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Soviet Azerbaijan



Soviet Baku, year unknown. Photo: DerWolf / Wikipedia

After the dissolution of the Russian empire in 1917 and during the ensuing civil war Azerbaijan became an independent state the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR). Throughout its brief existence from 1918 to 1920, the young state found itself at war with neighbouring Armenia and under assault. In 1920, the Bolsheviks took control in Azerbaijan. The Soviet Union was created in 1922.

Initially part of the so-called "Transcaucasian Federation" within the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan gained the status of a full-right Union republic in 1936. Soviet rule in Azerbaijan lasted for nearly seven decades until, on 30 August 1991, Azerbaijan declared independence from the crumbling Soviet Union, following the example of several other Soviet republics.

Azerbaijanis' identity has long been complex. In Tsarist Russia, Muslim inhabitants of the Caucasus were often referred to as 'Tatars' or simply 'Muslims'. By the end of the 19th century a growing number of Azerbaijanis defined themselves as 'Turks' or 'Azerbaijani Turks.' Although their language is very similar to Anatolian Turkish, Azerbaijanis have never lived under Ottoman rule. Unlike the majority of (Sunni) Turks, most practice Shia Islam, something they share with more than twenty million ethnic Azeris living south of the Araks river in the northwest of Iran. In 1916 62 percent of Muslims in Azerbaijan were Shiite and 38 percent were Sunni.

In the 1920's the Soviet authorities pursued a policy of *korenizatsiya*, or nativization. It consisted of promoting natives to positions of responsibility in the government and the communist party and instituting the equality of Russian and local languages in the public

sphere. The aim was to provide legitimacy for Soviet rule.^[1] In Azerbaijani universities this resulted in a substantial increase in the number of Azeri students and instructors. Non-native speakers were required to learn the local language.^[2] While Azeri intellectuals and political activists which resisted Soviet rule were sent to prison camps, others supported what they saw as a modernization project, complete with literacy campaigns, building of new schools, women's emancipation, and the development of a literary language.^[3] A cultural revival took place in early Soviet Azerbaijan as a number of theaters, clubs and musical companies sprung up.

In 1924, the old Arabic alphabet used for the Azerbaijani language was officially replaced with a Latin script (this was the first of the three alphabet changes that would take place in Azerbaijan in the course of less than 70 years). Within just a few years, literacy rates more than doubled: from 25 percent in 1926 to 51 percent in 1933.^[4] Azerbaijani national culture was officially celebrated, in particular those aspects that had to do with loving one's homeland and fighting against the privileged. As Tadeusz Swietochowski, a Western historian of Azerbaijan, described it,

"In return for the acceptance of and cooperation with the Soviet regime, the nationalities received the guarantees of the right to develop their distinct cultures, to use freely and develop their languages, and to train and employ native cadres in their republics. The legacy of the Russian rule of the past, with its imperialism, chauvinism and Russification, was to be explicitly rejected."^[5]



Stalin promoting indigenization. Photo: Brokenworld Wikispace

The *korenizatsiya* policy came under criticism in the late 1920's and early 1930's, however. The Russian language was increasingly presented as an essential means to share in the

accomplishments of the "more advanced" Russian culture. The requirement for non-Azeri officials and public servants to speak the local language was gradually dropped. In 1936, the Soviet Union adopted a new constitution – known as the "Stalin constitution", which introduced significant administrative changes to the USSR. The new constitution granted full Union republic status to the three South Caucasus members of the Transcaucasian Federation, including Azerbaijan. As described by Swietochowski,

"This was the crowning act in the Stalinist policy of promoting local particularisms by splitting cultural, linguistic, or regional entities. From now on, only vertical relations with the center would be allowed, rather than horizontal links among the national republics, a prelude to the process of forging a new Soviet nation, and it would go hand in hand with Russification."^[6]

In Azerbaijan, the attempt was reinforced to create an *Azerbaijani identity* that would be cleared of any associations with Turkishness or Islam. It was then that the official name of the language was changed from Turkish to Azerbaijani. An accusation of following a Pan-Turkist or Pan-Islamist or "bourgeois nationalist" ideology was sufficient to warrant deportation or even execution. A significant number of Azerbaijani intellectuals, both within and outside of the communist party, fell victim to the Stalinist purges.

In 1940, Cyrillic was adopted as the official alphabet in Azerbaijan.^[7] Gradually, Russian, officially designated as the "language of interethnic communication" in the Soviet Union, started taking over and in many cases displaced local languages in importance. With growing rates of urbanization and increasing levels of education after World War II, many Soviet citizens viewed sending their children to Russian-speaking schools as a precondition for a good career. In Azerbaijan (and particularly in the capital city Baku) this led to the emergence of a group of educated Azeris who preferred using Russian to their native language, especially in the urban academic and professional environments.

Azerbaijan's economy also underwent a significant transformation during the Soviet period. Stalin's policies launched high-speed industrialization in the republic. During World War II, Azerbaijan also proved to be crucial to the Soviet war effort. Some estimates put Azerbaijan's wartime oil production at as high as 70 percent of the USSR's total.^[8] During that time Baku also became one of the key military industrial centres in the entire Soviet Union.^[9] Expanded factories produced steel and electrical motors. The canning and textile industries increased their range of production and took on the tasks of food processing and cotton production.^[10]

The wartime economy would define the development of Azerbaijan's economy for the entire post-war period. There was large-scale food industry, as well as light industry and machine building. The city of Sumgait on the Caspian shore not far from Baku became a centre of metallurgical and petrochemical industry. The second city of Azerbaijan, Ganja, became a centre of food processing and textile production.^[11] In the post-war period, agriculture remained in a prominent position in the republic's economy. The major cash crops were grapes, cotton, tobacco, citrus fruits and vegetables.^[12] Nevertheless, throughout the whole Soviet era Azerbaijan lagged behind other republics in investment levels and living standards (later, during the openness encouraged by perestroika in the 1980's, the existing disparity between living standards in Azerbaijan and other Soviet republics would become a source of discontent).



*Serebrovsky sea oil field in Azerbaijan, 1978.
Photo: constructionphotography.com*

Azerbaijan's oil industry did not fare so well as time passed. Already during the war, fearing Baku's capture by the Nazis, Stalin had ordered plugging the oil wells with concrete. Baku's oil specialists were moved to oil-producing regions in Russia, primarily in the Volga basin region.^[13] After the war ended, many oil wells proved unusable, while the remaining ones suffered from poor pumping methods. The bulk of the Soviet Union's oil production gradually moved to Russia's oil fields. To further develop Azerbaijan's oil production, the Soviet Union had to employ offshore drilling technology. However, such oil was more expensive to produce as compared to the abundant oil from the Volga-Ural and West Siberian oil fields. With the depletion of oil fields, production levels started falling from the late 1960s onwards. By the time the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, Azerbaijan's share in the Soviet Union's oil production was below two percent.^[14] Instead, Azerbaijan was specializing primarily in oil refining and building oil machinery. By 1991, its share in this field stood at sixty percent of the Union's total.^[15]

The 1960s marked a period of important changes in the political life of the republic. The Soviet leadership in Moscow was growing increasingly concerned with corruption and nepotism in the South Caucasus republics. In Azerbaijan, communist party secretary Veli Akhundov was retired after prolonged party criticisms for his "performance failures associated with corruption, matters of party discipline, and what were termed problems of 'localism' in the recruitment, placement, and functioning of cadres."^[16] An ambitious secret police (KGB) major, Heydar Aliyev, replaced Akhundov in July 1969. By the end of the 1960's, the leadership of all three Caucasus republics had been changed.

