the accompanying idea of "Friendship of Peoples", both presenting themselves as the great champions of this idea. Although Gambar refuted Balaian's pretenses down to the smallest details, in the best Buniiatov-like tradition, his article was never published allegedly, because one of Gambar's colleagues Farida Mamedova accused the author of plagiarism. According to Mamedova, Gambar based all his information on several of her own (controversial) works on Caucasian Albania, without mentioning these sources. Buniiatov, as director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, soothed the conflict between the young scholars and prevented a scandal by prohibiting the release of the article. However, due to a flourishing *samizdat* culture the article would still become very influential. Today

---

<sup>174</sup> This information is based on an interview with Zardusht Alizade, conducted by Sara Crombach, Baku, November 2011.

<sup>175</sup> Isa Gambar, "Starye pesni i novye legendy" (Baku, 1985). (Based on an unpublished copy handed over to me by the author).

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

many scholars regard this episode as the beginning of the conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.<sup>177</sup>

## Conclusion

After chapter one gave an analysis of Buniiatov's biography and his career up to 1987, the present chapter attempted to go into detail with the development of his work in that period. 1987 was taken as a watershed because around that time – in Gorbachev's *Perestroika* – the old-established standards of academic scholarship and of the ideological traditions in historiography were largely abandoned. As seen above, by that year historiography in Baku went wild and became openly aggressive. The consequences will be elaborated in chapter three.

Chapter two was a thick reading of Buniiatov's works, following the development of his thought and the elaboration of his central arguments through the ages. Right from the beginning of his career in Baku in the 1950s Buniiatov challenged what was regarded, in his eyes, as a foreign and imposed historical canon of Azerbaijan, and he saw it as his own responsibility to create a new and better perspective on the past. The fact that the existing canon was largely created by Russian and Armenian scholars had, according to many Azerbaijanis, led to misrepresentations of the Azerbaijani (ancient) past. Generally the Azerbaijani people were considered to be newcomers in the region, and, perhaps even worse, former nomads that lacked a glorious history of strong states and national culture, unlike the Georgian or Armenian neighbors. These were Buniiatov's main challenges in the 1950s, and he addressed them systematically from his first article in 1958 to the late 1980s.

In his 1958 article, which was his first contribution to Azerbaijani historiography, he immediately engaged with one of the most urgent political issues: the historical legitimization of the territory of the Azerbaijani SSR. The question of territory would always be at the center of Buniiatov's scholarly work. While initially it was sufficient to claim the modern territory of the AzSSR as an ancient part of "historical Azerbaijan", soon also parts of neighboring Dagestan, Georgia, Armenia and Iran were claimed for ancient "Azerbaijan".

---

<sup>177</sup> This information is based on interviews with Isa Gambar, Farida Mamedova, Arabist Zardusht Alizade and historian Arif Iunusov, all scholars who worked at the Academy of Sciences of Baku in the 1980s and who stood at the cradle of the Popular Front a few years later, Baku, April/May 2012.

And Buniiatov would gradually establish his own school of scholars that continued his work in this respect.

A second issue of importance relates to Buniiatov's attempts to work with Armenian chronicles, and at the same time his dependence on Russian translations of these works, and even on the analysis provided by Western scholars. How problematic that was we saw in the sections on possible plagiarism with regard to the works of Dowsett and Hewson. By claiming that the most prominent Armenian chronicles were originally written in the Albanian language, Buniiatov killed several birds with one stone. In the first place he "proved" that the ancient Albanian (that is: Azerbaijani) culture was as highly developed as the Armenian, with an own language, a script and a historiography of its own. Secondly he "unmasked" the Armenian neighbors as conspirators by arguing that ancient Albania was incorporated into the Armenian culture through a deal between the Armenians and the Arab rulers. Whereas evil tongues had argued that ancient Albania could not survive due to the fact that it had never been a state and nation in the first place, Buniiatov refuted this view by "proving" that Albania was, on the contrary, a strong and consolidated state that had become the victim of conspiracy of its rivals.

The present thesis does not aim at evaluating these historiographical disputes by revisiting the original manuscripts; however, the timing of Buniiatov's publications, and his way of arguing, make it reasonable to conclude that Buniiatov's thesis contain a good deal of appropriating the work of other scholars, and of making claims based on dubious evidence. Obviously, his works became celebrated because they flattered the Azerbaijani nation, not because of their academic rigor.

A third issue, which is strongly connected with the second one, is related to the persistent idea that the Azeris were newcomers in the region. By claiming a direct link between ancient Albania and modern (Soviet) Azerbaijan, Buniiatov provided his country with millennia-old roots in the Caucasus. Moreover he provided his nation with an ethno-genesis that went back to long before the twelfth-century massive arrival of Turkic tribes in the Caucasus. This topic of ethno-genesis was extremely important in the political context of the Soviet Union. Proving an ancient and indigenous past in a certain region had direct political consequences, as past residence was seen as a basis for present-day claims to statehood and territory. And as seen above, also here the argument is weak.

After these first and important steps (completed with his first monograph of 1965), Buniiatov continued his mission with claiming a continuity of the Albanian unity, albeit under different names, by bridging the many centuries between the Arab invasion and the Russian annexation of the South Caucasus at the beginning of the 19th century. Albania was no longer an almost mythological state that had disappeared from the historical scene in the early Middle Ages, but thanks to Buniiatov the country and the nation had been able to survive, in spite of the fact that the (Albanian) language, religion, or any other markers of a national identity gradually disappeared and had been replaced by a new religion (Islam), language (Turkic) and culture (Soviet). The strength of Azerbaijani statehood Buniiatov cemented with three monographs on the Atabeks and related local dynasties.

A fifth element that is characteristic of Buniiatov's method is the fact that, in spite of his nationalist mission, he still operated within the Soviet framework. Religious movements were interpreted by Buniiatov as anti-feudal social movements fighting for liberation from foreign oppression, which was completely in conformity with the historiographical dogmas of Moscow. Also his focus on the ancient history was in line with the Soviet historiographical guidelines. Until the late 1980s Buniiatov was careful enough not to extend his polemics into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, since issues like the immigration of Armenians from Iran and the Ottoman Empire, and the pogroms against Armenians and Azeris of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, would have violated all red tapes. Only during Gorbachev's *Perestroika* these taboos were broken, both by Buniiatov and his students.

Yet already within that Soviet framework, Buniiatov's contribution to history-writing was highly political, and led to a continuing and increasingly open confrontation with Armenian scholars. In Armenia he became regarded as an Armenophobic pseudo-scholar, while at home he enjoyed a heroic status that built upon his WWII merits. We should keep in mind that within the tacit pecking order between the various peoples of the USSR, Azerbaijan as a "Muslim" republic had a lower status than "Christian" Armenia, and Buniiatov challenged this injustice. This made him the perfect candidate for setting up a complete new school of historians that continued and expanded his work.

The price for this historical emancipation was high. Buniiatov manipulated historical sources and Western publications, and he educated the new generation of Baku historians in a spirit that placed nationalism above academic integrity. The feeling of insult that the "others" inflicted upon Azerbaijan justified the means, and was so widely shared in Azerbaijan that

Buniatov's claim to leadership in Azerbaijani historiography remained unchallenged until 1987.

What will follow in chapter three is a study of his publicist and popular works, of the subsequent years, often written in connection to the escalating war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorny Karabakh. It is in the late 1980s that we observe the emergence of a new generation of politicians and scholars, especially in the Popular Front Movement, which, as we will see, refused to accept Buniatov's claim to a monopoly on Azerbaijani historical analysis.

## **Chapter III:**

# **Resisting marginalization in times of change: Buniatov's political gambling between the old regime, the Popular Front and the return of Aliiev (1987-1997)**

### **Introduction**

After focusing on Buniatov's life within the context of politics and society in the first chapter, and analyzing his contribution to Soviet Azerbaijani historiography until roughly 1987 in the second chapter, the present chapter will attempt at investigating Buniatov's role in the turbulent political life of Azerbaijan from the start of *Perestroika* to his violent death in 1997. This change of perspective – the integration of his scholarly and public life into contemporary history – is appropriate because of Buniatov's growing involvement into politics; accordingly, his writings of that period have strong connections to the political events, and express the changed political atmosphere of the time.

The central argument of this chapter is that Buniatov was caught in a very complex and volatile political environment, which threatened to marginalize him as a scholarly authority, and which thereby challenged his image as the moral conscience of the nation that he had been forging over the past decades. Challenges came from various sides: the Soviet system that enabled his career was eroded, forcing him to look out for new alliances; the growing protest movement that led to the emergence of the Popular Front attacked Buniatov as a member of the old Soviet elite, all the more since the Popular Front leadership was dominated by scholars of a younger generation many of whom worked in Buniatov's Institute; and finally, in the escalation of the conflict with Armenia, the dominant view in Baku was that Moscow supported Armenia. All of these factors made Buniatov employ an even more aggressive style of writing. Moving away from historical text analysis, his academic output of these years was clearly subordinated to political analysis and fierce accusations of Armenian scholarship. Eventually, Buniatov also experimented with the use

of Islam as a social glue, and as a response to the alliance of nationalists and the Church in Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

In these years Buniiatov's work closely reflected the political events around him, and he emerged as a major publicist. In fact, after 1987 Buniiatov left the general scholarly framework, and within a few years he would even go into politics.

Buniiatov was, according to many of his colleagues, perceived as the ideal person and scholar to counterbalance the Armenian territorial aspirations that increased during *Perestroika*. His status as war hero gave him an enormous cachet also outside of the AzSSR, and his scholarly contribution to the construction of an Azerbaijani historical canon was regarded as a serious counterpoint to the politicized historiography of Azerbaijan's neighbors.

But it would be wrong to regard Buniiatov simply as a protagonist of historiographical revision. Rather, he was still part of the *nomenklatura*; he had reached the peak of his career during Brezhnev's rule, a period marked by stability that in the mid-1980s became increasingly seen as an era of stagnation, where communist ideals were hollowed out by mismanagement and corruption. In other words: Buniiatov had certainly something to lose with Gorbachev's ambitious plans to reform economy, state and society.

By contrast, the young and enthusiastic upstarts at the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan had nothing to lose - at least that was their dominant feeling when Gorbachev came to power in 1985. Unlike Buniiatov and the majority of Buniiatov's generation, they were inspired by the dynamic optimism about the changes that were in the air. But they no longer shared the old ideals of socialism, which they found had lost all vitality and credibility.<sup>1</sup> In their eyes, the old *nomenklatura*, including Buniiatov, was a huge obstacle on the road to renewal, democratization and reform. They would become the driving force behind political reform in the AzSSR, and ultimately behind the unintended side effects of this reform. Although most of my interviewees were born in the late 1940s or early 1950s, they all saw Khrushchev's *Thaw* as an inspiring period that unfortunately died an early death. This time, in the second half of the 1980s, they did not want to lose the momentum for systematic change.

The present chapter is for a large part based on the accounts of these contemporaries of Buniiatov; many of them, including Zardusht Alizade, Arif Yunusov, Leila Yunusova, Isa

---

<sup>1</sup> This 'clash of generations' of the Perestroika-era is marvelously analyzed by Georgi Derlugian, in *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus. A World-system Biography* (Chicago / London, 2005).

Gamber, Arzu Abdullaeva and others, worked at Buniiatov's institute or were even regarded as his disciples. They stood for various political trends in society, first united in the idealism of *Perestroika* and then split into radical nationalist and liberal wings of the popular movement. Accordingly, also the methodology of this chapter differs from that of the preceding chapters: what I do here is to reconstruct Buniiatov's publicistic work and his career by evaluating his own statements and publications with the help of interview partners, many of whom already back then had serious conflicts with the scholar.

This chapter will first portray Buniiatov as a beneficiary of the rule of Geidar Aliev, party boss of Soviet Azerbaijan between 1967 and 1981, then member of the Politburo in Moscow; after Aliev's removal by Gorbachev in 1987, also Buniiatov experienced a crisis in his career. In section two I will give a brief historical analysis of the escalation of the Karabakh conflict and the struggle with Armenia, which shaped Buniiatov's journalistic interventions in those years, in particular on the Sumgait pogroms of 1988. In the third section I discuss the emergence of the Azerbaijani Popular Front, and Buniiatov's ambiguous relationship with this movement and its major figureheads. Section four follows through with this timeline by placing Buniiatov against the background of the increasing nationalist radicalization within the Popular Front.

The last section traces Buniiatov's scholarly and political career from the early 1990s to his violent death in 1997. It begins with a brief outline of the new Aliev regime that emerged in Azerbaijan, as a consequence of the war and the breakdown of the Popular Front. It is against this background that I analyze Buniiatov's role for the new regime of Geidar Aliev, which stabilized Azerbaijan by returning to the mechanisms that characterized Aliev's rule over Azerbaijan between 1969 and 1987. I argue that in spite of their conflictual personal relations, Buniiatov fulfilled a central role for Aliev's new identity project.

### **Ziia Buniiatov and Geidar Aliev: an ambivalent relationship**

In the 1980s Buniiatov was at the height of his academic career, mainly thanks to former party-boss Geidar (Heydar) Aliev, who reportedly was the leading force behind the appointment of Buniiatov as director of the Institute of Oriental Studies in 1981. Such appointments were decided upon by the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan branch of the

Communist Party. Geidar Aliev was in control of the Central Committee and its decisions.<sup>2</sup> Buniyatov who had the reputation of being a rebel was perhaps not the most logical candidate for a leading position at the Institute of Oriental Studies, but next to being a rebel, he always knew how to use his networks in order to serve his career.<sup>3</sup>

Geidar Aliev is for more than one reason a key figure in the present research. Due to his remarkable career, Aliev had an enormous influence on the development of Soviet Azerbaijan in every conceivable way, an influence that is still alive in modern Azerbaijan. In particular Aliev's ambiguous relation with Ziya Buniyatov is food for speculation and requires a detailed study. In every phase of Buniyatov's professional life, from the 1960s until his assassination in 1997, Geidar Aliev played a role, sometimes as Buniyatov's protector, sometimes as his alleged antagonist, but mostly this role was difficult to pin down.

Geidar Alievich (Alirza ogly) Aliev (1923-2003), born in Nakhichevan in the same year as Buniyatov, was certainly the most powerful Azerbaijani of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Aliev's roots were in fact in what is now Armenia, but his family moved to Nakhichevan before his birth.<sup>4</sup> Aliev thus combined *Yeraz* roots (as Azerbaijanis from Yerevan, but also from other parts of Armenia, are called) with Nakhichevan networks, a combination that would become a crucial element of his power base in society.<sup>5</sup>



*Geidar Alievich Aliev (1923-2003) (Photo: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heydar\\_Aliyev](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heydar_Aliyev))*

---

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, May 2012). Alizade was at the time of Buniyatov's appointment one of his subordinates.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York / London, 2003), 84-85.

<sup>5</sup> Audrey Altstadt, "Azerbaijan and Aliyev. A Long History and an Uncertain Future", *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 50 Nr. 5, Sep./Oct. 2003, 3-5.

Aliev's career began in 1941 as a lieutenant of the local NKVD of Nakhichevan.<sup>6</sup> In the following decades he rose to the highest position of the NKVD (which in 1954 was renamed KGB). In 1967, he was appointed chief of the Azerbaijani KGB. When Brezhnev started a campaign against corruption he decided to appoint Geidar Aliev as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan in 1969. In fact, in all three republics of the South Caucasus, a new generation of Party leaders came to power, and scholars characterize all three of them by the metaphor of "feudal" tendencies. They all created strong patron-client networks, were very loyal to Moscow, but at the same time promoted nationalism in their own republics. The promotion of a national culture was meant to legitimize their own power at home, and this strong national identification went hand in hand with reliance on local networks.<sup>7</sup> All three republican leaders aimed at the highest possible sovereignty for their respective republic, and cooperation with each other was mainly limited to a tacit agreement to not step on each other's toes. They all competed for Moscow's favor and investments, also in order to legitimize their own republican power, so all relations were directed towards Moscow, without fostering regional cooperation between the three Caucasus republics.<sup>8</sup> But then *Perestroika* shook up this "feudal" order.

An interesting account of *Perestroika* in Azerbaijan is Rasim Agaev's and Zardusht Alizade's *The End of the Second Republic* (2006), in which Agaev presents the "official" side in the first part of the work while Alizade represents the opposition perspective in the second.<sup>9</sup> According to Agaev, a former member of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, in the early 1980s, the Azerbaijani SSR was considered a model republic, at least judging by the official numbers with regard to achievements of production and modernization that Party Boss Kamran Bagirov (1982-1988) presented at the 31st Party Congress of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan in 1986.<sup>10</sup> In spite of this, "large parts of society began to regard the state as a monopolistic exploiter of the masses, and this discontent

---

<sup>6</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 134. In neighboring Georgia Shevernadze was appointed First Secretary in 1972, and in Armenia Demirchian was installed in 1974.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-140.

<sup>9</sup> Rasim Agaev and Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki* (Moscow, 2006). The title refers to the Azerbaijani SSR, which is according to the authors the second republic. The first republic was the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918-1920), and after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the third Azerbaijani republic was established.

<sup>10</sup> Rasim Agaev, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 10. Kamran Bagirov (1933-2000) was First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, succeeding Geidar Aliev in 1982 and replaced by Abdurrahman Vezirov in 1988, shortly after the beginning of the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh.

gradually led to the crisis of communism in the mid-1980s".<sup>11</sup> According to Agaev, the main reason for this apparent contradiction was what he calls the "Aliev Factor".<sup>12</sup>

Under the guise of a great "fight against corruption", Aliev started a large-scale purge of the Azerbaijani political elite in 1969. All key positions were now occupied by personal friends of the new leader. This is generally regarded as the beginning of a clan-like structure that from then on was characterized by nepotism and regionalism.<sup>13</sup> Aliev provided the so-called *Nakhichevantsi* with all kinds of privileges, but in order to avoid accusations of doing so, he created alliances with Azerbaijani immigrants from Georgia and Armenia. And "slowly but surely this region-based addiction to nepotism would become one of the most striking features of post-War Soviet Azerbaijan."<sup>14</sup>

But Aliev's star would rise even further in the sky of Soviet politics. When former all-Union KGB-leader Iurii Andropov came to power in November 1982, he made Geidar Aliev a full member of the Politburo in Moscow. This was the first time in history that an Azerbaijani politician would climb to the highest echelons of all-Union political life. And Aliev was full of optimism about his new responsibility, as one can read in his speech shortly before his appointment in December 1982:

"Our openness (*glasnost*) is our most important instrument to create a strong link between the Party and the masses. This is also the case with us, in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, we never hide something from our people, we are open in all our actions, and our openness is the basis for an active attitude and the trust of our population."<sup>15</sup>

Although Aliev had to change Baku for Moscow, this was certainly not the end of his power in the AzSSR. As his successor in Baku he appointed the scholar Kamran Bagirov, whom all of my interview partners characterized as absolutely loyal to Aliev. According to Zardusht Alizade, Bagirov was an old *Komsomol* friend of Gorbachev; while not being corrupt, he had a weak character and was nothing more than a puppet of Aliev.<sup>16</sup> In reality Azerbaijan was after 1982 still completely dominated by Aliev and his personal protégés.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>13</sup> Rasim Agaev, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 19-25.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23-25.

<sup>15</sup> Geidar Aliev, "Gluboko izuchat' obshchestvennoe mnenie" (Baku, Azerneshr, 2 November 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 317.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with professor of history of the Baku State University Eldar Ismailov (Baku, August 2009).

By the time Aliev went to Moscow it was clear that the corruption in Azerbaijan was enormous, combined with the fact that the standard of living was one of the lowest in the whole USSR.<sup>18</sup>

The turning point came during *Perestroika* when Gorbachev wanted to get rid of the conservative and corrupt elements who hindered his political ambitions. Aliev was sent into retirement in 1987. In fact, Gorbachev had carried out similar purges in other republics such as Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan in order to install new local elites that were loyal to his reform.

In spite of Aliev's departure his tentacles were still unmistakably present in society. According to Caucasus sociologist and historian Georgi Derlugian, neo-patrimonial principles in the Caucasus, both in Armenia and Azerbaijan, had structured the intelligentsia and party elite. While Gorbachev successfully dismissed the regional leaders it was more difficult to deal with the local traditions of clientelism and regionalism.<sup>19</sup>

*Perestroika* in the Caucasus soon fostered nationalism by the younger local intelligentsia that interpreted the reform as a possibility to champion national interests and to get rid of the old guard. For Armenians the main factor was the ambition to defend the self-determination of the Armenian population of Nagorny Karabakh, and eventually even reunification of the region with Soviet Armenia.<sup>20</sup> In Armenia, Gorbachev's reform was in the first place interpreted as an invitation to express their long-existing territorial claims more assertively. Aliev's dismissal from the Politburo in October 1987 was an important trigger, since this meant the end of Azerbaijan's powerful protecting hand in Moscow. In Azerbaijan itself, the growing Armenian nationalism was seen with suspicion.<sup>21</sup> The news of Aliev's dismissal came as a shock to society, especially since Armenians had refreshed their territorial claims with regard to Nagorny Karabakh already since the early days of *Perestroika*. Aliev had been, at least since his membership of the Politburo, the most powerful promotor of Azerbaijani interests in Moscow.<sup>22</sup> Aliev's downfall would soon

---

<sup>18</sup> Rasim Agaev, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 14-19.

<sup>19</sup> Georgi Derlugian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus. A World-system Biography* (Chicago, 2005), 86-200.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 189-190.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 298-302.

<sup>22</sup> Rasim Agaev, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 36-37.

become a catalyzing factor for the conflict with Armenia that had been slumbering for almost seven decades.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Buniatov's removal from directorship***

There are good reasons to assume that Aliev's removal from the Politburo was also the trigger, though not the reason, for Buniatov's demotion from the position of the Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences. One could conclude that he had to go because he was a protégé of Aliev; but local informants argue that things were more complicated. My Azerbaijani colleagues gave me a chance to go through what one might describe as part of the archive of the Oriental Institute, that is, the surviving correspondences from those years. The collection that I had a chance to study comprised all kinds of letters on personnel and research issues, but nothing on the reason why Buniatov lost his position. What is clear is that official Institute letters were signed by Buniatov until 1986; starting in May 1987, the letters carry the signature of a certain G.Z. Aliev, who occupied the position of interim director from *May* 1987. This means that Buniatov's ousting preceded Aliev's removal from the Politburo in *October* that year.

According to some current employees of the institute, all of them former subordinates of the scholar, Buniatov was “temporarily retired”, since he had reached the age of 65. However this information is rather doubtful: first of all, scholars normally did not retire at the age of 65, and secondly, Buniatov was in fact only 64 years old in 1987. According to the Arabist Zardusht Alizade, Buniatov's removal was actually due to a conflict with Geidar Aliev.

It seems that Buniatov anticipated that Aliev's star in Moscow was sinking; according to Zardusht Alizade (who in 1986 was an employee of Buniatov), Buniatov must have obtained information of Aliev's problems in Moscow from Marshal Shestopolov, the husband of Tagira Buniatova's sister. This was a crucial family relation that probably provided Buniatov with an extra protection in Moscow over all those years. Assuming that Gorbachev was planning to remove Aliev, Buniatov started to make critical remarks about his patron, not realizing that Aliev's pawns were still omnipresent. This outrageous behavior was,

---

<sup>23</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. by Bruno Coppieters (Brussels, 1996), 3.

according to Zardusht Alizade, the reason for the ‘retirement’ of the scholar.<sup>24</sup> Geidar Aliev allegedly ordered the President of the Academy of Sciences to force Buniatov to write a letter of resignation. Alizade still remembers the huge humiliation Buniatov felt: ”The former director and Soviet hero walked through the corridors of the institute like a beaten dog.”<sup>25</sup>

## **The escalation of the Karabakh conflict**

Gorbachev’s reform encouraged a reassessment of Azerbaijani history, first of all of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the period of the awakening of the Azerbaijani nation. This reassessment of Azerbaijani modernity before the Revolution was led by the Soviet humanities, by historians and Orientalists of Buniatov’s generation and their disciples. Scholars had been the backbone of Soviet ideology; now, in the late 1980s, they became carriers of revision.

At the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, Buniatov encouraged discussions that had been taboo before Gorbachev’s reform. Whereas previously his emphasis had been on ancient and medieval history, the focus of scholars switched to the more recent history, such as the Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic of 1918 to 1920.

In the neighboring Soviet republic of Armenia a similar process of reassessing the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was underway. Armenians of Nagorny Karabakh were also inspired by Gorbachev’s reform and petitioned Moscow for secession from the AzSSR and unification with the Armenian SSR. They interpreted the promised democratization as an opportunity for self-determination.

The Armenian and Azerbaijani perspectives completely opposed each other. According to Armenians, Nagorny Karabakh was their historical homeland, and its placement into the fold of Soviet Azerbaijan was a tragic historical mistake. They also held that Stalin and Baku had conducted a policy of ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population of the region. Perhaps even more important: Nagorny Karabakh was considered to be the cradle of Armenian

---

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, April 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

culture and as such under constant threat by “the Turks”.<sup>26</sup> From the Azerbaijani position the growing conflict was the result of external intervention by Armenia and the Armenian diaspora in Russia and the West. The Armenian claims were a direct threat to the stability of the USSR and a violation of the territorial integrity of Soviet Azerbaijan. Stalin’s decision to create the Autonomous Oblast’ Nagorny Karabakh (NKAO) as part of the Azerbaijani Republic had been rightful, since the region was historically a part of Azerbaijan and economically strongly connected to Baku. The status quo was, according to Azerbaijan, also in the interest of the Armenian population.<sup>27</sup> The Armenians however had never been satisfied with the status of NKAO, and had been petitioning Moscow since many decades. To Armenians, Gorbachev’s *Perestroika* meant in the first place an opportunity to restart the political battle for unification with Nagorny Karabakh.<sup>28</sup>

The Armenian and Azerbaijani perspectives had been deliberately separated from each other. Both groups did not engage with the collective memory of the other, there had never been in Soviet times a dialogue, or a basic knowledge of the narrative of the other (oddly contradicting the rhetoric of friendship of the peoples).<sup>29</sup> Armenians were convinced of Baku’s ambition to assimilate NKAO within the AzSSR, and Azerbaijanis were convinced that the Armenian ambition to unite the region with the ArmSSR was tantamount to expulsion of the Azerbaijanis living in the area.<sup>30</sup>

In February 1986, a letter signed by nine prestigious members of the Communist Party of the ArmSSR was personally delivered to Gorbachev by political scientist Igor Muradian (born in 1957), one of the leading figures of what would soon become the Karabakh Committee. In August 1987 another petition, with more than 75.000 signatures, was sent to Moscow.<sup>31</sup> Historian Sergo Mikoian (1929-2010; son of Anastas Mikoian, who was in the highest echelons of central Soviet power from Lenin to Brezhnev) and novelist-journalist Zori Balaian (b.1935), both Armenian nationalists with good connections to the Armenian diaspora in the United States, openly pleaded in American newspapers for unification of

---

<sup>26</sup> Marina Kurkchian, “The Karabagh Conflict: from Soviet Past to Post-Soviet Uncertainty” in *The Armenians, Past and Present in the Making of National Identity*, ed. Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchian (New York, 2005), 150-151.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>28</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994”, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 125.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 .

