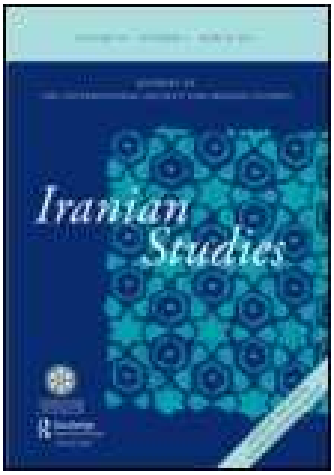

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The Rise of Red Kurdistan

Current literature on twentieth century Kurdish history overwhelmingly covers Kurdish populations and national movements within the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. This article, hoin Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan,ever, focuses on Soviet Kurdistan and Kurdish policy in Azerbaijan between 1920 and 1937 through the broader question of national minorities within the republic. It is claimed here that the Soviet policy on Azerbaijani Kurds was part of a multilayered issue. First of vnall, the Kurds of Azerbaijan were semi-nomadic mountain dwellers transformed by the modernization policies implemented in Soviet territories. Azerbaijani Kurds were a national identity within the Soviet Union and thus subject to ethnophilic All-Union policies in those years. Finally, Kurds were one of the numerous national minorities in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan who were exposed to the national minority policies executed within the republic by the administration in Baku. The national minority policy in Azerbaijan was often contested and limited by local conditions and obstacles. Therefore, the granting of cultural rights in the 1920s to national minorities, which included the Kurds of Azerbaijan, the promotion of these rights in the 1920s and 1930s, and opposition to these policies can only be examined with regard to these three layers.

Introduction

Current literature does not give a clear presentation of the situation between titular nationality and national minorities, including the Kurds in Azerbaijan, who were one of the numerous minorities in the republic.[1] According to Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, for instance, there was already an assimilation policy in Azerbaijan and this policy aimed at the unification of all nationalities under a single Azerbaijani identity starting in the 1920s. They argue that, in 1926, the national minorities were deprived of their national languages and absorbed into the Azerbaijani nation.[2]

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[1]D. Muller, "The Kurds of Soviet Azerbaijan, 1920–91," *Central Asian Survey* 19, no. 1 (2000): 41–7.
[2]Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union* (London, 1967), 130.

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Stephen Blank also repeats these claims by referring to Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay.[3] Considering the developments in Ukraine and in the European part of the USSR, it has been suggested that the nationalities policy on national minorities in each republic of the Soviet Union was altered after 1932.[4] In fact, these claims are far from the reality of the 1920s and 1930s in Azerbaijan as they are merely extrapolations of the reality in Russia proper and the western territories (such as Ukraine after 1932) to the rest of the Union. As this article demonstrates, the reality on the ground was far more complex than the Azerbaijani Turkic nationalists' termination of minority rights as early as the 1920s. This complexity is illustrated by the following situation. Between 1923 and 1930, the Kurds of Azerbaijan were the only minority (except Armenians) that had an administrative territorial division bearing their name. The period when the Kurdish population experienced the benefits of the national minority policies, however, was the years from 1931 to 1936.

The aim of this article is to understand this complexity through both the broader Soviet nationalities policy and developmentalist goals and factors on the republican level. At the All-Union level Soviet nationalities policy promoted titular identities of each republic, including the titular identity of Azerbaijan, providing it with a modernization program that focused on education. Soviet republics did not have homogenous populations and included various national minorities. The promotion of titular national identity did not mean an assimilation of these minorities. On the contrary, until 1937, the Soviet central administration did its best to avoid the assimilation of national minorities within each republic by the titular nationalities.

The Azerbaijani Soviet administration and the Azerbaijan Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (AKP(b)) aimed at the rapid modernization of this underdeveloped corner of the Union. This modernization attempt included transforming illiterate peasants, who made up nearly 90 percent of the population, into literate citizens. Education and literacy campaigns were not only about the Turkic majority of the republic but targeted minorities like the Kurds. Moreover, the national minorities policy aimed to provide a utopic target of primary school education in minority languages. The Kurds of Azerbaijan were one of the numerous national and ethnic minorities within Soviet Azerbaijan who were supposed to benefit from this policy. The administration in Azerbaijan, in addition to these literacy and education campaigns for modernization, had political reasons for supporting the cultural rights of national minorities. By supporting the national minorities, they wanted to keep the titular (Turkic) nationalism under control and prevent any enmity between the Turkic majority and the various minorities of the republic. In the 1920s, the Soviet regime considered Azerbaijan a model of modernization and development that could be presented to the peoples of Iran and Turkey. The administration saw the fact that the main body of the Kurdish population lived in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq as an opportunity. The policy implemented

[3]Stephen Blank, *The Sorcerer as Apprentice, Stalin as Commissar of Nationalities, 1917–1924* (Westport, CT, 1994), 138.

[4]T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY, 2001).

over the Kurdish minority of Azerbaijan could be an example of the socialist nationalities policy's superiority for the Middle East, a region dominated by either nation builders who aimed to assimilate the Kurds or European colonial powers that saw Kurds a pawn ro be used. Finally, the Soviet Kurds could compare their favored position with their kin in other countries and this would guarantee their allegiance to the Soviet state.

On the ground, however, campaigns to educate and spread literacy among the Kurdish population met with serious obstacles, notably the lack of an alphabet, the extensive Turkification of Kurds before Soviet rule, and the absence of language homogeneity. The absence of language homogeneity among different Kurdish regions, divided and isolated by mountainous terrain, is attributed to the fact that the Kurdish people lived across different countries, spoke different versions of Kurdish, and were exposed to different levels of Turkification. Perhaps the most important obstacle was the strong resistance from pro-Turkish and pro-Russian factions in the AKP(b) and the republican apparatus in Azerbaijan to the All-Union national minorities policy of the Bolshevik regime. This internal opposition considerably delayed their works. These impediments delayed the creation of a Kurdish alphabet based on the Latin script and furthermore hindered the development of primary education in Kurdish and their efforts to replace an oral nomadic-tribal culture with a sedentary written culture. The Kurdistan Uezd and Okrug, established in 1920–30, had already been erased from the administrative map of Azerbaijan.[5] Yet in 1930–31, as a result of the Bolsheviks' strong advocacy, national minorities policy achieved preliminary and limited success. This period ended in 1937–38 and is marked by a change in the policies pursued towards the national minorities. However, this period is beyond the scope of this paper.

Red Kurdistan: A Soviet Administrative District

In Transcaucasia of the 1920s and 1930s, major Kurdish settlements were in Armenia and Azerbaijan. There were also smaller settlements in Georgia.[6] The Kurds of Azerbaijan were predominantly Shi'ite Muslims, while the Kurds of Armenia and Georgia were Yezidis with a small minority of Sunni Muslims. There has been a Kurdish presence in the Caucasus since the Shaddadid dynasty in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the existence of some Kurdish tribes in Karabakh (or Karabagh) highlands was recorded at

[5]Uezd is a Russian term at secondary or district level administrative subdivision within the borders of Imperial governorates. This subdivision was used by the Russian Empire and in the early years of the Soviet Union. Okrug is also an administrative term at primary or regional level but denoted a larger territory than uezds.

[6]Despite current knowledge of the Yezidis's distinct identity, this group was considered to be part of the Kurdish population of the Soviet Union during the 1920s. In Armenia, the Yezidi Kurdish population was in Leninakan (Gumri) and Echmiadzin Uezds. According to 1924 figures, the Yezidi Kurdish population numbered 15,000–20,000. Except three villages, all of them were semi-nomadic and the literacy rate among Yezidi Kurds was 1 percent; "Partrabota sredi ezidov," *Zaria Vostoka*, June 25, 1924, 4; "Ezidskaia Derevnia," *Zaria Vostoka,* April 8, 1925, 4; "Zak. soveshchanie po rabote sredi natsmen'shinstv," *Zaria Vostoka*, July 2, 1926, 3.

the end of the sixteenth century. However, nearly all the contemporary Kurdish population of Azerbaijan migrated in the nineteenth century from Iran.[7] Their language was Kurmanji, and they named themselves Kurmanji.[8] Nearly all Kurds of the Soviet Azerbaijan lived at the western end of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. In terms of Soviet republican borders, they were located in the east of the Zangazur mountain range of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (hereafter SSR) and west of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast in Azerbaijan SSR (Figure 1).