In his 1991 book *Patronage and Politics in the USSR*, John P. Willerton, a researcher of patron-client networks in the Soviet Union, noted the "special buoyancy" of patronage networks in Azerbaijan:

"Azerbaijani has had an especially strong reputation for pervasive mafia-type networks. Azerbaijani patron-client relationships have been rooted in geographical and clan ties that transcended the political rivalries of the Soviet period. Local mafias flourished in Azerbaijan, seemingly removed from the direct influences of outside factors even though events in Baku were closely monitored by Moscow. Azerbaijan is an especially appropriate setting to consider the conduct and consequences of patronage politics".^[17]

Immediately after his arrival, Heydar Aliyev implemented "extensive personnel turnover ... within all leading party and state bodies, and at both the republic and regional levels ... Within just two and a half years of Aliyev's succession, the Azerbaijan communist party central committee *Buro* included only one Azerbaijani member *not* recruited by the new party boss."^[18] The living standards in Azerbaijan rose under Aliyev's leadership, although they remained below average. In 1970 the per capita income in Azerbaijan stood at 63 percent of the Union-wide total, this increased to 80 percent by 1980.^[19]

Heydar Aliyev carried out a balancing act between *korenizatsia* and remaining on good terms with the central authorities. He promoted Azeris to nearly all positions of authority. In a symbolic gesture, he brought back to Azerbaijan the remains of a writer, Javid Huseyn, who had died in Siberian exile in 1941 during the Stalinist purges. At the same time, Aliyev cultivated his relationship with Leonid Brezhnev, avoided confrontations with Moscow and in 1983 went on to become the first Muslim member of the Politburo, the Soviet Communist Party's all-powerful executive body.



Heydar Aliyev at the opening ceremony of the Narimanov Memorial Home Museum in 1977. Photo: National archives of Azerbaijan

Aliyev's position was weakened after 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet Union's leader. Gorbachev was intent on reducing the dominance of the Brezhnev-era elite in the leading positions in the party and the government. In 1987, Aliyev was forced to resign from his position in Politburo, officially for health reasons, amidst allegations of corruption.

The impact of the seven decades of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan continues to be debated. Some, like Dutch journalist Charles van der Leeuw, who spent part of the 1990s living and working in Baku, pass a damning judgment on the Soviet attempts to re-write Azerbaijani history:

"The true, complete history of Azerbaijan under Soviet rule has never been written, and most probably will never be. Never in history, with the possible exception of southern Europe under the Catholic terror on the eve and during the early years of the Reformation, have events and backgrounds been distorted in such a systematic and shameless manner. Only the Fascist regimes of the 20th century such as those of Germany, Spain and Italy were to better the Soviets in turning chronicles into caricatures so grotesquely.

Even after independence, there has been little time for Azeri scholars to reflect upon their own 20th century history, turbulent as the situation remained. Throughout its domination over Azerbaijan, the Communist Kremlin, no matter how hard it pretended otherwise, has had one ultimate goal only: to deprive Azerbaijan of its right to national dignity and to its own place under the sun. The tone may have been different, the 'need' of 'imperial order' having been replaced by so-called workers' solidarity, but the final objective differed in no way from the previous Russian masters: looting the territory and enslaving the nation."^[20]

Thomas de Waal, one of the leading Western experts on the Caucasus, presents a more nuanced view:

"It is tempting but misleading to see the seventy-year Soviet experiment as just a second Russian imperial project. Ultimate power resided in Moscow and Russia played the role of the big brother, but the Soviet Union was much more complex and contradictory. The Soviet state modernized, terrorized and Russified the Caucasus but also gave it new kinds of nationalism. It also went through radically different phases: from the Bolshevik would-be utopia of international class liberation to the Stalinist authoritarian state of the 1930s to the corrupt, Brezhnev-era multinational state. Modernization meant both the destruction of old traditions and emancipation for women and technological progress. Policy toward the nationalities veered from the implementation of a liberal "affirmative action empire," which gave new opportunities to non-Russian nations, to genocide. While some small ethnic groups benefited hugely from "nativization" programs, others were subjected to deportation and mass terror."^[21]

"...Soviet Azerbaijanis had been entirely altered by the Soviet experiment. Millions of Azerbaijanis had served in the Soviet armed forces, learned to drink vodka, studied in universities or technical colleges, or worked in Russia – and had never set foot inside a working mosque. Standards of health care and literacy were undoubtedly higher in Soviet Azerbaijan, and women had far greater opportunities, but they also lacked basic political and cultural freedoms."^[22]

Further reading

On society and culture

- Audrey Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule*. Hoover Institution Press, 1992.
- Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*. Columbia University Press, 1995.
- Charles van der Leeuw, [Azerbaijan: A Quest for Identity. A Short History](#). Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. See Chapter 7: "Time of the Soviets", pp. 124
- Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2010. Chapter 3: "Soviet Caucasus", pp. 71-97.

On the Soviet economy in Azerbaijan

- World Bank, *Food and Agricultural Policy Reforms in the Former USSR*, Washington, 1992
- World Bank, *Azerbaijan: From Crisis to Sustained Growth*, Washington, 1993.
- World Bank, *Statistical Handbook: States of the Former USSR*, Washington, 1992.

Steve LeVine, *The Oil and the Glory: The Pursuit of Empire and Fortune on the Caspian Sea* (Random House, 2007). Chapter 4 (pp. 41-53) describes the development of the oil industry in Soviet Azerbaijan.

For a short description of the manufacturing sector of the Soviet Azerbaijan, see the section "[Industry](#)" in the [Azerbaijan Country Study](#) (1995) available from the Library of Congress:

"During World War II, relocated and expanded factories in Azerbaijan produced steel, electrical motors, and finished weaponry for the Soviet Union's war effort. The canning and textile industries were expanded to process foodstuffs and cotton from Azerbaijan's fields. Azerbaijan's postwar industrial economy was based on those wartime activities. Among the key elements of that base were petrochemical-derived products such as plastics and tires, oil-drilling equipment, and processed foods and textiles (see table 14, Appendix). In 1991 the largest share of Azerbaijan's industrial output was contributed by the food industry, followed by light industry (defined to include synthetic and natural textiles, leather goods, carpets, and furniture), fuels, and machine building. Significant food processing and cotton textile operations are located in Gyandzha in western Azerbaijan, and petrochemical-based industries are clustered near Baku. The city of Sumgait, just north of Baku, is the nation's center for steel, iron, and other metallurgical industries."