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-20.

NKAO with Armenia in 1987.<sup>32</sup> And when Abel Aganbekian, Gorbachev's economic advisor, held a speech addressing the Armenian diaspora in Paris he claimed that for historical and economic reasons NKAO should be part of Armenia. He formulated his view as follows: "I would like to hear that Karabakh has been returned to Armenia. As an economist, I think there are greater links with Armenia than with Azerbaijan. I have made a proposal along these lines, and I hope that the problems will be solved in the context of *Perestroika* and democracy."<sup>33</sup> His speech was published in the French communist newspaper *l'Humanité*, and made Azerbaijanis aware of the growing international pressure.<sup>34</sup>



*The Karabakh Committee (Photo: <http://www.historyofarmenia.am/en/Encyclopedia>).<sup>35</sup>*

In 1987, at the eve of the conflict, there were 360.000 Armenians living in Azerbaijan (including the Armenian population of NKAO) and 185.000 Azerbaijanis in Armenia, with NKAO being a mixed region with a population of 160.000 people, of whom 75 per cent were ethnic Armenians (and Kurds, and others).<sup>36</sup> The multi-ethnic demography of the whole

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>35</sup> The Karabakh Committee was established by the economist Igor Muradian, born in Odessa, raised in Baku, who had studied in Moscow at the Plekhanov Institute of National Economy. Other members on the foto are the journalist Zori Balaian, orientalist and later president Levon Ter-Petrosian, mathematicians Vazgen Manukian and Babken Ararktsyan and physicist Ashot Manucharian. Not on the picture is "leading national poetess" Silva Kaputikyan.

<sup>36</sup> Marina Kurkchian, "The Karabagh Conflict", 148-150.

region made the situation explosive, with incidents beginning to occur.<sup>37</sup> The economic situation also contributed to the growing feelings of discontent. The AzSSR was the poorest republic in the region, and although NKAO was relatively well-off within Azerbaijan, the region was still much poorer than the average of the ArmSSR. Armenians from NKAO could easily organize themselves, due to their autonomous status, and also due to the fact that they were supported by the ArmSSR (and also by the diaspora and Moscow).<sup>38</sup> As Moscow's influence was decreasing, local leaders did not hesitate to mobilize the masses for their own advantage.<sup>39</sup> The preparing work had been done by scholars. And when Aliiev, the main factor of power of Azerbaijan in Moscow, was dismissed, the *nomenklatura* of NKAO decided it was time to act.<sup>40</sup>

In November 1987, the first Azerbaijani refugees arrived in Baku and Sumgait, an industrial city near Baku. The refugees were, according to their own testimonies, deported from several regions in the ArmSSR.<sup>41</sup> According to Arzu Abdulaeva, eyewitness and one of the founders of the Popular Front, they were as many as 2000, mainly from the Armenian regions Kapan (near Nagorny Karabakh) and Masis (near Yerevan).<sup>42</sup> The arrival of the refugees prompted great alertness in Azerbaijan. Moscow kept silent about this first wave of IDP's but the local population of Baku and Sumgait was alarmed.<sup>43</sup>

The opposition was still small and silent however, and the Azerbaijani Communist Party was loyal to Moscow as always. In Armenia *Perestroika* had completely different consequences. From the start of Gorbachev's reform, both the oppositional powers and the Armenian Communist Party viewed *Perestroika* in the first place as a new opportunity to mobilize nationalism, and to renew territorial claims. According to the Azerbaijani historian Arif Yunusov, Armenians had, unlike Azerbaijanis, always been Armenian in the first place, and only in the second place Soviet.<sup>44</sup> And because Armenians had a more powerful network in Moscow, it was less crucial for them to show loyalty to the policy of the center. Besides

---

<sup>37</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-142.

<sup>39</sup> Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past. Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1993), 127.

<sup>40</sup> Georgi Derlugian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus*, 190-191.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Arzu Abdulaeva (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Interviews with Arif Yunusov and Arzu Abdulaeva (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Arif Yunusov (Baku, November 2009).

that, together with *Perestroika* a new wave of Destalinization was launched in Armenia, and it was fashionable again to openly criticize Stalin's mismanagement. The establishment of NKAO as an autonomous region within the borders of AzSSR was now presented as one of Stalin's many crimes. And by doing so, Armenians felt supported by the official policy of the center.<sup>45</sup> Another crucial difference between Azerbaijan and Armenia was the fact that Azerbaijan, and in the first place Baku, was much more a multi-ethnic society, which meant that Russification, and thus Sovietization, had been more powerful. But due to its multi-ethnic population, Baku was also much more vulnerable to ethnic clashes than Yerevan. With the arrival of the first refugees in November 1987, Nagornyi Karabakh soon became a topic for mobilization, also in Azerbaijan.<sup>46</sup>

In 1988 Gorbachev organized elections for new delegates of the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, and several scholars of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences participated. The Azerbaijani Communist Party realized they were losing support of the people and heavily manipulated the pre-elections. Finally four candidates were selected to take part, among others the Orientalists Nariman Qasimov, who got 49 votes, and Ziia Buniyatov who ended second with 125 votes. So already in 1988 Buniyatov must have had ambitions to go into politics, be it without direct success.<sup>47</sup> According to his rival in the elections Nariman Qasimov, the Azerbaijani Communist Party manipulated the elections in order to avoid Buniyatov being the new Azerbaijani representative in Moscow, since the scholar had the reputation of a hooligan.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Buniyatov and the Sumgait Pogroms (1988)***

After a series of smaller interethnic confrontations in Armenia and Azerbaijan, a first serious outburst of violence took place in Sumgait in February of 1988. A gloomy, impoverished industrial city not far from Baku, Sumgait had been designed as a workers' paradise that should symbolize the ideals of communism and internationalism, but now it was mainly populated by ex-prisoners, low-skilled unemployed and the first Azerbaijani refugees that had come from Armenia in the months prior to the outbursts of violence.<sup>49</sup> There is good

---

<sup>45</sup>Georgi Derlugian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus*, 188-190.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with history professor Roza Arazova (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>47</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi resubliki*, 352.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Nariman Qasimoglu (Qasimov) (Baku, July 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 31-32.

reason to assume that the pogrom of Sumgait developed spontaneously, as the culmination of a process of escalation in which developments in Armenia and Azerbaijan reinforced each other and spiraled out of control.

On 13 February 1988, the Armenian population of Stepanakert, the capital of NKAO, started a political rally on Lenin square, demanding from Moscow a transfer of the region to the ArmSSR.<sup>50</sup> This was also the starting point of huge meetings in Yerevan. The amount of demonstrators doubled day by day and after a week, more than one million people gathered on the main square of Yerevan.<sup>51</sup> The first official Azerbaijani protest took place on 19 February 1988, the seventh day of the Armenian rallies in Nagorny Karabakh, when a group of workers, students and intellectuals were marching to the Parliament building in Baku, and presented a letter to the leadership with the demand to defend NKAO as an intrinsic part of the AzSSR.<sup>52</sup> A day later, on 20 February 1988 the Supreme Soviet of NKAO decided to secede the region officially from the AzSSR. The news was published in the newspaper "Bakinskii Rabochi" on 23 February. This was the first open act of secession in the whole USSR, where the recognition of existing borders was still perceived as a crucial factor for stability.<sup>53</sup>

The final trigger however, would be the news of two Azerbaijani boys who had been killed during interethnic clashes in Agdam (a town close to the official NKAO border) on 22 February 1988. The incident was first hidden from the population, but as the news reached Azerbaijan on 27 February 1988 the situation was ready to explode.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, in the same week, a new wave of refugees was coming to Baku and Sumgait, with new testimonies of violence committed by the Armenian population.<sup>55</sup>

The Sumgait pogroms of February 1988 were a watershed for the whole Soviet Union, since this kind of ethnic violence had not happened since the end of World War II, and it clearly showed that the rhetoric of "Friendship of the Peoples" and "international workers solidarity" had become meaningless phrases. During the pogroms, that started on 27 February and lasted until the Soviet troops quelled the rioting on 1 March, about 30 Armenians were

---

<sup>50</sup> Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 132-133.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 11-27.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>53</sup> Rasim Agaev, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 38-39.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 33.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

killed, hundreds got injured and almost all of the 14.000 Armenian citizens of Sumgait felt forced to leave the republic.<sup>56</sup>

In spite of Gorbachev's policy of *Glasnost*' (openness) there was hardly any official news on the events, which allowed for the wildest conspiracy theories to gain currency. According to some, the CIA was behind the events in order to undermine the USSR. Others blamed the central KGB since Moscow wanted to strengthen its grip on the whole region, or conservative powers of the center wanted to undermine the *Perestroika* project.<sup>57</sup>

The most popular view in Azerbaijan was that Armenians themselves were behind the events, in order to discredit Azerbaijan in the eyes of Moscow and the Western world.<sup>58</sup> This theory is confirmed by the Azerbaijani judge Aslan Ismayilov, who in 1989 was appointed public prosecutor in the case of the Sumgait events. That Ismayilov was not objective in this function is clear from his following statement:

“On the tenth day of my investigation I started to realize that the events were organized by the central authorities. [...] It was then my only desire to show that the events were planned outside of Azerbaijan. I wanted to do all I could to save the reputation of my people. I was convinced that both the central authorities, and the Armenians themselves were to blame.”<sup>59</sup>

According to Zardusht Alizade, the pogroms were first of all working in favor of the KGB and of extremist nationalists, both Armenian and Azerbaijani. Worst of all: “After the Sumgait pogroms, a rational solution was no longer possible.”<sup>60</sup>

Armenians saw the disastrous events of Sumgait as a repetition of the genocide that they had undergone in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. According to many Armenians, the nation had once again become the victim of Turkish ambitions to eradicate the Armenian people.<sup>61</sup> The Armenians of NKAO had been isolated from the Armenian SSR, but since 1965 they had managed to find acceptance in the USSR for the discourse of genocide. This argument was also used by the Supreme Soviet of NKAO when it voted for unification with

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>57</sup> Interviews with Hikmet Hajizade and Zardusht Alizade (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>58</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 40-42.

<sup>59</sup> Aslan Ismayilov, *Sumgait – Beginning of the Collapse of the USSR* (Baku, 2011), 16-18.

<sup>60</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 310-313.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 44.

the ArSSR on 20 February 1988, exactly one week before the Sumgait pogroms.<sup>62</sup> Moscow was unable to react adequately. The center imposed silence upon all means of mass-communication, which led to wild speculations.<sup>63</sup>



*Commemoration of Sumgait Pogroms in Yerevan, 8 February 1989*

(Photo:[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pogrom\\_de\\_Soumgait#/media/File:Btv1b38000282-p4.jpg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pogrom_de_Soumgait#/media/File:Btv1b38000282-p4.jpg))

The German historian Michael Kohrs stated that the historical debate was the actual introduction to the ethnic clashes. The same scholars who once had served the Soviet regime now fuelled the nationalist ambitions. The historical debate was presented to the public not with the goal to educate the people, but to mobilize them by rhetoric of hatred against the other. This happened both in Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>64</sup> Buniiatov's article "Why Sumgait?" (1988), is a clear example of this ambition to mobilize the nation.<sup>65</sup>

Buniiatov's "Why Sumgait" was the first time published by the Academy of Sciences of the AzSSR in early 1989.<sup>66</sup> It was designed as a response to the article "Watershed"

---

<sup>62</sup> Yo'av Karny, *Highlanders* (New York, 2000), 511.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 42-44.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Kohrs, "Geschichte als politisches Argument: Der 'Historikerstreit' um Berg Karabach", in *Osmanismus, Nationalismus und der Kaukasus*, ed. F. Adanir et al (Wiesbaden, 2005), 58-63.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 43. Davud Imanov's film "Echo from Sumgait" was another case in point. The film is available on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnIILmu88> (Last accessed on 10 November 2018).

<sup>66</sup> Ziiia Buniiatov, "Pochemu Sumgait (Situatsionnyi analiz)", *Izv. AN AzSSR, Ser. ist., fil. I prava, nr.2* (Baku, 1989). Reissued in *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana po dokumentam i publikatsiiam*, ed. Naile Velikhanli (Baku, 1990), 355-363.

(1988), published in the journal of the Central Committee of the ArmSSR, in which the Armenian historian Armen Ogenesian made a direct connection between the pogroms of Sumgait and the genocide by the Turks against the Armenians in 1915. Ogenesian argued that the Sumgait pogroms were not a real “watershed”, for Turkish-Azerbaijani violence against Armenians had a long history going back at least to 1895.<sup>67</sup> Ogenesian exposed the Azerbaijani people as an ancient enemy that aimed at the extermination of the Armenian nation, just like their “Turkish brothers” did seventy years earlier.<sup>68</sup> Buniiatov opposed the Armenian interpretation, which he believed had been supported by the Soviet and the international press. According to Buniiatov, the Armenian explanations of the regrettable events were deliberate falsifications of what actually happened:

”I want to try to find an answer to the question why this could happen in Sumgait [...] a city that was always a symbol of the ”Friendship of Peoples”. [...] I don’t want to use the rhetoric of our opponents who speak of ‘evil powers’ in the pogrom of Sumgait.”<sup>69</sup>

Buniiatov explained that the role of the “eternal victim”, adopted by Armenians, was a myth. The first act of aggression was in fact the Armenian Karabakh Committee’s call for secession from the AzSSR, which was a direct attack on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. The “traditional Armenian habit of presenting their people as a victim of foreign invaders”, so Buniiatov, was a distortion of reality. It concealed the Armenian aspirations for the restoration of the “Great Armenian Empire”. In reality, so Buniiatov, “the Armenian nation always knew how to use its privileges in times of foreign occupation.”<sup>70</sup> And, Buniiatov proceeded, even Armenian writers from the past admitted that their culture had been flourishing even under Turkish or Azeri rule:

”All Armenian writers from the Middle Ages testify that the Seljuq Sultans had a ‘Christian love of one’s neighbour’ and allowed the Armenians to build their churches and to practise their religion freely. Also during the Azeri rule of the (Azerbaijani) Atabeks they lived in peaceful coexistence with their neighbours. Even later, when the region was part of the Ottoman Empire, Armenian sources bear witness to the Turkish tolerance towards their national culture.”<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Armen Ogenesian, “Vodorazdel”, *Golos Armenii (Kommunist)*, No. 258, November 1988.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Zia Buniiatov, “Pochemu Sumgait”, 356.

<sup>70</sup> Zia Buniiatov, “Pochemy Sumgait”, 356-357.

<sup>71</sup> Zia Buniiatov, “Pochemu Sumgait”, 357.

According to Buniiatov, the “ancient animosity” was a mythological invention of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This invention served the political aspirations of the Armenian nationalist Dashnaksutiun Party that was established in 1885 in the Ottoman Empire, and that enjoyed great support from the Armenian diaspora in Europe. Buniiatov places the nationalist movement of the Karabakh Committee in the direct tradition of the Dashnaksutiun Party.<sup>72</sup> Their aims were the restoration of “Great Armenia” and the mobilization of the international community against the Muslim Turks. These nationalists, in close cooperation with the Armenian clergy, used the geopolitical instability of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries for their political aspirations. Even the most cynical means were justified by their ruthless lust for power. Then Buniiatov explains that the genocide of 1915, a major factor of identification for Armenians, was in fact a falsification of history:

“The leaders of the Dashnaks planned even a slaughter of their own population, a slaughter of which they afterwards blamed the Turks.”<sup>73</sup>

Here Buniiatov actually suggested that also the 1915 genocide had been planned by Armenian nationalists. He does not use the word “genocide” - he calls both the events of 1915 and 1988 “slaughter” or “massacre” (reznia) – but the message is clear. While Armenians connected the genocide of 1915 directly to the Sumgait pogroms of 1988, both as manifestations that present the Armenian people as an eternal victim of the Turks, Buniiatov decided to copy this idea and turn it upside down. In the case of Sumgait the main purpose of the Armenian nationalists was gaining support for self-determination, meaning the annexation of Nagorny Karabakh.<sup>74</sup> The “evidence” that Buniiatov presented was hardly convincing. He blamed a certain Grigorian, an Armenian citizen of Sumgait, of having killed five Azerbaijanis, which led to the escalation of the events.<sup>75</sup> He also mentioned the role of Armenian journalists that had “penetrated the town several hours before the events started, waiting for things to begin”.<sup>76</sup> According to Buniiatov, this dubious role of the media was

---

<sup>72</sup> In 1990 the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan published a collection of documents of the Dashnaksutiun Party, in order to inform the readers about the political and nationalistic pretences of the movement.

<sup>73</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, “Pochemu Sumgait”, 358. Although the Armenians were allowed to commemorate the genocide of 1915 for the first time in 1965, the history of violent clashes in the Caucasus between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the establishment of the Soviet Union could not be studied before Gorbachev’s reform, according to Buniiatov’s former student Naile Velikhanli in an interview with Sara Crombach, Baku, August 2009.

<sup>74</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, “Pochemu Sumgait”, 357.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 358-359.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 359.

enough proof to conclude that the pogroms were planned by the Armenians in order to discredit Azerbaijan. The idea to accuse the Armenians of having committed the pogroms of Sumgait themselves is still very common in contemporary Azerbaijan, reinforced by a general idea that Azerbaijanis are a peaceful people that are simply not able to organize violence of any kind. Buniatov belonged to the founders of this myth that would become one of the basic pillars of collective identity.

Between Buniatov and his Armenian colleagues a new controversy arose. For almost seventy years, the period that was generally considered to be the time in which the modern conflict was rooted, had been kept carefully under the surface. For Buniatov, it seems, this “friendship of peoples” was not just a myth or a propaganda term. He remembered the past, when solidarity was still the standard:

”Especially the ‘friendship of peoples’ was more than ever alive during the Great Patriotic War when we fought against Nazi Germany. I ask myself, in alarm, the next question: What would have happened if the Armenians had shown the same aspirations during the war? With no doubt we would have lost the fight. This did not happen, thanks to God.”<sup>77</sup>

When the war hero Buniatov used this argument, it carried weight. Although Soviet ideology had lost its authority by 1989, the Second World War was still a very strong source of identification. Buniatov suggested that Armenians, potentially, could have collaborated with the Nazis. Likewise, the current Armenian aspirations were a direct threat for the stability of the Soviet Union. According to him, both the Azerbaijani and Armenian populations were victims of “evil nationalist [that is: Armenian] powers” that benefited from the general social, economical and political instability, in order to undermine the state. He ended his article with a striking vision of a possible future scenario:

”More than forty years the Armenians strive for secession of the NKAO. And Moses wandered in the desert for forty years with the sons of Israel, hoping that future generations would forget their past as slaves in Egypt. Let’s hope that this conflict will not last for forty more years. [...] Many centuries Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Georgians, Lezgins and other Caucasian peoples lived, and will live, peacefully together, irrespective of their race and in spite of nationalist groupings such as the Dashnaks.”<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Zia Buniatov, “Pochemu Sumgait”, 360.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 360.

When Buniatov referred to the Armenian nationalist Dashnaktsutyun Party it was certainly not just a metaphor for Armenian nationalism in general. Although the Dashnak Party had been banned in Soviet Armenia after the establishment of the USSR, the party had continued to exist abroad, and also as an underground movement in Yerevan. The founders of the Karabakh Committee had mobilized Dashnak support already in 1986, mainly to collect weapons for an armed conflict in Nagorny Karabakh.<sup>79</sup>

“Why Sumgait” led to heated reactions from both sides. Azerbaijanis were thankful to their scholar and hero, whom they saw as standing in the breach for justice. Armenians felt wronged by the denial of the genocide in 1915 and of course they rejected the absurd accusation that it might have been Armenians who organized the pogroms in Sumgait. Series of counter-attacks, partly launched by scholars of the Academy of Sciences of Yerevan, were the result.

After Sumgait, Buniatov (who had always had the ambition “to serve the nation”, as the motto of his first monograph in 1965 tells us) realized that it was necessary to leave the scholarly discourse and to employ more populist methods in order to save the reputation of his nation. At least this seems the most logical thing to conclude after reading his infamous article “Why Sumgait?”.<sup>80</sup>

This radical view was gaining much acceptance among Azerbaijani scholars of the elderly generation. Particularly interesting is a letter of members of the Academy of Sciences of Baku of August 1989, sent to the Communist Party of the USSR, in which the scholars – including Buniatov - call for support from Moscow in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict:

“The current developments have a devastating influence on the inter-ethnic relations of our multi-ethnic state. If we put aside the pseudo-political and pseudo-democratic demagogy (that finds its basis in the general socio-economic misery of the population) we can see that the conflict is only about the territorial claims of the ArSSR, which abuses democracy and glasnost’ for the old strategic goals of the nationalist Dashnak Party, in order to re-establish a Great Armenia.”<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 18.

<sup>80</sup> The article “Why Sumgait” is one of the very first examples of Buniatov’s new discourse. The tone is no longer ‘just academic’, but clearly of an inflammatory character. Surprisingly enough, only one of my interviewees shared this opinion, generally however, this article is still hailed by the public. In an interview, Arif Yunusov called the article ‘a scandalous piece of work with dangerous consequences’ (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>81</sup> Naile Velikhanli, *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana po dokumentam i publikatsiiam*, 328.

## **A domestic challenge to the regime and to Buniiatov: the bidding scholars of the Popular Front**

But the old generation was no longer in control, and had lost their monopoly on historical and political interpretation. The riots in combination with the threat of losing territory mobilized hundreds of thousands of people who had never been politically active before. The leaders of the Azerbaijani SSR were totally unable to address the problems associated with the Karabakh crisis and the growing unrest. The political and social uncertainty, together with the popular perception that the Communist leaders of Azerbaijan were no longer in control of the situation, became a breeding ground for the creation of a new mass-movement. The driving force behind this nationalist movement was the need to defend the territory and sovereignty of the republic.<sup>82</sup>

Many young scholars were inspired by the spirit of reform. Buniiatov however, stayed loyal to the old elite and was not impressed by the ideals that inspired the young scholars to establish a Popular Front. At one point Buniiatov condescendingly called the Popular Front “a movement of aspiranti”, that is, of PhD students.<sup>83</sup>

The Azerbaijani Popular Front movement emerged from a “club of scholars” in 1987. This club met weekly and discussed topics such as political and economic reform and the integrity of Azerbaijan in the USSR, the latter with a view to Armenian claims on Nagorny Karabakh. The founding fathers of this club of scholars were the Orientalist Zardusht Alizade and the historians Leila Yunusova and Arzu Abdulaeva, all employees at the Academy in Baku.<sup>84</sup>

Buniiatov realized that the Popular Front was not going to offer the same career opportunities as the Communist Party had done before. Moreover, the Turkic orientation of the movement was at odds with Buniiatov’s theories on the Azerbaijani past and future. According to one of the founders of the Popular Front, Hikmet Hajizade, Buniiatov also opposed the movement’s struggle against Russification. Being half Russian and half Talysh himself, with Azeri as his second native language after Russian, Buniiatov was always in the

---

<sup>82</sup> Interviews with founders of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan Zardusht Alizade, Arzu Abdulaeva and Leila Iunusova (Baku, November 2011 and May 2012).

<sup>83</sup> Interviews with Zardusht Alizade, Leila Yunusova and Hikmet Hajizade (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>84</sup> Interviews with these three founding fathers of the Popular Front (Baku, November 2011 and May 2012).

first place a Soviet man, not an Azeri.<sup>85</sup> Or as Rasim Agaev formulated it: "I remember Buniiatov, noisy and with an unpleasant choice of words, in a way only he could talk, complaining about the omnipresent *Nakhichevantsi* [one of the most powerful regional "clans" of Azerbaijan, of which Aliev was the leading representative], a fact that made him prefer to be Russian. The legendary Azerbaijani academic, Hero of the Soviet Union, was actually Russian. He was even proud of having the qualification "Russian" in his [Soviet] passport."<sup>86</sup>

It was not only Buniiatov who rejected the Popular Front, it was also the other way around. The liberal and *Perestroika*-minded founders of the movement considered people like Buniiatov an obstacle for progressive reform. A striking detail in this respect was the fact that Buniiatov allegedly had a physical skirmish with the young historian Leila Yunusova, who during one of her speeches in the courtyard of the Academy had provoked Buniiatov's anger.<sup>87</sup> This physical pawing was allegedly nothing new: according to several (anonymous) interviewees, Buniiatov regularly hit his colleagues or subordinates, a feature that did not make him more popular among the young scholars of the Popular Front. According to Hajizade, after the incident Buniiatov asked Leila's supervisor, director of the Institute of History Igrar Aliev, to dismiss Yunusova. Aliev refused.

For the young generation, born after World War II and raised in the spirit of *Thaw* and the 1960s, *Perestroika* offered opportunities for democratization and human rights. Young scholars of the Academy of Sciences of Baku were inspired by Gorbachev's reform as a possibility for democratization, the development of human rights and socialism with a human face.<sup>88</sup> Buniiatov's generation, born in the 1920s, was raised in the spirit of Stalinism, the heroic war, and Soviet patriotism. For Buniiatov the Soviet system was his natural habitat, for it had brought him honor and respect, especially since he was an acclaimed war hero. For the younger generation this respect for the old guard was no longer self-evident: While perhaps more of a cynic or opportunist than a true believer in socialism, Buniiatov had over decades confronted the Moscow dogmas on how Soviet national identity and brotherhood of nations

---

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Hikmet Hajizade (Baku, August 2009).

<sup>86</sup> R. Agaev, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 19-20.

<sup>87</sup> This information is based on several interviews with witnesses who preferred to stay anonymous, but was later confirmed by Leila Yunusova. She was obviously proud of having been beaten by Buniiatov, and enjoyed telling the episode in an interview (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2011).

should look like; but now the Popular Front saw him as a typical representative of the Soviet system, as a relic of the past.

This generation gap also reflected a divide between a growing opposition that in 1987 was still inspired by Gorbachev's reform, and the Communist Party that was much more conservative and unwilling to participate in any *Perestroika*. In Armenia, by contrast, *Perestroika* had a different effect, namely uniting the opposition and the Communist Party in the struggle for unification of Nagorny Karabakh with Armenia. Both republics tried to use Moscow, and also Gorbachev's reform, as an instrument for supporting their respective nationalist ambitions. The Armenian Karabakh Committee, in spite of its opposition to the regime, maintained common ground with their local Communist Party, from the very beginning.<sup>89</sup> The Azerbaijani Popular Front, by contrast, hardly shared anything with the local Communist Party, and fighting the authorities was central in the political events of the following years.<sup>90</sup>

The club of scholars entered a second stage in 1988. After the Sumgait events, the movement expanded rapidly, and so did their goals. Besides ideals of *Perestroika*, Nagorny Karabakh had now become a vital topic, and so was the perception that Moscow completely misunderstood the situation.<sup>91</sup> Gorbachev had been the main source of inspiration in 1987, but this changed after Sumgait. And while the founding fathers in 1987 still had been unanimous about their ambitions, the movement became more divided from the beginning of 1988, even before its actual establishment as a party.<sup>92</sup> According to Zardusht Alizade, the original goal was not the end of the USSR but a gradual evolution towards a more democratic system. This was unfortunately undermined by the events of February 1988 and the rapid popularization of the movement after Sumgait. Another scholar who stood at the cradle of the Azerbaijani Popular Front, Hikmet Hajizade, was, unlike Zardusht Alizade, always anti-Soviet, anti-conservative, and first of all convinced of the bankruptcy of a "rotten and hypocrite system".<sup>93</sup>

The first leaders of the opposition movement realized that the Communist Party of Soviet Azerbaijan would never be able to allow any kind of reform within the framework of

---

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Interviews with Zardusht Alizade, Hikmet Hajizade and Eldar Ismailov (Baku, July 2009 and May 2012).