From July 1923 until 1929, there was a Kurdistan *uezd* (administrative division) or *Kurduezd*, which included the districts of Kel'bajar, Lachin, Kubatli and part of Jebrail.[9] The administrative center of this uezd, which was also

Figure 1. Kurdish Population in the South Caucasus before 1937 and the Administrative Borders of Azerbaijan SSR in 1929–30.

[7]A. Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy, Lachin, Kel'badzhary, Nakhkrai* (Baku, 1932), 57–9; Tat'iana Aristova, *Kurdy zakavkaz'ia: Istoriko-etnograficheskii ocherk* (Moscow, 1966), 21, 37–9.

[8]Cherkez Bakaev, *Iazyk azerbaidzhanskikh kurdov* (Moscow, 1965), 6.

[9]Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 10; Bakaev, *Iazyk*, 6.

called "Red Kurdistan" or "Soviet Kurdistan," was Lachin. The town of Lachin was built next to an older village-size settlement Abdallar (or Abdaliar), as a demonstration of Soviet power.[10] Apparently the establishment of the Kurdistan Uezd was an ambiguous compromise between two different groups within the administration in Baku, to which we will return in the following sections. The pro-Kurdish group supported the idea of establishing a Kurdish region and aimed at real autonomy as this was planned for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. Another group, which can be defined as pro-Turkic or centralist, aimed for an ordinary uezd which would be named Kurdistan simply because it encompassed nearly all the Kurdish population of Azerbaijan. Both sides had prolonged discussions over establishing Kurdistan Uezd at the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the Azerbaijan SSR (TsIK AzSSR) in October–December 1922.[11] When Kurdistan Uezd was declared on the same day as Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Okrug, it presented a strange picture. Although the uezd had "Kurdistan" in its name, it was not an autonomous territory based on a national identity. It did not enjoy the same juridical and practical autonomy of the Nagorno-Karabakh oblast' in Azerbaijan (both founded on the same day). The uezd did not bear an ethnic name of Kurdish (Russian: *Kurdskii*), it had a geographical definition of Kurdistani (Russian: *Kurdistanskii*) and it was placed among other uezds of Azerbaijan, without having a special rank. This ambiguous situation was a result of differences within the Azerbaijani administration. The pro-Kurdish group read this as an expression of Kurdish autonomy, which they desired to achieve just as the Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh had. However, the pro-Turkic group treated the uezd as an ordinary administrative division with an unusual name.

In April 1929, the Sixth Azerbaijani Congress of Soviets approved a reform of the administrative structure, abolishing all uezds, including the Kurdistan uezd. Uezds were replaced with okrugs, which were bigger administrative units than uezds. The former territories of Kurdistan uezd were placed within Nagorno-Karabakh Okrug. The abolition of the Kurdistan Uezd was part of an All-Union policy of the dissolution of *all* uezds in the Soviet Union. However, in May 1930 Kurdistan Okrug was carved out of Nagorno-Karabakh Okrug by the decision of the TsIK AzSSR.[12] Kel'bajar, Katurl'in, Lachin, Kubatli, Zangelan districts and part of Jebrail district constituted this new okrug. The center of Kurdistan Okrug was again Lachin. Zangelan district, which was not part of the previous Kurdistan Uezd, was added to Kurdistan Okrug; thus the territories of the latter extended to the Soviet–Iranian border.[13]

The Kurdistan Okrug did not exist for more than a few months because the Council of People's Commissars and the Central Executive Committee of the

[10]"Iz poezdki v Kurdistan," *Zaria Vostoka*, September 12, 1925, 3.
[11]Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 50–51.
[12]Muller, "The Kurds," 53.
[13]"Obrazovan Kurdistanskii okrug," *Zaria Vostoka*, June 2, 1930, 5.

USSR abolished the okrug system on 23 July 1930 in all territories of the Soviet Union. Long after the abolition of the uezd and okrug there were still some organizations named Kurdistan (Sovhoz, newspaper, etc.).[14]

Turning Illiterate Peasants into Literate Citizens

The nationality policy in the Soviet Union was part of Soviet modernization plans that aimed to create a literate society. In 1921, the literacy rate in Azerbaijan was far from satisfactory (7.4 percent of the whole population, 10.4 percent of the male population and 4.2 percent of the female population).[15] There were pre-revolutionary traditional primary schools for the Turkic population in the Caucasus but these schools were not secular. There were also a few Russian-Tatar schools (*Russko-tatarskie shkoly*), where courses were conducted in Russian. In these schools, Turkic was limited to a language course. Although Turkic speakers were the second biggest group in Transcaucasia, the number and coverage of these schools was extremely limited.[16] After the collapse of the Russian Empire, the Republic of Azerbaijan (1918–20) initiated an education reform and Turkification of the education system, but the republic existed less than two years and economic conditions were not favorable for large-scale change. Consequently, when the Bolsheviks arrived in 1920, proper textbooks or curricula in the Turkic language did not exist.

The Soviets had a policy of *korenizatsiia* (nativization or indigenization), which meant training local technical, academic, managerial and administrative personnel from indigenous nationalities in each republic. In addition, all correspondence for administration and production had to be done in the local tongue. The *korenizatsiia* campaign announced the numerous aims they shared with the local intelligentsia, such as combating backwardness and illiteracy, promoting education, and developing a literary language based on local speech.[17] The Party inspectors prioritized *korenizatsiia* and periodically reported on the success of the policy. According to these reports, the Turkic percentage within Azerbaijani personnel was much lower than Armenians and Georgians in their republics. The lower representation of Turkic speakers in their own republic was a concern for Party officials, because it could engender nationalist anger. Azerbaijan had to catch up with the necessary level of

[14] *Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin İşlər İdaresinin Siyasi Partiyalar və İctimai Hərəkatlar Dövlət Arxivi* [The State Archive of Political Parties and Public Movements of the Executive Office of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan] (hereafter *ARPİİSPİHDA*) (fond) 1-(opis) 74-(delo) 408, "Protocol of Politburo of the AKP(b), no.101," January 2, 1936. The newspaper *Sovetskii Kurdistan* (Soviet Kurdistan) continued to be published until 1960. See Cherkez Bakaev, *Iazyk azerbaidzhanskikh kurdov* (Moscow, 1965), 7.

[15] *Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Arxivi* [The State Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan] (hereafter *ARDA*) (fond) 57-(opis) 1-(delo) 228-(listi) 2–5, 31 (1921).

[16] *ARDA* 57-1-864-2 (1931). On the Turkic course: *Itogi vypolneniia pervogo piatiletnego plana razvitiia narodnogo khoziaistva ZSFSR* (Tbilisi, 1934), 185; *ARDA* 57-1-1294-131, November 1938.

[17] L.A. Grenoble, *Language Policy in the Soviet Union* (Dordrecht, 2003), 124.

developing national cadres in the party and state, and also a proletariat from the titular nationality.[18]

Extremely low literacy rates in the republic were a major obstacle to achieving the goals of *korenizatsiia*. Thus, in the 1920s and 1930s, schools sprang up in all regions of the republic, some textbooks in the Turkic language were published, and the number of Turkic students skyrocketed. This was a time when enthusiastic revolutionaries of various nationalities and hopeful national intellectuals all aimed at a single goal: to educate their illiterate fellow citizens and develop the republic. The following figures demonstrate the expansion of the education system and the increase in the number Turkic students in Azerbaijan.[19]

Quantity of	**1914/15**	**1919/20**	**1928/29**	**1932/33**
All students in the schools	72,423	50,962	187,475	426,549
Turkic students	23,238	16,621	104,680	239,795

Parallel to these schooling rates, a rapid increase in the literacy rates among the population of Azerbaijan can also be observed: 1897 (9.2 percent), 1926 (28.2 percent) and 1939 (82.8 percent).[20] According to the data for the end of 1927, the Turkic language was used in most of the vocational schools that provided special skills.[21] Increasing the percentage of Turkic students and lecturers in higher education (Russian: *Tiurkizattsia*) was supported in Azerbaijan. Accordingly, cadres had to be

[18] *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii* [Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History] (hereafter *RGASPI*) (fond) 558-(opis) 1-(delo) 2195-(listy) 1/6, after October 10, 1920; *RGASPI* 17-112-715-23-26/29, 32–6, September 30, 1925; *RGASPI* 17-69-59-27/55 and *RGASPI* 17-113-336-109/137, September 16, 1927; *RGASPI* 17-114-265-36/38, October 15, 1931; *RGASPI* 17-114-265-236, not later than October 19, 1931; *ARDA* 57-1-697-1/5, June 23, 1929.