[Appendix A](#) in the [Azerbaijan Country Study](#) provides a selection of statistical data on Soviet Azerbaijan, including health care statistics, data on employment by economic activity, foreign trade, industrial outputs (data provided primarily by the World Bank).

On Stalin's policy towards Iranian Azeris following World War II, and the role of the leadership of Soviet Azerbaijan in Baku, read a fascinating article by Fernande Scheid

Raine in Cold War History, Vol. 2, No 1, October 2001: "Stalin and the Creation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party in Iran":

"In the summer of 1945, Stalin was presented with a new school map of the postwar Soviet Union ... Looking at the Caucasus, however, Stalin shook his head. Taking his pipe out of his mouth he pointed it towards the south and circled the Soviet border to Iran, muttering: "But I don't like the border here."

^[1] Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 110.

^[2] Swietochowski, p. 112.

^[3] Swietochowski, p. 111.

^[4] Swietochowski, p. 114.

^[5] Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 110.

^[6] Swietochowski, pp. 125-126.

^[7] Swietochowski, p. 128.

^[8] Library of Congress, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia: Country Studies*, 1995, p. 118.

^[9] Altstadt, p. 152.

^[10] Library of Congress, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia: Country Studies*, 1995, p. 119.

^[11] Library of Congress, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia: Country Studies*, 1995, p. 119.

^[12] Library of Congress, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Country Studies*, 1995, p. 117.

^[13] Steven LeVine, *The Oil and the Glory*, Random House, 2007, p. 50.

^[14] Library of Congress, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia: Country Studies*, 1995, p. 120.

^[15] Library of Congress, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia: Country Studies*, 1995, p. 120.

^[16] Willerton.

^[17] John P. Willerton, *Patronage and Politics in the USSR*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 191.

^[18] Willerton, p. 197.

^[19] Svante Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (London, M.E.Sharpe, 2011), p. 201.

^[20] Charles van der Leeuw, *Azerbaijan: A Quest for Identity. A Short History*. St Martin's Press, 2000, p. 124.

^[21] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (2010), p. 71.

^[22] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (2010), p. 72.

Nationalism, Elchibey and the birth of the Popular Front



*Abulfaz Elchibey (right) with Alparslan Türkeş of the Turkish MHP party.
Photo: Wikipedia Commons*

Abulfaz Qedirqulu Aliyev, better known as Abulfaz Elchibey (the pseudonym stands for "noble messenger") was born in Nakhchivan, the Azerbaijani exclave sandwiched between Armenia, Turkey, and Iran, in 1938. His father died in the First World War. Recalling his childhood, Elchibey wrote that he would secretly fast and pray on his own. Driven by his desire to study traditional Azeri poets, who had written in the Persian and Arabic languages, in 1957, Elchibey began his education at the Oriental Studies Department at Azerbaijan State University (currently Baku State University). Elchibey later noted that at university he would frequently engage in discussions with friends, concluding that Soviet rule amounted to the colonization of the Azeri nation.^[1] Elchibey studied Arabic which would later bring him to Egypt to work as a Russian-Arabic translator in Egypt in 1963-1964.

After his return from Egypt, Elchibey and four of his friends created a group at the university to call for a revival of Azerbaijani national consciousness. They worked out a strategy to attract members. As Elchibey later explained,

"We had trouble because we were inexperienced, and the KGB was always following us. So we decided to work each individually and do propaganda. I worked with all my might to create national consciousness in the university, among university students. I would create groups of three, five or nine people and talk to them myself. This took time and strength".

One of the young people whose views were influenced by Elchibey was Novella Jafaroglu, later an Azerbaijani women rights activist. She described her first meeting with Elchibey in an

interview with ESI, emphasizing his fascination with the heritage of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and its founding father, Mammed Emin Resulzade.

In 1967 I was working in a village in Nakhchivan, as a chemist in a laboratory. The village was called Keleki. There I met Elchibey. Back then, I truly thought that the Soviet Union was the best thing that happened to us. I read a lot of literature by the Soviet authors but I had no idea of Azerbaijan's history. One day, Elchibey sent word that I meet him at the river side. He started telling me about Mammed Emin Resulzade, Azerbaijan's first independence, the struggle the country had gone through, the purges. He showed me the flag of the first republic of Azerbaijan: This was the first time that I had ever seen it. No one knew it in the country. He explained that he could not have told me all these things at home. There were spies everywhere.



The flag of the ADR (1918), currently the state flag of Azerbaijan

In 1969, Elchibey completed his doctoral thesis on the Tulunid state (a Turkic state in Egypt in the ninth and tenth century). The years 1971 to 1974 marked the emergence of some dissident student groups in Soviet Azerbaijan. Elchibey's arrest on charges of "propaganda against the Soviet Union" came as no surprise. He was handed an 18-month sentence and was imprisoned from January 1975 until July 1976. Several months after his release, Elchibey started working at the manuscript department of the Academy of Sciences, exploring the first written sources of Turkish and Islamic history. It was an isolated job which allowed little room for contact with people. American journalist Thomas Goltz, who interviewed Elchibey in 1991, described this time as "very lonely years indeed" for someone who was a "solitary dissident figure in a distant Soviet republic."^[2]



Rally in Baku, 1990. Russian inscriptions on the placards say "No to murderous Perestroika!" and "To Armenian nationalists, get out of Karabakh!". Photo: FotoSoyuz

The period of the late 1980's marked the creation of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA), an anti-Soviet movement similar in nature to the popular fronts that had already sprung up in the Baltic republics. Elchibey, together with a small group of like-minded intellectuals, stood at the origin of the PFA. Another founder was Isa Gambar, who first met Elchibey in 1983 as a third-year university student. Hikmet Hajizade, a biophysicist who worked like Elchibey at the Academy of Sciences, also became active in the PFA. The two met first in late 1988.^[3]



Hikmet Hajizade. Photo: wn.com

The movement aligned itself at first with *perestroika* principles of gradual reform, a fact reflected in its official name, 'The Popular Front of Azerbaijan in Support of Perestroika.' PFA activists drew on a copy of the program of the Estonian popular front for inspiration.^[4]

They advocated for basic civil rights, restoration of Azerbaijan's Turkic national identity, transition to the market economy, a greater national autonomy for Azerbaijan and especially preserving Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.^[5]

Initially the PFA's official statements stated that it was possible to achieve these goals within the framework of the Soviet Union. However, there was soon a lack of consensus within the PFA on its goals and methods: while more moderate members insisted on gradual reforms, other called for more radical measures, including secession from the USSR.^[6] Isa Gambar told ESI in an interview later that he and Elchibey shared the idea of promoting Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union, establishing a democracy as well as pursuing the unification of Azerbaijan with Azeri-populated provinces in northwestern Iran (the so-called "South Azerbaijan").

The waning hold of Communist ideology in Soviet republics in the late 1980's laid bare the weakness of the officially proclaimed "friendship of the Soviet peoples." Popular movements calling for independence from the Soviet Union employed a distinctly nationalist vision. This vision was not always shared by resident minorities, many of whom had political ambitions of their own.

