

From Soviet Conformity to Cultural Revival: Historical Continuity and Change in Azerbaijan's National Narrative

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Abstract: *This article provides a meticulous examination of the multifaceted transformation of Azerbaijan's cultural and historical identity, spanning from the Soviet era to its post-independence trajectory. While the Soviet regime undeniably orchestrated sweeping reforms that profoundly disrupted traditional expressions of national consciousness—a process particularly intensified during the repressive periods of the 1930s and 1950s—it simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically, established crucial infrastructural foundations that would underpin modern statehood. The leadership of Heydar Aliyev during the 1960s–1970s notably signaled a pragmatic shift towards nation-building, artfully navigated within the existing Soviet framework, demonstrating a subtle yet significant cultivation of national identity even amidst Soviet loyalty. Following the reassertion of independence in 1991, Azerbaijan embarked on a systematic and deliberate recovery of its historical memory, traditional cultural paradigms, and sovereign identity. This post-independence cultural reawakening has been profoundly shaped by the painful legacy of the Karabakh conflict and the broader challenges posed by inherited Soviet cultural suppression. By rigorously analyzing instances of both profound rupture and enduring continuity, this study aims to illuminate the intricate dynamics of cultural resilience and the strategic reconstruction of national narratives in Azerbaijan, highlighting its emergence on the global cultural stage, often with the sustained support of international bodies such as UNESCO.*

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, Soviet cultural policy, Stalinist repression, national identity, cultural revival, de-Sovietization, historical memory, religious suppression, heritage preservation, post-Soviet transformation, nation-building, intangible cultural heritage.*

Introduction

Azerbaijan's historical trajectory throughout the 20th century presents a compelling paradox characterized by simultaneous periods of significant development and profound disruption. As a constituent republic of the former Soviet Union, it inherited not only the material advancements associated with modernization but also bore the considerable psychological burden of

systemic cultural repression. The intricate journey from a mere Soviet administrative unit to an independent, self-narrating republic has necessitated not only a fundamental political transformation but, critically, a comprehensive rehabilitation of its collective memory and deeply rooted traditions. A thorough understanding of this complex process mandates a granular analysis of several distinct phases: the profoundly destructive

impact of early Soviet policies, the meticulously measured consolidation of national infrastructure achieved during a period of cautious nation-building, and the vigorous post-1991 revival of suppressed identities and invaluable cultural heritage, explicitly confronting the trauma of territorial loss and the ongoing project of cultural de-Sovietization.

Stalinist Repression and the Silencing of History (1930s-1950s)

The nascent decades of Soviet governance in Azerbaijan, particularly under the draconian rule of Joseph Stalin, were indelibly marked by brutal political repression and the systematic dismantling of indigenous cultural and religious institutions. The Great Purge of 1937–1938 proved especially devastating, leading to the decimation of Azerbaijan's intellectual and political elite. As Altstadt¹ meticulously documents, **hundreds of prominent writers, poets, educators, scientists, and public figures** were summarily arrested, subjected to forced exile, or executed on fabricated charges of fervent nationalism or counter-revolutionary agitation. During this period, across the Soviet Union, **millions were arrested, with hundreds of thousands executed or sent to forced labor camps (Gulags)**². While precise, definitive figures for Azerbaijan specifically are debated due to Soviet secrecy, scholarly estimates suggest a significant portion of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia and po-

litical leadership were purged. Luminary figures such as Huseyn Javid, Mikayil Mushfig, and Ahmad Javad—cornerstones of early Azerbaijani literature—tragically fell victim to this pervasive state terror.