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Hikmet Hajizade (Baku, May 2012).

*Perestroika*, such as for instance a revision of the historical canon or a liberalization of the planned economy. As a result, the further development of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan was in opposition to the conservatism of the local Communist Party. According to historian Audrey Altstadt, the Popular Front was soon regarded as the voice of the people and the main source of inspiration for political change.<sup>94</sup>

In the spring of 1988 Zardusht Alizade visited the Baltic States and was inspired by the newly founded Popular Front Parties there. He decided to do the same in Azerbaijan, and in the summer of the same year the “Club of Baku Scholars” transformed into an “initiative group” that followed the model of the Popular Fronts of the Baltics. This “initiative group” was officially established in July 1988 by around 30 scholars of the Academy of Sciences of Baku. Whereas the Armenian equivalent of the Popular Front, the Karabakh Committee, was inspired by the national question, and the Baltic Popular Fronts by aspirations for independence, the main goal for the Azerbaijani Popular Front was still to defend territory and to increase Azerbaijani sovereignty within the frame of the USSR.<sup>95</sup>

Meanwhile, in March 1988 Armenians in NKAO established the radical movement “*Krunck*” (“Crane”), which was the first organization in the USSR that used strikes as their main political weapon.<sup>96</sup> Already in 1987 *Krunck* existed as an informal secret organization that organized, in cooperation with the local Communist Party, the first meetings in the capital of NKAO Stepanakert.<sup>97</sup>

In March 1988 the Karabakh Committee was established in Yerevan, by intellectuals such as the above-mentioned Zori Balaian (b. 1935) and Levon Ter Petrosian (b. 1946), the future president of Armenia. In spite of the name, their agenda included more than just Nagorny Karabakh. For them, the Armenian cause required the reunification of all Armenians, both territorially and ideologically: as Thomas de Waal put it, “all Armenians from Beirut to Los Angeles had to reunite in common nationalist goals.”<sup>98</sup> The Karabakh Committee was formed by the generation that in the 1960s lobbied for the official recognition of the genocide of 1915. Whereas the Azerbaijani Popular Front was born during *Perestroika*

---

<sup>94</sup>Audrey Altstadt, “Azerbaijan and Aliyev”, 5-7.

<sup>95</sup> Interviews with Arzu Abdulaeva and Zardusht Alizade (Baku, May 2012). Popular Fronts in the Baltic Republics were established in April (Estonia), June (Lithuania) and July (Latvia) of 1988.

<sup>96</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 55-57.

<sup>97</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 305-308.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 55-57.

and founded by the young generation, the Karabakh Committee - which was linked to the radical *Krunk* movement – was the fruit of experienced veterans who built on previous successes.<sup>99</sup>

The authorities in Moscow realized that something had to be done. Gorbachev decided that the Party leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan were obviously not able to control their republics, and on 21 May 1988 he replaced both Karen Demirchian and Kamran Bagirov by new leaders, his old friends Suren Arutiunian (b. 1950) in Armenia and Abdurrahman Vezirov (b. 1930) in Azerbaijan.<sup>100</sup>

The advantage of the newcomers was, in Gorbachev's mind, that they were both outsiders, and not, like their predecessors, completely integrated in the local "clan-structure".<sup>101</sup> A major problem would soon be the fact that Gorbachev had sent a liberal, progressive leader to Yerevan, and a conservative one to Baku.<sup>102</sup> And even worse, the Russian-speaking Vezirov, who had worked abroad as a diplomat since 1976, was hardly able to understand the sensitivities of Azerbaijani nationalism. His talks of the necessity to defend Soviet internationalism and to fight the heritage of the "Alievshchina" (as he pejoratively called the rule of Geidar Aliev) only increased the gap with society, including the young Popular Front movement. This was a major disadvantage compared to Armenia, where Party and opposition cooperated and clearly shared common goals.<sup>103</sup>

### ***Buniatov's return to directorship***

Buniatov's disgrace was not for long: in November 1988, Buniatov was once again in office as director of the Baku Institute of Oriental Studies.<sup>104</sup> This quick reinstatement is another riddle in Buniatov's career. It was definitely not the fruit of his popularity – to the contrary: as a result of Gorbachev's reform after 1987 a new director should be no longer appointed by the Central Committee but directly elected by the employees of the Institute. In the fall of

---

<sup>99</sup> Claude Mutafian, "Karabakh in the Twentieth Century", in *The Caucasian Knot. The History and Geo-Politics of Nagorno-Karabakh*, eds. Levon Chorbajian, Patrick Donabedian and Claude Mutafian, London and New Jersey, 1994, 146.

<sup>100</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 318-320.

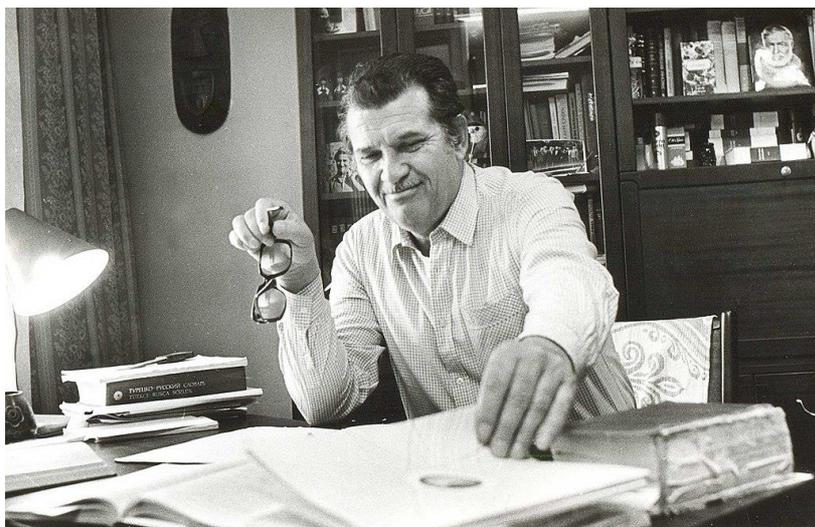
<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 317-320.

<sup>102</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 58-59.

<sup>103</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 319-321.

<sup>104</sup> According to letters from the Archive of the Institute of Oriental Studies of Baku, Buniatov was back in his old position by the end of May 1988.

1988 the first free elections were organized at the Institute of Oriental Studies, but the majority of the scholars elected not Buniiatov but the Iranist Saleh Aliev, who worked at that time at the IVAN in Moscow. Obviously the young generation of scholars did not feel represented by Buniiatov, who was according to them a symbol of the old conservative Party elite. Yet the president of the Academy overruled the vote of the Institute's staff and made Buniiatov again director.<sup>105</sup>



*Ziya Buniiatov (Photo: [https://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziya\\_Bunyadov](https://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziya_Bunyadov))*

Information about these elections was absent in the records of the Institute of Oriental Studies that I was given permission to study.<sup>106</sup> According to Zardusht Alizade, Buniiatov had created strong ties with Azerbaijan's new leader Vezirov, who will be discussed later in this chapter, as soon as Geidar Aliev was dismissed from the Politburo, and they shared a common enemy. Vezirov showed his gratitude by arranging Buniiatov's reappointment. Most likely the authorities, including the president of the Academy of Sciences, feared the revolutionary spirit of the young generation, and a leading scholar such as Buniiatov had to counterbalance the pressure from below.<sup>107</sup> In 1990 Buniiatov was even elected Vice-president of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Interviews with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, April 2012) and Bagrai Seiranian, who was a friend and colleague of Buniiatov's rival at the elections, Saleh Aliev (Moscow, IVAN, November 2010).

<sup>106</sup> The archives were hardly accessible for research, and at the rare occasions when I was allowed access the material was incomplete.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>108</sup> Göhver Bakhshalieva, *Bibliografiia*, 20.

The crisis in society continued. Barely a month after Arutiunian's arrival, on 15 June 1988, the Supreme Soviet of the ArSSR adopted a resolution for unification with NKAO.<sup>109</sup> Two days later this was followed by a reaction of the Azerbaijani party reconfirming the old status of NKAO as beyond dispute. On 12 July 1988 the Communist Party branch of NKAO voted for "unilateral secession" from the AzSSR. Moscow reacted by reconfirming the status of NKAO, but Gorbachev also decided to put NKAO under direct central control.<sup>110</sup> On 24 July 1988 Arkadii Volskii, the Politburo's representative in NKAO, was given formal authority to overrule Baku. This was in fact the end of Azerbaijani control in the region.<sup>111</sup>

In reaction to the direct threat of losing Nagorny Karabakh, the Popular Front brought up more nationalist figures, including the Orientalists Isa Gambar and Abulfaz Aliev, a Turkologist and since the 1970s one of Azerbaijan's very few dissidents. The biography of Abulfaz Aliev, who would soon become known as Elchibey, will be discussed later in this chapter. Gambar and Aliev decided to negotiate with Vezirov, but did not gain recognition. The talks of July 1988 had two results: a growing animosity between the Popular Front movement and the Communist Party, and an increasing discord between the liberal and moderate founders, and the more militant nationalists, within the movement.<sup>112</sup> The unwillingness of the Communist Party to cooperate, combined with Vezirov's conservatism and anti-*Perestroika* attitude, were important motivating factors for Zardusht Alizade to bring the movement to a next phase.<sup>113</sup>

Within a couple of months the founders wrote a program and a charter for the Popular Front of Azerbaijan in which the most pressing requirements were formulated. All nine items of the program were related to the Karabakh question, and were presented to the public in November of 1988. This initiative group would become the basis for the establishment of the Popular Front as a party. Their main goal was to "create a broad participation of the masses in the solution of economic, social, cultural and political problems of Azerbaijan."<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 60.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>112</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 320-326.

<sup>113</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 83. This information was confirmed by Zardusht Alizade in an interview (Baku November 2011).

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, May 2012).

The nine demands that were presented to Vezirov were, among others, reinstalling Soviet power in NKAO, a severe punishment of the Party top of Nagorny Karabakh for provoking an ethnic conflict, and an end in the biased coverage in the official media. Armenia should stop interfering in internal affairs of Azerbaijan. None of the demands had to do with the economic situation or other more general political topics.<sup>115</sup>

In the fall of 1988 Azerbaijanis from many parts of Armenia were forced by the local Armenian population to leave their homelands, especially in the rural areas.<sup>116</sup> By the end of 1988, 200.000 people were expelled, both Azerbaijanis and Kurds. By November 1988 almost all Azerbaijanis had been forced to leave Armenia, followed by massive expulsions of Armenians from Azerbaijan.<sup>117</sup> This marked also the beginning of mass rallies on Baku's Lenin Square, led by the militant nationalists Etibar Mamedov and Neimat Panakhov, both rooted in *Yeraz* families that had been forced to leave Armenia in the 1940s. They did not feel represented by the elitist Russian-speaking Baku intelligentsia, as personified by Zardusht Alizade or Leila Yunusova, and soon they would become the new, nationalist and populist face of the Popular Front.<sup>118</sup>



*Baku rallies November 1988 (Photo:<https://en.azvision.az/news/58998>)*

---

<sup>115</sup> This information is based on the original document of the nine demands of the Popular Front presented to Vezirov in November 1988. The document was until 2012 in the *samizdat* archive of Arif Yunusov. When the archive was destroyed by the Azerbaijani authorities in the spring of 2012, Arif Yunusov gave some of the saved documents to me. The document is since then in my personal archive.

<sup>116</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 62.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

On 7 December 1988 Armenia was shocked by a heavy earthquake, killing at least 25.000 people.<sup>119</sup> The reactions in Azerbaijan were mixed, especially as so many Azeris had been deported from Armenia in the months prior to the earthquake. Some Azerbaijanis spontaneously organized help for the victims, but some others celebrated the disaster.<sup>120</sup> For the first time in Soviet history the Armenian diaspora was allowed to support the affected areas. Gorbachev gave a speech in Yerevan, but when the situation was also used to lobby for supporting the NKAO issue, Gorbachev decided to dismantle the Karabakh Committee, and all leaders of the movement were arrested.<sup>121</sup>

### ***Buniatov and Sakharov (December 1988)***

The Armenian earthquake was reason for one of the most famous and respected Moscow dissidents, Andrei Sakharov, to visit the region. After going to Yerevan and bringing his respect to the victims, Sakharov, accompanied by his spouse Elena Bonner, also visited the Academy of Sciences in Baku with the intention to create a dialogue with Azerbaijani scholars about the growing dispute with Armenia.<sup>122</sup> Sakharov and most of the Russian intelligentsia were generally pro-Armenian, due to a strong historic relation, but also because the pro-*Perestroika* intelligentsia sympathized with the Armenian struggle for self-determination as part of a general movement for democratization in the late 1980s.<sup>123</sup>

Sakharov was very much respected by Moscow and also by the western world. Whereas Azerbaijanis perceived themselves as the victim of Armenian expansion and aggression, the rest of the world seemed to have an opposite impression. And then Sakharov arrived in Baku, representing exactly this anti-Azerbaijani and pro-Armenian voice.

---

<sup>119</sup> Ronald Suny, "Soviet Armenia, 1921-1991", 122.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with one of the founders of the Popular Front, Arzu Abdulaeva (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>121</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 65.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 66. This episode is also described in Sakharov's memoirs *Moscow and Beyond, 1986 to 1989* (New York, 1990).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 66-67. When in February 1989 Zardusht Alizade visited a forum of (Russian) dissidents in Moscow - the so-called Moscow Forum - everyone present pleaded for a release of the members of the Karabakh Committee, except for Alizade, who argued that the Karabakh Committee had contributed seriously to the conflict. In Alizade's opinion the meeting clearly showed the one-sided perspective of Soviet intelligentsia that generally had no understanding for the Azerbaijani position in the conflict. This information was confirmed by Zardusht Alizade in an interview with Sara Crombach, May 2012.



*Andrei Sakharov (1921-1989)*

*(Photo: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissolution\\_of\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Union#Azerbaijan's\\_blockade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissolution_of_the_Soviet_Union#Azerbaijan's_blockade))*

Sakharov also met with Buniiatov, who soon after published a devastating article about Sakharov, under the title "Parasiting Informals" (1989).<sup>124</sup> This article is a second example of Buniiatov's new aggressive style of writing:

"About two months ago our city Baku was visited by the infamous Alikhanian-Bonner.<sup>125</sup> And she was not alone, but with her husband the Academician Sakharov and three other persons that call themselves 'informals', all employees of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR: Batkin, the hysterical woman Starovoitova, and the laboratory assistant Zubov, who was expelled from the Institute of Oriental Studies for parasitism."<sup>126</sup>

All these scholars were in fact respected dissidents, at least respected by most people who believed in Gorbachev's reform; in the eyes of Ziaa Buniiatov and many others in Azerbaijan, their visit to Baku just demonstrated that the reform-minded intelligentsia in Moscow supported the Armenian struggle for self-determination at the cost of the Azerbaijani republic. Buniiatov consistently used Bonner's Armenian surname Alikhanian

---

<sup>124</sup> Ziaa Buniiatov, "Tuneiadstvuiushchie neformaly" (Baku, 15-4-1989). Republished in *Sobranie*, tom III (Baku, 1999), 222-223.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 222. [Buniiatov here refers to Elena Bonner, Sakharov's wife, who had an Armenian father but always used her mother's last name Bonner].

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

and thus reduced her to just an advocate of the Armenian lobby. Buniatov continued his fury against Sakharov and Bonner:

”The thinking part of our society pitied Sakharov when he was deported to Gorky. [...] The amount of interviews spilled by Sakharov and Alikhanian-Bonner to the foreign media, while they were actually enemies of the state, were still supported by society. The victim and Nobel Price laureate was not even allowed to receive his decoration at home. In Gorky however a steep turnaround in his thinking occurred. From a smart scientist he turned into an ordinary scientific worker, receiving his pension for his idleness, and his nonsense. And because he was no longer a scientist he turned into a fighter for peace and perestroika, bad-mouthing everything that took place in our society and bringing separation between the nations. And Alikhanian-Bonner was his vassal.”<sup>127</sup>

Sakharov was according to Buniatov first of all anti-patriotic, and he undermined the solidarity between the Soviet nations. Extremely rude was Buniatov’s treatment of Sakharov’s wife Elena Bonner: ”And thus Sakharov is not only put on a pedestal in the sick eyes of his partner, but also in the eyes of many others.”<sup>128</sup> Here Buniatov made a malicious allusion to Bonner’s almost complete blindness after an accident during World War II.

According to Buniatov, Sakharov ”who came to Baku with the olive-branch of the peacemaker” was in fact nothing more than a marionette of Aganbekian, the Armenian nationalist and Gorbachev’s economic advisor, who already in 1987 had pleaded for unification of Nagorny Karabakh with Armenia.<sup>129</sup>

One can certainly imagine that Sakharov’s visit to Baku didn’t have the results that Gorbachev had planned. And indeed: what was presented as an attempt to restore peace in the region was perceived in Azerbaijan as another attempt of the Armenian lobby to claim Azerbaijani territory. Many of my interview partners recall the event at the Azerbaijani Academy as a painful demonstration of Moscow’s habit to ignore the perspective of Azerbaijan. Some of my interview partners however had the impression that Sakharov was positively influenced by Buniatov and nuanced his one-sided point of view after the Baku meeting.<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Altai Göyüşev, who was present at the Baku meeting with Sakharov (Baku, May 2012).

## **The radicalization of the Popular Front and the rise of “Pan-Turkism”**

With his sharp anti-Armenian rhetoric Buniyatov was not only riding the tide but trying to be at the forefront of breaking old taboos; but this he did in order to curb the ambitions of the younger generation who were increasingly eroding the fundament of his public prestige. For this purpose, Buniyatov was contributing to the marginalization of the liberal wing of the Popular Front Movement, the original founders of the movement whose political agenda went beyond the conflict with Armenia and also encompassed democratization of the Azerbaijani political system.

The exodus of Azerbaijanis from Armenia, which had erupted in the fall of 1988, had devastating consequences for Azerbaijani society, and Baku rapidly changed from “a civilized city into a savage wilderness”, according to eyewitnesses.<sup>131</sup> The Baku population, which previously showed little political awareness, now felt urged to take action. Mass-meetings continued between 17 November and 5 December 1988. On 12 January 1989 Moscow installed a so-called Committee of Special Administration (*Komitet osobogo upravleniia*) in NKAO. Headed by Arkadii Volskii (1932-2006) who was already in charge of the region since July 1988, this committee broke all economic, cultural and administrative ties with Baku and in fact gave, according to most Azerbaijanis, free reign to militant Armenians to control the region.<sup>132</sup>

In the beginning of March 1989, the leading figures of the Popular Front decided to establish a “temporary initiative center” (*vremennyi initsiativnyi tsentr*), whose main task was to disclose information on the events in and around NKAO. On 6 March 1989 the initiative center approached the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, Vezirov, in a letter requesting official registration of the organization. In their letter to Vezirov the founding fathers of the movement, almost all employees of the Academy of Sciences of Baku, argued that they were fully compliant with the wishes of the Communist Party and wanted to support *Perestroika*, which they depicted as a revolutionary process supported by a broad segment of society. Leading moral principles were the ideas of humanism, social

---

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Arzu Abdulaeva (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>132</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 69-71.

justice, friendship and equality of the peoples, democracy and the protection of human and civil rights.<sup>133</sup>

The Communist Party did everything to discredit the new movement. While in Armenia the Communist Party was more inspired by the progressive ideas of *Perestroika* and willing to cooperate with the opposition, in Azerbaijan opposition was not tolerated, and this would become an obstacle for a smooth change of power.<sup>134</sup> However, all the efforts of the Communist Party to oppose the movement had an opposite effect, and the popularity and authority of the Popular Front movement grew immensely during the spring of 1989. This was a dangerous situation for Vezirov, since, as Zardusht Alizade formulated it: “The official intelligentsia of the USSR, and even more so in Azerbaijan, always functioned as the lubricating oil for the wheels of power. As soon as this oil began to obstruct, the power machine got into serious difficulties.”<sup>135</sup>

New leading figures in the Popular Front Party were historian Isa Gambar, the later founder and leader of the Musavat Party, and Abulfaz Aliyev (1938-2000) “Elchibey”, as he was called by his admirers. They were both founders of the movement *Varliq* (Creature), a movement that had been established in the beginning of 1988, and that was much more nationalist and less elitist and internationalist than the Popular Front. Only in the beginning of 1989 the movements decided to cooperate, mainly driven by the fear of losing Nagornyi Karabakh.<sup>136</sup>

Paradoxically, it seems that Buniiatov was trying to prevent the rise of Elchibey by bringing himself up as candidate for the leadership of the Popular Front -- the movement that he despised so much for its disdain of Azerbaijan’s Soviet elites. This is how moderate liberals such as Leila Yunusova or Zardusht Alizade commemorate Buniiatov’s bid for leadership:

“When in 1989 the Popular Front organized elections for a new leader, Isa Gambar proposed Zia Buniiatov as the ideal candidate, realizing the importance of a moral face, someone who would be respected by everyone in society. I was convinced that Vezirov, who did everything possible to control our movement behind the screens, was the

---

<sup>133</sup> Letter to Vezirov, 6 March 1989. A copy of the Popular Front letter to Vezirov was in the *samizdat* archive of Arif Yunusov. After this archive was almost completely destroyed by the Azerbaijani authorities in 2012, it was given to me by Arif Yunusov.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>135</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki (Chast' vtoraiia)*, 324-325.

<sup>136</sup> Interviews with Arzu Abdulaeva and Roza Arazova (Baku, May 2012).

initiator behind this impossible plan. Isa Gambar knew as much as we all did that Buniyatov was extremely undemocratic, authoritarian, and bad-mannered. We all knew how close Buniyatov was to Vezirov due to his new habit of criticizing Geidar Aliev and his old habit of nurturing friendly relations with power.”<sup>137</sup>

According to Alizade the candidacy of Buniyatov was without any doubt an attempt of the Communist Party and of the KGB to control the Popular Front movement, combined with Buniyatov’s ambition to maneuver himself into the center of power.<sup>138</sup>

Buniyatov’s articles on Sumgait and Sakharov were thankfully received by Azerbaijani society, and he might have thought that this made him an ideal new leader of the Popular Front, but Buniyatov was no longer the undisputed icon he used to be. The moderate members of the Popular Front were able to prevent Buniyatov from being elected, but had to accept another candidate that was hardly any better in their eyes. The newly elected leader was Abulfaz Aliev (Elchibey). As Alizade remarked in an interview with me, “according to Leila, Arzu and myself the nationalist ideas of Elchibey were completely at odds with our principles of internationalism and democracy. His past in prison could damage the reputation of our movement. And above all: we hardly knew him and didn’t know if we could trust him.”<sup>139</sup> The populist elements in the Popular Front had become a majority though, and the moderate founders had to accept the choice for the nationalist Elchibey. This didn’t mean that Buniyatov’s role in the movement was over.

---

<sup>137</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki (chast’ vtoraiia)*, 367-368.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.



*Abulfaz Aliyev (Elchibey, 1938-2000)*

*(Photo: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abulfaz\\_Elchibeynim.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/elchibey.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abulfaz_Elchibeynim.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/elchibey.jpg))*

Arif Yunusov described Buniatov's ambivalence, or even hypocrisy, with regard to the Popular Front in detail in his *samizdat* article "Where are you going, Buniatovizing Academic?".<sup>140</sup> According to Yunusov, Buniatov regularly gave speeches at the mass meetings of the Popular Front, uttering the most radical language, mobilizing the masses to "beat the Armenians", or "to call for withdrawal from the USSR", whereas in the newspapers his language was much more moderate and he even called the national leaders of the Popular Front "dangerous extremists".

"Many of us, scholars in the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, remember vividly how Buniatov often insulted the Azerbaijani people, telling how proud he was to have a Russian mother, and showing us with triumph his (Soviet) passport, in which his nationality was registered as Russian. When the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh started he suddenly realized he was Azeri, and started to abuse Armenians. [...] As soon as it became clear to Buniatov that the Popular Front would never accept him as their new leader, he started to intimidate his opponents by dismissing them from the institute. One

---

<sup>140</sup> Arif Yunusov, "Kuda Vy idete, Buniatovstviushii akademik?" (*samizdat* article) Baku, 5-12-1989.

of his subordinates, Zardusht Alizade, was seriously hindered to defend his thesis, and he was even beaten in the face by Buniitov. Alizade went to court, but with no success.”<sup>141</sup>

From Yunusov’s *samizdat* article one gets the impression that Ziia Buniitov was highly opportunistic in recklessly maneuvering between pleasing two masters: the people and the party. According to Yunusov, Buniitov called for Azerbaijani independence at one meeting in Baku on 29 November 1989, but in a newspaper article a few days later held the opposite view, arguing that secession from the USSR would only isolate the country.<sup>142</sup> As long as Buniitov hoped for a leading role in the Popular Front he pretended to support the movement, but as soon as Elchibey was elected as the new leader of the movement, Buniitov distanced himself again, by arguing that there was not one real intellectual in the movement.<sup>143</sup> In an interview Arif Yunusov nuanced the image of Buniitov:

”One should differentiate between the young Buniitov who was in the first place a devoted historian, the first Azerbaijani scholar who created a historical canon, the founder of Albania studies, and the old Buniitov who had become a careerist and opportunist, driven by the ambition to protect the country against Armenian attacks, but also by the ambition to protect or even increase his power in society. And while in the 1960s and 70s his contribution was certainly very fruitful for the country, in the 1980s he developed into a provocative agitator, someone who did not hesitate to call upon the masses to use violence.”<sup>144</sup>

On 16 July 1989 the first congress of the movement elected newcomer Elchibey as leader. According to Isa Gambar, Elchibey, being one of the few dissidents of the Academy, was a crucial source of inspiration for the revolutionary movement.<sup>145</sup> Gambar, who had introduced Elchibey, believed that the latter could play a crucial role for the emancipation of the Popular Front, due to his dissident past and his enormous contribution to national identity, both in his works and personality.<sup>146</sup> In fact he had been in prison ”due to an excessive

---

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with Arif Yunusov (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Isa Gambar (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>146</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 367-369. According to Zardusht Alizade, the introduction of new figures such as Buniitov (as was mentioned earlier in this chapter), Isa Gambar or Elchibey, was most probably, just like the Sumgait pogroms, the result of KGB infiltration in the movement. Zardusht Alizade in an interview (Baku, May 2012).