[19] *Itogi vypolneniia pervogo piatiletnego*, 184.

[20] These figures cover the 9–49 age range. *Itogi vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1959 goda, Azerbaidzhanskaia SSR* (Moscow, 1963), 43.

[21] In 1924/25, the ratios of Turkic speakers to all students were: in industrial-technical tekhnikums, 497 students out of 652; in agriculture tekhnikums, 168 students out of 299; in agricultural-industrial tekhnikums, all students out of 587; in pedagogical tekhnikums, all students out of 1,704 students were Turkic. In all tekhnikums of Azerbaijan, 3,517 students out of 5,006 were Turkic. In 1925/26, in industrial-technical tekhnikums, 644 students out of 833; in agriculture tekhnikums 226 out of 485; in agriculture-industrial tekhnikums, 646 students out of 685; in pedagogical tekhnikums, 1796 students out of 1998; in pharmaceutical tekhnikum 53 students out of 66 were Turkic. In all tekhnikums of Azerbaijan, 4,057 students out of 5,979 were Turkic. See *ARDA* 57-1-456-56 (1926). In 1927, the ratios of students of tekhnikums at which Turkic was the only language of education to all tekhnikums in Azerbaijan was: in agricultural tekhnikums, 816 out of 1,625; in industrial-technical tekhnikums, 896 out of 1,126; in medical tekhnikums, 296 out of 575; in pedagogical tekhnikums, 2,178 out of 2,373. However, we should also underline that in some areas such as socio-economic or art courses, the students in Russian-only tekhnikums were in the majority. See *ARDA* 57-1-422-20, December 15, 1927.

ethno-linguistically Turkic with a good knowledge of the Turkic language, and, enjoying open support, these members were trained in other parts of the USSR in order to improve their qualifications.[22]

Education of National Minorities of Azerbaijan in their Native Tongues

The education and *korenizatsiia* campaigns were not limited to the titular nations of union-republics. The Bolsheviks also aimed to bring up local cadres from national minorities within each republic and to give these minorities their cultural rights. The education of minority nationalities in their native tongues was an essential part of these cultural rights. In 1920, few months after the establishment of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, the Commissar of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment of Azerbaijan SSR (hereafter, AzNarkompros) Buniatzade underlined at the First All-Azerbaijan Congress of Workers of Enlightenment and Culture that the new Soviet regime wanted to add the language and literature of minority nations into the education system.[23] When compared with the Russian Imperial period, the recognition of various languages and adding them into school curricula was a dramatic change. In Azerbaijan, Armenians and Russians were the biggest minorities in terms of population. However, there were other minorities such as Talish, Tats and Kurds. In time the number of separate identities increased. In 1932, there were twenty-eight nationalities or ethnic groups (*natsional'nost*) in Azerbaijan. This list of nationalities or ethnic groups (*natsional'nost*) in Azerbaijan included even those peoples with population figures of only a few hundred, such as Budukhs and Khynalugs.[24]

In the 1920s, the Soviet education policies aimed to introduce minority language classes in the school curricula. At the same time, they had an even higher goal. They wanted to raise literacy among national minorities providing primary education in their native tongues. Soviet policymakers considered this a natural consequence of recognizing the minorities' cultural rights, something absent in the Russian Empire. However, they faced a complex situation. The national minorities of Azerbaijan differed in terms of literacy levels. For example, those nationalities with a higher percentage of literacy included Jews (76.9 percent), Germans (73.3 percent) and Eastern Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians) (62.4 percent). The second group consisted of medium levels of literacy: Volga Tatars (44.3 percent), Georgians (37.1 percent) and Armenians (24.5 percent). The third group had the lowest rates: Mountain

[22]*ARDA* 57-1-414-55, 56, 64, April 20, 1927.

[23]*Kommunist*, no. 64, September 30, 1920; no. 66, October 3, 1920; no. 73, October 11, 1920. In the districts where national minorities lived, the language of education was to be decided according to the expression of the wishes of the parents of students, and to the daily language that was used in their homes; see "Resolution of the 3rd session of the 5th convocation of AzTsIK on the general primary education, May 29, 1928," in *Sobranie Uzakonenii AzSSR* (Baku, 1928), 9: 173.

[24]These lists changed in time. For a list produced in 1932 see: *ARDA* 57-1-1002-71, August 20, 1932. For changing list of nationalities at the All-Union level: F. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations, Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY, 2005), chapters 3 and 6.

Jews (15.2 percent) and Turks (8.6 percent).[25] In some cases minority languages (such as those of Kurds, Tats, Avars, Talish) did not have a written form. Moreover, they had different dialects, which sometimes prevented a proper conversation among members of the same ethno-linguistic group from different regions. Specialists and linguists had to be trained for the purpose of creating a homogenous written language from these different tongues. In each case, a dialect as the written form of the language had to be chosen; an alphabet and grammar system had to be built; and a terminology to answer the needs of a modern society and economy had to be created. Then the whole population had to become literate by receiving primary education in this written homogenous language. Ideally, they also had to have access to vocational education in their own language, in order to be active agents in the development of the country. However, in some cases, the language of education in this final step was still a question. Finally, all these steps had to be hastily accomplished parallel to the breakneck speed of the first and second five-year development and industrialization plans in 1929–37. These were overreaching objectives, especially the creation of a standardized language for small ethno-linguistic groups that lived in remote areas far from the dynamics of a modern society and who spoke variations of the same language, most notably the Kurds.[26]

Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks were intent on following this policy and had various political reasons for pursuing it. Firstly, the Soviet administration was convinced that creating a literate society was the first step in turning the semi-nomadic Kurdish peasants into modern citizens. As had occurred in other parts of the republic, the regional Soviet managers who followed the policy of modernization among the Kurds of Azerbaijan and Armenia fought against traditional practices such as blood feuds, *kalym* (payment for brides), underage marriages, the torture of women and "active opposition to the emancipation of women."[27] (Figure 2). Despite the official policy, the emancipation of Kurdish women and the prevention of polygamy or kidnapping girls for marriage were distant targets for the women's organization of the AKP(b).[28] For the Soviet regime, Kurds were also far from being city dwellers or factory workers capable of producing a Kurdish proletarian culture. Before the collectivization campaign, nearly all Kurdish tribes led a semi-nomadic life.[29] In the summer they would move to Zangazur Mountains in Armenian SSR.[30] The authorities defined

[25]Here Turk refers to the former Ottoman subjects or Turkic speakers who had vernacular closer to the Anatolian Turkic than Azerbaijani Turkic language. *ARDA* 57-1-777-59, March 21, 1929; *ARDA* 57-1-777-161 (1929).

[26]*ARPİİSPİHDA* 1-14-83-61 (1936). The boundaries between language and dialect are determined by a number of linguistic and non-linguistic factors. This made the task extremely difficult. Grenoble, *Language Policy*, 20.

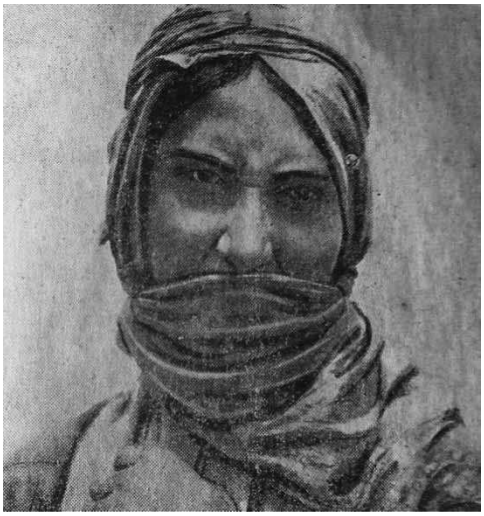
[27]These issues were raised at local party meetings by party officials: A. Shamilev, "Sredi Ezidov," *Zaria Vostoka*, June 14, 1924, 3; for an All-Union report covering eastern republics including Azerbaijan: *RGASPI* 78-6-86-71/83, October 15, 1935; *RGASPI* 17-114-734-91/105, December 11, 1935.

[28]"Vse takzhe," *Zaria Vostoka*, November 25, 1925, 4; "Sredi rabotnits i krest'ianok bol'she vnimaniia kurdianke," *Zaria Vostoka,* January 6, 1926, 4.