In Azerbaijan, it was the predominantly ethnic Armenian-populated autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh which became the focus of an escalating conflict from 1987 onwards.^[7] In what became one of the key events in the disintegration of the Soviet Union, on 20 February 1988 the parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh voted to unify the region with Armenia. The move was condemned in Azerbaijan. Rallies and demonstrations were held across the country demanding to keep Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. Interethnic tensions flared. Hundreds of ethnic Azeris fled from the southern regions of Armenia. On 28 February 1988, Azerbaijan experienced some of the worst interethnic violence in the entire Soviet history in Sumgait on the shores of the Caspian Sea, some 35 km from Baku.^[8] Anti-Armenian pogroms swept through the city. The official death toll stood at 32, and almost all 14,000 Sumgait Armenians fled the city.^[9] The events, Caucasus expert Thomas de Waal notes, became a turning point in the relationship of Armenia and Azerbaijan: "After the Sumgait pogroms, Armenia and Azerbaijan were embarked on a collision course, which the Soviet leadership failed to halt".^[10] In November 1988, a series of mass demonstrations began. A growing list of grievances against Soviet rule, including the Soviet authorities' inability (or unwillingness) to protect Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, served as a mobilizing force. Abulfaz Elchibey, an Orientalist scholar and dissident, stood at the forefront of the rising independence movement in 1988-1989.

The Karabakh conflict intensified calls for complete "political, economic and cultural independence of Azerbaijan".^[11] The Popular Front evolved into "an umbrella group uniting individuals and groups of different political orientations who opposed any change in the republic's borders ... and placed emphasis on the use of the Azerbaijani language in the republic."^[12] With the rise in the tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, protests became more intensive. For the first time since 1921, the tri-color flag of the ADR was waved again. At the PFA's first Congress on 16 July 1989, Elchibey was elected Chairman and the Azerbaijan Popular Front declared its mandate as "ensuring the independence of Azerbaijan", "revealing the truths about the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic" and "situating Azerbaijan on a free and democratic foundation."^[13] As Elchibey told US journalist Thomas Goltz in early 1992:

"Democracy is a child of Europe, and it is now rolling over the world like a wave... It is wholly natural that the first countries in the Soviet Union to be affected were those in the Baltics – those closest to democratic Europe. The last will be Central Asia. But Azerbaijan is a special case, partly because of geography, partly because of our history. We were a colony of a European power – and were thus kept in contact with European ideas while other neighboring states were not. Also, we had an independent state for two years, starting in 1918- the first secular republic in the Muslim World."^[14]

Meanwhile, the tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the soon-to-collapse Soviet Union broke out into an ever more vicious confrontation. On 13-14 January 1990, a wave of violence against Armenians swept through Baku. Alarmed by the violent outbreak and the growing power of the Popular Front, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev decided to intervene, dispatching troops and tanks into Baku on January 19 to quash the Popular Front Movement. The official reason for the decision was to fight "Islamic fundamentalism."^[15] That same night, with Azeris taking to the streets to protest, the Soviet troops began a brutal crackdown.^[16] More than 200 Azerbaijanis died as a result. The events of 20 January are still referred to as *Black January* in Azerbaijan.



Bodies of protesters killed by Soviet troops in the "Black January" in Baku (20 January 1990). Photo: unknown

Black January was a turning point. The burial ceremonies for the victims took place at Shehidler Kiyabani (Martyrs' Alley) in Baku. The funeral was an expression of deep resentment: "The harbor was clogged with small private boats blaring their horns. Azerbaijan was united like never before. The era of the Soviet Union was over."^[17] The traditional 40-day mourning period was marked by a national strike.

Four days after "Black January" Gorbachev appointed Ayaz Mutalibov, a high-level Communist functionary, as First Secretary of the Azerbaijan Communist Party. After the

failed putsch attempt by Communist hardliners against Gorbachev in August 1991 in Moscow, a number of Soviet republics declared independence. The Azerbaijan Parliament, spurred on by Mutalibov, followed suit on 31 August 1991. (The parliamentary act establishing independence of the republic came into force on 18 October 1991.^[18]) In September 1991, Mutalibov organized elections, in which he ran unopposed and was elected president. Later that month, the Communist Party disbanded itself, and Mutalibov reinvented himself as an anti-Communist.

The republic's start into independent statehood was tumultuous. The continued losses in the war over Karabakh, including the news about the massacre of civilians by Armenian militants in Khojaly, made Mutalibov increasingly unpopular. Mutalibov resigned in March 1992 but was reinstated by the parliament two months later – only to be forced out again by Popular Front activists, who stormed the parliament in protest.^[19] The new presidential elections were scheduled for June 1992. Heydar Aliyev, who was residing in Nakhichevan at the time, was barred from running due to the legislative age limit for candidates.

Presidential elections, which took place June 1992, were more democratic than any other ballot in Azerbaijan's history thus far. Audrey Altstadt, an expert on Azerbaijan, writes: "The elections, agreed foreign observers, were about as free and fair as possible under the conditions. Elchibey won with just 55 percent of the vote."^[20] At Elchibey's signing-in ceremony, his Popular Front supporters "with tears streaming down their faces, rose to sing the national anthem of the first republic."^[21]

Further reading

- o Paul B. Henze, [The Transcaucasus in Transition](#). RAND Corporation, 1991.
- o Audrey Altstadt, [The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule](#), Hoover Institution Press, 1992.
- o Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary. A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic*. M.E: Sharpe, 1998.
- o Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*. New York University Press, 2004.
- o Ceylan Tokluoglu, "[Definitions of national identity, nationalism and ethnicity in post-Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1990s.](#)" *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4 July 2005, pp. 722-758.

^[1] "[Elçibey'in kendini anlatıyor...](#)", Anti Gazete, 25 August 2010.

^[2] Thomas Goltz, p. 60.

^[3] ESI Interview with Hikmet Hajizade (by e-mail), 1 December 2010.

^[4] Thomas de Waal, "Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War" (New York University Press, 2003), p. 82.

^[5] ESI Interview with Hikmet Hajizade, 1 December 2010.