Azerbaijani nationalism”, as Isa Gambar puts it, and this made him a hero in the eyes of many Azerbaijanis.<sup>147</sup>

Unlike Armenia or the Baltic republics, Soviet Azerbaijan had few if any dissidents, and the discourse of human rights was practically non-existing. And although Elchibey could hardly be considered an advocate of human rights, his status as Azerbaijani dissident made him the ideal candidate to lead the Popular Front.<sup>148</sup> An Arabist, poet and person of literature, Elchibey was arrested by the KGB in 1975, under accusations of ”Pan-Turkic” ideas and an excess of Azeri nationalism.<sup>149</sup> Until then Elchibey had worked as one of Buniatov’s subordinates at the Institute of Oriental Studies. After his release from prison in 1977 he was transferred to the politically less sensitive Institute of Manuscripts.<sup>150</sup> Precisely this dissident status and his Turkic nationalism made him so popular in the late 1980s.<sup>151</sup> Pan-Turkism was absolutely taboo in the Soviet Union, but now his ideas were warmly received, especially by the younger generations, and mainly due to general anti-Armenian sentiments in society that contributed to the popularity of racist ideologies.

The first generation of Azerbaijani historians, such as Zia Buniatov, Igrar Aliev and Farida Mamedova, had developed a concept of Azerbaijani history according to which the Turkification of Azerbaijan had begun at the earliest only in the eleventh century. This was the official concept, recognized by the Party and taught in school and compatible with Buniatov’s Albanianism.<sup>152</sup> In the same period some other historians, such as Makhmud Ismailov, Suleiman Alidzharov and others, aimed to prove that the Turks had been an ancient and indigenous people in the Caucasus, and had been at the cradle of Azerbaijani history.<sup>153</sup> The first group, the so-called classical school, was generally trained in Moscow or Leningrad, mainly Russian-speaking, and in high positions at the institutes of History or Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences. The second group, the so-called National Patriots, often had teaching positions at Baku State University or at the pedagogical Institute, and were very influential among students. This division became visible during *Perestroika*, and the

---

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Isa Gambar, conducted by Sara Crombach. Baku, November 2011.

<sup>148</sup> Rasim Agaev, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 30-31.

<sup>149</sup> Yaroslav Vasilkov and Marina Sorokina (eds.), *Lyudi i sud'by* (St. Petersburg, 2003), 435.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Isa Gambar (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>152</sup> Arif Yunusov, ”Mifi i obrazy vruga v istoricheskoi nauke i uchebnikakh po istorii nezavisimogo Azerbaidzhana” (unpublished, 2011).

<sup>153</sup> Arif Yunusov, ”Mifi i obrazy”, 2011.

result was a double conflict: first the conflict between Azerbaijani and Armenian historians, and secondly between the generations.

When the political events catapulted history into the spotlight, the old classical school was no longer fashionable. Zia Buniatov was still respected due to his contribution to undermining the Armenian claims, but Igrar Aliev, whose contribution to historiography had always been focused on the Persian roots in the Azerbaijani ethno-genesis, became very unpopular during *Perestroika*. The main question that divided both schools was the question of ethno-genesis: Are we Turks or are we Albanians? Or: are we a mix of many influences, Turkic, Persian, Albanian? Or are we first of all Turks? With the Popular Front's rise to prominence in 1988-89, the perspective of the national patriots became dominant, inspired by Elchibey.<sup>154</sup> Elchibey's Pan-Turkism was a rejection of Azerbaijani ethno-genesis: he simply called the Azerbaijani people Turks, and their language Turkish.<sup>155</sup> With the election of Elchibey the Popular Front turned even more into a radical, nationalist movement. Zardusht Alizade was certainly not amused by the election of Elchibey, whose ideology completely contradicted the original ideas of the movement.

### **The Popular Front: from a radical movement to a torn party**

Mass demonstrations in the fall of 1989 called for the liquidation of the Committee of Special Administration of NKAO. While democratization or human rights as political topics perhaps were reserved for a small elite, the possible loss of territory was unacceptable for all strata of the population. The Azerbaijani Communist Party developed an ambivalent position towards the Popular Front, for the movement could be used to exert pressure on Armenia and Moscow with respect to the Karabakh interests.<sup>156</sup> Eventually, the Communist Party was forced to negotiate with the Popular Front, especially after several strikes that paralyzed the entire public life. The so-called "September strikes" became an important symbol for the Azerbaijani national movement as a whole, and its success was completely attributable to the enormous authority of the Popular Front among the population.<sup>157</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> Arif Yunusov, "Mifi i obrazy", 2011.

<sup>155</sup> Rasim Agaev, *Konets vtoroi respubliki*, 34.

<sup>156</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 86-88.

<sup>157</sup> Aidyn Balaev, "Svoboda (istoricheskaja khronika: 1988-1992)" (Baku, 1992), 5.



Baku, September 1989 (Photo: <http://riowang.blogspot.com/2010/08/autumn-in-baku.html>)

On 5 October 1989 the movement was officially registered as a party by the Ministerial Council of AzSSR, and they got permission for the dissemination of the newly founded newspaper "Azadliq" (Liberty), with a circulation of 200.000.<sup>158</sup> The result was an even greater chaos in society: the official authorities were losing public support, and the Popular Front, though without official authorization, had the actual legitimacy in the eyes of many Azerbaijanis.<sup>159</sup>

At the peak of its popularity however, the Popular Front became torn apart by the more radical forces. Already at the very first session of the plenum of the Popular Front on 27-28 October 1989 disagreements between the liberal and extremist wings appeared to be insoluble.

When at the end of 1989 all communist regimes of Eastern Europe fell one after the other, the situation in Azerbaijan became completely untenable. Inspired by one of the most militant nationalists of the Popular Front, Neimat Panakhov, activists in the autonomous republic Nakhichevan tore down the Soviet border with Iran, and thousands of Azerbaijani's crossed the border to "meet with their ethnical brothers in South Azerbaijan", the region that was considered to be part of the historical homeland of the Azerbaijani people, at least by

---

<sup>158</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 87.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

many nationalists.<sup>160</sup> Moscow was furious, and most media in the USSR described the Azerbaijani people as a nation looking for Iranian Islamic fundamentalism, a new perspective that was certainly not helpful for the reputation of Azerbaijan.<sup>161</sup>

In early 1990, the founding fathers of the “Club of Scholars”, namely Zardusht Alizade, Leila Yunusova and Arzu Abdulaeva, left the Popular Front and started a new Social Democratic Party.<sup>162</sup> According to Zardusht Alizade, he was convinced that the nationalist leaders of the Popular Front incited the population of Baku to violence and pogroms against the Armenian population, and he strongly believed the KGB supported them in this. Given the many refugees that had poured into the city in the preceding months it was easy to stir up emotions.<sup>163</sup>

Unfortunately it was too late to turn the tide: On 13 January 1990 the notorious pogroms against the Armenian population of Baku started. While rumors of upcoming pogroms were buzzing long in advance, the authorities did nothing to prevent an escalation, and during the first days of ethnic violence the present Special Forces did not intervene.<sup>164</sup> After one week of ethnic riots in Baku, Gorbachev felt that it was time to intervene. Without any warning, on 19-20 January 1990 the Soviet Army marched into the city of Baku to “stabilize the situation”. Around 90 Armenians were killed during the riots, and another 130 citizens, mainly Azerbaijanis, died as a result of the intervention of the army. Several hundreds were wounded on the night of 19-20 January.<sup>165</sup> Just like with the Sumgait pogroms, the events of what soon was called Black January were clouded in theories of conspiracy. And the Popular Front had certainly played a double role: reportedly, some people of the movement had tried to save the Armenian population during the pogroms, while others had taken part in the excessive violence. Two hundred members of the Popular Front were arrested.<sup>166</sup>

---

<sup>160</sup> Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 133-137.

<sup>161</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994”, 8. Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 88.

<sup>162</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 89-91.

<sup>163</sup> Interviews with Zardusht Alizade and Arzu Abdulaeva (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Arzu Abdulaeva (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>165</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 90-93.

<sup>166</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994”, 8-12.



*Azerbaijani stamp commemorating Black January 1990 (1990)*

*(Photo: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissolution\\_of\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Union#Azerbaijan's\\_blockade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissolution_of_the_Soviet_Union#Azerbaijan's_blockade))*

Black January had huge consequences for Azerbaijan and for the Popular Front. Except for the massive arrests, First Secretary of the Communist Party Vezirov was sent to Moscow and replaced by Ayaz Mutalibov (b. 1938). The radical Popular Front figure Panakhev fled to the Autonomous Republic Nakhichevan, a region that declared itself independent. The Communist Party wanted to restore control in the rest of Azerbaijan, and Moscow installed Soviet troops in Baku in order to stabilize the situation.<sup>167</sup> On a side note, Buniiatov's extra-marital son Valerii Buniiatov – whose mother was a Russian nurse that took care of Buniiatov during the war when he was injured - was one of the Soviet commanders in Baku.<sup>168</sup> Valerii Buniiatov was responsible for the prosecution of Popular Front members and for re-establishing the power of the Communist Party.<sup>169</sup>

The Azerbaijani population was horrified by what was perceived by many as an act of "colonial aggression". The mourning ceremony in honor of the events of "Black January" was conducted by the official Muslim leader, the Shaykh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, who gained stature by supplying the nationalist cause with religious authority. Tens of thousands burnt their party membership cards, and around one million attended the funeral in

---

<sup>167</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 2003, 93-94.

<sup>168</sup> Zardusht Alizade, *Konets vtoroi respubliki (Chast' vtoraya)*, 319.

<sup>169</sup> Yo'av Karny, *Highlanders* (2001) 523-524.

honor of the victims.<sup>170</sup> This event symbolized a definitive shift from socialist ideology towards "a renewal of Islam in the self-awareness of the people".<sup>171</sup>

"Black January" marked the spectacular growth of the Popular Front. In 1990 hardly anything was left of the early ideals of democracy and human rights of the young scholars of the academy. After Black January the Popular Front was no longer advocating sovereignty within the federal framework of the Soviet Union: the new goal was full independence of Azerbaijan.

Anti-Soviet feelings had been growing since 1988, but after Black January there was hardly anyone left who still defended the Soviet Union and the politics of Moscow. Tens of thousands of Azerbaijanis ended their party membership, and one of them was Ziya Buniatov. Another one was the official Muslim leader Shaykh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, who had his finest hour leading the funeral of the victims of Black January, a celebration that was attended by more than a million Baku citizens.

### **Making racism acceptable again: The History of Azerbaijan in Documents and Publications (1990)**

Meanwhile the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences continued its work on history, with growing urgency.

The *History of Azerbaijan in Documents and Publications* (1990) contains a collection of articles on the nineteenth and twentieth century history of Nagorny Karabakh and Azerbaijan. It was published by the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. Chief-editor Naile Velikhanli, who worked from 1984 as a senior researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies, is considered to be one of Buniatov's most prestigious former students and aspirants. Today she is director of the Museum of Azerbaijani History in Baku. According to Velikhanli the book was a "crucial step by historians on the road of historical truth."<sup>172</sup> Velikhanli:

"Whereas in former decades historians were mainly interested in Ancient and Medieval history, the research of the late eighties is devoted to a more recent past, a period that

---

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>171</sup> A. Göyüşev and E. Ashgerov (eds.), "Islam and Islamic education in Soviet and independent Azerbaijan", *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States* (London / New York, 2010), 199.

<sup>172</sup> Naile Velikhanli, "Vvedenie", in N. Velikhanli (ed.), *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana po dokumentam i publikatsiiam* (Baku, 1990), 4.

was actually taboo before Gorbachev's *glasnost*. Due to the current reform and to many serious efforts to shed an objective light on our recent past, we can finally become familiar with the elements of this recent past of our country, such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop-Pact, the violent deportations of many peoples, the repressions. [...] Another issue is the experience of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, which existed for 23 months.[...] All the qualities of this republic were always neglected or, even worse, falsified."<sup>173</sup>

This showed the rapid growth of a new discourse, not only on Azerbaijan or the Armenians, but also on the Soviet Union. The Molotov-Ribbentrop-Pact of 1939 or the repressions of the first decades of the USSR were, in spite of de-Stalinization, never made subject to serious research in the USSR. Velikhanli expressed concern about the growing anti-Islamic feelings that were spread by "Armenian propagandists". Then the scholar makes clear why these new revelations are of great political relevance. Reflections on former clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, from 70 years ago could be a warning for the future. Whereas *Perestroika* in Azerbaijan is an inspiration for a rebirth of a dormant national consciousness, according to Velikhanli, in neighbouring Armenia she sees mainly negative consequences of the political reform:

"We can identify a nationalism that is linked to anti-Islamism. Recently the Armenian society developed strong feelings of anti-Azerbaijanism, comparable to the influence of the Dashnak at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. [...] People tend to forget that these nationalists attack other peoples and this is why we collected, for a broad public, all the material that informs the reader about the true character of this [Dashnaktsutun] party, which played, and again plays, a huge role in the Armenian-Azerbaijani tragedy. [...] By using the slogan 'religious unity is greater than national entity!' these nationalists sow discord between the Azerbaijani Muslims and the Christian Armenians."<sup>174</sup>

According to Velikhanli this is an absurd statement, which for many centuries has been used to conceal anti-Azerbaijani sentiments and to serve (Armenian) political purposes. This is, and was for many centuries, partly due to the attitude of the Armenian clergy. Here the scholar recalls the former general-consul of Russia in Armenia, Maevskii, who almost a century earlier supposedly noted that "religious activity of the Armenian clergy was almost meaningless, and always intended to strengthen nationalism. In other words: not the word of

---

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 6.

Christ was their priority, but to sow dissention between Muslims and Christians.” (Unfortunately Velikhanli does not mention a source.)

Velikhanli states that Armenians try to present the conflict as a religious dispute, which according to her is merely a strategic maneuver to gain support from Russia and the Western world. To reinforce her argument she quotes a fragment from an article that she claimed was published in the Armenian newspaper “Msjak” (the Toiler) in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

“As a consequence of our social and moral orientation, we (Armenians) isolated ourselves from our Muslim neighbors, in fact we did not want any friendly relationship with our neighbors. Our intelligentsia, and most of all our political leaders, tried to awaken feelings of hatred in our people, towards Turks and Muslims, and they conducted an aggressive foreign policy against these neighbors.”<sup>175</sup>

By seamlessly connecting the Armenian nationalists of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the nationalist ideas of today Velikhanli makes clear who is to be blamed for the conflict today. She also refers to the famous Armenian writer Silva Kaputikian (1919-2006), who, according to Velikhanli, spread a similar hatred. Kaputikian was one of the early leaders of the Karabakh Committee together with, among others, Zori Balaian. The Armenian poet said in an interview:

“For 300 years we cherished love and hope towards our Christian neighbor Russia, a country that saved us many times from the Muslims! But now we are with our backs against the wall! There is no way out! On one side Turkey, on the other Azerbaijan. We can not breath. We die!”

Velikhanli repeats her views on the causes of the conflict again and again: “the current adversity is completely the result of the devastating Armenian National Question.”<sup>176</sup> In her view, the Armenians provoked the intervention of the Soviet Army in Baku in January 1990. Because:

“According to which moral right did the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR decide to ‘defend the Armenian population of Azerbaijan against the Azerbaijani barbarians!.’ This decision is probably the direct reason for the events of Black January in Baku! Who

---

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 8.

was forced to leave his homeland in the first place? As we all know the Azerbaijani population was the first victim of violent deportations.”<sup>177</sup>

Velikhanli reacts with rage to Suren Arutiunian (First Secretary of the Communist Party of the ArSSR between May 1988 and April 1990), who stated that what mattered in the Karabakh case was not a territorial conflict but the right for self-determination of the Armenian people. Velikhanli calls this right for self-determination a “pure theft of others’ territory”.<sup>178</sup> She concludes by stating that it is the responsibility of scholars to inform the public by unfolding the historical truth and to provide the Azerbaijani population with scientific arguments and with “a language of real facts”.<sup>179</sup>

The “History of Azerbaijan” contains, besides Velikhanli’s introduction, several dozens of articles and documents that were published before in the journal *Izvestiia* of the Academy of Sciences of the AzSSR in 1988 and 1989. One of the articles that are reissued in this publication is Buniatov’s “Why Sumgait”. Most of the authors in “History of Azerbaijan” worked at the Institute of Oriental Studies and all the chapters were dedicated to the recent history of the country; also included are several nineteenth-century documents on Nagorny Karabakh and the Dashnaktsutyun. The volume also contains a letter by members of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences of 11 August 1989 to the Communist Party of the USSR, in which the scholars call for support from Moscow in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict:

“The current developments have a devastating influence on the inter-ethnic relations of our multi-ethnic state. If we put aside the pseudo-political and pseudo-democratic demagogy (that finds its basis in the general socio-economic misery of the population) we can see that the conflict is only about the territorial claims of the ArSSR, which abuses democracy and glasnost’ for the old strategic goals of the nationalist Dashnak Party, in order to re-establish a Great Armenia.”<sup>180</sup>

This letter was signed by members of the Academy, one of them being Ziia Buniatov. From all publications of this volume the most shocking was probably a chapter from Velichko’s infamous racist work “Caucasia, the Russian Case and Inter-Racial Questions.”<sup>181</sup>

---

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 328-335.

<sup>181</sup> Vasili Velichko, *Kavkaz. Russkoe delo i mezhduplemennye voprosy* (St. Petersburg, 1904).

Vasili Lvovich Velichko (1860-1903) was a Russian nationalist, journalist and editor of the newspaper *Kavkaz*.

This work was first published in 1904 and reissued in 1990 by the Academy of Sciences of Baku, obviously because its anti-Armenian rhetoric was so appealing:

“Armenians with their short skulls are a politically unreliable race, whereas the Azeris are very loyal. Just as the Armenians and Jews, as a result of their racial instincts, are at core hostile to any statehood and especially to the idea of unrestricted monarchy, so the Azeris are naturally and organically in sympathy with it.”<sup>182</sup>

Velichko’s racist vision of the Armenians as “an unreliable race” contradicted the view, quite common in Azerbaijan, that “Armenians were always the natural allies of the Russians”. Velichko’s writings on the ethnic situation in the Caucasus does not seem to be born out of any logic, but it suited the political situation in Azerbaijan in 1990 very well. Armenians were shocked by this publication and the Academy in Yerevan answered, by the mouth of historian Zori Balaian, in a similar way, namely by presenting the Muslim Turks and Azeris as the hereditary enemies of Armenia and Russia.<sup>183</sup>

## **War, breakdown, and Aliev's return**

Gorbachev's new leader of Azerbaijan, Ayaz Niyazovich Mutalibov (born in Baku 1938) made his career in the Communist Party in the 1970s and 1980s. On 24 January 1990, a few days after the Baku pogroms, Gorbachev appointed Mutalibov First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, replacing Vezirov. Whereas Vezirov was an avowed opponent of Geidar Aliev, which had proven to be a great handicap during his leadership, Mutalibov was an old friend of Aliev, and the two were linked in a patron-client relationship. His friendship with Geidar Aliev was certainly helpful for the development of a successful career.<sup>184</sup> Mutalibov’s appointment would also mark the beginning of Geidar Aliev’s come-back in Azerbaijan, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

---

<sup>182</sup> Vasili Velichko, “Kavkaz. Russkoe delo i mezhduplemennye voprosy”, in *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana po dokumentam i publikatsiiam*, 67.

<sup>183</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 143.

<sup>184</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, May 2012).



*Ayaz Mütalibov (1938) (Photo: [https://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayaz\\_Mütalibov](https://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayaz_Mütalibov))*

The Communist Party continued its fight against the Popular Front, some of whose members were arrested. To ensure stronger mobilization and coordination of the oppositional power, the Popular Front initiated the Democratic Block (DemBlok). This forum consisted of fifty organizations that were allowed to join if they recognized the strife for Azerbaijan's independence, human rights and political pluralism. Meanwhile, in Armenia the elections for the Supreme Soviet in May 1990 were won by the successor to the Karabakh Committee, the Armenian National Movement (ANM). Levon Ter-Petrosian was elected speaker of the Armenian Supreme Soviet in August. The ANM was one of the first non-Communist parties with power in the USSR, and in August 1990 the Supreme Soviet of Armenia passed a declaration of sovereignty.<sup>185</sup>

The Popular Front continued to be shaken by internal disputes. After the moderate founders had left the Party in January 1990, leaving the stage to the radical nationalists, a second schism occurred between the radicals and the (remaining) liberals. Both groups clashed about the elections for the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet that were planned for September 1990. The radical wing of the Popular Front urged for a boycott in order not to support the illusion of free and open elections that in reality would be mere window dressing. The liberals, such as Hikmet Hajizade and Isa Gambar, thought it wiser to participate, in order to be able to play a role, albeit small, in the parliament.<sup>186</sup> The liberals won the battle

---

<sup>185</sup> Ronald G. Suny, "Soviet Armenia, 1921-1991", in *The Armenians*, ed. by Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchyan (New York, 2005), 123.

<sup>186</sup> Aidyn Balaev, "Svoboda (istoricheskaja khronika: 1988-1992)", 5.

within the Popular Front, and the next step was the preparation of an electoral program. Most important topics were the independence of Azerbaijan, a free market economy, the establishment of a liberal democracy, and political pluralism.<sup>187</sup>

The emergency government of Mutalibov did not allow the opposition to appear in the media, and foreign independent observers were not admitted to the country. The elections of September and October 1990 were in many ways a debacle for democracy: results were falsified, processes were sabotaged. In result, the Azerbaijani Popular Front obtained only ten percent of the votes, and the Communist Party under Mutalibov stayed in power.<sup>188</sup> These results were incomparable to the situation in neighboring Armenia where the nationalist movement ANP came to power after the elections of May 1990.<sup>189</sup>

For Zardusht Alizade the most painful disappointment was what he saw as the lack of democratic culture of broad segments of the population.<sup>190</sup> As Hikmet Hajizade formulated it, the “historical fate of the Azerbaijani people, rooted in both Eastern despotism and communist ideology”, stood in the way of an emancipation of the majority.<sup>191</sup> The Popular Front aimed at nothing less than changing the psychology of the population, through education and promoting civil society; its main instrument was the *Azadliq* ("Freedom") newspaper.<sup>192</sup> For the radicals in the Popular Front, the liberal wing was too soft with regard to the Armenian aggression; as their leader Etibar Mamedov put it: “Better a dictator of our own people than a democrat of another nation.” According to the liberals such as Hikmet Hajizade and Isa Gambar, this vision was anti-democratic and contrary to the fight for human rights.<sup>193</sup> Overall the Popular Front lacked political professionalism, and the intellectual level was barely above mediocre.<sup>194</sup> Leading figures from both camps, including Isa Gambar, Elchibey, as well as other writers or scholars, had hardly any political experience.

Gorbachev still had the ambition to save the unity of the USSR, and he launched the idea of a new Union Treaty. Armenia, Georgia, Moldavia, and the Baltic States were no

---

<sup>187</sup> Interview with Isa Gambar (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>188</sup> Suha Bolukbasi, *Azerbaijan, a Political History* (New York, 2011), 158.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>190</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>191</sup> Interview with Hikmet Hajizade (Baku, August 2009).

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> Interview with Hikmet Hajizade (Baku, May 2011).

<sup>194</sup> Interviews with Hikmet Hajizade and Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2011).

longer interested in such a union and voted for independence. Mutalibov however supported Moscow and agreed with the proposed treaty, also because Azerbaijan counted on Moscow's support with regard to the conflict.<sup>195</sup> Yet this process was aborted by the coup attempt in Moscow on 19 August 1991, when a group of conservatives from Gorbachev's team tried to take control of the country.<sup>196</sup> They were convinced that Gorbachev's reform destabilized the country, and also rejected the new union treaty that was supposed to give more sovereignty to the remaining nine republics, and that was about to be signed by the leaders after referenda in these republics had resulted in large popular support. Ironically the unsuccessful August Putsch attempt became the final blow to an already collapsing Soviet Union, with Yeltsin emerging as the new undisputed leader of Russia.<sup>197</sup>

During the putsch, Mutalibov made the biggest mistake of his political career by choosing the side of the coup leaders. He expected that they would support a crackdown on the Karabakh Armenians, and hoped for more support for the Azerbaijani perspective in the conflict.<sup>198</sup> On the first day of the coup, Mutalibov was visiting Iran where he allegedly stated that the coup "was a natural consequence of the policies that had brought chaos during the past several years."<sup>199</sup> Although Mutalibov later denied having supported the coup, it was obviously too late to turn the tide. Both the Popular Front and Geidar Aliev accused Mutalibov of having supported the anti-Gorbachev coup, and Aliev even demanded that the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet should eliminate the monopoly of the Azerbaijani Communist Party. Furthermore Aliev demanded the lifting of the state of emergency in Baku, which was still in force since Black January. Remarkably enough, Aliev's demands were completely in line with the Popular Front.<sup>200</sup>

After the failure of the coup the Communists had lost their last shred of legitimacy, and Mutalibov had no choice but to cooperate with the opposition. The state of emergency in Baku was repealed on 29 August 1991, and on the same day independence was declared. Under pressure of the Popular Front, the Declaration of Independence of Azerbaijan was

---

<sup>195</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 113-114.

<sup>196</sup> Ronald G. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment* (New York/Oxford, 1998), 481-482.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 481-483.

<sup>198</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 160.

<sup>199</sup> Suha Bolukbasi, *Azerbaijan, a Political History*, 170.

<sup>200</sup> Suha Bolukbasi, *Azerbaijan, a Political History*, 170-171.

adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the AzSSR on 18 October 1991, followed by the dissolution of the Azerbaijani Communist Party.<sup>201</sup> The Azerbaijani people approved the Declaration of Independence in a referendum in December 1991. On 26 December 1991 the Soviet Union officially ceased to exist and Azerbaijan was recognized by the international community as an independent country.<sup>202</sup>

After the declarations of independence of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorny Karabakh, the territorial conflict that had begun as an academic dispute now escalated into open war. In 1992 and 1993 the Karabakh army occupied, with the help of Armenian volunteers, not only Nagorny Karabakh but also the adjacent Azerbaijani regions of Lachin, Kelbajar, Agdam, Fizuli, Jabrayil, Gubadli and Zangilan, which was 14% of the territory of Azerbaijan. All ethnic Azerbaijanis were expelled from the occupied regions.<sup>203</sup>

Mutalibov, now the first president of independent Azerbaijan, had to step down in March of 1992 after heavy losses in Khojali, a village in Nagorny Karabakh. At the first free elections in June 1992, the Popular Front was elected with great majority of votes, and party-leader Elchibey became the new president.<sup>204</sup> Now the Popular Front was the leading party of the young state. The new nationalist government considered the Azerbaijani people to be Turks. Their hero was Atatürk, and the Azerbaijani language was renamed into Turkish.<sup>205</sup> Elchibey was not interested in Buniatov's theory of Caucasian Albania since this was not in conformity with his vision of a glorious unification of all Turkic peoples in one "Turan", a unification that was thought possible due to the disintegration of the USSR. Elchibey conducted a strong policy of "cultural Turkeyization" of society, which heavily discriminated all non-Turkic groups that lived in Azerbaijan, and which was strongly anti-Russian.<sup>206</sup>

The war had disastrous consequences: 700.000 refugees and IDPs from Armenia, Nagorny Karabakh and the surrounding regions sought refuge in Azerbaijan. Eventually,

---

<sup>201</sup> Georgia had declared its independence already in April 1991 and both Nagornii Karabakh and Armenia in September 1991. Between August and December 1991 all fifteen republics would become independent states. Ronald G. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 481-484.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 483-484.