[29]Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 11.

[30]"Eilagi: ot nashikh spetsial'nykh korrespondentov," *Zaria Vostoka*, August 2, 1925, 5.

Figure 2. Kurdish woman of Milli village



Source: A. Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy, Lachin, Kel'badzhary, Nakhkrai* (Baku, 1932), 73.

this traditional, rural, tribal and semi-nomadic life as the remnants of feudalism, which had to be erased from the Soviet Union. That is why, at the Kurdish party meeting in Armenia, Aleksandr Shakhsuvarian, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Armenian Communist Party (KP(b)A), declared that, the "Soviet government has been the gravedigger of Kurdish feudalism."[31] The first step in solving these problems was considered to be the pursuit of an intensive literacy and education campaign. This could be done easier in native languages.

From the internationalist standpoint of the Soviet regime, "nationalist" leaders (Musavvatists in Azerbaijan, Mensheviks in Georgia and Dashnaks in Armenia) wanted to build nation-states while keeping their eyes closed to the demands of national minorities in their republics.[32] The Soviet attempt at giving the ethnic and national minorities their rights regardless of their minority position was simply reversing this policy. In other words, the success of the national minorities policy was seen as a sign of success in the struggle against both Russian and titular nations' nationalisms. Thereby, the government promoted the Azerbaijani Turkic

[31]"Soveshchanie kurdskogo aktiva," *Zaria Vostoka*, April 22, 1926, 3.

[32]This is not to say that it was always so. For example, in 1919, the Azerbaijani national government organized Kurdish cavalry divisions against Armenians and opened a Kurdish department at the military academy in Baku to train twenty cadets. See Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 69; Muller, "The Kurds," 45–6.

national identity against Russian nationalism and in this way also reinforced the ethnic identity of the national minorities in Azerbaijan against Turkic nationalism.

It was also expected that providing cultural rights would prevent the enmity of a national minority against the titular nation of each republic and establish peace between different identities.[33] For instance, they anticipated eliminating Kurdish antagonism against the Azerbaijani Turkic majority by giving the Kurds of Azerbaijan their cultural rights. The Bolsheviks had to maintain peace in the region in order to implement their modernist projects and this was a difficult task. Since 1905 repeated ethno-religious clashes between Turkic-speaking Muslim populations and Armenians tore apart the entire region and an unbridgeable gulf emerged between different communities. The Kurds also suffered from this conflict, especially the Yezidis who were attacked during the Ottoman Army's march to the east in 1918. In 1919, Armenian attacks on the Kurdish population in the Republic of Armenia forced the latter to escape to Iran and Turkey. Many of them settled in the compact settlements of the Kurdish population in the north of Nakhchivan exclave after leaving Turkey and Iran in 1926.[34] The bloody memories of the recent past were quite fresh in people's minds. For the Bolsheviks, this was the least desirable situation. Indeed, various Bolshevik leaders emphasized the importance of stability and inter-ethnic peace in the region.[35] Transcaucasia was in the process of a Bolshevik reconciliation following ethnic cleansing efforts, massacres and deportations in the first two decades of the twentieth century.[36] Providing cultural rights and primary education for every single identity was seen as leverage to achieve peace and stability in the region.

Finally, the Party was keener on developing the Kurdish language and culture because Kurdish ethno-linguistic groups inhabited a region divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The Soviet regime treated this as an opportunity to teach the minorities' kinfolk in these countries how socialism promoted the culture and language of minorities as opposed to policies of repression and assimilation. At the same time, the Soviet regime was still anxious about the possibility of Kurdish tribal uprisings with British support. In effect, the Soviets had reasons to be worried. In 1925, an uprising led by the Kurdish religious leader Sheikh Said seriously threatened the Turkish government and this at a time when Turkey and Britain were negotiating the borders

[33] *RGASPI* 17-114-265-237, not later than October 19, 1931; "O rabote sredi natsmen'shinstv (postanovlenie ZAKK raikoma VKP(b))," *Zaria Vostoka*, July 13, 1926, 3.

[34] Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 67.

[35] V.M. Molotov, "Rech' tov. V.M. Molotova na prieme delegatsii trudiashchikhsiia Sovetskoi Armenii, 30 Dekabria 1935 goda," *Pravda*, January 6, 1936, 3. L. Beria, the head of the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Federation, always emphasized this brotherhood in his speeches. He underlined that the brotherhood of three nations (Azerbaijanis, Armenians and Georgians) was an essential condition for the development of the region. See L. Beriia, *Pobeda Leninsko-Stalinskoi natsional'noi politiki* (Tbilisi, 1936); L. Beriia, *Novaia Konstitutsiia SSR i Zakavkazskaia Federatsiia* (Tbilisi, 1936); L. Beriia, *Edinaia sem'ia narodov* (Tbilisi, 1937).

[36] The enmity between Armenian and Azerbaijani members of the AKP(b) was an impediment. *RGASPI* 17-84-75-38/43 (before February 11, 1922); V. Shklovsky and R. Sheldon, "The End of the Caucasian Front," *Russian Review* 27, no. 1 (January 1968), 17–68; A.L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford, CA, 1992), 39–44.

dividing Turkish regions from the British Mandate of Mesopotamia. Although Turkish forces managed to suppress the rebellion, the situation diminished Turkey's negotiating powers. The British were successful in including the Ottoman province of Mosul in their mandate. In the Soviet Union, Sheikh Said was considered to be an agent of imperialism.[37] At a meeting, after pointing out the alleged cooperation of British imperialists with Armenian nationalists and Kurds abroad, Aleksandr Shakhsuvarian underlined that, "the Soviet Kurd of Armenia learned a lot in the past five years [of Soviet rule]. He knows well about the differences between the nationalities policy of the Soviet rule and the adventurous policy of imperialism."[38] In short, it would be better to be loyal to the Soviet regime, which aimed to provide cultural rights to the Kurds, than being fooled by the adventurous promises of British agents.

When Azerbaijan was integrated into the Soviet system in 1920, the AzNarkompros became fully responsible for the education of the entire population, including national minorities.[39] In 1921, the Section of National Minorities in the AzNarkompros was founded for all cultural–educational activities among the national minorities in the republic.[40] In the districts where national minorities lived, the language of education was decided according to the preferences of parents, and to the daily language that was used in their homes.[41] However, the pace of executing such a policy was too slow. In September 1925, the Section of National Minorities was reorganized into the Council of National Minorities (SNM) within the same Commissariat. This Council was founded to coordinate activities in the sphere of education in minority languages.[42] The SNM worked with the State Publishing House of Azerbaijan (AzGIZ) to publish and distribute textbooks in minority languages.[43]

From the beginning, the case of national minorities having a regional or union republic was relatively better, because textbooks in their native languages were printed there. The SNM of Azerbaijan had contacts with the SNMs in Armenia, Georgia, North Caucasus, Crimea, Tataristan, Uzbekistan and central SNM in Moscow in order to receive necessary publications in minority languages of Azerbaijan.[44] This aim was obvious in the Armenian, Georgian and Russian cases. They were in constant correspondence with their comrades in Tbilisi, Erevan and Moscow, visiting them in order to provide textbooks in native languages and recruit teachers who

[37]Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 91.

[38]"Soveshchanie kurdskogo aktiva," *Zaria Vostoka*, April 22, 1926, 3.

[39]In 1920, the People's Commissariat of Nationalities (Narkomnats) in Moscow had already lost its role in educational activities. Grenoble, *Language Policy*, 38.

[40]*ARDA* 57-1-222-2 (1921).

[41]Resolution of the 3rd session of the 5th convocation of AzTsIK on the general primary education, May 29, 1928, *Sobranie Uzakonenii AzSSR* (Baku, 1928), 9:173.

[42]*Biulleten' ofitsial'nykh rasporiazdenii i soobshenii Narkomprosa Azerbaidzdanskoi SSR* (Baku, 1926), 1:8, March 6, 1926; *ARDA* 57-1-453-196, March 15, 1927.

[43]*ARDA* 57-1-452-6, 20, 20ob, December 8, 1927.

