

When Russia held Iranian Azerbaijan

We print here excerpts from EIR's 1984 Special Report, "How Moscow Plays the Muslim Card in the Middle East," about the Soviet occupation of the northern half of Iran after World War II, and Moscow's subsequent sponsorship of the so-called Democratic Party of Azerbaijan. Today's Transcaucasus crisis has brought these matters alive again, with the prospects of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic bolting to join Iran, or Moscow, in its move to prevent that, marching south once again.

Some of the Soviet personnel mentioned have disappeared or changed their posts. Former Politburo member Geidar Aliyev, the career intelligence officer from Azerbaijan, was made a first deputy prime minister of the U.S.S.R. in 1982. Aliyev lost his Communist Party and government posts in October 1987, at the age of 64, after reportedly suffering a serious heart attack. But the Soviet press reported his presence at various government meetings during the following year, and other sources have alluded to his continuing involvement in Azerbaijani politics. Abdul-Rakhman Vezirov, the Azerbaijani party chief ousted Jan. 20, after Armenian complaints he had fanned the violence in Azerbaijan, had old intelligence ties to Aliyev. Vezirov had served overseas, as Soviet ambassador to Pakistan, among other postings.

Though the dramatis personae have changed, the Soviet intelligence agencies' ability to undercut genuine nationalists by means of provocation and instigation of violence is much in evidence in the present crisis. It relies on the networks described here.

The center of aspirations

The Soviets never made any bones about where the Middle East ranks on their list of geopolitical priorities. A Nov. 25, 1940 note from the Soviet government to the Third Reich spelled out Soviet demands for further definition of the spheres of influence carved up between them in the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement the year before. Moscow consented to join the Germany-Italy-Japan alliance (it never did) only if granted a land and naval base in the area of the Bosphorus

and the Dardanelles and only "provided the area south of Batum and Baku in the general direction of the Persian Gulf is recognized as the center of the aspirations of the Soviet Union."

The Azerbaijani Communist Party

By the late 1920s, the Communist International's Third World operations were reshaped to emphasize the building of individual Communist parties, but the role of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, with its heritage from the "Islam-Marxist" N. Narimanov (shot in the 1930s as a "nationalist deviationist"), stayed as strong as ever. The party's approach, later perfected by Geidar Aliyev, was to exploit indigenous belief structures, but tame them away from the disruptive excesses of Islamo-Marxists and shape them as a means for the outward expansion of influence. Azerbaijan supplied organizers and administrators to Soviet Central Asia proper, establishing Baku as the hub of Soviet activity in the Islamic world. The Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi Communist parties were organized from Baku.

Baku was also a staging-place for operations of the GPU and the NKVD, the acronyms by which the Soviet state security organization today called the Committee for State Security (KGB) was known in the 1920s and 1930s. The GPU had an Eastern Department and a general Foreign Department in which there was an Eastern Section handling operations in Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, and Iraq. Beginning in the 1920s, the GPU built up an extensive network of deep-penetration agents, to the point where defectors testified that GPU agents included functionaries in important Iranian government ministries, consuls of the Iranian diplomatic service, Iranian police officials on the take and even a prince of the House of Qajars. Soviet operatives typically included members of Iranian and Azerbaijani families that split themselves on two tracks so as to have a stake in the future of their area, no matter who ended up controlling it; such was the case of the two Taghi-Zade brothers, known as the Red and the White Taghi-Zades. The former acted as a Soviet agent run out of Baku, maintaining a liaison for the Soviets with German intelligence networks in Iran during the 1930s, while the Tabriz-based "White" brother, Sayid Hassan Taghi-Zade, became an Iranian senator and eventually the Iranian delegate to the United Nations, lodging complaints against Soviet behavior in Iran in 1946.

Also in Iran, the GPU attempted to develop leverage by cultivating ethnic minorities—Kurds and Armenians. In the case of the Armenians, this involved a GPU interface with the Armenian Apostolic Church, several of whose bishops deployed on GPU missions from the church's center in Yerevan, Soviet Armenia, into Iran, China, India and elsewhere.

Soviet occupation

What the accumulated Soviet capabilities meant for adjacent countries became evident at the end of World War II,

when Soviet troops occupied the northern half of Iran, and for a period of nearly a year showed every intention of staying there to secure that “center of aspirations . . . in the general direction of the Persian Gulf” about which they had informed the Third Reich’s Foreign Ministry before the Hitler-Stalin Pact was broken. In August 1945, as an agreed-upon early 1946 deadline for Soviet withdrawal from northern Iran drew near, the Soviets threw their backing behind the formation of an independent Democratic Party of Azerbaijan. On Dec. 12, 1945, they backed the proclamation of the autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan, with its capital in the north Iranian city of Tabriz. Kurdish separatists simultaneously set up a Kurdish People’s Government, holding a strip of territory to the west of the Azerbaijani entity and bordering on Iraq, Turkey, and the Armenian S.S.R.