These repressions were concurrently amplified by the imposition of forced collectivization, a policy that precipitated widespread economic dislocation and profound social trauma across rural landscapes. Traditional power structures were deliberately targeted, with landowners (*bəylər*) and religious clergy systematically purged under the guise of class-based antagonisms, thereby eroding the very foundations of established authority. Furthermore, the forced deportations of specific ethnic groups—including the Meskhetian Turks, Kurds, and subsequently, Azerbaijanis from Armenia—further exacerbated demographic instability and deepened an entrenched climate of inter-communal mistrust. This early Soviet manipulation of ethnic demographics would regrettably sow seeds for future conflicts. For instance, in November 1944, **tens of thousands of Meskhetian Turks**, estimated to be around **92,000**, were forcibly deported from their homeland in Georgia to Central Asia³. Historical records also indicate significant deportations of **Kurds and Azerbaijanis** from various Transcaucasian regions throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Specifically, **over 150,000 Azerbaijanis were deported from Armenia between 1948 and 1953**⁴.

Religious life during this period was nearly completely obliterated. Prior to Soviet rule, Azerbaijan had a vibrant religious landscape with numerous active places of worship. By the height of the anti-religious campaigns, most mosques, churches, and synagogues were closed or destroyed. It is estimated that **thousands of religious institutions across the Caucasus were shut down or repurposed**, leaving only a minuscule number officially operational by the late Soviet period⁵. The venerable Juma Mosque of Shamakhi was deliberately abandoned to decay, while in Baku, the iconic Alexander Nevsky Cathedral was razed in 1937, serving as a stark symbol of the state's aggressive and uncompromising erasure of religious pluralism. The deliberate destruction and repurposing of religious sites during the Soviet era had a profound and lasting impact on Azerbaijani society. Beyond the physical structures, it aimed to sever the spiritual and communal ties that had historically bound communities. The iconic Juma Mosque of Shamakhi, left to decay, and the outright demolition of Baku's Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in 1937, were not merely acts of architectural destruction; they were calculated strikes against the very soul of the nation's diverse religious fabric. This relentless assault extended to the systematic persecution of religious leaders, who were either executed or incarcerated. As a result, the transmission of invaluable Islamic knowledge and traditions was forced underground, relying on clandestine

networks and the courageous few who risked everything to preserve their faith. This period left a deep scar on the collective memory, with the challenges of reconstructing the full scope of its impact still faced by researchers today, given the deliberate obliteration of records and silencing of voices.

Religious leaders were either executed or incarcerated, forcing the transmission of Islamic knowledge and traditions into clandestine networks. Scholarly inquiry into this period of religious suppression often highlights the immense challenges faced by researchers in reconstructing the full scope of its impact, given the deliberate obliteration of records and silencing of voices.

Concomitantly, this era witnessed the wholesale rewriting of Azerbaijani history, meticulously tailored to serve the narrow ideological imperatives of the Soviet state. The national past was forcibly recontextualized through a rigid Marxist-Leninist lens, with any historical linkages to Iran, the Ottoman Empire, or pre-Russian statehood pejoratively depicted as reactionary or feudal⁶. This pervasive historiographical violence effectively severed the organic continuity of Azerbaijan's historical identity, contributing to a profound and enduring cultural amnesia among generations. The imposition of a Cyrillic-based alphabet, replacing the traditional Arabic script and then the Latin script, further exacerbated this rupture, alienating new generations from their written heritage and historical documents.

Beyond the tangible losses, the imposition of a Cyrillic-based alphabet was a particularly insidious form of cultural rupture. By replacing the traditional Arabic script, and then the Latin script, this policy created a linguistic chasm that alienated new generations from their ancestral written heritage and historical documents. This was not a mere administrative change but a strategic move to reorient Azerbaijani identity away from its deep-rooted historical and cultural connections with the wider Turkic and Islamic worlds. The ability to read historical texts, ancient manuscripts, and even family records became progressively difficult, fostering a sense of disconnection from the past. This linguistic engineering contributed significantly to the “cultural amnesia” described by scholars, making the post-independence efforts to reintroduce the Latin script and recover historical literacy all the more crucial and challenging.

Pragmatic Nation-Building within the Soviet Framework (1969-1982): First Steps Towards Modern National Self-Identification

The tenure of Heydar Aliyev as leader of the Azerbaijan SSR marked a pivotal shift, moving beyond the repressive Stalinist era towards a period of cautious national reassertion⁷. Within the constraints of Soviet loyalty, Aliyev strategically promoted Azerbaijani interests, laying the groundwork for modern nation-build-

ing and fostering a nascent sense of self-identification.