[44]*ARDA* 57-1-453-197, March 15, 1927.

could conduct courses in these languages.[45] In the Armenian case, for instance, the aim was to send books in Turkic to the Turkic population in the Armenian SSR, and receive textbooks in Armenian for the Armenian minority in Azerbaijan.[46] They published books in the Tat language in 1926–27 for the Mountain Jews and ordered books from Uzbekistan for the Persian schools. Textbooks in German and Volga Tatar came from German and Tatar republics within the Russian Federation.[47] The North Caucasian Kraikom in Rostov was the center for providing educational and cultural materials in Greek for the Greek minorities scattered in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.[48] As a consequence of these efforts, the availability of textbooks and teachers for the courses in Russian, Armenian, German and Volga Tatar gradually increased.[49] The plans of the SNM moved further to increase national minority sections in the seven-year schools and in *tekhnikums* (institutes of vocational education) in regions of diverse nationalities.[50] In summary, the Soviet regime saw the primary education of national minorities in their own languages, including Kurdish, as necessary for political reasons. In the case of major minorities who had their own republics in other parts of the Soviet Union, education in native languages improved significantly in the 1920s.

The Reality on the Ground

The above picture suggests that in the 1920s Kurds also experienced considerable development. However, primary education as well as publications in Kurdish remained an unfulfilled project until 1931. There were economic factors that mitigated the implementation of the Soviet minorities policy on the ground. In the first half of the 1920s, the Kurdish population was deprived of food and other basic needs.[51] In 1924, for example, around 20,000 inhabitants of the Kurdish Uezd (nearly half of the population) temporarily migrated to the Nagorno-Karabakh region because of a local famine.[52] The lack of mountain roads and transportation was another major problem.[53] Epidemic diseases were frequent and hygiene was absent in all stages of daily life. More importantly, the infrastructure for education was almost entirely absent.

The literacy rates were close to zero in Kurdish territories and the Kurdish language had a negative reputation among Kurdish literates. The literacy rate of the Kurdish

[45] *ARDA* 57-1-453-125, August 23, 1927.
[46] *ARDA* 57-1-228-215, December 9, 1922.
[47] *ARDA* 57-1-664-4ob, June 12, 1928.
[48] *ARDA* 57-1-452-2, December 28, 1926. Greek language was also modified in 1927, see *ARDA* 57-1-453-115, 119, January 1, 1927.
[49] *ARDA* 57-1-453-197, March 15, 1927; *ARDA* 57-1-452-6, 20, 20ob, December 8, 1927; *ARDA* 57-1-777-56ob, March 21, 1929.
[50] *ARDA* 57-1-453-197, 199, March 15, 1927; *ARDA* 57-1-452-7, 8, 9, 17, December 8, 1927.
[51] Muller, "The Kurds," 47–8.
[52] "Po uezdam Azerbaidzhana," *Zaria Vostoka*, April 25, 1924, 3.
[53] *Zaria Vostoka*, April 12, 1925, 1.

population was extremely low. According to an Azerbaijani report in 1931, literate people among Kurds constituted only 4.3 percent of the entire Kurdish population and these were educated in Russian-Turkic schools.[54] According to an Soviet secret police (Ob"edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie pri SNK SSSR, OGPU) report in 1931, at the border territories of Azerbaijan with Iran, the rate of illiteracy was as high as 95–99 percent. In the territories where Talish and Kurds were located—Lenkoran and further south of Nagorno-Karabakh—illiteracy was 100 percent.[55] The literate minority considered speaking Kurdish as a shameful act (Russian: *schitalsia pozorom*). The graduates of these schools disdainfully rejected Kurdish .[56] Many Kurdish intellectuals believed the Kurdish language to be a mountainous dialect of the Persian language lacking an alphabet. It would be a useless tool for the cultural development of their people.

There was no Kurdish alphabet with separate letters for each main sound in Kurdish. In the 1920s, the preparation of a Kurdish alphabet was an extremely important task set for scholars and was considered an essential step for the success of the literacy campaign. In 1921, an Armenian Kurdologist Agop Kazarian (Lazo) prepared an alphabet based on the Armenian script. The Armenian language had been used alongside Arabic on official documents of the Ottoman Empire; most of the Ottoman elite read Armeno-Turkish and many Turkish language books had been published in the Armenian script since the early eighteenth century. Thus many party members deemed it appropriate to assign the Armenian script to the Kurdish language. In practice, this alphabet was not broadly accepted. An official at the Communist Party meeting in 1926 explained what needed to be gradually done in the case of languages like Kurdish without a literature and alphabet of its own:

> The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment of Armenian SSR (hereafter, ArNarkompros) Armenian Narkompros prepared an alphabet for [Kurds], however there is only one person who knows this alphabet—the one who prepared this [...] First of all, few circles of literate and competent individuals should be organized, who know also this alphabet; second, it is necessary that these people, who are literate in this [Kurdish] alphabet, create a volume of literature by translating fiction, textbooks, communist [ideological] programs, [communist] party literature, and laws. In this way, [these efforts] create some kind of cultural atmosphere and enable the establishment of schools with this alphabet. In 5–10 years, we will be at the position of moving all Kurdish intelligentsia to this alphabet and we will have the right to talk about unimpeded nationalization of schools.[57]

The highly Turkified Kurdish population in Azerbaijan posed another problem. As a consequence of Turkification, there were two different figures given on the

[54] *ARDA* 57-1-864-12, 13 (1931).
[55] *RGASPI* 17-114-265-236, 242–3, October 7, 1931.
[56] *ARDA* 57-1-864-12, 13 (1931).
[57] "Rech' t. Vaganiana," *Zaria Vostoka*, June 9, 1926, 3.

Kurdish population during this period. The higher figures were based on descent and the lower figures on the population's daily language. According to the census of 1926, the total number of the Kurds in the Kurdistan Uezd of Azerbaijan was 37,182 (72.2 percent of the Uezd population) and 3,123 of them could speak Kurdish (excluding Nakhchivan).[58] The Kurdish population in the Nakhchivan exclave of Azerbaijan in 1925 was recorded to be around 3,000.[59] In 1929, only 17.8 percent of the Kurds (7,355 out of 41,193) could speak their native tongue. However, a report written in 1931 provides a higher percentage, estimating that only 12,000 out of 42,216 of the Kurdish minority spoke their native tongue. The 1936 figures showed that the population of Kurdish speakers among Kurds was lower than that reported in 1931 (around 5–6,000).[60] These figures indicate that the majority of Kurds living in Azerbaijan had been linguistically Turkified or were at least bi-lingual. In 1931, an expedition group of five experts led by Professor S. Bukshpan was sent to study the Kurdish population of Azerbaijan.[61] Bukshpan, who was far from being a Turkic nationalist, confirmed the widespread practice of inter-ethnic marriages and underlined the spread of the Turkic language in place of Kurdish.[62] Those Kurds who did not know Turkic either lived in small remote mountain settlements far from Shusha's town market and artisan production, or they were female members of the communities who had no contact with Turkic speakers.[63] The process of Turkification of the Kurds in Azerbaijan had started long before the Soviet regime began administering the region. The Russian Imperial records referred to this phenomenon as Tatarization (Russian: *tatarizatsiia*) because the imperial administration named all the Turkic populations of the region as Tatars. The Turkification of the Kurds was not the only case. A high level of Turkification was taking place prior to the Soviet period, especially among other Muslim peoples, such as Talish and Tsakhur. The similarities in religion, customs, lifestyle and history allowed this pre-Soviet process of assimilation to take a natural course.[64] If the Soviet administration wanted to establish primary education in Kurdish by developing a homogenous Kurdish written language, they also had to teach Kurdish to the majority of the Kurds of Azerbaijan.

[58]Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 61.
[59]"Sredi nakhichevanskikh kurdov," *Zaria Vostoka*, February 4, 1925, 3.
[60]*ARPIISPIHDA* 1-14-83-37, October 28, 1936.
[61]Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 5.
[62]Ibid., 72–4.
[63]*ARDA* 57-1-864-115, 116, February 15, 1931.
[64]On the Turkification of Talish prior to the Soviet rule, see *ARPİİSPİHDA* 1/14/83/30, 31, 33, October 28, 1936; also for the account of Talish expedition B.V. Miller, *Predvaritel'nyi Otchet o Poezdke v Talysh Letom 1925 g.* (Baku, 1926), 4–5; on the Turkification of Kurdish population prior to the Soviet rule, see Muller, "The Kurds," 42–5; *ARDA* 57-1-777-54, March 21, 1929; *ARDA* 57-1-864-115, 116, February 15, 1931; Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 61, 72–4; *ARPİİSPİHDA* 1-14-83-37, October 28, 1936; on the Turkification of Tsakhurs see *ARDA* 57-1-777-54, March 21, 1929.