The head of the “independent Azerbaijan” operation was an Iranian Communist named Jaafar Pishevari, who was none other than the Islamo-Marxist Sultan-Zade, who had attended the Communist University in Soviet Turkestan and been present at the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928. He had also been an official in the short-lived Soviet Republic of Ghilan, which existed in 1920 and 1921 when the Red Army occupied the southern coast of the Caspian Sea; Josef Stalin had supported hanging on to Ghilan, but Lenin defeated that policy at the time.

The Soviet Army did pull out of Iran in 1946, but the Azerbaijani party leadership kept its agents in the Azeri part of Iran, running them in close collaboration with the KGB. The leadership of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan in large part relocated to Baku and points north, including Moscow and Leipzig, East Germany—a center for unreconstructed Nazis working in the Communist intelligence services. Pishevari was killed in a car crash in the Soviet Union in 1947. One of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan’s prominent military figures, Gen. Golam Yayha Daneshian, lived in Baku after 1946 and was multiply honored with Soviet military and political medals. He and other of the “Democratic Azerbaijan” exiles maintained ties across the unusually porous border between Soviet Azerbaijan and Iran. After the Khomeini revolution, they or their agents returned there more frequently.

The wartime and postwar head of the Azerbaijani party, Mir Diaffir Bagirov, reportedly fond of the slogan “Long live the united people of Azerbaijan!” was a close friend of the KGB chief Lavrenti Beria, whose experience in Baku went back to pre-1917 days when he reported both to the Czarist Okhrana and to the Baku party chief Anastas Mikoyan. With Beria, until Beria’s execution in 1953, and alone, until he himself was eliminated in 1956, Bagirov personally ran agents in merchant circles in Iranian Azerbaijan.

Aliyev

Future Azerbaijani Communist chief Geidar Aliyev reportedly had roots in the religious establishment. It is be-

lieved that one of his relatives was Ali-Zade, longtime head of the Muslim Spiritual Administration of the Transcaucasus. In the summer of 1945, when Pishevari was preparing his “independent Azerbaijan” gambit, Sheikh-ul-Islam Ali-Zade went on a special asset-building mission to Iran, visiting Tabriz, Qazvin, and Teheran on invitation from the Iranian Muslim official, Sheikh-ul-Islam Malayeri. This was the time when Moscow was sending every conceivable religious emissary into the Middle East, starting with the grand tour of the region made by Patriarch Aleksei (Simansky) of the Russian Orthodox Church/Moscow Patriarchate. Iran was still under joint British and Russian occupation. In each zone, there were prisoners in jail for collaboration with the Nazis during the war. Many of these had been members of a Nazi fifth column brought into being by skilled experts playing an anti-imperialist card, in the way the Soviets do today. The story of Ali-Zade’s visit goes, that Malayeri asked him if he could not get “poor, innocent Iranians . . . still kept in jail for their alleged connivance with the Germans” to be set free. “Can you use your influence with the Soviet ambassador to effect their speedy release? If you do, you will give us an irrefutable proof of the position you enjoy with your authorities.” Ali-Zade did prevail upon the Soviet ambassador, the internees were set free, and Moscow propaganda capitalized on the whole affair to make Britain look bad for not releasing the analogous people in the southern part of the country.

Geidar Aliyev, born in 1923, launched his career through the KGB during those years. According to Soviet emigré Ilya Zemtsov, who worked under Aliyev in Baku, the former covert communications officer behind German lines was assigned to a newly expanded Eastern Department of the KGB in 1953. In the following years, says Zemtsov, Aliyev was deployed in Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkey again.

In 1957 he got his degree from the History Faculty, State University of Azerbaijan, and by 1964 he was deputy chairman of the Azerbaijani KGB with the rank of colonel. In 1967, the year Yuri Andropov became national KGB chairman, Aliyev was made head of the KGB in Azerbaijan. When Ayatollah Khomeini was living in Iraq in the 1960s, agents from Aliyev’s Azerbaijani KGB maintained a Soviet liaison with him, according to an Iranian source.

In 1969, Aliyev took over as First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party.

Just months before his November 1982 elevation to full Politburo membership, according to the *Times* of London, Aliyev told visitors in Baku of his “personal hope that the Azerbaijanis will be united in the future.”

References

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