- ^[6] Thomas de Waal, "Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War" (New York University Press, 2003), p. 87.
- ^[7] Audrey L. Altstadt, "Azerbaijan and Aliyev – A Long History and An Uncertain Future," *Problems of Post Communism*, Vol 50, no 5, September/October 2003, p. 5
- ^[8] Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 31.
- ^[9] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, p. 111.
- ^[10] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, p. 112.
- ^[11] Ceylan Tokluoglu, "Definitions of national identity, nationalism and ethnicity in post-Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1990s" (*Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4 July 2005), p. 726.
- ^[12] Political organization in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, Vladimir Babal, Demian Vaisman, Aryeh Wasserman, pg 25
- ^[13] Azərbaycan Halk Cephesi ve Ebulfez Elchibey, nihalatsiz.com
- ^[14] Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary. A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic*. M.E: Sharpe, 1998, pp. 59-60.
- ^[15] Audrey L. Altstadt, "Azerbaijan and Aliyev – A Long History and an Uncertain Future," *Problems of Post Communism*, Vol 50, no 5, September/October 2003, p. 4.
- ^[16] Audrey L. Altstadt, "Azerbaijan and Aliyev – A Long History and an Uncertain Future," *Problems of Post Communism*, Vol 50, no 5, September/October 2003, p. 4.
- ^[17] Kenan Aliyev, "[Twenty Years After 'Black January,' Azerbaijan Still Struggles For Freedom](#)", 20 January 2010.
- ^[18] Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the UK, "[History of Azerbaijan](#)".
- ^[19] Charles King pg 226
- ^[20] Audrey L. Altstadt, "Azerbaijan and Aliyev – A Long History and An Uncertain Future," *Problems of Post Communism*, Vol 50, no 5, September/October 2003, p. 7. Another estimate is 59.4 percent of the vote (see, for example, the article in the Library of Congress, The Presidential Election of 1992, available [here](#)).
- ^[21] Audrey L. Altstadt, "Azerbaijan and Aliyev – A Long History and An Uncertain Future," *Problems of Post Communism*, Vol 50, no 5, September/October 2003, p. 7.

Elchibey's rise and downfall



Abulfaz Elchibey. Photo: turandanseslenis.blogspot.com

Abulfaz Elchibey's brief presidency (1992-1993) did not bring stability. Elchibey was elected president of Azerbaijan in June 1992. His government was faced with the daunting task of governing a newly independent country which found itself at war and experienced economic collapse. The Popular Front attempted to conduct a range of reforms, including some economic liberalization in line with the IMF's recommendations and adopting some legislation guaranteeing a broad range of cultural rights to minorities. The government conducted negotiations with Western oil companies with a view of attracting the sorely needed foreign investment to the oil sector. As Elchibey wrote later, "According to the drafts of the contracts with U.S., British, Norwegian and Turkish oil companies nearly \$10 billion to the country's industry was to be brought into the country."^[1]

It is conceivable that such reforms, with time, could have brought positive results. Yet time was a scarce resource, and security problems trumped economic concerns. As Carnegie expert Marina Ottaway described it in 2003,

"...a strong popular mandate, which Elchibey had initially possessed, [was] not a sufficient basis on which to build a democratic state – at least not during a war and not when the fledgling democratic government [was] in competition against a well-established, formerly communist party machine. Elchibey had no political experience and no control over the administrative apparatus. The Azerbaijan Popular Front had many supporters but was a weak organization. It had come to power because the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the defeats in the war in Nagorno-Karabagh had weakened the Communist leadership, not because of its own capacity to organize. Making things worse, Elchibey did not have time to focus on consolidating his government and putting into place a program of reform, because war consumed his

attention. He had been elected on an ambitious platform, promising full civil liberties, full cultural rights for all national groups, the freeing of state and legal systems from the ideological influence of the Communist party, the creation of a market economy and environmental protection. But once in office, he was consumed by the problem of consolidating his power and fighting a war."^[2]

Throughout 1992, Azerbaijan kept sustaining losses on the battlefield. Azerbaijan did not yet possess a real army and fighting in Karabakh was done by loosely organized military units that looked like private militias and lacked organization, training, experience and equipment.^[3] Rates of desertion were high. Some of the weaponry which had previously belonged to Russian troops stationed in Azerbaijan ended up in the hands of the Karabakh Armenians.



Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) soldiers from the 8th regiment are rushing out of a trench during operation on the Agdam front. Photo: Jonathan Alpeyrie 2008

Further aggravating the situation, fighting spread beyond the administrative borders of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast. One of the most severe blows came in April 1993, when the entire Azerbaijani region of Kelbajar, which bordered on Nagorno-Karabakh, fell to the Armenians. The occupation was condemned by the international community including the United Nations. Turkey closed its border with Armenia.^[4] As a result of these hostilities, Azerbaijan was inundated with hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons.

Elchibey was an unlikely candidate for the leadership of a war-torn country. He was a scholar and focused on what he knew best: culture and language. Culture wars marked his presidency. For Elchibey, one of the main goals was to "shed ... the Russo-Soviet legacy" and to "(re)assert Turkic identity."^[5] He insisted that the official language of Azerbaijan be called Turkish, as it was the case in the period from 1918 to 1936. This was reflected in the law on language adopted in December 1992. The alphabet was changed back from Cyrillic to Latin.^[6] While Elchibey himself denied pursuing pan-Turkic policies a strong Turkish orientation of the new government was met with rising suspicion on the part of certain ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan.^[7]

Identity-based aspirations dominated Elchibey's foreign policy as well. As Azeri analyst Nazrin Mehdiyeva put it, the Popular Front's cultural strategy became a political strategy.^[8] Elchibey later explained: "I believed that as a country moving toward democracy we should have friendly relations only with other democracies. I wanted to sit face to face only with democrats, with human beings. We distanced ourselves from dictatorships, such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea."^[9] The new government's policies served to antagonize Azerbaijan's large neighbors – Russia and Iran. Azerbaijan's ally of choice was Turkey.

As a symbolic gesture, on an official visit to Russia in his capacity as president of Azerbaijan in September 1992, Elchibey refused to speak Russian and used a translator. Intent on making a total break with the Soviet past and on minimizing Russia's interference in Azerbaijan's affairs, he severed the ties through which Russia could exert control over the country: he was against Azerbaijan's membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and successfully insisted on the withdrawal of Russian troops and military bases. Russia was increasingly unhappy with what it saw as Elchibey's anti-Moscow stance.

Iran's concerns stemmed from the over twenty-million-strong ethnic Azeri minority located mostly in the northwest of the country. Calls for unification of "north" and "south" Azerbaijan (the latter denoting the lands populated by ethnic Azeris in Iran) were common among Popular Front supporters in Baku. When Elchibey was invited to Iran after taking office, he put forth the demand to make Tebriz, the center of the Azeri-populated region of Iran, rather than Tehran his first stop. He insisted on the release of all those imprisoned in Iran for promoting the cause of "united Azerbaijan". Elchibey also stated that all Turks coming from South Azerbaijan would be granted Azerbaijani citizenship.



Abulfaz Elchibey and Heydar Aliyev. Photo: marka.az

Faced with what they saw as an attack on their own interests, both Russia and Iran adopted a confrontational stance vis-à-vis Azerbaijan. As Nazrin Mehdiyeva, an Azeri scholar, argues: "when faced with a possibility of being excluded, Russia and Iran manipulated ethnic groups inside Azerbaijan as 'access channels' to intervene in Azerbaijani domestic politics, destabilize the situation, and bring to power a government that would be more responsive to the demands of Moscow Teheran."^[10] Iran was able to stir up discontent within the roughly 200,000-strong Talysh ethnic minority in the southern regions of Azerbaijan which grew into a secessionist movement.^[11] Russian put increasing pressure along the northern border with Daghestan.