The homogeneity of the Kurdish language remained a serious issue. Books in Kurdish were published in Armenia immediately following the development of the alphabet. Kurds living in Armenia and Azerbaijan however could not use these books because of the differences in the dialects they spoke. These linguistic differences were influenced by the different degrees of Turkification among the Kurdish population living in different geographical areas. Azerbaijani Turkic had a strong influence on the Kurdish language in Azerbaijan while such circumstances did not exist in Armenia. The two regional dialects in Azerbaijan were the Lachin-Kel'bajar and Nakhchivani spoken in the Nakhchivan exclave and differed considerably. The impact of the Turkic language on Kurdish lexicon and phonetics in different localities varies. According to the published results of the 1931 expedition led by Bukshpan, this influence created up to 25 percent of the dissimilarities among the different Kurdish dialects.[65]

Three Groups in Azerbaijani Bureaucracy

Beyond the aforementioned obstacles, the rifts within and between the Party and state bureaucracy in Azerbaijan also had an impact on the implementation of national minorities policy. Three different groups can be identified in the AzNarkompros and in the AKP(b). The internationalists wanted to avoid any ethnic or national antagonisms and were keen to support all ethno-linguistic identities. They were ready to recognize and support any kind of ethno-linguistic difference in the republic. They wanted to accelerate the formation of these national identities by supporting and transforming regional dialects into national languages, introducing an alphabet and systematized grammar to those tongues without a written form, devoting resources to translation and education, and finding necessary terminology to enrich these neglected but worthy dialects. They believed that by providing all individuals the means to realize a native ethnic culture they would prevent discontent and ethnic conflict. The indigenous intellectuals of the region's ethno-linguistic minorities belonged to this group and contributed to these efforts. To them the work of AzNarkompros progressed "at the pace of a tortoise" and was not satisfactory at all.[66] This group argued that these languages were underdeveloped because of imperial-colonial forces such as those of the Russians, Ottomans and Persians. Accordingly, the language of the shepherd could develop with an unexpected speed into the language of an administrator or technocrat if the Soviet government in Baku pursued affirmative policies and created favorable conditions. In most cases, however, the existence of very small and isolated groups or entirely Turkified groups presented a problem. This issue was brought up at a national minorities meeting in 1931 by Isakhanian, an Armenian who was head of

[65] *ARPİİSPİHDA* 1-14-83-38/42, December 1, 1931; *ARPİİSPİHDA* 1-14-83-37, October 28, 1936; Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 65, 67.

[66] *ARDA* 57-1-864-125, February 15, 1931. The case of Khakass in RSFSR is a concurring example, see F. Hirsch, "Toward an Empire of Nations: Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities," *Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (2000): 212, 213.

both the National Minorities Section of the Central Committee of the AKP(b) and the nationalities committee of the AzNarkompros. He complained about the problems associated with having such a small and isolated group by using the small Udi population and already Turkicified Kurds as two vivid examples:

> At one of the meetings in Vartashen, one of the party members declared that a literature in Udi language has to be published. That member is a literate accountant. But for 2,000 people we need to create alphabet, we need to have authors. I stated at that time that, there are only 2,000 [people] who understand this language, this is a dying language. [...] For example, it would be funny if a Kurdish school were opened in Gubatli in Kurdistan region or in the Kurdish settlement of Zabukh [because] they lost their language long time ago. [...] If a nationality still preserves its tongue, or it has lost it for various reasons, this doesn't mean that we must dig out and revive this language.[67]

The second group can broadly be defined as pro-Russian and supported the priority of the Russian language above minority languages. There were Russians within this group with nationalist tendencies who ridiculed the regime's efforts to promote the cultures and languages of national minorities. They believed that the promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity could consolidate loyalties to minority identities and would only lead to problems in managing a society. In fact, according to this group, the problem was that assimilation was left incomplete. They justified this by recounting the recent disastrous collapse of the Russian Empire and the territories that remained in Turkey and Romania, and the independence of Finland, the Baltic States and Poland. Using Lenin's formula, if the surface these Russian communists had been scratched a Great Russian chauvinist would have been found. The beliefs of these pro-Russian bureaucrats reflected those of a section within society. Nationalism, religious conservatism and "great nation chauvinism" still existed among segments of the Russian population in Azerbaijan. These tendencies were especially strong in the rural settlements and in villages of the Orthodox sects such as Molokans.[68] Even though Turkic language classes were compulsory, in most of the Russian schools they were considered unnecessary and were not conducted at all.[69]

Some genuine internationalist Bolsheviks belonged to this pro-Russian group and supported the promotion of the Russian language for the sake of economic rationality.

[67] *ARDA* 57-1-864-118, 119, February 15, 1931. Vartashen was a district where the Udi population is settled. The contemporary name of this region is Oguz. Actually, Kurds were not the only ethno-linguistic group that lost their native tongue in the previous episodes of history. Isolated Armenians and Greeks in Georgia also had similar problems. *ARDA* 57-1-873-8, April 29, 1932.

[68] *ARDA* 57-1-864-135 (1931). The resistance of the Russian population to nativization campaigns and even nationalist attitudes to the native peoples was not confined to Azerbaijan. For the Kazakh case, see Matt Payne, "The Forge of the Kazakh Proletariat? The Turksib, Nativization, and Industrialization during Stalin's First Five-Year Plan," in *A State of Nations, Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. R. Suny and T. Martin (Oxford, 2001), 223–52.

[69] *ARDA* 57-1-864-5 (1931).

Russian culture had the highest level of development within the borders of the USSR and Russian had been the *lingua franca* among many of the different territories of the Soviet Union. They believed a socialist country allowed all cultures and languages to develop without any oppression and in time they would merge with the higher culture. This would be a proletarian culture, using the language of its most advanced constituents. Accordingly, if Germany had been included in a socialist federation, then German would have been the official language of this state.[70] However, there was no sign of a German, French or English revolution that would replace Russia with its cultural and linguistic dominance. In this case, instead of waiting for 100 years, it would save limited resources and time to declare victory for the more progressive Russian culture. For example, Semen Dimanshtein, an important figure in the All-Union People's Commissariat of Nationalities (Narkomnats) the People's Commissariat of Nationalities in Moscow, was an internationalist who opposed promoting the cultures and languages of national minorities. His opposition derived from an internationalist view. These pro-Russian internationalists believed that the danger of the Great Russian chauvinism was eliminated and Russian nationalism would no longer have the potential of assimilating other identities. Thus supporting national languages and cultures was unnecessary, and would only consolidate national divisions and further weaken the international solidarity.[71] Moreover, these internationalists feared that local nationalist groups would hijack the Bolshevik revolution. Similarly, Anatoly Lunacharskii, the famous commissar of the All-Union People's Commissariat of Enlightenment in Moscow, also favored a uniformed and centralized education in all republics of the Soviet Union.[72] However, it was not always easy to understand if the person who supported the policy of giving priority to Russian was a Russian chauvinist or a pragmatic Bolshevik. It is likely that some of the internationalists were at the same time disguised Russian nationalists who promoted the Russian language as the medium of the international class of proletariat. Lenin was alarmed by this veiled nationalism long time ago and voiced his concerns earlier at the Eighth Party Congress (18–23 March 1919) "Scratch some communists, and you will find Great Russian chauvinists" [footnote] V. I. Lenin, Collected Works, volume:29 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 194.