<sup>203</sup> J. Rau, *Der Berg-Karabakh-Konflikt zwischen Armenien und Aserbajdschan* (Berlin, 2008), 41-47.

<sup>204</sup> Suha Bolukbasi, *Azerbaijan, a Political History*, 194-195.

<sup>205</sup> Kyle L. Marquardt, "Framing Language Policy in post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Political Symbolism and Inter-ethnic Harmony", *Central Asian Survey* 30:2 (May, 2011), 183.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 182-183.

after huge losses of territory to the Armenian troops in 1992-93, also the Popular Front lost its legitimacy. Elchibey was forced to surrender power and fled Baku in June 1993.<sup>207</sup>

This was the moment that Geidar Aliev had waited for since his disgrace in October 1987. After his dismissal, Aliev had resided in Moscow, also for treatment after a heart attack at the end of 1987. Like so many other Azerbaijani Communists, he had left the Communist Party in 1990 after Black January, and soon returned to his native region Nakhichevan where in 1991 he was elected Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic.<sup>208</sup> In Nakhichivan he started reshaping his political ideology and image. His new ideology was now a newly formulated nationalism that - unlike the Pan-Turkic ideals of Elchibey - carefully integrated Islam as an intrinsic part of Azerbaijani national culture. This post-Soviet nationalism, often called Azerbaijanism in order to distinguish it from Turkic nationalism, claimed to be completely different from the Soviet heritage in which it was de facto thoroughly rooted.<sup>209</sup>

In Nakhichevan, where he was independent from Baku's changing rulers, Aliev in 1992 established the Party of New Azerbaijan (Yeni Azerbaijan Party, YAP). Although Armenia also claimed Nakhichevani territory, Aliev was able to make an agreement with the Armenian president Ter-Petrosian, and kept Nakhichevan out of the war.<sup>210</sup> Exactly this made his comeback possible. In June 1993 Geidar Aliev returned to Baku on board of a Turkish military airplane. By then, the population had completely lost its confidence in Elchibey and in his policy of Turkish oriented nationalism. When in a referendum in August 1993, the population withdrew its confidence from Elchibey, Aliev was appointed acting president of the country.<sup>211</sup> He was even “begged by his people to come back to save the country from further disasters”, as he formulated it himself in a documentary made by Andrei Konchalevski in 2003, shortly before Aliev passed away.<sup>212</sup> In October 1993, Aliev was

---

<sup>207</sup> Altay Goyushov, Naomi Caffee and Robert Denis, “The Transformation of Azerbaijani Orientalists into Islamic Thinkers after 1991”, in Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann, *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, 311-312. In 1997, Elchibey returned to Baku to lead the opposition movement against Aliev. In 2000 he died of cancer in Ankara.

<sup>208</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 160-161.

<sup>209</sup> Tadeusz Swietochowski, “Turkism, Azerbaijanism and the Language Question”, *Nowy Prometeusz*, nr. 4, 2013, 115-124. Azerbaijanism developed as a nationalist ideology already before the Russian Revolution, as a reaction to Pan-Turkism, with the aim to distinguish Azerbaijan as a separate nation.

<sup>210</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, 210.

<sup>211</sup> Suha Bolukbasi, *Azerbaijan, a Political History*, 205.

<sup>212</sup> Andrei Konchalevskii, *Vremia vlasti*, 2003. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=064pWje1NaM> (Last accessed 20 November 2018).

officially elected president of the country with 98,8% of the votes;<sup>213</sup> this position he would hold until his death in 2003 (after which his son Ilham Aliev took office). Aliev immediately started to restore his old networks; the old Communist elite, meanwhile all members of YAP, was reinstalled in all key positions of society.<sup>214</sup> After more than five years of chaos that popular perception connected to the Popular Front, Geidar Aliev was regarded as the figurehead of stability and possible prosperity.

When in September 1993 Geidar Aliev signed the "Contract of the Century", a lucrative contract with several major western and Russian oil companies,<sup>215</sup> the region became the focus of international attention with regard to energy and security, and Azerbaijan's position in the Karabakh conflict strengthened. Although the war ended in a stalemate, the fact that Geidar Aliev and Yeni Azerbaijan could arrange a cease-fire was highly appreciated by the population, and Aliev was seen as a hero. The success of this ceasefire, which became effective in May 1994, was mainly due to the fact that both parties were exhausted by war, and involved Russia as mediator and peacekeeper.<sup>216</sup> It seems the majority of the population did not seem to bother that their president once belonged to the party elite, that he had been director of the KGB of the AzSSR and then First Secretary of the republic's Communist Party. Aliev's communist past was reassessed, and he was now respected because of his alleged ability to manipulate Moscow in times of the USSR, and to serve Azerbaijani interests after the end of the Soviet Union.

## **Buniatov's return**

Also the Institute of Oriental Studies was affected by the political changes, and by Aliev's clan networking. Between 1991 and 1992, the director's chair was occupied by Aida Imangulieva, mother-in-law of the current president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliev. In September 1992 she passed away.<sup>217</sup> This made Buniatov's come-back possible: in October 1992 he was again elected director of the Institute, a position he would occupy up to his

---

<sup>213</sup> Audrey Altstadt, "Azerbaijan and Aliyev. A Long History and an Uncertain Future", 8-9.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>215</sup> Suha Bolukbasi, *Azerbaijan, a Political History*, 206.

<sup>216</sup> Christine Bell, *Peace Agreements and Human Rights* (Oxford, 2005) 326-327.

<sup>217</sup> Interview with Naile Velihanli (Baku August 2009).

violent death in 1997.<sup>218</sup> Buniiatov's reappointment was furthered by his joining of the Yeni Azerbaijan Party, on Aliev's direct invitation when the latter was still in Nakhichevan. At one of the first YAP congresses in November 1992, Buniiatov was even elected vice-chairman of the party.<sup>219</sup>

Buniiatov obviously believed that Aliev's experience and his enormous network in the former *nomenklatura* would bring stability and better chances in the war. Aliev probably needed Buniiatov's prestige as a scholar, which was more important than the conflicts they had entertained in the past.<sup>220</sup> But still, their conflicts continued. According to Zardusht Alizade, Geidar Aliev was a very dominating and intimidating personality, also towards the people around him. This was for Buniiatov hard to accept, and the two had from the beginning of their new cooperation many disputes, for instance about the process of privatizing the country that Buniiatov regarded as highly unjust.<sup>221</sup> And indeed, although Aliev had introduced the rhetoric of democracy, his new regime was hardly more democratic than in the old days. In 1995 came a new constitution for Azerbaijan, partly based on the constitutions of western countries, but with an almost unlimited power for the president.<sup>222</sup>

In spite of these political disagreements, Aliev's return was certainly favorable for Buniiatov and under his directorship, the Institute of Oriental Studies expanded its research into the political, economic and cultural relations between Azerbaijan and the Near and Middle East, especially in view of the new strategic interests of foreign policy.<sup>223</sup>

Buniiatov himself had to provide Yeni Azerbaijan with a scientific basis for the party program; his mission was to create a new identity for an unstable country that in its first nineteen months of independence already experienced a military coup, two different presidents, and a violent conflict with one of the neighbors. The new identity was based on Islam and the Caucasian Albanian roots.

---

<sup>218</sup> Gövher Bakhshalieva, *Bibliografiya*, 20.

<sup>219</sup> Geidar Aliev, *Sil'nee Smerti*, 25-32.

<sup>220</sup> Interview with Altay Göyüşev (Baku, August 2009).

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>222</sup> Audrey Altstadt, "Azerbaijan and Aliyev. A Long History and an Uncertain Future", 8-9.

<sup>223</sup> The information is based on the website of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani <http://www.orientalstudies.az> (2 August 2017). According to several of my interviewees from the institute, who preferred to stay anonymous in this case, this information is rather optimistically formulated. In reality "the institute seems to be, since the early 1990s, in a long-term coma", according to one of them.

Buniatov's work on the Caucasus Albanian roots of the Azerbaijani nation could easily be resurrected as national history and his works from the 1960s to 1980s were reissued posthumously.<sup>224</sup> The Albanian ethnogenesis was meant not only to counter the nationalist discourse of the Popular Front but also to confront Armenian historical claims “on their own soil”. Islam was employed by the regime as a second ingredient for Azerbaijani identity, and as another difference to the Armenians. At the same time, the regime's return to Soviet historiography also needed to be counterbalanced by a critique of the Soviet era, in order to stress the difference between Aliev's old and new regimes. Buniatov had to become the architect of this new project.

After October 1993, when Aliev was elected third president of the country, Buniatov became one of the pillars of the new regime, again posing as the moral conscience of the nation.<sup>225</sup> In 1993, Geidar Aliev awarded Buniatov with the title “Citizen of Honour of Astar” (Buniatov’s place of birth), and in 1994 he became “Citizen of Honour of Göyçay” (the place where he went to secondary school).<sup>226</sup>

The following two sections analyze Buniatov's works from the 1990s by asking which political functions they fulfilled; here I focus on the image of Buniatov as a scholar of Islam and on his investigation of Soviet history in Azerbaijan, in particular his critique of Stalinism. While the spotlight on Islam was meant to portray religion as a new social glue in times of conservative consolidation of state and society, Buniatov's research into Stalinism produced the discursive distinction of the new regime from the old one, in spite of the clear continuities in elite formation and political practice.

## **Exploring Islam for national identity**

In late Soviet Azerbaijan, Islam was formally represented by the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Caucasus, chaired by Shaykh-ul-Islam Allakhshukur Pashazade (b. 1949). Pashazade's title, Shaykh-ul-Islam, was the Soviet term for a Shii equivalent to the office of Sunni “Muftis” in other parts of the USSR. In office since 1980, Pashazade's task was to

---

<sup>224</sup> In 1999 his three monographs, plus several dozens of articles were reissued (500 copies) by the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences in Baku. Ziya Buniatov, *Izbrannye sochineniia v treh tomah* (Baku, 1999). In 2007 the three monographs were translated into Azerbaijani (25.000 copies). The Azerbaijani translations are still regularly used in schools and universities.

<sup>225</sup> Interview with Altay Göyüşev (Baku, August 2009).

<sup>226</sup> Göhver Bakhshalieva, *Bibliografiia*, 20-21.

organize and control the rudimentary network of Shii mosques in Azerbaijan and, theoretically, also in Georgia and Armenia (while his Sunni deputy, with the Sunni title of Mufti, was in charge of the Sunni minority in the South Caucasus).<sup>227</sup> Like the other Muftiates that Stalin established after World War II in Ufa, Makhachkala, and Tashkent, the main task of the South Caucasus Spiritual Administration was to demonstrate Islam's compatibility with Soviet ideology, and at the same time to control the Muslim congregations.<sup>228</sup>

While in Soviet times, Pashazade had thus largely been an *apparatchik*, the conflict with Armenia made him a symbol of Azerbaijani national identity and pride. An important element that increased his influence was the fact that the Armenian religious leader, the Catholicos, had been prominent in the Karabakh Committee since its beginnings in 1988.<sup>229</sup> In Azerbaijan, the Armenian Apostolic Church was perceived as one of the initiators of the conflict, but many Azerbaijanis realized that it was also the Armenian Church that had inspired social reform, a role that Islam in Azerbaijan never played.<sup>230</sup>

According to the British-Armenian sociologist Hratch Tchilingirian, the popularity and influence of the Armenian Church immensely increased since 1987, which coincided with the beginning of the national liberation movement. New converts, inspired by *Perestroika*, realized that the Church could play a significant role with regard to the “liberation” of Nagorny Karabakh. Between 1989 and 1991 the church leadership of Karabakh was involved in providing places of worship and active evangelization of the Armenian population in the region. Within less than three years of an increased freedom of religion, the Armenian Church had regained its role as moral pillar of society, and even more striking, the Church had developed into the main national institution that supported and inspired the nationalist struggle for liberation, and for independence of Nagorny Karabakh.<sup>231</sup> So from the very beginning of *Perestroika*, in Armenia the opposition, the Communist Party and even the Church collaborated and shared common goals.

---

<sup>227</sup> Altay Göyüşev and Elchin Äskärov, “Islam and Islamic Education in Soviet and Independent Azerbaijan”, in Michael Kemper, Raoul Motika and Stefan Reichmuth, eds., *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and its Successor States* (Routledge, 2009), 187.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>229</sup> Hratch Tchilingirian, “Religious Discourse and the Church in Mountainous Karabakh”. *Revue du monde arménien moderne et contemporain*, Paris (3) 1997, 67-83.

<sup>230</sup> Arif Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan*, 167-168.

<sup>231</sup> Hratch Tchilingirian, “Religious Discourse and the Church in Mountainous Karabakh”, 73.

The Azerbaijani situation was completely different. Both Islamic leadership and the Communist Party had been loyal to Moscow until the events of Black January 1990, and they were strong opponents of the Azerbaijani opposition. Only after Black January this changed: now Moscow was perceived as a colonial power that treated Muslims as second-rate citizens. This perception increased due to the fact that indeed the Moscow intelligentsia was supporting Armenia in the conflict, and presented Azerbaijan increasingly as a backward and even fundamentalist republic, which was hard to accept in one of the most loyal republics of the USSR. The result was a growing religious awareness, mainly based on feelings of disappointment towards Moscow.<sup>232</sup>

During *Perestroika* the state had largely given up censorship, and its control over religion diminished. New mosques and madrasas had been established on private or local initiatives, and imams were elected by the congregations.<sup>233</sup> The old clergy however didn't intend to give up its powerful status. In September 1989, a public scandal brought to light Pashazade's strong connections to the KGB,<sup>234</sup> but in the same month the Sheikh was reelected as chairman of the Caucasus Spiritual Administration – and in the same year he also gained more status by becoming a deputy of the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet.<sup>235</sup> As a politician, he sent letters to Gorbachev, the United States and many international religious leaders, explaining that in spite of Armenian and Soviet propaganda, the Islamic factor did not play any role in the conflict with Armenia. He demanded a withdrawal of all Soviet troops from Azerbaijan, in order not to create a new Afghanistan.<sup>236</sup> After Vezirov's removal, the Sheikh fully supported Mutalibov,<sup>237</sup> and the Communist elite made a deal with Azerbaijan's “official” Islam against the Pan-Turkic Popular Front.<sup>238</sup> Also the Popular Front realized that Islam had become a political factor, and established a “Council for free believers” that organized Qur'an translations, meetings and Islam publications.<sup>239</sup> But it seems these actions did not have a great impact on the Islamic communities on the ground. While independent Islamic groups expanded and found their niches, the “official” Islam

---

<sup>232</sup> Arif Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan*, 169-170.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>235</sup> Arif Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan*, 172-173.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-178.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 180-182.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

remained closely interwoven with the Communist Party that safeguarded its control over the Islamic infrastructure of the country, against increasing religious and political influences from both Turkey and Iran.<sup>240</sup>

According to Arif Yunusov, in the 1980s Baku had seven mosques, and the rest of the country another eleven; but people had organized more than a thousand underground places for prayers and religious gatherings. These places and societies would be the upbeat for a more open revival of Islam in the late 1980s and 1990s, when also more “official” mosques were reestablished.<sup>241</sup> A revival of Islam was not new; it was triggered by the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1978, and by the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979. Azerbaijanis were negative about the Soviet war against their “Muslim brothers”, and in some Shii circles of society Ayatollah Khomeini was seen as a hero who liberated Muslims from their atheist colonizers. The Azerbaijani Special Services reported on the emergence of semi-clandestine pro-Iranian organizations, the so-called *Khomeinichilar tashkilati* (“Organizations of Khomeini supporters”); they became most prominent in the region of Nardaran, a religious centre near Baku with a strong Talysh (i.e., linguistically Iranian) population.<sup>242</sup>

Shortly after Azerbaijan became independent, Iran actively started to export the ideas of an Islamic revolution and statehood in Azerbaijan. Especially the refugee-camps were a target for influence.<sup>243</sup> Azerbaijani youth was recruited to study in religious schools and Hizbollah camps in Iran. When they returned to Azerbaijan they spread the political ideas of Hizbollah. The Iranian influence on political Islam was increasingly considered a threat by the Azerbaijani authorities, who looked for reasons and possibilities to reduce all kinds of foreign influences in Azerbaijani political life.<sup>244</sup> The assassination of Ziya Buniatov in 1997 would become the final blow to Hizbollah in Azerbaijan, which will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Already during the 1980s, the Soviet leadership in Moscow encouraged its experts and Orientalists to reflect on the political nature of Islam, and how Soviet interests can be packed

---

<sup>240</sup> Altay Göyüşev and Elchin Äskärov, “Islam and Islamic Education in Soviet and Independent Azerbaijan”, 199-209.

<sup>241</sup> Arif Yunusov, *Islamic Palette of Azerbaijan* (Baku, 2012), 10.

<sup>242</sup> Arif Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan*, 165-166.

<sup>243</sup> Anar Valiyev, “Foreign Terrorist Groups and Rise of Homegrown Radicalism in Azerbaijan”, *HUMSEC Journal*, Issue 2, 2008, 95-99.

<sup>244</sup> Altay Göyüşev and Elchin Äskärov, “Islam and Islamic Education in Soviet and Independent Azerbaijan”, in Michael Kemper, Raoul Motika and Stefan Reichmuth, eds., *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and its Successor States* (Routledge, 2009), 199-204.

in Islamic forms, for domestic and foreign purposes.<sup>245</sup> This was also the case in Baku; according to Gövhər Bakhshalieva (Buniatov's successor as director of the Institute), “in 1986 the Presidium of the Academy decided to take extra measures to increase the scholarly and propagandistic work [of the Institute of Oriental Studies], with the aim to intensify research on Islam”.<sup>246</sup> At the same time, however, many trained Orientalists left the institute to enter diplomatic service.<sup>247</sup>

Since the beginning of *Perestroika* many books and works about Islam were published, and in 1986 the Russian translation of the Qur'an by Ignatii Krachkovskii (1883-1951), published with comments of the editors in 1963, was reissued in the Soviet Union.<sup>248</sup> And according to Arif Yunusov, who traveled between 1985 and 1987 through all of Azerbaijan in order to enlighten the working class population of the republic with lectures about Islam, a general increasing interest in Islam was characteristic for the *Perestroika* years.<sup>249</sup>

The interest in Islam gradually increased since the mid-1980s, and after Black January it was clear that the Qur'an had become a new symbol of Azerbaijani identity and of protest against the Soviet regime. As several scholars argued in interviews with me, Zia Buniatov began to believe that Islam should be the most important ingredient for a new identity and national self-consciousness.<sup>250</sup> According to Turkologist and historian Altay Göyüşev, Buniatov's “opposition to historians of a ‘Turkophile’ bent was the main factor that pushed him toward Islam as a new topic of research.”<sup>251</sup> Many interview partners emphasized that Buniatov had hardly any connection to Islam before 1990. Or as Hikmet Hajizade

---

<sup>245</sup> Hanna Jansen and Michael Kemper, “Hijacking Islam: the Search for a New Soviet Interpretation of Political Islam in 1980”, in Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann, *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London, 2011), 124-129.

<sup>246</sup> Interview with Gövhər Bakhshalieva (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>247</sup> Interviews with Altay Göyüşev, Farda Asadov and Zardusht Alizade (Baku, May 2012)

<sup>248</sup> Arif Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan*, 2004, 166 (only 10.000 copies for the whole USSR). Krachkovskii, who died in 1951, prepared the translation between 1921 and 1930. In 1963 this translation was posthumously published, and after 1986 many times reissued. E.A. Rezvan, “Koran v Rossii”, in *Islam na territorii byvshei Rossiiskoi imperii. Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' I*, edited by Stanislav Prozorov, Moscow 2006, 212.

<sup>249</sup> Arif Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan*, 2004, 167.

<sup>250</sup> Interviews with A. Göyüşev (historian at the Baku State University) and Nariman Qasimoglu (former colleague of Buniatov, who was in fact the first to produce an Azerbaijani translation of the Qur'an in 1988-1989, even before Buniatov) (Baku, August 2009).

<sup>251</sup> Altay Goyushov, Naomi Caffee and Robert Denis, “The Transformation of Azerbaijani Orientalists into Islamic Thinkers after 1991”, 310.

formulated it: "Buniatov's only relation to Islam was the fact that he loved to drink vodka together with the Sheikh," that is, with Mufti Allahshükür Pashazade.<sup>252</sup>

After Black January this attitude changed radically. Islam was now in the first place perceived as the victim of Moscow colonialism. The Orientalists of Baku, the secular specialists who had the knowledge of the religion and the "Muslim" Arabic and Persian languages, now became a voice in the Islamic revival driven by anti-Soviet aspirations to liberate the country. And especially a Russian-speaking Communist Orientalist like Buniatov, who had lost the trust of the people during the rise of the Popular Front, discovered the use of Islam in a last attempt to regain the momentum.

Buniatov's renown as an expert on Islam is closely linked the first Azeri Qur'an translation that appeared in 1990.<sup>253</sup> In the same year this publication was awarded with the Tagiev-prize.<sup>254</sup>

However, this publication – like so many of Buniatov's works – aroused much controversy. In fact, there is much evidence that this Qur'an translation was not Buniatov's work; rather, it was accomplished by Vasim Mammadaliev, who in 1991 was pro-rector of Baku State University, until 1992 when he was appointed dean of the newly established Faculty of Theology at the same university.<sup>255</sup> Mammadaliev is generally considered one of Azerbaijan's most outstanding religious scholars of Islam.<sup>256</sup> In the Qur'an publication itself, however, Mammadaliev is mentioned only as Buniatov's co-author. Understandably, Buniatov's cousin Zemfira Qurbanova, who keeps the archive of the scholar, emphasizes that the translation was completely Buniatov's work, and this is also the view that is most widespread in Azerbaijan today. As I argue, this is one more myth that has been prepared by Buniatov, and that has been continued after his death. As Qurbanova does not provide access to the scholar's manuscript legacy (where one would expect draft translations), my argument is based on my interview partners, who, as the reader knows by now, were critical of Buniatov. Yet the issue was also brought up by Vasim Mammadaliev himself, who was open

---

<sup>252</sup> Hikmet Hajizade in an interview with Sara Crombach, Baku, August 2009.

<sup>253</sup> Vasim Mammadaliev and Ziia Buniatov, *Qur'an Kerim (tercüme)* (Baku: Azerneshr, 1991).

<sup>254</sup> Göhver Bakhshaliev, *Bibliografiya* (Baku 2004).

<sup>255</sup> This information is based on an interview with Vasim Mammadaliev (Baku, May, 2012)

<sup>256</sup> Altay Goyushov, Naomi Caffee and Robert Denis, "The Transformation of Azerbaijani Orientalists into Islamic Thinkers after 1991", 310.

for an interview with me; his statements are in line with what my other oral sources say. Also after 1990, Mammedaliev continued to work on the Qur'an.

According to Mammedaliev (b. 1942), already his father was an Arabist, and a specialist on the Qur'an; he gave his son a religious education. In the late 1950s and 1960s, the young Mammadaliev studied Arabic language at the Oriental Faculty of Azerbaijani State University; at the same time he also belonged to private circles of Islamic religious specialists who, at their homes, operated "secret *madrasas*". Officially ignored, these private circles for the transmission of Islamic knowledge challenged the Soviet system of Islamic education, which was concentrated in Soviet Uzbekistan where the regime maintained the KGB-controlled Mir-i Arab madrasa (in Bukhara) and an Islamic Institute (in Tashkent) to produce loyal imams for the mosques in the various parts of the USSR.<sup>257</sup> In Soviet Azerbaijan only sixteen people graduated at one of these institutes, one of them was for instance Shaykh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade.<sup>258</sup> As indicated above, Mammadaliev lacked this official religious education but gained his knowledge on Islam from academic and clandestine religious circles.

Reportedly, the Central Committee of the Azerbaijani Communist Party already requested the production of an Azerbaijani translation of the Qur'an already in 1968. One way or another Mammedaliev was involved in this project and started to work on a translation, but already the following year Moscow intervened and the project was put on halt. With *Perestroika*, the Communist Party re-launched the plan for a translation, and Mammadaliev decided, together with Buniiatov, to finish the job as soon as possible, because, according to Mammadaliev, they knew that *Perestroika* could be as short as the *Thaw* had been.<sup>259</sup>

Vasim Mammadaliev reported to me that he had completed more than half of the translation work already in the 1960s. In my interview with him, he considered Buniiatov's contribution to the translation as marginal; but when the book appeared in print, the cover

---

<sup>257</sup> Eren Tasar, "The Official Madrasas of Soviet Uzbekistan", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 59 (2016), 265-267.

<sup>258</sup> Nesrin Aleskerova, "Islam v Azerbaidzhane: istoriia i sovremennost'", *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 16 January 2005. <https://ge.boell.org/en/2005/01/16/islam-v-azerbaydzhane-istoriya-i-sovremennost> (date of consultation: 10 August, 2017).

<sup>259</sup> This information is based on an interview with Vasim Mammadaliev (Baku, November 2011). Mammadaliev was until 1992 professor at the Oriental Faculty of the Baku State University. When this university established a Theological Faculty, which offers academic studies of religions in general, Mammadaliev was appointed Dean of the Faculty. Salient detail is the fact that, at least in 2011, the Turkish Diyanet payed the education program. Mammadaliev also has a popular TV-show on Islam.

page had both names as if the translation was the product of an equal co-operation.<sup>260</sup> Mammadaliev's account is very credible in the light of Buniiatov's habit to appropriate other people's works and publish them under his own name, as reported by other co-workers at Buniiatov's institute.<sup>261</sup> And while Buniiatov certainly knew classical Arabic, he barely used Azeri for publications, as we have seen in chapter II, and as even Qurbanova acknowledged, and is therefore an unlikely candidate for a literary translation of the Qur'an.<sup>262</sup> His first language had always been Russian, and publications in Azerbaijani were always translated by others. The Qur'an translation thus stands in a longer line with other cases in which Buniiatov violated the scholarly code of conduct, albeit here with the real author not silenced but marginalized; while this might not be full plagiarism, he imposed his name on the work of Mammadaliev, who at that time might have had no other choice than to accept this deal with the politically well-connected boss of Azerbaijani Oriental studies.

Buniiatov's reputation as the first translator of the Qur'an into Azeri must also be challenged from another side. According to Zardusht Alizade and Arif Yunusov, "there was a wave of Qur'an translations from the early 1980s, probably already inspired by the Iranian Revolution."<sup>263</sup> In particular two other Arabists and scholars of Islam, Tariel Gasanov and Nariman Qasimov, had produced translations in the late 1980s; Qasimov had published Qur'an fragments since the beginning of 1988. According to Qasimov (or Qasimoglu as he calls himself today), his translation preserved more of the Qur'an's poetic character than Buniiatov's and Mammadaliev's version.<sup>264</sup> Ziaa Buniiatov however was the most famous scholar-hero, and perceived as the moral face of the country; his translation, which was not even his own, is still most popular.