Elchibey's presidency also failed to keep the rivalry of different factions in his government in check. The Popular Front was poorly organized. The administrative apparatus, dominated by former Communists, remained outside Elchibey's control. In a 2004 analysis, German expert on the Caucasus, Hendrik Fenz, painted a picture of a chaotic administration:

"...The Azerbaijani nationalist parties, the Popular Front in particular, discredited themselves through internal mismanagement. Frequent splits, the founding of new parties, and conflict between party factions were symptoms of an intra- and cross-party power struggle that interfered with the parties' main activities and made them appear incapable of effective action."^[12]

Most importantly, the government did not exert control over its military forces. When faced with mounting Azerbaijani losses, Elchibey dismissed one of the key commanders in Nagorno-Karabakh, Suret Huseynov. The move backfired. In June 1993, Huseynov led an open military rebellion against Elchibey. Huseynov's units, largely composed of troops which had fought in Nagorno-Karabakh, seized Ganja, Azerbaijan's second-largest city, and were marching towards Baku. In this state of emergency, fearing a coup d'etat, Elchibey reluctantly invited Heydar Aliyev, Soviet Azerbaijan's erstwhile leader, to Baku to mediate the crisis.

At that time, Heydar Aliyev was living in his native Nakhichevan^[13] (to which he had returned from Moscow in 1990) and held the position of speaker of the regional parliament. Aliyev accepted Elchibey's offer, arriving in Baku on a Turkish plane. Aliyev's arrival spelled the end of Elchibey.

Aliyev acted swiftly. He negotiated with Huseynov, whose "rebel division" had encircled and threatened Baku.^[14] Huseynov would soon receive the position of Prime Minister, albeit not for long. On 15 June 1993, seventy-year old Aliyev was elected Speaker of the National Assembly, thus temporarily obtaining presidential powers. On 18 June, Elchibey left Baku for "self-exile" in his birthplace of Keleki in Nakhchivan. In a later interview, he maintained that his decision to leave was based on his reluctance to provoke a destructive civil war in Azerbaijan.^[15] In the meantime, Aliyev organized a referendum which resulted in a no-confidence vote for Elchibey, finalizing the president's ouster. On 3 October 1993 Aliyev was elected president with 98.8 percent of the vote.^[16] He would hold presidential office until his death a decade later.

In 1994, reflecting on the fall of the Elchibey government, Isa Gambar, a leading PFA and later opposition figure, blamed Russia for this:

"The Elchibey government made many mistakes, but no single one led to its downfall. At that time, democratic governments were being changed in practically all the countries of Eastern Europe and the former USSR. Azerbaijan was no exception to this

trend. Here, two factors were at work: the influence of pro-imperialist forces in Moscow and the society's lack of preparation for democracy."^[17]

Living in obscurity in Keleki, Elchibey wrote about the achievements and failures of his government, yet maintained that they accomplished more than they were credited with:

"One can really see a gap between our promises and our actual achievements. However, a bigger gap exists between what the PFA government had accomplished and what the governments before and after us had and have accomplished."^[18]

Elchibey never officially resigned from presidential office, saying in an interview with *Uncaptive Minds* in December 1996,

"Until June 1997, I consider myself president *de jure* of Azerbaijan. I was elected by the people and I have refused to sign any formal resignation. I will remain here in Keleki until then."^[19]



Visiting the grave of Abulfaz Elchibey on his memory day, 22 June 2006

Elchibey remained chairman of the Popular Front. Now in opposition, the movement was turned into a political party in order to participate in the 1995 parliamentary elections. In 1997, Elchibey returned to Baku to take a more proactive role in opposition politics as the leader of the Popular Front party. He died of cancer in 2000 in a military hospital in Ankara, aged 62.

Further reading

- Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
- Stephen K. Batalden and Sandra L. Batalden [*The Newly Independent States of Eurasia: Handbook of Former Soviet Republics*](#) (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1997).
- Thomas Goltz's *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn Post-Soviet Republic* (M.E. Sharpe, 1998), and in particularly chapter 4 entitled "Karabakh: The Black Garden".
- Thomas de Waal's *The Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York University Press, 2003).
- Marina Ottaway, [*Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*](#) (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).
- Nazrin Mehdiyeva, "Azerbaijan and Its Foreign Policy Dilemma." *Asian Affairs*, vol. XXXIV, no. III, November 2003.
- Hendrik Fenz, [*"The Limits of Democratization in Postauthoritarian States: The Case of Azerbaijan"*](#) (OSCE Yearbook 2004: Baden-Baden, Nomos).

^[1] Abulfaz Elchibey, "Independence: A Second Attempt", December 1993.

^[2] Marina Ottaway, [*Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*](#), 2003, p. 56.

^[3] Martina Ottaway, p. 56.

^[4] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 121.

^[5] Nazrin Mehdiyeva, "Azerbaijan and Its Foreign Policy Dilemma", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. XXXIV, November 2003, p. 274.

^[6] Jacob M. Landau and Barbara Kellner-Heinkele, *Politics of Language the Ex-Soviet Muslim States*, Hurst, 2001, p. 151.

^[7] Nazrin Mehdiyeva, "Azerbaijan and Its Foreign Policy Dilemma", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. XXXIV, November 2003, p. 271.

^[8] Mehdiyeva, p. 274.

^[9] Interview with Abulfaz Elchibey, "Will Be a Free Man", *Uncaptive Minds*, Winter-Spring 1996-1997, p. 113.

^[10] Nazrin Mehdiyeva, "Azerbaijan and Its Foreign Policy Dilemma" (*Asian Affairs*, vol. XXXIV, no. III, November 2003), p. 271.

^[11] Nazrin Mehdiyeva, Azerbaijan and Its Foreign Policy Dilemma, *Asian Affairs*, Vol. XXXIV, November 2003, p. 277.

^[12] Hendrik Fenz, "[The Limits of Democratization in Postauthoritarian States: The Case of Azerbaijan](#)" (OSCE Yearbook 2004: Baden-Baden, Nomos), p. 169.

^[13] Nakhichevan is an autonomous republic of Azerbaijan physically separated from the rest of the country by Armenian Zangezur region, and bordering also on Iran and Turkey. Although it is under Azeri sovereignty, it has a great deal of autonomy and is governed by its own elected parliament. Since the 1960s, the Nakhichevan political elite has governed Azerbaijan ([Heydar Aliyev](#), [President of Azerbaijan](#) (1993–2003), [Abulfaz Elchibey](#), [President of Azerbaijan](#) (1992–1993), [Rasul Guliyev](#), speaker of the [National Assembly of Azerbaijan](#) (1993–1996) and opposition leader, [Christapor Mikaelian](#), founding member of the [Armenian Revolutionary Federation](#), [Stepan Sapah-Gulian](#), leader of [Social Democrat Hunchakian Party](#)

^[14] Note to GK: I have noted that there is more info about this at Charles King pg 227 (but I don't have the book so not able to check)

^[15] "I Will be a Free Man", an interview with Abulfaz Elchibey, *Uncaptive Minds*, Vol. 9, nos. 1-2, 1997, p. 118.