The last group within the Party and state bureaucracy was pro-Turkic. This group found itself between the two pro-Russian and pro-minorities fronts. On the one side they attempted to refute pro-Russian arguments, and on the other side they resisted national minorities policies, which they felt created divisions among the dominant Turkic identity and culture in Azerbaijan. They also emphasized that available resources were hardly sufficient to support every minority aspiring to promote its own small and underdeveloped cultural and linguistic identity in the midst of Turkic majority of Azerbaijan. There were many practical problems with sustaining the educational policies concerning the national minorities. The republican and

[70]Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (London, 2005), 78.
[71]Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–23* (London, 1999), 146–7.
[72]Blank, *The Sorcerer as Apprentice*, 113.

party administration needed to train cadres to fulfill the aims of the *korenizatsiia* campaign while being under constant pressure to also provide a qualified Turkic labor force. Resources were scarce and not always available even for the Turkic students. And even though the number of schools and teachers increased rapidly each year, the quality of education and its printed materials was so low that the stage of crisis continued for more than a decade. The Commissariat was mostly behind in the annual school construction plans and the existing school buildings still did not have the necessary facilities after nine years of Sovietization. Some did not have libraries, blackboards, desks, heating units or even window glass. Most schools did not have enough cupboards, tables, desks, chairs, clocks, thermometers, geography maps, diagrams and globes to conduct lessons. Rural schools became centers of epidemics such as trachoma. Most primary schools were located far from the villages. Other practical problems included the fact that half of the teachers did not graduate from a specialized school and only 18 percent of students were female.[73] In the midst of this catastrophic picture, the pro-Turkic group considered supporting minorities to be a mere fantasy or even a conspiracy against Turkic identity. According to one of the representatives of this pro-Turkic group, the "Turkic language is more and more conquering the obsolete languages, like Tat, Talish, Lezgin, Kurdish, etc."[74] Naturally, there was a conflict between the pro-Russian and pro-Turkic groups. In his speech, Isakhanian provided a wonderful example for both pro-Russian and pro-Turkic sides:

> Recently, at a meeting a young worker stood up and said: down with *tara*, *kamancha*, long live European, Russian music [...]. Beside him, sat another comrade, who declared that, for him, there is nothing dearer than *zurna*.[75]

However, the pro-Turkic and pro-Russian parties had one common goal: impeding the implementation of the national minority policy. According to Isakhanian, the planning department in the AzNarkompros resisted the Party's national minority policies:

> Until last year [1930], our planning department knew only three nations—Turkic, Armenian and Russian; and they did not know anybody else. There was a bureaucrat at the [Az]Narkompros. When they told him that, ["]you must do these things for those [other] nationalities["], he replied ["but] this is absurd, this cannot be [done]. Is it really so that the supplies for Mountainous Jews, Talish, etc. are [also] included into production plans?["].[76]

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[73]*ARDA* 57-1-777-54ob, March 21, 1929; also see the presentation of the commissar of the AzNarkompros, M.Z. Kuliev, at the sixth congress of All Azerbaijan Soviets, on the tasks of cultural construction in the Republic, April 6, 1929; *Kommunist*, no. 81, April 9, 1929.

[74]M.G. Veliyev (Bakharly), *Azerbaidzhan (Fiziko-geograficheskii, etnograficheskii i ekonomicheskii ocherk)* (Baku, 1921), 50; cited by Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 76.

[75]*ARDA* 57-1-864-120, February 15, 1931. *Tara*, *kamancha* and *zurna* are local musical instruments.

[76]*ARDA* 57-1-864-122, February 15, 1931.

Isakhanian's comments on the AzNarkompros bureaucrat illustrates that, despite the All-Union policies and the AKP(b) directives, the bureaucrats at the AzNarkompros prevented further work on developing the Kurdish language as they considered it unnecessary.[77]

At the Conference of National Minorities in Baku in June 1931, Il'iasov, the former director of public education in Kurdistan Uezd, complained about the case of the Kurdish alphabet in Azerbaijan. He reminded the audience that seven years before, when the committee on the Latinization of Turkic script actively worked on the matter, a Kurdish alphabet based on the Latin script was developed. His team had worked on the first Kurdish alphabet and ABC-book and sent the finalized versions of their project to the AzNarkompros in 1924. Il'iasov continued: "However, unfortunately, the alphabet and the ABC-book did not find any sympathy [at the AzNarkompros] and died right there. The issue [of Kurdish written language] was temporarily halted at that point."[78] Professor Bukshpan also complained that the bureaucrats at the AzNarkompros held back educational and cultural works in the minority languages. The local nationalism (Turkic-Azerbaijani), he argued, did not die out after the fall of the Musavvat Party's national regime in April of 1920. On the contrary, according to Bukshpan, in the 1920s the representatives of local nationalism (pro-Turkic group) tried to assimilate the national minorities of Azerbaijan by using the Soviet administrative structure.[79] Finally, when the establishment of Kurdistan Uezd was discussed in 1922–23, the internationalist group supported a real autonomous territory, as it was planned for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, while pro-Turkic and pro-Russian groups strongly opposed this. For this reason the committee charged with the delimitation and design of these territories could not agree on a single solution. Ultimately they established a Kurdistan Uezd with a national name but without any autonomous powers from the center in Baku.

In the 1920s, Soviet authorities in the Caucasus organized research expeditions to the Kurdish territories more than once in order to understand the local culture, despite being far from solving the region's problems.[80] Primary education and cultural developments in Kurdish remained merely a project on the drawing board. In the 1929/30 academic year the schooling rate of Kurdish children was 40.1 percent, and they were educated in Turkic schools.[81] In remote mountainous regions the schooling rate was considerably lower. When the Kurdistan Okrug was abolished together with all okrugs in the Soviet Union in 1930, there was not even a single textbook in Kurdish in Azerbaijan, let alone primary school education in the Kurdish language.

[77] *ARDA* 57-1-864-124, February 15, 1931.
[78] Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*, 77.
[79] Ibid., 75–7.
[80] The first expedition was led by G. Chursin, an ethnographer from Tbilisi, in 1924. G. Chursin, "Azerbaidzhanskie kurdy," *Izvestiia Kavkazskogo istorki-arkheologicheskogo instituta* 3 (1925): 1–16; E. Pchelina, "Po Kurdistanskomu uezdu Azerbaidzhana," *Sovetskaia* etnografiia 4 (1932): 108–21; V. Sysoev, "Kurdistan," *Izvestiia Azerbaidzhanskogo komiteta okhrany pamiatnikov stariny, iskusstva i prirody* 3 (1927): 25–44; V. Sysoev, "Lachin", *Izvestiia Azerbaidzhanskogo komiteta okhrany pamiatnikov stariny, iskusstva i prirody* 3 (1927): 45–53.
[81] *ARDA* 57-1-864-12, 13 (1931).

Renewed Push in the 1930s

In 1930, AKP(b) defined providing compulsory primary education in the native languages of all nationalities in Azerbaijan as a task for the AzNarkompros that had to be fulfilled by the 1932/33 academic year.[82] This demand for teaching in minority languages was a result of a push by All-Union authorities in 1929–30.[83] Following this directive, intensive work on primary education increased the number of native languages as the medium of education.[84] A scientific council was established at the AzNarkompros, which had to "study the methodical questions of the educational activities among the national minorities."[85] Both state and party organs were keen on education in the languages of national minorities. The Council of Peoples' Commissars of Azerbaijan SSR issued a resolution underlining the failure of education in native languages for "culturally backward national minorities" such as Tats, Kurds, Avars and Lezgins. The resolution ordered that the pedagogical cadres had to be provided for national minority schools. In order to train necessary cadres, Lezgin, Tat, Avar, Talish and Kurdish sections had to be opened in various *pedtekhnikums* (pedagogical institutes) in the regions where these minorities were settled.[86] The AKP(b) continued to put emphasis on this issue in the following year. The closing resolution of the ninth congress of the AKP(b) in 1932 demanded the ending of illiteracy and the intensification of work on the education of national minorities in their native tongues.[87] A week later, central organs in Moscow asked the union republics to translate essential juridical texts and laws into minority languages. Moreover, Moscow asked republican capitals to correspond with their districts of national minorities in the language of the latter, and avoid using the language of the titular nation or Russian. Finally, the Central Committee of the Republic of Transcaucasia Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, which was an additional administrative body above Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia until its abolishment in 1936, also urged these three republics to improve the primary education of their national minorities.[88]

As a first step in 1930, the All-Union Academy of Sciences in Moscow, with the cooperation of ArNarkompros in Erevan, prepared a Kurdish alphabet based on the

[82]Decree of the Central Committee of the AKP(b) on the execution of the universal compulsory education in AzSSR, August 28, 1930; *Bakinskii Rabochii*, no. 201, August 28, 1930.

[83]For this mobilization in 1929 and 1930, and consequences, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY, 2001), 163–5.

[84]Resolution of the congress of the All Azerbaijan Soviets on the report of the Commissar of the AzNarkompros on the introduction of universal compulsory primary education in Azerbaijan, February 16, 1931, *Sobranie uzakonenii AzSSR* (Baku, 1931), 20: 378.