After the Qur'an translation, Vasim Mammadaliev continued his studies of Islam. Publishing many articles, for instance "Islam and Youth"<sup>265</sup>, and several books such as *The*

---

<sup>260</sup> This information is based on an interview with Vasim Mammadaliev (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>261</sup> This information is based on several interviews with former colleagues of Buniiatov, most of them prefer to stay anonymous. The only scholar that openly testifies about this alleged habit of Buniiatov is Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>262</sup> Zemfira Qurbanova in an interview (Baku, May 2012).

<sup>263</sup> This information is based on an interviews with Arif Yunusov and Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2011).

<sup>264</sup> This information is based on an interview with Nariman Qasimoglu (Baku, August 2009).

<sup>265</sup> Vasim Mammadaliev, "Qur'an ve genclik", *BDU İlahiyyat fakültesinin elmi mecmuesi* 4 (2006), 31-34.

*Qur'an and Science*.<sup>266</sup> And besides being a believer he also became a public figure who hosted a talk show on Islam on national television.<sup>267</sup>

### ***Religions, Sects, Religious Movements***

Also Buniatov continued his work on Islam, and the other work that he established as a scholar of Islam was an Azeri-language encyclopedic dictionary, *Religions, Sects, Religious Movements*, written between 1993 and 1995, and posthumously published in 1997.<sup>268</sup> On the first page one can read that the publication was the result of the “initiative and concern of the Azerbaijani president Geidar Aliev.<sup>269</sup> And the “prominent scholar, Member of Parliament and public figure Zia Buniatov offers the Azerbaijani reader valuable information on religions, sects, religious movements and historical figures.”<sup>270</sup>

In the preface, Buniatov explains his motives:

“This encyclopedia is for me a moral duty towards the people. Up to now our people received its knowledge on religion and religious figures only through the atheist approach and the prism of Marxism-Leninism. All books, articles and brochures written in the Soviet era are fully dominated by this perspective. And this makes everything written in those days highly subjective. All information on religion was in other words mendacious and hindered the people’s knowledge of the truth .”<sup>271</sup>

Here Buniatov seems to have forgotten that he was one of the most prominent Soviet scholars that had produced this “mendacious perspective” as part of the system. He continues his argument by stating:

“The Communist Party made use of an enormous collective of scholars with the goal to alienate the people from religion and stimulate feelings of indifference. And now the nation returns to its religious roots, but unfortunately there is hardly any information in the form of books or other sources of information. In order to distance us from former

---

<sup>266</sup> Vasim Mammadaliev, *Qur'an ve elm* (Baku: Qismet, 2006).

<sup>267</sup> Altay Goyushov, Naomi Caffee and Robert Denis, “The Transformation of Azerbaijani Orientalists into Islamic Thinkers after 1991”, 311.

<sup>268</sup> Zia Buniatov, *Dinler – Terigetler - Mezhebler* (Baku, 1997). The work is published in Azeri, in the Cyrillic alphabet, which was used in the Soviet era since 1938. Although the Popular Front and Elchibey had introduced the Turkic-Latin alphabet in 1991, Buniatov (just like Geidar Aliev) distanced himself from this choice.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

atheism we need solid and deep knowledge. In this publication I tried to inform the public on all world religions, sects, historical and religious persons and all other kinds of questions with regard to religion.”<sup>272</sup>

Obviously Buniiatov has not only the ambition to inform the public on Islam, but also on “all world religions”. Buniiatov concludes the preface with the following words:

“Perhaps the given information is concise and incomplete, but I studied many encyclopedias, books and special sources in order to gather as much information as possible. This publication is the first work in this field and might not be completely satisfactory for some readers. God willing, future generations will have access to more complete and higher qualified sources of information. That will solve any disputable questions. I want to thank Professor Haji Vasim Mammedaliev for the articles “Allah”, “Qur’an”, “Mohammed” and “Mötezile”.”<sup>273</sup>

Here Buniiatov clearly suggests that the work was almost completely his own, with the exception of four articles written by Vasim Mammedaliev, the Qur’an specialist who had done most of the work on the Qur’an translation.

The encyclopedia is indeed quite broad and perhaps not always complete. Except for topics related to Islam - such as Allah, Qur’an, Ramazan, or many historical Islamic figures - it offers information on Christianity – such as Catholic monasteries, Protestant leaders or Orthodox priests – but also Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Ancient Greek or Roman gods. The Islamic figures that were prominent in Buniiatov’s early works - such as Babek or the several Armenian Catholicosses - are not mentioned in his encyclopedia.

The most significant feature of the encyclopedia is certainly the fact that Buniiatov’s focus is not on Islam but on religions in general. One can speculate about Buniiatov’s motives. First of all this might be a first attempt to integrate post-Soviet Azerbaijan not into the Islamic world but also into a broader context. For a young country facing problems of post-colonialism this might be a necessary step to reinvent itself as a part of the “Orient” as well as of Europe. It is even an attempt to rival with Armenia, which is due to its national religion almost “naturally” considered to be European.

---

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 6.

And this is not completely new. In his works that were discussed in the second chapter he presented Azerbaijan's forerunner Albania as one of the oldest Christian nations and as such as a nation that was rooted also in a western Christian tradition.

## **Critiques of Soviet historiography**

Not only Islam needed a new interpretation; so did Soviet historiography of twentieth-century Azerbaijan. After independence, Azerbaijani historians initiated a serious reassessment of the past, shed light upon topics and periods that had hitherto been ignored and thereby transferred the new official ideology into a new historical canon. In his analysis of historiography in independent Azerbaijan, the historian Arif Yunusov (b. 1955, now in forced exile in the Netherlands) found that the most crucial change occurring in history textbooks of the post-Soviet period is the central role of myths and images of the national enemy; history is re-interpreted through the conflicts of the present.<sup>274</sup>

Whereas during the Soviet Union the emphasis had always been on the Friendship of Peoples, under the umbrella of which national historiographies could be produced, the new canon after 1991 celebrated all events and heroes that allegedly had contributed to national independence or liberation. New enemies of the people are the Armenians, the Russians, but for instance also Iran. Soviet anti-religious propaganda, Stalinism, and political repression are portrayed as evidence for the persistence of Russian colonialism. Geidar Aliev, who was always part of the repressive Soviet elite, was revised as someone that had, within the difficult colonial context of the USSR, always saved Azerbaijan as a nation, according the general opinion in society. Or, as Zardusht Alizade formulates it: "The population of Azerbaijan generally considered the USSR now as a 'black empire' in which there was only one 'white' republic, the Azerbaijani SSR, thanks to its 'white' leader Geidar Aliev."<sup>275</sup>

According to the Azerbaijani Turkologist Altay Göyüşov (b. 1965), the Soviet elite initiated a revival of the nineteenth-century Azerbaijani intelligentsia. Supposedly, these so-called *ziyalilar* (Enlighteners) created a strong Azerbaijani identity within the context of Russian colonialism in the second half of the nineteenth century. One problem in this development was that these intellectuals – journalists, historians, teachers, and writers,

---

<sup>274</sup> Arif Yunusov, "Mifi i obrazy vraga v istoricheskoi nauke i uchebnikakh po istorii nezavisimogo Azerbaidzhana" (unpublished, 2011). Arif Yunusov gave me this article at one of our several meetings in Baku.

<sup>275</sup> Zardusht Alizade, interview (Baku, August 2009).

including of theater pieces – were largely influenced by Russian, European, and Iranian models, and developed their projects against the traditional Muslim system of education.<sup>276</sup> These “secular intellectuals”, - of which the writer Mirza Akhuzade (1812-1878) was one of the most significant examples, - had evolved into the conscience of the nation and challenged the local Muslim community by stating that Islam would always be an obstacle for social progress.<sup>277</sup> The Soviet teleological construction of a genealogy of progressive thinking in Azerbaijan - from Muslim traditionalism to "bourgeois" identities and finally to nationalism and socialism – had resulted in the construction of a particular Azerbaijani line of intellectual culture, and of secularism, comparable to similar Soviet cultural heritage projects in Soviet Daghestan and Soviet Tatarstan.<sup>278</sup> Sovietization and its accompanying repression not only damaged Islam but also the nationalist intelligentsia.<sup>279</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, “the general public yearned for an idealistic reconciliation of its Muslim and secular identities.”<sup>280</sup> In all of these republics, post-Soviet historiography largely continued a construction of national cultural heritages based on “free-thinking” individuals that allegedly “liberated” their societies from Islamic “obscurantism”, and paved the way for modern identities.<sup>281</sup> The situation of the 1990s was comparable to the turbulent years of the early twentieth century. As Eva Maria Auch observed, the role of Islam, a Turkic-oriented nationalism, ethnic clashes with Armenians and problems of post-colonialism were both in the last decade before the 1917 revolution and in the 1990s the main issues of concern for the Azerbaijani elites.<sup>282</sup> And indeed: one can see remarkable parallels between the two periods.

The historical parallel between the two periods of transition brought Azerbaijani historians to another focus point of research: the revision of the negative image of the short-

---

<sup>276</sup> Altay Goyushov, Naomi Caffee and Robert Denis, “The Transformation of Azerbaijani Orientalists into Islamic Thinkers after 1991”, 306-307.

<sup>277</sup> Altay Goyushov, Naomi Caffee and Robert Denis, “The Transformation of Azerbaijani Orientalists into Islamic Thinkers after 1991”, 306.

<sup>278</sup> Michael Kemper, “*Ijtihad* into Philosophy: Islam as Cultural Heritage in Post-Stalinist Daghestan”, *Central Asian Survey* 33:3 (2014), 390-404; A.K. Bustanov and M. Kemper, “From Mirasism to Euro-Islam: The Translation of Islamic Legal Debates into Tatar Secular Cultural Heritage”, in *Islamic Authority and the Russian Language: Studies on Texts from European Russia, the North Caucasus and West Siberia*, ed. by A.K. Bustanov/M. Kemper (Amsterdam: Pegasus 2012), 29-54.

<sup>279</sup> Altay Goyushov, Naomi Caffee and Robert Denis, “The Transformation of Azerbaijani Orientalists into Islamic Thinkers after 1991”, 307.

<sup>280</sup> Altay Goyushov, Naomi Caffee and Robert Denis, “The Transformation of Azerbaijani Orientalists into Islamic Thinkers after 1991”, 307.

<sup>281</sup> This approach is clearly reflected in the monograph of Eva-Maria Auch. Eva-Maria Auch, *Muslim – Untertan – Bürger* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 433-439.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 471-495.

lived Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918-1920), which now suddenly appeared as a new model for independent statehood. One of the first to launch a reassessment of the perception of the ADR was Buniiatov, who in his article “Myths and Myth-makers” (1989) argued that “unfortunately Soviet historiography was full of mythmaking, and it is time to start a revision of history.”<sup>283</sup> At his Oriental Institute, Buniiatov did not initiate new research on the ADR, but he inspired his colleagues and subordinates to revise history.<sup>284</sup> Of course, his criticism of “myth making” was mainly directed against his Armenian colleagues, and did not include any revision of his own positions.<sup>285</sup>

With distance to the former Soviet teleology, the years before and after the October Revolution appear as much more diverse, with various trajectories that, under different conditions, might not have led to the Bolshevik victory in the Caucasus.<sup>286</sup> Connected to this was a new perspective on the establishment of Soviet power in Azerbaijan, and in particular the role of the so-called “twenty-six commissars of Baku”. Executed by the British interventionist forces in 1918, these commissars were praised in the USSR as heroes who achieved the first socialist regime in Azerbaijan.<sup>287</sup> With the new celebration of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic, also the narrative of these Bolshevik heroes was dismantled, all the more since most of these commissars had been Armenians.<sup>288</sup>

Buniiatov himself chose the Stalinist repressions of the 1920s and 1930s as a new subject to profile himself. In 1993 he published *Kırmızı Terror (Red Terror)*, a collection of several of his articles that had appeared in different newspapers between 1990 and 1992.<sup>289</sup> The collection drew attention to Azerbaijani victims of Stalinist terror; the work contained unique documents on the show processes, the torture procedures and the methods of interrogation of the notorious “*Sledorgan*”, which was part of the NKVD in Azerbaijan. *Red Terror* became extremely popular in Azerbaijani society in which anti-Soviet sentiments ran high in the early 1990s.

---

<sup>283</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, “Mify i mifotvortsy” (Baku: Elm, 1989), 1-2.

<sup>284</sup> This information is based on an interview with Naile Velihanli (Baku, Aug. 2009).

<sup>285</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, “Mify i mifotvortsy”, 1-2.

<sup>286</sup> Altay Göyüşev, *1917-1920-dzhi illərdə şimali qafqaz dağlılarının azadlıq uğrunda mübarizəsi* (Baku, 2000).

<sup>287</sup> Dzhamil B. Guliev (red.), *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana* (Baku, 1979), 143-158.

<sup>288</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, “Mify i mifotvortsy”, 1-3.

<sup>289</sup> Ziia Buniiatov, *Kırmızı terror* (Baku, 1993)

It should be mentioned that in most other Soviet republics (including in Armenia), the critique of Stalinism had already resumed in the 1980s, and contributed to the impetus for Perestroika. Not so in Azerbaijan, where Buniiatov's *Red Terror* indeed marked one of the first milestones.<sup>290</sup> Indeed, while some of the Azerbaijani Stalinist victims had already been rehabilitated starting with Khrushchev's de-Stalinization program, many others received rehabilitation only after the publication of Buniiatov's book.<sup>291</sup> For his research Buniiatov was permitted access to the archives of the KGB, which after 1991 were placed in the archive of the Azerbaijani Ministry of National Security.<sup>292</sup> With this privileged access, Buniiatov was in the position to shape the image of the Azerbaijani victims, and of Stalinism. As after him, access to these files were largely closed again for historians, one could also argue that he not only started the debate but also ended it.

Buniiatov thus set the agenda. Importantly, his 1993 book covered not only the persecution of prominent Azerbaijani historians, intellectuals and politicians during the peak of Stalinist terror in the 1930s but also drew attention to the continuation of repression in the post-war years, and thus to the persistence of anti-religious and thereby anti-nationalist policies in Soviet Azerbaijan.

A case in point is his discussion of the student group *Yildirim* ("Lightning") which in the 1940s promoted Azerbaijani language and literature, and whose members reportedly argued for a more independent development of the AzSSR vis-à-vis Moscow. In 1948 all students that belonged to *Yildirim* were arrested by the KGB; in show-trials they were forced to confess that they actually aimed at the secession of the AzSSR from the USSR in order to join Turkey. This meant that they were exposed as Pan-Turkists.<sup>293</sup> In 1949 the whole group received up to 25 years of prison camp; their rehabilitation came in 1956. After their return into society the group continued as an informal network.

Equally important was to produce synthesizing overview works that would cement the new view on Azerbaijani history. In 1993 the Academy decided to produce a new "History of

---

<sup>290</sup> Dzhamil Hasanli, interview (Baku, August 2009).

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Dzhamil Hasanli, interview (Baku, August 2009). Buniiatov was not the first to write about Stalinist repression. During the Soviet Union only one work was dedicated to memories of Stalinist repressions: The novel *Underground Waters Flow into the Sea* by Mehdi Husein was published in Russian in 1966 and based on the personal story of Samaya Huseinova. In 1991 a second book on the issue was published in Azerbaijani: in *Memory of Blood* Murtuz Sadikhli testified to his childhood when his family lived in exile in Kazakhstan.

<sup>293</sup> Z. Buniiatov, *Kırmızı Terror*, 306-324.

Azerbaijan”, reportedly on Buniiiatov's initiative. It was an ambitious project to rewrite Azerbaijani history in seven volumes. The first volume was published in 1993 and edited by Buniiiatov.<sup>294</sup> A second project was a compact History of Azerbaijan in one volume, which became the new standard work for education in the mid-1990s. Buniiiatov was chief-editor, and the work is still used in secondary schools in the country.<sup>295</sup>

## **The assassination of a national icon**

On 21 February 1997 Ziia Buniiiatov was assassinated in front of the House of Heroes in Baku, the apartment building where he had lived since the 1960s. The whole country was shocked by this brutal murder of one of its national icons. There are two narratives about his assassination – one official and public, and one from insiders who knew him.

The official version is given by no one less than President Geidar Aliev, who at Buniiiatov's funeral stated that “Buniiiatov is killed with the goal to destabilize the country.”<sup>296</sup>

According to Aliev:

"Ziia Buniiiatov had a great influence on our youth and he was the constructor of our identity and self-consciousness. He did so by his scientific work and by his role as a politician. He spoke openly, raised his voice against Armenian aggression, in fact he led the movement against Armenian aggression...Thanks to heroes like Ziia Buniiiatov, tens of thousands followed this movement, as a protest against Armenian attacks on Azerbaijani territorial integrity. [...] The death of Ziia Buniiiatov is an enormous loss for the people and for science. One of the most needed people of our country is murdered. [...] This is even worse than a normal murder; this is an aggression against the whole nation! This is not just a crime, but a terrorist attack! The murder of Ziia Buniiiatov is a murder of all the people, of the state, of our independence and of our leaders!"<sup>297</sup>

Aliev certainly realized that he had lost one of the most prominent members of the government and that the legitimacy of his party is at stake. Although Yeni Azerbaijan had

---

<sup>294</sup> Ziia Buniiiatov, *Azərbaycan tarixi* (Baku, 1993). The other volumes were edited after Buniiiatov's death by Naile Velikhanli, one of his most successful students. Interview with N. Velikhanli, conducted by Sara Crombach, Baku, August 2009.

<sup>295</sup> Ziia Buniiiatov, *Azərbaycan tarixi* (Baku 1994).

<sup>296</sup> G. Aliev, “Nevospolnimaia utrata dlia naroda I nauki”, in *Sil'nee Smerti*, 21.

<sup>297</sup> G. Aliev, “Nevospolnimaia utrata dlia naroda I nauki”, 21-25.

lost already popularity by 1997, Buniiatov was still respected for his uncompromising behaviour.



*Zia Buniiatov's tomb (Photo: Sara Crombach)*

This official version is the background against which many contemporaries praised Buniiatov in the memorial volume that came out in 2002. The volume thereby cemented the image of the scholar for posterity.

The official investigators quickly identified the Shii underground Hezbollah as the perpetrator. Hizbollah was established in 1993 with the support of Iran, and had adherents mostly in the IDP-camps.<sup>298</sup> Preceding the murder, Hizbollah had accused the government of corruption, and even claimed that Zia Buniiatov was an agent of the Israeli Mossad who wanted to spread Zionism in Azerbaijan.<sup>299</sup> Hizbollah clearly saw Buniiatov as a part of the Aliev government, which many parts of society perceived as a puppet of the United States, and of an "Israeli lobby".<sup>300</sup> As the party had incriminated Buniiatov of connections with Mossad, the state investigation concluded that Hizbollah was responsible for the crime. Further evidence was never given.

---

<sup>298</sup> A. Yunusov, *Islam in Azerbaijan*, 222.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-223.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

In 1998 the scholar was posthumously awarded with the highest honor of Azerbaijan: the so-called “Istiqlal” (“Independence”) Order.<sup>301</sup> In 1998, the Institute in which Buniiatov worked for 33 years was officially renamed “Ziia Musa-oglu Buniiatov Institute of Oriental Studies”. Current director G. Bakhshalieva - herself from among his disciples - paid her respect to Buniiatov’s role as a scholar with the following words:

"His publications will inspire the heart and the soul of the people and call for what is everyone’s duty as a citizen: to love the Motherland, to serve it honourably till the last gasp! Just like Ziia Buniiatov did himself."<sup>302</sup>

But against this heroic image of Buniiatov as a martyr for the Azerbaijani nation there is also an unofficial version, not articulated in public; it comes in the form of rumours and speculations spread among the population.<sup>303</sup> Most people in fact seem to believe that Buniiatov was killed because he was a threat to the regime and Hezbollah was just blamed for the murder in order to get a free hand for eliminating Iranian influences. For many of my interviewees the most plausible explanation is that Buniiatov was killed because he threatened to publish information that would compromise several officials of the army, the government, and even Geidar Aliev himself.<sup>304</sup> As a member of parliament, in the last two years of his life Buniiatov repeatedly accused the army and the Ministry of Defense of corruption. On radio and television he repeatedly threatened to publish material that would compromise several people of Yeni Azerbaijan.<sup>305</sup> His widow Tagira was seriously concerned about his habit to openly threaten ministers and top figures of the Yeni Azerbaijan Party. According to Tagira, shortly before his death, their apartment was entered by burglars who were obviously looking for documents, without any success. According to Tagira her husband, ”who always had been brave and honest, preferred dying over remaining silent.”<sup>306</sup>

---

<sup>301</sup> G. Bakhshalieva, *Bibliografiia* (Baku 2004), 21.

<sup>302</sup> G. Bakhshalieva, *Bibliografiia* (Baku 2004), 17.

<sup>303</sup> The main prosecutor in the murder case of Buniiatov, Roshan Aliev, had concluded that ”Muslin extremists from Hezbollah” were guilty. Aliev was killed himself in Baku in 2002. ”Scandal Murder in Baku”, *Azernews*, no. 11, 2002.

<sup>304</sup> All information is based on several interviews with scholars, politicians, and other people around Buniiatov, but they all prefer to be anonymous due to the delicacy of the topic.

<sup>305</sup> Interviews with A. Göyüşev and H. Hajizade (Baku, August 2009).

<sup>306</sup> Tagira Buniiatova in an interview (Baku, November 2011). A few months after Buniiatov died his grandson Musa, who studied in the United States, was killed in New York. It is unlikely that this crime was in any way related to the assassination of his grandfather. Shortly after this second murder Musa’s father, Ziia’s eldest son Dzhamil, died of a heart attack.

Ziia’s widow Tagira Buniiatova lived in the ‘House of Heroes’ in Baku and worked, almost until she passed

According to another unofficial version Buniatov had regularly disputes on television with Geidar Aliev. The main topic was the process of privatization that, according to Buniatov, was too sudden and too extreme. Aliev obviously wanted a rapid transition towards capitalism, i.e. a “shock therapy”, and Buniatov allegedly criticized this policy. This version is confirmed by the famous Azerbaijani screenwriter, film producer and author Rustam Ibrahimbekov in his 2008 novel *Slozhenie voln (Increasing Waves)*.<sup>307</sup> In this novel a “famous Soviet hero and orientalist” is killed exactly for the reason that he openly fought against privatization and the accompanying “mafia-like” practices. Although the name of the hero is not mentioned it is completely clear that the story is about Zia Buniatov, since there was only one single hero-orientalist in Baku. This version is also confirmed in interviews by Arif Yunusov and Zardusht Alizade.<sup>308</sup>

Buniatov is still glorified today. Also the young generation – mostly without having read a word of Buniatov himself – regards him as a "savior of the nation", first against the Nazis, then the Armenians, then the Russians, and finally against evil in society. This is also the theme of Buniatov's tomb: located on the Heroes' Cemetery above Baku, in the vicinity of the graves of important politicians, artists, and more heroes, Buniatov's larger-than-life memorial statue depicts the scholar squeezing an evil snake. Fresh flowers at his feet testify to the ongoing veneration of his person.

## Conclusion

After chapter one presented Buniatov’s biography as an example of careful myth-making and chapter two gave an analysis of Buniatov’s construction of an Azerbaijani historical canon until 1987, the third chapter has attempted to investigate Buniatov’s role in the turbulent period of Perestroika, the collapse of the USSR and the establishment of independent Azerbaijan. The chapter demonstrated the entanglement of biography, publications and politics.

As seen in the first chapter, already from the start of his academic career in the late 1950s Buniatov had been perceived as the ideal person to counterbalance Armenian territorial aspirations, and this significance would rapidly increase in the late 1980s. Geidar

---

away on 19 April 2016 at the age of 91, in the National Parliament.

<sup>307</sup> Rustam Ibrahimbekov, *Slozhenie voln* (Moscow, 2008).

<sup>308</sup> This information is based on interviews with Arif Yunusov and Zardusht Alizade (Baku, November 2011).

Aliev came to play a prominent role in the ups and downs of Buniiatov's life, sometimes in the background, as in the case of his sudden "retirement" as director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, and sometimes clearly visible as when Buniiatov switched into politics in the early 1990s. When Aliev was made full member of the Politburo in Moscow, his influence in Azerbaijan was still unmistakably present. Only after his downfall in 1987 this had direct consequences for Azerbaijan, since the country lost its most important advocate in Moscow. It was also a turning point for Buniiatov, who now lost his director's position, though not for long.

The escalation of the Karabakh conflict after the Sumgait pogroms of early 1988, were a watershed for the whole Soviet Union. Buniiatov was personally affected by the growing chaos in society. His article "Why Sumgait" is a clear example of his new style that is no longer falling into the category of academic analysis; rather, his discourse becomes openly aggressive. Here he presents the Armenians as responsible for the pogroms, and places this in a long tradition of Armenian nationalism (by referring to the Dashnak party in the context of Sumgait) and aggression towards the Azerbaijani people. The Armenians are, according to Buniiatov, undermining what was perhaps the most important dogma of the Soviet belief: the idea of Friendship of the Peoples. Needless to say, already since the 1950s Buniiatov's own work had contributed to the challenging of this dogma, by questioning the status quo through historical arguments. Now, as Azerbaijanis were expelled from Karabakh and the Azerbaijani nation saw itself as a victim, it was easy for Buniiatov to present the enemy as the sole culprit for the violation of the Soviet status quo.

The Sumgait pogroms also mobilized a movement of young scholars who were partly inspired by Gorbachev, and partly alarmed by the ethnic clashes. As we saw, Buniiatov's relationship to these young colleagues was very ambiguous: most of the time he expressed his contempt for them, and regarded them as threats, but at several occasions he also courted them, and even tried to establish himself as their leader. Yet the contradictions were insurmountable: as a careerist of the old generation Buniiatov was alien to the spirit of change and democratization. He realized however that he needed to reconsider his own position in society, and his later maneuvers to gain influence in the Popular Front movement clearly illustrate his opportunism and his ambition for power.

Had the Communist Party of Azerbaijan been more open to change, then Buniiatov might have obtained a different role for linking to the Popular Front. Unlike in the Baltics or Armenia, republics where the Communist Parties were inspired by the reform, in Azerbaijan

the Party was much more conservative and not ready for change. This made a dialogue between the Popular Front and the Party impossible. In the Baltics and Armenia Party and reform movements joined forces and found a common ground for possible reform. In Azerbaijan not only the “common enemy” Armenia undermined stability, but also the domestic cleavage.

Buniatov’s return to directorship opened new possibilities for the scholar. He continued his work as a defender of Azerbaijani national interests against Armenia. His article on Sakharov’s visit to the region is a remarkable example of his new journalistic style, which had begun with “Why Sumgait” one year earlier. He heavily criticized and ridiculed Sakharov, turning the respected dissident into a proponent of inimical conspiracies against the solidarity between the Soviet nations. According to Buniatov the Moscow intelligentsia that was inspired by Gorbachev’s reform, irresponsibly following a dangerous political fashion.

When nationalists such as Isa Gambar and Elchibey managed to obtain leadership positions in the Popular Front, Buniatov (who was their superior in the Institute of Oriental Studies) gained influence in the movement and his regular and popular speeches during several rallies in Baku gave him a new authority in the eyes of the masses. This is another example of Buniatov’s opportunism. For several years he had criticized the Pan-Turkic nationalism of the movement - which opposed his ideas of “Azerbaijanism” and “Albanianism” - but now he rather unexpectedly supported the racist populism of the movement. And whereas in former days he had boasted about having a Russian national status, he now expressed openly anti- Russian positions.