^[16] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 123.

^[17] Interview with Isa Gambar, "The west doesn't know" *Uncaptive Minds* 8, no. 1 (1995): 45-49.

^[18] Abulfaz Elchibey, "Independence: Second Attempt", December 1993, Keleki, Nahchivan.

^[19] "I Will be a Free Man", an interview with Abulfaz Elchibey, *Uncaptive Minds*, Vol. 9, nos. 1-2, 1997, p. 119.

The return of Heydar Aliyev



Heydar Aliyev. Photo: Government of Azerbaijan

When Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan's former Communist leader, arrived in Baku in 1993 to take over control the country was facing defeat on many fronts. Azerbaijan was losing the war in Nagorno-Karabakh; cities were flooded by displaced persons; the economy was hit by the collapse throughout the Soviet economic space; Russia and Iran were hostile and the West was largely uninterested. Aliyev was able to give the population stability. He reversed many of Elchibey's foreign policy decisions and was able to normalize relations with all major powers in the region.

The most pressing dilemma for Aliyev was to decide what to do in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent regions. As Thomas de Waal noted, the confusion which marked the period from Elchibey's ouster to Aliyev's election had serious consequences:

"During four months of confusion, after one president lost office and before another gained it, Azerbaijan lost a huge swath of territory to Armenians east and south of Nagorny Karabakh. This was effectively when the war was lost."^[1]

Initially, Aliyev did try to regain Nagorno-Karabakh. To minimize the political threat to himself, he disbanded battalions loyal to the Popular Front. He was then faced with the challenge of creating a real army. In December 1993, Aliyev launched a new military campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh, which lasted throughout the spring of 1994. It failed. These months saw a high number of Azerbaijani casualties far exceeding Armenian ones. In May 1994, Russia negotiated a ceasefire agreement, and the war was technically over.^[2]

Aliyev decided to mend relations with Russia and Iran and to create better ties with the West. He pursued a foreign policy described as *balanslastirilmis* (balanced). This, he argued, was essential for Azerbaijan to survive in a difficult neighborhood and rebuild its economy. As

Thomas Goltz described it, Aliyev "played the Iranian card well" and "was not above groveling before the Russians as part of his policy of realpolitik."^[3] Azerbaijan agreed to join the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States in 1993 (the step which was sharply criticized by many Popular Front supporters and Elchibey himself).^[4]

Aliyev acknowledged Moscow's interests in the South Caucasus region. He signed protocols referring to the common defense and economic space. Goltz noted that Aliyev paid "lip service" to Moscow and "obstinately refused to implement any of the agreements in a meaningful way."^[5] The ties between the two countries improved in and resulted in a number of strategic commercial and economic agreements, most notably a lease of Qabala (Gabala) radar station and the delimitation of the Caspian Sea.^[6]

Aliyev maintained friendly ties to Turkey through his personal relationship with Demirel. Aliyev saw Turkey as a strategic partner and a "gateway to the West for the Azerbaijani economy", and faithfully cultivated this friendship^[7] Turkey was also the safest way for Azeri oil to reach Western markets.



Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Photo: earthmagazine.com

Aliyev used his country's hydrocarbon resources to give the West a stake in Azerbaijan's stability. Oil exports and the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (completed in 2006) became important factors of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. High levels of investment and technological expertise were necessary to develop Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon resources. The decision was made to invite foreign companies into Azerbaijan. As Hoşbakt Yusufzade, a leading Azerbaijani oil expert and the author of the energy strategy of Azerbaijan, recalls:

"When the USSR collapsed, technology and money were needed to drill the Azerbaijani oil. We could either wait 30 years until we had the money and means or invite foreign companies. Aliyev chose the latter.

There were people who objected. They said "we can do it ourselves." But it was a risky and expensive work and having international partners was a very good idea." ^[8]

When Heydar Aliyev came to power, he halted the ongoing negotiations Elchibey had begun with western oil companies, which excluded Russia and Iran. The first thing Aliyev did was to grant a 10-percent share to Russia's Lukoil in a forthcoming contract.

Heydar Aliyev created a team to negotiate the terms of the contract with a British Petroleum-led consortium of international companies for development rights of the Azeri oil fields. Heydar Aliyev also sent his son, Ilham Aliyev, "to be his eyes and ears at the talks". ^[9] The negotiation focused on the distribution of profits and the oil fields that would be included. By all accounts, the negotiations produced a good deal for Azerbaijan. The contract negotiated entails investment of 7.4 billion USD over 30 years in three offshore oil fields (Guneshli, Chirag, Azeri). In addition, the consortium had to pay the Azerbaijani side a 300 million USD "signing bonus." ^[10]

The consortium consisted of ten major companies from six countries. As oil expert Levine explains in his book on Caspian oil politics, the process of distributing shares of the fields to the consortium partners was "a strategy of building a diplomatic shield". The final contract, which was soon referred to by Azerbaijanis as "contract of the century", was signed on 20 September 1994 in Baku's Gulistan Palace. Looking back today, Yusufzade highlights its importance not only in terms of investment but also as a signal to other investors that Azerbaijan was stable enough for large-scale investments. ^[11]

Having secured some gains in foreign policy and in oil diplomacy, Heydar Aliyev set out to consolidate his domestic power. In October 1994, Aliyev removed Suret Huseynov, the commander who had staged a rebellion against Elchibey in June 1993, from his position of Prime Minister on charges of treason. The same charge was put against the representatives of other "power ministries", i.e. the Ministers of Defense and the Interior. Huseynov fled to Russia. ^[12]



Alikram Hummatov. Photo: qwiki.com

Aliyev's position remained contested. As Charles King, an expert on the South Caucasus, noted that in the first years of his presidency Aliyev's rule was challenged by regional clan strongholds and loyalists of different Russian, Turkish and Iranian networks. National separatism had resurfaced in the country's south populated by Talysh, an ethnic group, speaking an Iranian language. In June 1993, Talysh nationalist colonel Alikram Hummatov had proclaimed "Talysh Mughan Autonomous Republic" during an uprising in the city of Lenkaran in the south of Azerbaijan. While Aliyev had no army at his disposal at the time, he instead provoked a local rebellion against Hummatov, who ended up fleeing.^[13] As King described it,

"Unlike his many opponents, Aliyev stood at the center of a vast network of friends and colleagues from his days as Communist Party leader and, even more crucially, from his earlier career as head of the Baku branch of the KGB."^[14]

Other armed uprisings and assassination attempts against Aliyev followed,^[15] yet he was able to consolidate his grip on power after each one.

The pro-presidential New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) was established and a new constitution was adopted in 1995. The first parliamentary elections of independent Azerbaijan were held on 12 November 1995. The YAP party came in victorious.