[85]*ARDA* 57-1-878-12 (1931).

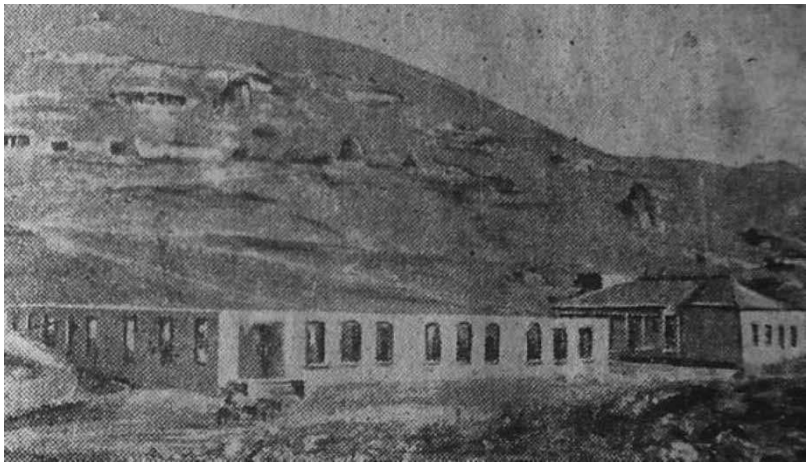
[86]*Sobranie Uzakonenii AzSSR* (Baku, 1931), 38: 607; *Bakinskii Rabochii* no. 243 and 244, October 18–19, 1931.

[87]The resolution of the ninth congress of AKP(b) on the report of the Central Committee of the AKP(b), *Bakinskii Rabochii*, no. 28, February 1, 1932.

[88]*ARDA* 57-1-873-6/9, February 29, 1932.

Latin script in 1930. After the creation of the alphabet, the union-republics in Transcaucasia were urged to publish textbooks and books in Kurdish. In June 1931, The Central Committee of the AKP(b), the Cultural-Propaganda section of the AKP(b) and the AzNarkompros organized a conference of national minorities in Baku to emphasize the importance of the national minorities policy and discuss its implementation. Following the conference, the AzNarkompros and Azerbaijan State Scientific-Research Institute (AGNII) organized the above-mentioned expedition of Professor Bukshpan to the Kurdish settlements in the former Kurdistan Okrug and Nakhchivan. The aim of the expedition was to clarify the difference between the Kurdish language used by the Kurds of Azerbaijan and those of Armenia, and to investigate if publications for education could be produced using a common written language. The results of the expedition were published as a book.[89] The Conference in 1931 set a number of tasks for the AzNarkompros to accomplish. In order to fulfill these tasks further steps were taken for running the primary education of national minorities including Kurdish in their own language. In the academic year of 1933/34, the first classes of the primary schools and centers for literacy (Russian: *likpunkty*) started to provide education in Kurdish (Figure 3). Summer courses were organized in 1931 at the Shusha pedagogical high school in order to prepare Kurdish teachers to run lessons in Kurdish. A permanent Kurdish section was opened at the same high school and three textbooks in

Figure 3. School construction in the village of Minkend



Source: A. Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy, Lachin, Kel'badzhary, Nakhkrai* (Baku, 1932), 85.

[89]Bukshpan, *Azerbaidzhanskie Kurdy*.

Kurdish were printed by 1933.[90] In 1933 another expedition was organized. This time, the Institute of Nationalities at the Scholar Committee of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR sent a group of scholars led by Arab Shamilov (or Ereb Shemo, 1897–1978), a Kurdish Bolshevik revolutionary since 1917, writer, and a promising Kurdologist at the Leningrad Institute of Literature and History. The aim of the expedition was to study the economic and social conditions of the Kurdish population in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, and to understand the possibility of creating a Kurdish written language that could be understood and used by all Kurds within the USSR.[91]

These efforts were followed by limited success however. Kurdish textbooks were published in Azerbaijan in 1934 and 1936 with an interruption in 1935. In 1936, textbooks were available but only for the first and second grades.[92] Most of the teachers were graduates of Shusha pedagogical high school, where there was a Kurdish section. In this high school, except for Kurdish language and literature, all courses were conducted in Azerbaijani. In practice, Kurdish literature was not taught at all because there was no textbook for this course. In these courses, teachers simply tried to translate literature texts written by Russian or Azerbaijani authors (such as Pushkin, Lermontov, Samad Vurgun and Sabir) into Kurdish during school hours. It was obvious that these translations were far from providing the students with the necessary knowledge of the literature. In fact, some of the students were still illiterate after three years of education. The level of teachers' qualifications were very low and most Kurdish textbooks were simply not available. Moreover, the chosen dialect for the written form was not understood by all regions and tribes. There was still a long way to go towards the creation of a uniform language. It is true that in 1938, primary education in Kurdish did exist in some schools; however its success was very limited. There were only 808 students educated in twelve Kurdish schools and the language of education was Kurdish only until the third or fourth grades.[93] Finally, it should be added that this unsatisfactory level of development was not limited to Azerbaijan. Although there were publications in Kurdish in Armenia, the use of these publications was limited to Armenia, Georgia and Nakhchivan. If one reason for this was regional differences in dialects, another reason was that the elaborated written form of the Kurdish language was not comprehensible to the majority of Kurds. In 1934, the difficulties of creating a Kurdish literary language and literature, and their relationship with the Kurds living beyond Soviet borders were discussed at a conference in Erevan, Armenian SSR. As the conference resolution stated that the lack of a homogenous language, standard grammar, terminology and orthography were still serious problems waiting to be solved.[94]

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[90]Ibid., 82.
[91]"Izuchenie kul'tury kurdov," *Zaria Vostoka*, August 11, 1933, 4.
[92]*ARPİİSPİHDA* 1-14-83-77 (1936); *ARPİİSPİHDA* 1-14-7-122 (1937).
[93]*ARDA* 57-1-1291-94/96 (Spring 1938).
[94]Basile Nikitine, *Les Kurdes: Étude Sociologique et Historique* (Paris, 1956), 287–92.

Conclusions

The policy on the Kurds of Azerbaijan was a complex issue and it was subject to both modernization policies and the nationalities policy of the Soviet Union. The education and literacy campaign in Azerbaijan covered both Turkic and non-Turkic populations. The non-Turkic identities or national minorities were officially encouraged to develop their own languages and cultures and to bring up cadres for the new Soviet state. The policy of *korenizatsiia* demanded local cadres from all identities without any exclusion or discrimination. It was obvious that society could not develop if part of it was isolated from the rapid development plans. In the 1920s and 1930s, the AKP(b) at the republican level, and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at the All-Union level pushed for the primary education and cultural development in the native languages of national minorities, including Kurds. Moreover, Kurdistan Uezd and Kurdistan Okrug were established in 1923–30. However, neither the Party resolutions nor the declaration of "Red Kurdistan" in the first decade of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan brought any tangible results for the Kurds. It was only after the renewed wave of All-Union attempt on the national minorities in 1930–31 that initial results appeared, albeit on a small scale.

If All-Union plans and policies were a factor, the situation on the ground in Azerbaijan should be added as another important dimension. There were issues on the ground which mitigated successful implementation of Soviet minorities policy and modernization process. For instance, it is not a surprise that in the first years of Soviet rule, there was no serious work on education or cultural activities in Kurdish because the regional administration had to struggle against other vital issues such as local famine, which continued for a few years. Different dialects as a result of mountainous terrain and various levels of Turkification of Kurdish, lack of an alphabet and a tradition of written literature, extremely low rates of literacy and the economic situation, but more importantly perhaps their nomadic lifestyle made schooling difficult. These conditions prevented the successful implementation of the minorities policy. Finally, the opposing groups within the local communist party and state bureaucracy in Azerbaijan hindered the execution of official policies. Remarkably, neither the Kurdistan Uezd nor Okrug facilitated education in the Kurdish language as Soviet national minorities policy prescribed. This suggests that Moscow's impact in the republic or Baku's presence in its regions was not always omnipotent and omnipresent. In addition, focusing on the Russian case or extrapolating from one Soviet region (for instance Ukraine) to another republic cannot always be helpful in understanding other regions of the Union. As the Kurdish case demonstrates, the Soviet minority policies can only be understood through All-Union, republican and regional levels. Because the cadres, practices, conditions and competing ideologies at the republican and local levels allowed or hindered the execution of the official plans.