After Black January in 1990 even the most convinced Communists had left the party, including Buniatov and even the former Party boss Geidar Aliev. In order to reinstall stability in society, the new leader of the Communist Party Mutalibov started to cooperate with the opposition. But it was too late to turn the tide: one year later the Soviet Union collapsed, and the nationalist and populist Elchibey became the first free elected president of Azerbaijan. After great territorial losses in the war, Elchibey was eventually forced out of power, and this was the moment Geidar Aliev had waited for. His return to power opened new perspectives for Buniatov. The scholar now had to provide Aliev’s Yeni Azerbaijan Party with a scientific and moral basis.

This new situation required a new discourse on the past. Areas that had once been taboo for scholarship - such as the clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia from before the establishment of the USSR, but also Stalin's terror and the repression of religion – suddenly turned into important markers in the creation of national identity and ideology. Buniatov, who once had been an important contributor to the Soviet Azerbaijani historical canon, now adapted the old wisdom to new political challenges. By publishing a translation of the Qur'an – in fact, by appropriating co-authorship of this translation – the former communist now even posed as a specialist on Islam. With his last posthumously published work *Religions, Sects, Religious Movements*, he presented Azerbaijan as a country that also has strong connections with the (European) tradition of Christianity or Judaism.

Another central aspect of the new national identity construct was the positive re-evaluation of the founders of Azerbaijani national identity in the 19th century. This revival had already been initiated by the Soviet humanities, who represented the Azerbaijani enlighteners of the Tsarist era as movements that prepared the ground for socialism, and thus as contributing to the legitimacy of Soviet rule in the Caucasus. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, these Enlighteners became the most important source of inspiration for rebuilding national identity, albeit now disconnected from the Soviet past. Crucial ingredients of this national identity back in the 19th century had been a modernization of Islam, a Turkic cultural identity, and European values of liberalism and modernity. Buniatov and other Soviet – in fact, now 'post-Soviet' – intellectuals would reintroduce exactly these ingredients in the 1990s.

A last theme that was introduced by Buniatov was the significance of Armenian enmity as a strong factor of social cohesion. Buniatov thought that Armenians had two very strong issues on which their identity was based: first a strong construction of the past, and second the genocide memories that created an image of “eternal victim”. In a way Buniatov copied this Armenian model for his native Azerbaijan. When the conflict escalated in 1988, he discredited the image of Armenians as “victims” by stating that the memory of the 1915 genocide was based on a falsification of facts. The next step was his creation of exactly this same image of “eternal victim” as crucial for Azerbaijani collective memory by using the same rhetoric that proved to be so effective for the Armenian identity. In this way Buniatov added a new element to Azerbaijani identity: the Azerbaijani nation as a victim of the cunning and treacherous historical enemy. This image is in current times still very much alive.

## Conclusion

The present study has followed Zia Buniiatov's scholarly and political career through the decades, and has investigated his major works in relation to the development of his political views, as well as his changing status in Azerbaijani society. Next to the study of his writings, the present thesis has ventured into oral history, by tapping into the rich field of opinions about the scholar. My interviews with Buniiatov's colleagues and disciples – many of whom are highly critical of the scholar – produce a picture that stands in marked contrast to the image of Buniiatov as a heroic fighter for the nation.

While analyzing the career, work and perception of one particular Soviet and post-Soviet scholar, the present thesis has the ambition to also present a paradigmatic case. First, the case of Buniiatov is paradigmatic for the study of the prestige of Oriental studies in the USSR and thereafter; my work is therefore meant as contribution to the ongoing revision of the history of Soviet Oriental studies and its institutions, the historiography of which is still shaped by the overviews about Soviet Oriental scholarship produced by Soviet Orientalists themselves (including Buniiatov). On a second level, the present thesis offers a paradigmatic case for the study of “Oriental” historians, that is, of scholars from the Soviet periphery, and often of “Muslim” background, who used the frameworks and methods of academic Orientology in order to contribute to the emancipation and modernization of their respective nation. On a third level, the work presented here is paradigmatic for the long-term developments in Azerbaijani historiography, and for how prominent scholars adapted to the political breaks in twentieth-century Azerbaijan. And last but not least, my study of Buniiatov can to a certain degree also be read as a history of modern Azerbaijan, in particular as Buniiatov and his disciples occupied leading functions in the production of national conceptions to legitimize regimes and regime changes.

What started as a contribution to the historiography of Soviet Oriental studies thus obtained many more dimensions. The more I saw myself confronted with the paradoxical status of Buniiatov among his peers, disciples, and in Armenian and Azerbaijani society, the more I found myself writing a critique of what I call the “myth” of Ziia Buniiatov; and the more I investigated the production of this myth (which is still in place in today's Azerbaijan), the more I also deconstructed this myth. In fact, the whole story about Ziia Buniiatov, from

his war-time narratives over his academic works on ancient Albania and medieval Azerbaijan down to his last works on Islam and Stalin's terror, seems to be geared towards the production of a coherent heroic image of the scholar himself, with particular functions for the Azerbaijani nation and for Azerbaijani scholarship in particular. One underlying assumption of the present work is therefore that academic scholarship was crucial for nation-building; that Buniatov's Albanian theory fully corresponded to the needs of Soviet Azerbaijan's leadership; that his scholarship was contested not only by nationalist-minded Armenian scholars but also by liberal-minded junior scholars from his own school, and by radical Turkist scholars who briefly rose to power in the early 1990s; and that his work is today again open for political use by the continuing Aliiev regime in Azerbaijan.

### **The politicization of historiography**

The politicization of history writing worked both ways: while Orientalists and historians were strongly tied to the political dogmas of the Communist Party, many of these scholars became themselves politically influential. In the post-war Soviet Union we can see the consequences of this interaction. An analysis of his works of the 1950s to 1990s clearly illustrates that Buniatov, like many of his colleagues, had to operate carefully within the limits set by the USSR's Communist Party and its Azerbaijani branch in Baku. In general we can say that Buniatov was convinced of serving his own Azerbaijani nation, with a clear nationalist agenda, even to the point that he contributed to the conflict with Armenia, and thus to the growing ethnic tensions that gradually undermined the stability of the USSR and of Azerbaijan. By creating a glorious past for their people, Azerbaijani historians and Orientalists played a crucial role in the construction of a national identity. This process is strongly shaped by the rivalry with neighboring Armenia and the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh. Significant themes regarding this political role of historians-orientalists was the ethno-genesis of the Azerbaijani people, in particular the role of Caucasus Albania, the relation between Turkic and Caucasian elements in the body of the nation. Whatever position a scholar defended in these disputes about ethno-genesis, the goal was always to downplay or eliminate the Armenian historical presence in the region (mainly in disputed regions such as Nagorny Karabakh or Nakhichevan) and to deny Armenian indigenesness to the Caucasus. I argue that Orientalists and historians created a historical canon that left, and still leaves, no room for debate; thereby they directly or at least indirectly contributed to the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh.

Although Buniiatov's publications cover a wide range of topics, the Ancient and Medieval history of his home-country took a central place in his works. Completely in line with the tenets of the official ideology, Buniiatov set out to “invent” a great history for his country. Azerbaijan, with Caucasian Albania as a historical forerunner, was presented as a millennia-old nation that could measure up with other great civilizations of the region. The Azerbaijanis were no longer seen as Turkic nomads of later centuries but as an indigenous Caucasian people. This view on national history fit well into the Soviet policy to discredit the idea of Pan-Turkism. Perhaps more importantly, it also made clear that the Azerbaijanis were the legitimate heirs of the territory of the AzSSR. In contrast with this re-evaluation of Azerbaijani history, the place of Armenians in the region, or more specific: in Nagornyi Karabakh, was reduced in significance. This theory offered two politically important advantages: it gave an ancient and glorious past to his nation, and it undermined Armenian claims to the disputed region of Nagornyi Karabakh.

Another element of Buniiatov's theory concerns the uniqueness of Azerbaijani national identity. While hostile sources (mainly Armenian) had claimed that Azerbaijan was in fact a hodgepodge of “foreign” influences (such as Islam, introduced by the Arabs and later influenced by the Persians) with a language that was considered a Turkic dialect, Buniiatov presented this amalgam of influences as the unique essence of Azerbaijani identity. In spite of the many foreign influences of later centuries, Azerbaijani culture, ethnos and nationality were now strongly rooted in an ancient past, according to Buniiatov. And although many features had changed in the course of the centuries, the essence of the nation had been immutable.

### **The “Buniiatov Myth”**

Myth-making implies a certain manipulation of the public perception. In the present thesis, we encountered several instances where manipulation appears as a major strategy of the scholar-hero. While his wartime narratives cannot be confirmed or rejected (such as Buniiatov’s position in the *Shtrafbat* or his achievement in post-war Berlin), his books and articles allow us to identify the strategies that Buniiatov used to rise in prominence, such as for instance the plagiarism issues, his choice of topics between the 1950s and 1980s, his revision of the historical canon in the late 1980s and his turn to Islam and religion in the early 1990s. We also saw that the Albanian theory, however strongly emphasized, is based on a

simplistic identification of the Azerbaijanis as the successors to the ancient Albanians, without any regard for the streams of migration and the changes of language and religions. What keeps the Albanian theory together is the ambition to produce a counter-narrative to the strongly text-based Armenian national narrative. This, curiously, means that Buniatov employed the image of the “enemy-nation” as a model for his own national construct. At the same time, the chapter on Buniatov's historiography of ancient and medieval South-Eastern Caucasus reveals his skillful use of Soviet paradigms; this is for instance visible in his upgrading of religious movements to “national-liberation struggles”. Here the case of Buniatov might add to our understanding of where the Soviet discourse on national historiography within the “Friendship of Peoples” dogma had its limits: paradoxically, one could follow the general blueprint while at the same time crudely ignoring, denigrating, and provoking the scholars of the neighboring republic. At several moments Buniatov faced stiff opposition (as for instance when he was not allowed to have his habilitation thesis defence in Leningrad), but he always found ways around such problems (e.g. by having the defense in Moscow, where he obviously had more institutional backing).

Patronage is another topic that permeates the present study. Myth-making, by the scholar himself as well as by others, still needed the support of persons of higher standing. There is reason to assume that in Moscow, his major patrons were Evgenii Primakov (his fellow student at MIV, then *Pravda* Middle East correspondent closely connected to the KGB; in the early 1980s director of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow) as well as Marshall Shestopalov, his brother-in-law. Here I am relying on statements of my interview partners, in Moscow, Baku and elsewhere. While their views cannot be corroborated by archival material, the fact that all of them provide information that challenges the Buniatov myth makes for a plausible argument.

So what made the Buniatov myth successful? I have argued that Buniatov was extremely successful in producing scholarship, however questionable, that responded to public and political expectations of the Azerbaijani leadership. Myth becomes a self-propelling instrument: his own stories of war time heroism supported his academic position, and his position as director of the Oriental Institute in Baku made him virtually unassailable. At the same time the scholar was extremely adroit in adjusting his research line to the changing demands of the time; this is particularly clear in the events analyzed in chapter III, where Buniatov moved his research agenda into modern history and a few years later discovered Islam and Soviet terror as his new fields of historical inquiry. Studying a myth is

therefore more than just revealing how various fictions are entangled in one grand composition; it is also revealing the degree of flexibility in (self-)representation, in adjusting one's publication agenda, and in gaining, through patronage, a political position from which the myth can be safely disseminated, including by loyal disciples. In Azerbaijan, the assertive, then aggressively anti-Armenian orientation of Buniiatov's work made it almost impossible to criticize him; disciples who objected (or who did not tolerate Buniiatov's physical abuses) had nowhere to turn to, at least before *Perestroika*.

Buniiatov realized that socialism was no longer fashionable, and he had to re-profile himself in order not to lose momentum. He revealed himself as the first serious critic of Stalinist terror in Azerbaijan (ironically, by using his old patronage links to get access to the KGB archives, as we must assume), and he no longer described Russia as a friendly nation but as a colonizer that had repressed Azerbaijan's century-long struggle for sovereignty and independence. In the same period of social chaos he realized that the bankruptcy of socialist ideology led to a strong call for a new ideology.

## **Post-Soviet Azerbaijan**

In the 1990s, shortly after Azerbaijan became independent, Buniiatov himself went into politics, and although practically every citizen of the country realized that the complete political elite was corrupt, Zia Buniiatov still retained his image of honesty and straightforwardness. This strongly contributed to Buniiatov's standing as the incarnation of the conscience of the nation, a personality who saved the morale of his nation. This gave him a crucial significance for the new (and old) leader of the country, Geidar Aliev, who co-opted Buniiatov and used the latter's hero status for the legitimacy of his regime, and for the image of protecting national unity in a period of social chaos. Buniiatov's relation to Geidar Aliev was an important factor in his life.

Although post-Soviet Azerbaijan was in many ways a continuation of Soviet Azerbaijan, a new identity had to be constructed that placed the modern independent country directly in the tradition of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (May 1918 to April 1920). Next to the historical precursors in the field of state-formation, also pre-Soviet traditions of cultural nationalism were re-invigorated. This is particularly true for a number of nineteenth-century intellectuals such as Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundov and 'Abbas-Quli Bakikhanov, who were already in the Soviet period praised as "Enlighteners", and, with their mix of nationalist

and religious elements, as the awakeners of national self-consciousness, representing the supposedly unique blend of Azerbaijani identity. While it is hard to compare the Soviet careerist Buniatov with these nineteenth-century Muslim authors, he was seamlessly placed into this tradition.

The discord between two major theories about national identity, often referred to as “Azerbaijanism” versus “Pan-Turkism”, continues in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. According to the first theory, represented by the official circles, i.e. president Ilham Aliyev and the government, Caucasian Albania is still considered to be the direct forerunner of Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani people is without any doubt indigenous in the Caucasus, and all elements of Turkicness (such as first of all the language) are of later date. This theory is directly derived from the ideas of Soviet historians, in the first place Buniatov. According to the second theory, represented by various opposition groups, the Turkic roots of the Azerbaijani people are the most significant feature of the ethno-genesis, an argument which is fed by the fact that the country's official language belongs to the Turkic family. Turkism and Panturkism were discredited in the Soviet Union, but became increasingly popular in dissident circles since the 1980s. Elchibey, one of the founders of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan and the first democratically elected president of Azerbaijan (1992-93), was the main advocate of this idea, for which he had even been in prison in the late 1970s.

Since the demise of the Popular Front, Buniatov's contribution to the canon is - at least in official circles - hardly discussed, just like his biography. Buniatov is still considered a hero, a dissident, a recalcitrant and brave man and a great scholar. As Platt and Brandenberger argued, also today the glorification of heroes and myths in the Post-Soviet area is still Stalinist and post-Stalinist Soviet in character. In contemporary Azerbaijan, the seven decades of Soviet modernization, and the fact that Azerbaijan is strongly rooted in the Soviet period, are largely ignored; the Soviet past is perceived as alien to Azerbaijani identity. But paradoxically, this denial is in essence very close to the Soviet mechanisms of selective history writing, as is the continued use of national Azerbaijani icons, such as the poet Nizami, the national freedom fighter Babek, or the hero and scholar Ziya Buniatov. .

## Bibliography

- Abdel-Malek A., "Orientalism in Crisis," in: *Diogenes*, 44 (Winter 1963), 104-112
- Adam V., "Umdeutung der Geschichte im Zeichen des Nationalismus seit dem Ende der SU: Das Beispiel Aserbeidschan," in: F. Adanir (ed.), *Osmanismus, Nationalismus und der Kaukasus* (Wiesbaden, 2005), 22-24
- Agaev R. and Alizade Z., *Konets vtoroi respubliki* (Moscow, 2006)
- Akopian T.Ch., *Istoricheskaia geografiia Armenii* (Yerevan, 1968)
- Aleskerova N., "Islam v Azerbaidzhane: istoriia i sovremennost'," in: *Heinrich Böll Stiftung* (16 January 2005) <https://ge.boell.org/en/2005/01/16/islam-v-azerbaydzhane-istoriya-i-sovremennost> (date of consultation: 10 August, 2017)
- Aliiev F.M., "Azerbaidzhan v XVIII v.," in: *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, edited by Z. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 129-138
- Aliiev G., *Gluboko izuchat' obshchestvennoe mnenie* (Baku: Azerneshr, 1982)
- Aliiev G., "Nevospolnimaia utrata dlia naroda i nauki," in: A. Babaev (ed.), *Sil'nee Smerti* (Baku, 2002), 21-32
- Alpatov V.M., "Marr, Marizm i Stalinism," in: *Filosofskie issledovaniia* 4 (1993), 271-288
- Altstadt A., "Azerbaijan and Aliyev. A Long History and an Uncertain Future," in: *Problems of Post-Communism* 50:5 (Sep./Oct. 2003), 3-5
- Auch E.M., *Muslim – Untertan – Burger; Identitätswandel in gesellschaftlichen Transformationsprozessen der muslimischen Ostprovinzen Südkaukasiens (Ende 18. – Anfang 20. Jh)* (Wiesbaden: Dr Ludwig Reichert, 2004)
- Baberowski J., *Der Feind ist überall* (München, 2003)
- Bakhshalieva G., *Bibliografiia* (Baku 2004)
- Balaian Z., *Ochag*, (Yerevan, 1984)

- Balaev A., *Svoboda (istoricheskaia khronika: 1988-1992)* (Baku, 1992)
- Bartol'd V.V., "Mesto prikaspiiskikh oblastei v istorii musul'manskogo mira", *Sochineniia* Vol. 2 (1963)
- Baziiants A., *Lazarevskii Institut v istorii otechestvennogo vostokovedeniia* (Moscow, 1973)
- Baziiants A., *Vostokovednye tsenry v SSSR: Azerbaidzhan, Armeniia, Gruziiia, Ukraina* (Moscow, 1988)
- Beliaev A.E., "Vospominaniia o Z. M. Buniiatove," in: *Sil'nee smerti* (Baku, 2002) 458-459
- Bell C., *Peace Agreements and Human Rights* (Oxford, 2005)
- Blair B., "The Core Author of Ali & Nino: does it really matter?," in: *Azerbaijan International* 15 (Baku, 2011)
- Bolukbasi S., *Azerbaijan, a Political History* (New York, 2011)
- Bosworth C.E., "Obituary to Sir Gerard Clauson (1891-1973)," in: *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, Bulletin* 1:1 (1974), 39-43
- Brandenberger D., "...It is Imperative to Advance Russian Nationalism as the First Priority," in: *A Sate of Nations* (Oxford, 2001), 275-289
- Brandenberger D., Dubrovsky A.M., "The People Need a Tsar: the Emergence of National Bolshevism as Stalinist Ideology, 1931-1941," in: *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 5 (July 1998), 873-892
- Bobrovnikov V., "Pochemu my marginaly? Zametki na poliakh russkogo perevoda 'Orientalizma' Edvarda Saida," in: *Ab Imperio* 2 (2008), 335-340
- Buniiatova T., "Ziia – moia sud'ba," in: A. Babaev (ed.), *Sil'nee smerti* (Baku, 2002), 33-263
- Buniiatov Z.M., "Albanika III", *AN AzSSR* (Baku, 1964), 87-92
- Buniiatov Z.M., *Azerbaijan in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Baku, 1965)
- Buniiatov Z.M., *Azərbaycan tarixi* (Baku, 1993)

- Buniatov Z.M., *Dinler Terigetler Mezhebler* (Baku, 1997)
- Buniatov Z.M., "Etnopoliticheskie rubezhi Azerbaidzhana v period pravleniia Ildenizidov," in: *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, ed. by Z. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 93-97
- Buniatov Z.M., *Gosudarstvo Atabekov Azerbeidzhana 1136-1225* (Baku, 1978) (Reissued in *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh: Vol. 2* (Baku, 1999)
- Buniatov Z.M., *Gosudarstvo Khorezmshahov-Anushteginidov, 1097-1231* (Moscow 1986)
- Buniatov Z.M. (ed.), *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbeidzhana* (Baku, 1987)
- Buniatov Z.M., *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh* (Baku, 1999)
- Buniatov Z.M., *Kirmizi Terror* (Baku, 1993)
- Buniatov Z.M., "Mify i mifotvortsy," (Baku: Elm, 1989) available on: [www.ziyabunyatov.com](http://www.ziyabunyatov.com) (accessed on 1 February 2016)
- Buniatov Z.M., "Mkhitar Gosh. Albanskaia khronika," in: *AN AzSSR* (Baku, 1960), 27-37
- Buniatov Z.M., "Novye dannye o nakhozhenii kreposti Sheki," in: *DAN AzSSR* 9 (1959), 869-872
- Buniatov Z.M., "O deiatel'nosti katolikosa Albanii Viro 596-630," in: *Blizhnii i Srednii Vostok (sbornik statei)* (Moscow, 1962), 15-20
- Buniatov Z.M., "O dlitel'nosti prebyvaniia khazar v Albanii v VII-VIII vv.," in: *Izv. AN AzSSR, ser. obshchestv. nauk* 1 (1961), 22-34
- Buniatov Z.M., "O khronologicheskom nesootvetstvii glav 'Istorii Agvan' Moiseiia Kagankatvatsi," in: *DAN AzSSR* 4 (Baku, 1965), 65-67
- Buniatov Z.M., "O mestonakhozhenii srednevekovykh gorodov-kreposti Bazz i Sheki," in: *AN SSSR* (1961), 89-93
- Buniatov Z.M. and Zeinalov R.E., *Ot Kavkaza do Berlina* (Baku, 1990)

Buniatov Z.M., "Otvét moim kritikam i opponentam," (1969) available on: [www.ziyabunyadov.com](http://www.ziyabunyadov.com) (accessed on 1 February 2016)

Buniatov Z.M., "Pochemu Sumgait (Situatsionnyi analiz)," in: *Izv. AN AzSSR, Ser. ist., fil. I prava* 2 (Baku, 1989). Reissued in *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana po dokumentam i publikatsiiam*, edited by Naile Velikhanli (Baku, 1990), 355-363.

Buniatov Z.M., *Shikhab ad-Din Mukhammad an-Nasavi. Zhizneopisanie sultana Dzhalal ad-Dina Mankburny* (Baku, 1973)

Buniatov Z.M., "Tuneiadstvuiushchie neformaly" (Baku, 15-4-1989) Republished in *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh* Vol. III (Baku, 1999), 222-223

Bustanov A.K. and Kemper M., "From Mirasism to Euro-Islam: The Translation of Islamic Legal Debates into Tatar Secular Cultural Heritage," in: *Islamic Authority and the Russian Language: Studies on Texts from European Russia, the North Caucasus and West Siberia*, ed. by A.K. Bustanov and M. Kemper (Amsterdam: Pegasus 2012), 29-54

Bustanov A., *Soviet Orientalism and the Creation of Central Asian Nations* (New York: Routledge, 2015)

Cahen C., "Atabak," in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (online edition, 2008), available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/atabak> (accessed on 29 February 2016)

Crone P., "Korramis," in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, (online edition, 2011, available at [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/korramis](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/korramis)) (accessed on 18 November 2015)

Dasxurançi M., *The History of the Caucasian Albanians* (Translated by C. J. F. Dowsett (London: Oxford University Press, 1961)

Davudov O.M., *Material'naiia kul'tura Dagestana Albanskogo vremeni* (Makhachkala, 1996)

Derlugian G., *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus. A World-system Biography* (Chicago and London, 2005)

Donabedian P. "The History of Karabagh from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century," in: L. Chorbajian and P. Donabedian (eds.), *The Caucasian Knot. The History and Geo-Politics of Nagorno-Karabagh* (London, 1994), 51-109

Dowsett C.J.F., "The Albanian Chronicle of Mxit'ar Goş," in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 21:1/3 (1958), 472-490.