Further reading

Heydar Aliyev (1923-2003), is one of the most influential politicians in the history of modern Azerbaijan The *New York Times* described him in a 1993 article "["Ex-Kremlin Figure Returns to Power in Azerbaijan"](#)" as "almost a perfect child of the

Soviet system" who successfully reinvented himself "as an anti-Soviet Azerbaijani nationalist."

In October 1993, Aliyev was officially elected president.

In his article "**Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan: A Failed Revolution**" (*Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 53, no. 3, May/June 2006), Anar Valiyev analyzed the West's reluctance to raise objections during the 1993 elections, in the name of preserving stability in a strategically important region:

"Neither international organizations nor the United States and Europe criticized the elections. More concerned with regional stability, the foreign powers hailed Heydar Aliyev's iron fist for bringing stability to the country, and oil companies launched negotiations for oil contracts. Aliyev's accession satisfied all the regional players, including Iran and Russia, which had seen Elchibey as a threat to their interests" (p. 18)

Caucasus expert **Svante E. Cornell**, in a 2001 article "[Democracy Falters in Azerbaijan](#)" in *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 12, no. 2, notes in particular that Aliyev benefited from the support of Turkey, which by then had grown disappointed with Elchibey's inability to bring stability to the country:

"Given his [Aliyev's] Soviet past, most regional and international observers assumed that Aliev would be Moscow's man. Subsequent evidence has shown, however, that Aliev's main support has come from the same quarter that had supported Elcibey--Turkey. In fact, the Turkish Foreign Ministry had always suspected Elcibey of being too inexperienced and erratic to lead Azerbaijan in such a complicated internal and regional context, and it saw Aliev, with his vast political experience at the highest level, as the one man who could manage the task. By early 1993, the situation in Azerbaijan had gotten so bad that Turkey had "started looking out for alternative horses to back." Aliev, then head of the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhjivan on the Turkish and Iranian border, was the obvious choice" (p. 120).

Audrey L. Altstadt, in "**Azerbaijan and Aliev – A Long History and an Uncertain Future**" (*Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 50, no. 5, Sept. – Oct. 2003), written shortly before Heydar Aliyev's death in December 2003, describes him as "the most significant political figure in Azerbaijan since the death of Stalin":

"In the years of his presidency, Aliyev has maintained the independence of his small state despite pressure and incursions by two powerful neighbours, Iran and Russia, and at the same time he has finessed the demands of more than a dozen foreign oil companies." Aliyev performed an impressive "balancing act" maintaining good relations with the West without implementing democratic reforms.

"He presides over elections that are routinely judged not to be "free and fair" by international observers, but nonetheless Azerbaijan remains a candidate for entry into an expanding NATO. [...] Moreover, thanks to his fervent anti-terrorist rhetoric and the offer of small police contingents for Afghanistan and Iraq, Aliyev not only maintains good relations with Washington, but also won

the rescission of the hated Sanctions Amendment (Section 907) to the 1992 Freedom Support Act, which had banned direct US government aid to Azerbaijan. Not surprisingly, even his sworn opponents refer to him as "The Man" (pp. 3-4)

In Altstadt's view, Aliyev personified the very institution of presidency in Azerbaijan:

"Aliyev has turned Azerbaijan's presidency into the powerful office that it is. The man, in short, made the office, not the reverse." (p. 4)

In "[Democracy Falters in Azerbaijan](#)" (*Journal of Democracy*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2001), pp. 120-121). Svante E. Cornell sums up the first years of Aliyev's presidency as having restored some stability but thwarted Azerbaijan's democratic development:

"A the wave of democratic enthusiasm that had swept through the republic in 1991-92 had cooled significantly as early as 1993. Political instability and the economic hardship caused by the war, the dismantling of the Soviet command economy, and mismanagement under the APF government had led to a powerful wave of nostalgia for the Brezhnev era. And those "good old years" were associated with one man: Heydar Aliyev. Aliyev was the only person whom both Azerbaijanis on the street and foreign observers saw as capable of bringing Azerbaijan back on track. For an overwhelming majority of the population, stability was a more urgent concern than the abstract concept of democracy, which was generally seen as having brought nothing but disorder and poverty. It is reasonably certain that Aliyev would have won the 1993 presidential election overwhelmingly even if it had been held under proper democratic conditions. By 1997, Aliyev was credited, both domestically and internationally, with having restored order in Azerbaijan; with having succeeded in attracting numerous foreign oil companies to the country; with having improved Azerbaijan's standing in world affairs; and (with Turkey's help) with having created the foundation of a modern army."

All this, however, came "at the cost of political liberties and democracy" ("[Democracy Falters in Azerbaijan](#)", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2001), pp. 120-121).

In another article "[Azerbaijan in Transition to the New Age of Democracy](#)", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 36 (2003), Alec Rasizade, while giving credit to Heydar Aliyev's political skills, is highly critical of the growing socioeconomic inequality in Azerbaijan during his presidency:

"what has developed under Aliyev's presidency is a pitiable society of social and economic extremes, contrasting the record of Soviet equity in free health care and all levels of education, affordable housing, effective sanitation, and guaranteed employment." (p. 346).

For selected interviews with Heydar Aliyev, see the [list compiled by Azerbaijan International](#).

[1] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 122.

[2] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 123-124.

[3] Goltz, p. 371

[4] Abulfaz Elchibey, "Independence: A Second Attempt".

[5] Goltz, p. 446.

[6] Margelov, Michael , Russian interests....(also see Nuriyev article). Nasib Nassibli, "Azerbaijan: Oil and Politics in the Country's future," in Michael P. Croissant and Bulent Aras (ed.), *Oil and Geopolitics in the Caspian Sea Region* (Westport and London: Praeger, 1999), p. 107

[7] Angeliki Spatharou, *The Political Role of Oil in Azerbaijan, 1989-1994*, 33

[8] 5 July 2010 Yusufzade presentation at ADA Summer School

[9] Steve Levine, *The Oil and the Glory: The Pursuit of Empire and Fortune on the Caspian Sea*, Steve LeVine, Random House. Abstract [here](#).

[10] Steve Levine, *The Oil and the Glory: The Pursuit of Empire and Fortune on the Caspian Sea*, Steve LeVine, Random House.

[11] 5 July 2010 Yusufzade presentation at ADA Summer School

[12] Charles King, p. 227 (Thomas Goltz provides a somewhat different take on this saying that Aliyev gave Huseynov powers that he clearly would fail to carry out so he also was seen by the public as for example responsible for continued losses on the Karabakh front., see p. 414, pp. 447-448).

[13] Described in detail by Goltz, p. 413.

[14] Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom*, pg 226

[15] Two coup attempts involved Interior Ministry troops, and one of the attempts (1995) was linked to the Turkish deep state. This is explained by Thomas Goltz and confirmed by the Susurluk report, as well as by Ozdem Sanberk who flew to inform Heydar Aliyev of the plot. Charles King in his 2008 book *The Ghost of Freedom* also wrote of numerous coup attempts: "Actual or alleged coup d'etat became an almost annual occurrence – in 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1998 – but in the aftermath of each one, Aliyev was able to augment his power over both rivals and past associates" (p. 277).