Efendiev O.A., "Territoria i granitsy Azerbaidzhanskikh gosudarstv v XV-XVI vv.," in: *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, edited by Z.M. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 110-119

*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com> (last accessed 25 September 2018)

Etkind A., *Internal Colonization. Russia's Imperial Experience* (Malden, USA: Polity Press, 2011)

Frings A., "Cyrillization = Russification: Pitfalls in the Interpretation of Soviet Alphabet Policy," in: *Kampf um Wort und Schrift. Russifizierung in Osteuropa im 19.-20. Jahrhundert*, edited by Zaur Gasimov (Göttingen, 2012), 125-137

Gadzhiev M., "Kavkazskaia Albaniia i Dagestan: istoriko-geograficheskie i administrativno-politicheskie aspekty," in: *Albania Caucasica* ed. by A.K. Alikberov and M.S. Gadzhiev (Moscow, 2015), 28-41

Gadjiev M., "The Writing of Caucasian Albania. Facts and Falsifications," in: *Selective Remembrances: Archeology in the Construction, Commemoration, and Consecration of National Pasts*, edited by Ph.L. Kohl, M. Kozelsky, and N. Ben-Yehuda (Chicago, 2007), 103-104

Gambar I., "Starye pesni i novye legendy" (Baku, 1985) (Unpublished copy handed over to me by the author)

Gasany D., *Khrushchevskaia "ottepel" i natsional'nyi vopros v Azerbaidzhane (1954-1959)* (Moscow, 2009)

Gasany D., *SSSR-Turtsiia: ot neitraliteta k holodnoi voine 1939-1953* (Moscow, 2008)

Göyüşev A., *1917-1920-dzhi illərdə şimali qafqaz dağlılarının azadlıq uğrunda mübarizəsi* (Baku, 2000)

Göyüşev A. and Ashgerov E., "Islam and Islamic education in Soviet and independent Azerbaijan," in: M. Kemper and R. Motika, *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States* (London / New York, 2010), 168-223

Goyushov A., Caffee N. and Denis R., "The Transformation of Azerbaijani Orientalists into Islamic Thinkers after 1991," in: M. Kemper and S. Conermann, *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London and New York, 2011), 306-320

Guliev D. (ed.), *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana* (Baku, 1979)

Hewsen R. and Sir Clauson G., "Notes and Communications on the Chronology of Movses Daskhurantsi," in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 27:1 (1964)

Hirsch F., "Toward an Empire of Nations: Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities," in: *Russian Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (April 2000), 201-226

Hirsch F., *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005)

Iampol'skii Z.I., „K izucheniiu letopisi kavkazskoi Albanii,“ in: *Izv AN AzSSR* 9 (Baku, 1957), 149-152

Ibrahimbekov R., *Slozhenie voln* (Moscow, 2008)

Ismayilov A., *Sumgait – Beginning of the Collapse of the USSR* (Baku, 2011)

Jansen H. and Kemper M., "Hijacking Islam: the Search for a New Soviet Interpretation of Political Islam in 1980", in: M. Kemper and S. Conermann, *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London, 2011), 124-144

Kappeler A., *The Russian Empire: a Multiethnic History* (Harlow (Essex): Routledge, 2001)

Karny Y., *Highlanders: a Journey to the Caucasus in Quest of Memory* (New York, 2000)

Kemper M., "Ijtihad into Philosophy: Islam as Cultural Heritage in Post-Stalinist Daghestan," in: *Central Asian Survey* 33:3 (2014), 390-404

Kemper M., "Ljutsian Klimovič, der ideologische Bluthund der sowjetischen Islamkunde und Zentralasienliteratur," in: *Asiatische Studien / Etudes asiatiques* LXIII (2009), 93-133

Kemper M., "Propaganda for the East, Scholarship for the West. Soviet strategies at the 1960 International Congress of Orientalists in Moscow," in: *Reassessing Orientalism: Interlocking Orientologies during the Cold War*, edited by Michael Kemper and Artemy Kalinovsky (London: Routledge, 2015), 170-210

M. Kemper, "Red Orientalism": Mikhail Pavlovich and Marxist Oriental Studies in Early Soviet Russia," in: *Die Welt des Islams* 50 (2010), 435-476

Kemper M., Conermann S. (eds.), *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, (London and New York, 2011)

Kemper M., "The Soviet Discourse on the Origin and Class Character of Islam, 1923-1933," in: *Die Welt des Islams*, 49 (1) (2009), 1-48

Khalid A., "Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism," in: *Kritika* 1 (2000), 691-699

Kirasirova M., "'Sons of Muslims' in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the Foreign East, 1955-1962," in: *Ab Imperio* 4 (2011), 106-132

Knight N., "Grigor'ev in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?," in: *Slavic Review* 59 (2000), 74-100

Kohrs M., "Geschichte als politisches Argument: Der 'Historikerstreit' um Berg Karabach," in: *Osmanismus, Nationalismus und der Kaukasus*, edited by F. Adanir et al (Wiesbaden, 2005), 58-63

*Krasnaia Zvezda*, the newspaper of the Red Army, (April 1942)

Kurkchian M., "The Karabagh Conflict: from Soviet Past to Post-Soviet Uncertainty," in: *The Armenians, Past and Present in the Making of National Identity*, edited by Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchian (New York, 2005), 147-166

Landa R., "Talant uchenogo i uchitelia. Vospominaniia o E. A. Beliaev (1895-1964)", in: *Slovo ob uchiteliakh (moskovskie vostokovedy 30-60-kh godov)* (Moscow 1988)

Leerssen J., "The Downward Pull of Cultural Essentialism," in: *Image into Identity. Constructing and Assigning Identity in a Culture of Modernity*, edited by Michael Wintle (New York: Editions Rodopi BV, 2006), 31-52

Leezenberg, M., "'A People Forgotten by History': Soviet Studies of the Kurds," in: *Iranian Studies* Vol.48/5 (2015), 747-767

Leezenberg, M., "Soviet Orientalism and subaltern linguistics: The Rise and Fall of Marr's Japhetic Theory", in: *The Making of the Humanities, Vol. 3: The Modern Humanities* (Amsterdam, 2014), 97-112

Lewis B., *Islam and the West* (New York, 1993)

Lewis B., "The Question of Orientalism" (1993), in: *Orientalism: Reader*, ed. by A.L. Macfie (2000), 249-271

*Liudi I sud'by: biobibliograficheskii slovar' vostokovedov – zhertv politicheskogo terrora v sovetskii period (1917-1991)*, edited by Ia.V. Vasil'kov and M. Iu. Sorokina (Saint Petersburg, 2003)

Madelung W., "Ali al-Reza," in: *Encyclopedia Iranica* (online, 2013; originally published: December 15, 1985)

Madelung W., "Khurramiyya," in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam (New Edition)*, Vol. V (Leiden, 1986), 63-65

Mamedova F., *Politicheskaia istoriia i istoricheskaia geografiia Kavkazskoi Albanii* (Baku, 1986)

Mammadaliev V., *Qur'an ve elm* (Baku: Qismet, 2006)

Mammadaliev V., "Qur'an ve genclik," in: *BDU Ilahiyat fakültesinin elmi mecmuesi 4* (2006), 31-34

Mangazeev I., "Soviet Wartime Penal Forces. A 'Penal' Corps on the Kalinin Front," in: *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 15, 3 (September 2002)

Marquardt K.L., "Framing Language Policy in post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Political Symbolism and Inter-ethnic Harmony," in: *Central Asian Survey* 30:2 (May, 2011), 181-196

Martin T., "Borders and Ethnic Conflict: The Soviet Experiment in Ethno-Territorial Proliferation", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, Bd 47 (1999), 538-555

Martin T., *The Affirmative Action Empire, Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (London: Cornell University Press, 2001)

Mathee R., "Safavid Dynasty", in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (last update 28 July 2008) (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/safavids-ii>)

Marx K. and Engels F., *Marx-Engels Werke*, Volume 7 (Berlin, 1851)

Miliband S.D., *Vostokovedy Rossii XX- nachalo XXI v.: Bibliograficheskii slovar' sovetskikh vostokovedov* (Moscow, 2008; first published in 1995)

Minorsky V., "Caucasica IV," in: *BSOAS* XV/3 (1953)

Muradian P., *Istoriia pamiat' pokolenii* (Erevan, 1990)

Mutafian C., "Karabakh in the Twentieth Century," in: L. Chorbajian, P. Donabedian and C. Mutafian (eds.), *The Caucasian Knot. The History and Geo-Politics of Nagorno-Karabakh* (London and New Jersey, 1994), 109-155

Muskhelishvili D., *Istoricheskaia geografiia drevnei Gruzii* (Tbilisi, 1979)

Nielsen J., "Orientalism and Anti-Orientalism: is there a Middle Way?," in: *Ethnology of Sufi Orders: Theory and Practice, Proceedings of the British-Bulgarian Workshop on Sufi Orders* (Sofia 2001), 337-351

Oganesian A., "Vodorazdel", *Golos Armenii (Kommunist)* No. 258 (November 1987)

Patkanov K., *Istoriia Agvan Moiseia Kagankatvatsi*, (translated from Old-Armenian) (Saint-Petersburg, 1861)

Piriev V.Z., "Ob istoricheskoi geografii Azerbaidzhana XIII-XV vv.," in: *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, ed. by Z. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 98-110

Platt K., Brandenberger D., *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006)

Rakhmani A.A., "Azerbaidzhan: granitsy i administrativnoe delenie v kontse XVI-XVII vv.," in: *Istoricheskaia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, edited by Z.M. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 120-128

J. Rau, *Der Berg-Karabakh-Konflikt zwischen Armenien und Aserbaidzhan* (Berlin, 2008)

Ree E. van, "Stalin and the National Question," in: *Revolutionary Russia* 7:2 (December, 1994), 214-238

Reiss T., *The Orientalist* (London, 2005)

Rezvan E.A., "Koran v Rosii," in: S. Prozorov (ed.), *Islam na territorii byvshei Rossiiskoi imperii. Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' I* (Moscow, 2006)

Said E., *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993)

Said E., *Orientalism* (New York, 1978)

Sakharov A., *Moscow and Beyond, 1986 to 1989* (New York, 1990)

Schimmelpenninck van der Oye D., *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (London & New Haven, 2010)

Schimmelpenninck van der Oye D., "Mirza Kazem-Bek and the Kazan School of Russian Orientology," in: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 28:3 (2008), 443-458

Schwarz B., *Musik und Musikleben in der Sowjetunion 1917 bis zur Gegenwart* (Wilhelmshaven, 1982)

Sharifli T.M., "Feodal'nye gosudarstva Azerbaidzhana IX-XII vv. v rabotakh M.Kh. Sharifli," in: *Istoricheskaiia geografiia Azerbaidzhana*, edited by Z. Buniatov (Baku, 1987), 88-93

Shnirelman V., "Politics of Ethnogenesis in the USSR and after," in: *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology* Vol. 30, No.1 (2005) 93–119

Shnirelman V.A., *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001)

Shnirelman V.A., *Who gets the Past* (Washington, 1996)

Slezkin Y., "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism Authors(s)," *Slavic Review*, Vol. 53, No 2 (1994), 414-452

Slezkin Yu., "N.Ia. Marr and the National Origins of Soviet Ethnogenesis," in: *Slavic Review* 55:4 (1996), 826-862

Smith A.D., *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Smith J., "Stalin as Commissar for Nationality Affairs, 1918-1922," in: *Stalin, a New History*, edited by Sarah Davies and James Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 45-62

Spuler B., "Review of Buniatov's *Azerbaidzhan v VII-IXvv.*," in: *Der Islam* 43 (1967), 321-322

Stalin I.V., *Marxism and the National Question* (1912), in: I.V. Stalin, *Works*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954)

Suny R.G., "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations," in: *The Journal of Modern History* 73:4 (December 2001), 862-896

Suny R.G., "Soviet Armenia, 1921-1991," in: E. Herzig and M. Kurkchian (eds), *The Armenians. Past and Present in the Making of National Identity* (New York, 2005), 113-126

Suny R.G., *The Revenge of the Past. Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford USA: Stanford University Press, 1993)

Suny R.G., *The Soviet Experiment. Russia, The USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York and Oxford, 1998)

Suvari C.C., "Conflict and the Construction of Ethnic Identities: The Case of Ivanovka Village in Azerbaijan," in: *Forum of EthnoGeoPolitics*, 2/2 (Amsterdam, Autumn 2014) 34-46

Swietochowski T., "Turkism, Azerbaijanism and the Language Question," in: *Nowy Prometeusz* 4 (2013), 115-124

Tamazishvili A.O., "Iz istorii izucheniia v SSSR tvorchestva Nizami Giandzhevi: vokrug iubileia – E.E. Bertel's, I.V. Stalin i drugie," in: *Neizvestnye stranitsy otechestvennogo vostokovedeniia*, edited by V.V. Naumkin, Vol. 2 (Moscow 2004), 173-198

Tasar E., "The Official Madrasas of Soviet Uzbekistan," in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59 (2016), 265-267

Tchilingirian T., "Religious Discourse and the Church in Mountainous Karabakh," in: *Revue du monde arménien moderne et contemporain* 3 (Paris, 1997), 67-83

Tillett L., *The Great Friendship – Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968)

Tohidi S., "History of Central Asia in the Works of Ziaa Buniatov," (offprint presented by the author, Baku, 2004)

Tokluoglu C., "Defenitions of National Identity, Nationalism and Ethnicity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1990s," in: *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28:4 (July 2005), 722-758

Tolz V., "European, National and (Anti-) Imperial: The Formation of Academic Oriental Studies in Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Russia," in: *Kritika* 9, 1 (2008), 53-82

Tolz V., "Orientalism, Nationalism and Ethnic Diversity in Late Imperial Russia," in: *The Historical Journal* 48, 1 (2005), 127-150

Valiyev A., "Foreign Terrorist Groups and Rise of Homegrown Radicalism in Azerbaijan," in: *HUMSEC Journal* 2 (2008), 95-99

Vasil'kov Ia.V. and M. Iu. Sorokina, *Liudi i sud'by* (Saint Petersburg, 2003)

Velichko V., *Kavkaz. Russkoe delo i mezhduplemennye voprosy* (Saint Petersburg, 1904) (republishep in: N. Velikhanli (ed.), *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana po dokumentam i publikatsiiam* (Baku, 1990)

Velikhanli N., "Izmenenie istoricheskoi geografii Azerbaidzhana v rezul'tate arabskogo zavoevaniia," in: Z. Buniatov (ed.), *Istroicheskaiia geografii Azerbaidzhana* (Baku, 1987), 46-88

Velikhanli N. (ed.), *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana po dokumentam i publikatsiiam* (Baku, 1990)

Vuchinich V.S., *Russia and Asia: Essays on the Influence of Russia on the Asian Peoples* (Stanford, 1972)

Waal T. de, *Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York and London, 2003)

Whittaker C., "The Ideology of Sergei Umarov: An Interpretative Essay," in: *Russian Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Apr. 1978), 158-159

Yunusov A., *Islam in Azerbaijan* (Baku, 2004)

Yunusov A., *Islamic Palette of Azerbaijan* (Baku, 2012)

Yunusov A., "Kuda Vy idete, Buniatstvuiushii akademik?" (*samizdat* article presented by the author) (Baku, 5-12-1989)

Yunusov A., "Mifi i obrazy vruga v istoricheskoi nauke i uchebnikakh po istorii nezavisimogo Azerbaidzhana" (offprint presented by the author, Baku, 2011)

Zubok V., *Zhivago's Children. The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2009)

Zverev A., "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994," in: *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, edited by Bruno Coppieters (Brussels, 1996)

## List of interviews

Arzu Abdulaeva, Baku, Azerbaijan, May 2012

Esmeralda Agaeva, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009 / November 2011 / May 2012

Zardusht Alizade, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009 / November 2011 / May 2012

Roza Arazova, Khazar University, Baku, Azerbaijan, May 2012

Farda Asadov, Khazar University, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009 / November 2011 / May 2012 / October 2015

Tagira Buniatova, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009 / November 2011

Isaak Fil'shtinski, Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia, November 2010

Isa Gambar, Baku, Azerbaijan, May 2012

Dzjamil Gasanli, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009 / May 2012

Altay Goyushov, Baku State University, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009 / November 2011

Hikmet Hajizade, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009 / May 2012

El'dar Ismailov, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009

Sergei Kliashorny, Baku, Azerbaijan, May 2011

Robert Landa, Institute of Oriental Studies Moscow, Moscow, Russia, November 2010

Farida Mamedova, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009

Vasim Mammedaliev, Baku State University, Baku, Azerbaijan, May 2012

Nariman Qasimoglu, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009

Zifa Qurbanova, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009, November 2011, May 2012

Bagrai Seiranian, Institute of Oriental Studies (IVAN), Moscow, Russia, November 2010

M.A. Usmanov, Amsterdam/Kazan', November 2009

Naile Velikhanli, Museum of History of Azerbaijan, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009

Arif Yunusov, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 2009 / November 2011 / May 2012 /  
Amsterdam October 2017

Leyla Yunusova, Baku, Azerbaijan, November 2011 / Amsterdam October 2017

## List of documentaries

Lev Danilov, “Shtrafniki (Subjects of Resolution no 227)” (1989)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqt1DvHKqCk>  
(last accessed 15 January 2019)

Andrei Konchalevskii, “Bremia vlasti” (2003)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=064pWje1NaM>  
(last accessed 20 November 2018)

Davud Imanov, “Echo from Sumqait” (1992)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnlflILmu88>  
(last accessed 10 February 2019)

## List of names

### Zardusht Alizade



*<https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q12848442#/media/File:Zerdusht.jpg>*

Zardusht Alizade (b. Baku 1946) is an independent political analyst in Baku. In the 1980s he worked as an Arabist at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences. For many years Ziya Buniatov was his supervisor. Together with a small group of young scholars, among which also Leyla Yunusova, he founded the Azerbaijani Popular Front in 1987-88. Due to growing nationalism of the movement he left the Popular Front in 1990 and became one of the founders of the Social Democratic Party. In 2000 he left the party but to this day Zardusht Alizade is an important critic of the Yeni Azerbaijani Party and the government of Ilham Aliiev.

## Isa Gambar



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isa\\_Gambar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isa_Gambar)

Isa Gambar (b. Baku 1957) is a prominent Azerbaijani politician and leader of the Musavat Party. Between 1982 and 1990 he worked as a historian at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, under the leadership of Ziya Buniatov. Isa Gambar joined the Popular Front in 1989 and was elected Deputy Chairman in 1990. He was one of the founders of the Musavat Party and elected Parliamentary Speaker during Elchibey's presidency in 1992. In June 1993 Gambar was Acting President of Azerbaijan. To this day Gambar is one of the leaders of Azerbaijani opposition to the Ilham Aliyev regime.

## Dzhamil Gasanli



*[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamil\\_Hasanli](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamil_Hasanli)*

Dzhamil Gasanli (b. Agalikend (Az.SSR) in 1952) is an Azerbaijani historian, who published several books on Turkish-Soviet relations in the 1940s-1950s, and on Khrushchev's *Thaw*. Gasanli was professor of history at the Baku State University (1993-2011) and the Khazar University (2011-2013). Dzhamil Hasanli is the leader of the National Council of Democratic Forces of Azerbaijan since 2013.

## Hikmet Hajizade



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Hikmet\\_Hajizade#/media/File:Hikmet\\_Hajizade.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Hikmet_Hajizade#/media/File:Hikmet_Hajizade.jpg)

Hikmet Hajizade (b. Baku 1954) worked in the 1980s as a senior researcher at the Institute of Physics of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences. In 1988 Hajizade became an active member of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan and he was editor of the movement's newspaper "Svoboda". When Elchibey was in power in 1992-1993, he served as Deputy Prime Minister and as the representative of Azerbaijan in Russia. Since 1993 Hajizade is member of the Musavat Party. He is the founder and vice president of the Center for Economic and Political Studies and author of numerous articles on the problems of transition in Azerbaijan, and the history and theory of human rights.

## Leyla Yunusova



*[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leyla\\_Yunus.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leyla_Yunus.jpg)*

Leyla Yunusova (b. Baku 1955) is an Azerbaijani human rights activist and the director of the Institute of Peace and Democracy. In the 1980s she worked at the Institute of History of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences. Together with a small group of young scholars Yunusova founded the Azerbaijani Popular Front in 1987-88. Due to growing populism of the movement she left the Popular Front and founded the Social Democratic Party, together with Zardusht Alizade. Leyla Yunusova is one of Azerbaijan's foremost dissidents and after imprisonment between July 2014 and December 2015 she left Azerbaijan together with her husband Arif Yunusov. The couple lives in the Netherlands since April 2016.

## Arif Yunusov



*<http://www.publicdialogues.info/en/node/780>*

Arif Yunusov (b. Baku 1955) is an Azerbaijani historian and human rights activist. In the 1980s Yunusov worked at the Institute of History of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences and he attained his doctorate in history in 1986. Arif Yunusov is head of the Department of Conflict and Migration of the Institute of Peace and Democracy. He has published over 30 books, mainly on Azerbaijani history, Islam in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani-Armenian relations. In 2015 Yunusov was sentenced to seven years in jail and released for health reasons in November 2015. Together with his wife Leyla he lives in the Netherlands since April 2016.

## Ziia Buniiatov and the Invention of an Azerbaijani Past

### Summary

My dissertation is devoted to the Soviet post-World War II discourse on Azerbaijani history, which I study through the life and works of Ziia Musaevich Buniiatov, Hero of the Soviet Union, historian and orientalist, born in Baku in 1923, and assassinated in 1997. I explore Buniiatov's publications and his role in the development of an Azerbaijani national identity. By analyzing his historical writings from the late 1950s to the *Perestroika* period, and into the 1990s, when Azerbaijani nationalism culminated in the escalation of the territorial conflict with Armenia over Nagorny Karabakh, I attempted to establish in how far Buniiatov provided the basis for this escalation.

Next to studying his publications, I also explored Buniiatov's biography, his political role in society, his relations with the Azerbaijani Party boss (and later president) Geidar Aliev, and with the Popular Front in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The construction of what I call the "Buniiatov myth" is of crucial importance with regard to both his personal image and the perception of his work as a scholar.

The first chapter focuses on the biography and personality of Ziia Buniiatov and how he became one of the founding fathers of Azerbaijani historiography. Buniiatov's personality is full of paradoxes, which is mainly the result of the construction of an image as "living legend", done by himself, his wife Tagira and several others. Many oral testimonies of my interview partners challenge the carefully constructed heroic status of the scholar and the first chapter is therefore also an attempt to deconstruct the mythological image of Buniiatov, in order to understand the function of this myth for national identity in Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

In the second chapter I analyzed the major works that Buniiatov wrote between 1958 (when his first article was published) and 1987, when the political situation rapidly changed due to Gorbachev's *Perestroika*. Right from the beginning of his career Buniiatov challenged what was regarded, in his eyes, as a foreign and imposed historical canon of Azerbaijan, mainly constructed by Russians or Armenians. Buniiatov saw it as his own responsibility to

create a new and better perspective of the past. Generally the Azerbaijani people had been considered to be newcomers in the region, and former nomads that lacked a glorious history of a strong state and a great national culture, unlike the Georgian or Armenian neighbors. These were Buniiatov's main challenges and he addressed them systematically from the late 1950s to the late 1980s.

Characteristic of Buniiatov's method was the fact that, although he always had a nationalist mission, he carefully operated within the Soviet framework. Although his works had been strongly politicized from the beginning, he always had the image of a "pure", honest and objective scholar. And precisely this image made his work so influential in Azerbaijan. The political message of his work led to a continuing and open confrontation with Armenian scholars. In Armenia he was regarded as an Armenophobic pseudo-scholar, while in Azerbaijan he had a heroic image and his status as a scholar was beyond dispute. This also made him the perfect candidate for setting up a new school of historians that expanded his work.

The third chapter investigates Buniiatov's role in the political turbulence of Azerbaijan from the start of *Perestroika* to his violent death in 1997. In this period his writings are strongly connected to the political events, and they express the changed political atmosphere of the time. The Soviet system eroded quickly and the new protest movement of the Popular Front attacked Buniiatov as a member of the old elite. Buniiatov was caught in a very complex political environment, which threatened to marginalize him as a scholarly authority. The Popular Front rapidly gained popular support and undermined the legitimacy of the Communist Party. The conflict with Armenia escalated and according to the dominant view in Azerbaijan, Moscow supported Armenia. All these factors made Buniiatov employ an even more aggressive style of writing.

When Geidar Aliev returned to power in 1993, Buniiatov got a new role: he went into politics as the moral and scholarly conscience of the Yeni Azerbaijan Party. Azerbaijan was independent since 1991 and the new situation required a new discourse on the past. Buniiatov, who once had been one of the main architects of the Soviet Azerbaijani canon, now easily adapted to the new political challenges. Islam and nationalism were the main pillars of this new national identity. Buniiatov also added another new element to the post-Soviet Azerbaijani identity: the Azerbaijani nation as a victim of the treacherous historical enemy Armenia.

## Ziia Buniatov en de Uitvinding van een Azerbeidzjaans Verleden.

### Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift is gewijd aan geschiedschrijving in Azerbeidzjan in de na-oorlogse Sovjet-Unie. Het leven en werk van Ziia Musaevich Buniatov vormen het uitgangspunt voor dit onderzoek. Buniatov was Held van de Sovjetunie, historicus en orientalist, geboren in Baku in 1923 en vermoord in 1997, ook in Baku. Ik bestudeer Buniatov's publicaties en de rol die hij speelde bij de vorming van een Azerbeidzjaanse nationale identiteit. Door zijn historische werken te bestuderen, geschreven tussen 1958 tot aan zijn dood in 1997, probeer ik een beeld te schetsen van Buniatov's bijdrage aan de politieke situatie van de late jaren tachtig en vroege jaren negentig van de twintigste eeuw. In deze periode escaleerde het voorheen sluimerende conflict met Armenië over de regio Nagorny Karabakh en dit proefschrift laat zien in hoeverre Buniatov een basis schiep voor deze escalatie.

Behalve zijn werk, heb ik ook Buniatov's biografie bestudeerd, zijn relatie met de Azerbeidzjaanse Partijleider Geidar Aliev en zijn houding jegens het Azerbeidzjaanse Volksfront, een beweging die opkwam tijdens Gorbatsjovs *Perestroika*. De constructie van de zogenaamde "Buniatov mythe" is van groot belang voor zijn persoonlijke imago en ook voor de perceptie van zijn academische werk.

Het leven van Buniatov, zijn persoonlijkheid en zijn reputatie als een van de belangrijkste grondleggers van de Azerbeidzjaanse geschiedschrijving zijn de sleutelthema's van het eerste hoofdstuk. Buniatov had een zeer paradoxale persoonlijkheid hetgeen vooral het gevolg was van een zorgvuldige constructie van een imago van "levende legende". Deze mythologische status was in de eerste plaats door hemzelf gecreëerd, door zijn weduwe Tagira en ook door anderen in zijn omgeving. Veel interview-partners hebben deze status ter discussie gesteld en zelfs ten dele ondermijnd. Dit eerste hoofdstuk is zodoende ook een poging geworden om de "Buniatov mythe" te deconstrueren, om zo een beter inzicht te krijgen in de functie van deze mythe voor nationale identiteit in Sovjet- en post-Sovjet-Azerbeidzjan.

In het tweede hoofdstuk heb ik de belangrijkste werken van Buniiatov geanalyseerd, geschreven tussen 1958 (toen zijn eerste artikel werd gepubliceerd) en 1987 (toen de politieke situatie drastisch veranderde als gevolg van Gorbatsjevs *Perestroika*). Onmiddellijk in het begin van zijn loopbaan stelde Buniiatov de historische canon van Azerbeidzjan ter discussie. In zijn ogen was deze canon geconstrueerd door “vreemden”, zoals Russen en Armeniërs, die een verkeerde voorstelling van de geschiedenis hadden voorgespiegeld. Buniiatov zag het als zijn voornaamste taak om deze visie op het verleden te herzien. In het algemeen werden Azeris beschouwd als nieuwkomers in de regio, en bovendien, en dit was nog erger, werden zij gezien als voormalige nomaden die niet konden bogen op een glorieus verleden of een sterke nationale cultuur, hetgeen in schril contrast stond met buurlanden zoals Georgië of Armenië. Dit perspectief gaat Buniiatov stelselmatig ondermijnen vanaf zijn eerste publicatie in 1958.

Hoewel Buniiatov onmiskenbaar een nationalistische missie had, wist hij altijd zorgvuldig te manoeuvreren binnen het raamwerk van de Sovjet-Unie. Ondanks zijn politieke engagement had hij een imago als “puur” en objectief wetenschapper, en dit maakte hem in eigen land buitengewoon invloedrijk. In Armenië daarentegen zag men Buniiatov in de eerste plaats als “Armenofoob” en vanwege zijn soms dubieuze methodes werd hij daar vooral gezien als pseudowetenschapper. Voor Azerbeidzjan was hij echter de perfecte kandidaat voor het opzetten van een hele school van jonge historici die zijn werk zouden voortzetten en zelfs uitbreiden.

Het derde hoofdstuk beschrijft de rol van Buniiatov in de turbulente periode van *Perestroika* tot aan zijn gewelddadige dood in 1997. In deze jaren is Buniiatovs werk nauw verbonden met de politieke gebeurtenissen en zijn stijl wordt nu onverhuld agressief. De Sovjet-Unie erodeerde in hoog tempo en de nieuwe protestbeweging van het Volksfront zag in Buniiatov slechts een relikwie van een failliet systeem. De populariteit van het Volksfront groeide terwijl de Communistische Partij al snel weinig legitimiteit leek te hebben in de ogen van de massa. Tegelijkertijd escaleerde het territoriale conflict met Armenië over Nagornyi Karabakh. Buniiatov’s rol leek uitgespeeld.

Toen Geidar Aliev in 1993 terugkeerde naar het centrum van de macht kreeg Buniiatov een nieuwe rol: hij werd het morele en wetenschappelijke geweten van de Yeni Azerbeidzjan Partij. Vanaf 1991 was Azerbeidzjan een onafhankelijk land en de nieuwe situatie vereiste ook een nieuw perspectief omtrent het verleden. Buniiatov, die ooit een van de grondleggers was geweest van de historische canon van Sovjet-Azerbeidzjan, past zich

snel aan aan de noden van de tijd: hij introduceert islam en nationalisme als de belangrijkste pijlers van een nieuwe nationale identiteit. En Buniatov voegt een derde element toe: het Azerbeidzjaanse volk als slachtoffer van de verraderlijke, historische vijand Armenië.