This was achieved through the strategic promotion of Azerbaijani professionals, industrial growth, and the expansion of key cultural institutions. While overt nationalism remained prohibited, support for Azerbaijani-language publications, historical films, and the celebration of cultural icons like Nizami Ganjavi and Uzeyir Hajibeyov subtly nurtured a distinct Azerbaijani identity. These efforts, though framed within Soviet ideology, represented a crucial departure from past homogenization. The institutional and intellectual infrastructure developed during this period proved indispensable for the republic's eventual transition to complete independence in the early 1990s, preparing a cadre capable of articulating and leading the new national narrative.

Independence and the Recovery of Historical Memory: Confronting Trauma and Global Engagement (Post-1991)

The profound dissolution of the USSR in 1991 afforded Azerbaijan the unprecedented opportunity to reclaim not only its political sovereignty but, perhaps more significantly, its authentic historical voice. The newly independent republic immediately embarked upon an ambitious and systematic project of cultural recovery, earnestly seeking to re-establish continuity with its pre-Soviet and even its deep medieval past. The re-legalization of Novruz Bayramı and the

meticulous restoration of numerous religious sites were potent early symbolic gestures of this profound cultural renaissance. This period also saw a continued, albeit transformed, form of loyalty to the idea of an independent and developing Azerbaijani state, a loyalty that transcended former Soviet ideological affiliations. The Heydar Aliyev Foundation, established in 2004, became a prominent driver in this post-independence cultural renaissance, initiating numerous projects for the preservation and promotion of Azerbaijani culture both domestically and internationally.

Museums, national historical archives, and educational curricula underwent a comprehensive restructuring, meticulously reconfigured to reflect a genuinely national rather than a strictly ideological perspective. Dynasties once relegated to obscurity, such as the Shirvanshahs and the Qajars, were purposefully reintroduced into the collective public consciousness. Concurrently, historical grievances—including the devastating Stalinist purges and the systematic suppression of Islamic scholarship—were openly and critically addressed. The martyrdom of Azerbaijani intellectuals in the 1930s is now widely commemorated in public discourse, firmly enshrined as an integral component of the collective national memory.

However, this cultural revival has been inextricably linked with the profound trauma of the First Karabakh War (1988-1994). The occupation of significant Azerbaijani territories,

including the historic cultural center of Shusha, resulted in widespread destruction and desecration of Azerbaijani cultural and religious heritage. Mosques, cemeteries, and historical monuments in these regions suffered immense damage and systematic alteration, representing a severe blow to the nation's tangible and intangible cultural assets. This destruction served further to galvanize the post-independence drive for cultural preservation and assertion, underscoring the fragility of heritage in times of conflict and the urgent need for international recognition and protection. The subsequent Second Karabakh War (2020) and the liberation of these territories have initiated a new, urgent phase of cultural restoration and documentation, aiming to reverse decades of neglect and destruction and integrate these areas fully back into the national cultural fabric.

In response to this trauma and as part of its broader strategy for cultural assertion, Azerbaijan intensified its engagement with international organizations. Internationally, Azerbaijan began to present itself not merely as a modern energy exporter, but fundamentally as the legitimate inheritor of a rich, complex, and multifaceted civilization. This effort has been significantly amplified through its active collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Since becoming a member on June 3, 1992, Azerbaijan has strategically utilized UNESCO platforms to promote its cultural heritage on the global stage.

The inclusion of numerous Azerbaijani cultural elements on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has been pivotal:

1. Azerbaijani Mugham (Inscribed 2008)
2. The Art of Azerbaijani Ashiq (Inscribed 2009)
3. Traditional Art of Azerbaijani Carpet Weaving (Inscribed 2010)
4. Craftsmanship and performance art of the tar, a long-necked string musical instrument (Inscribed 2012)
5. Chovqan, a traditional Karabakh horse-riding game (Inscribed 2013)
6. Traditional art and symbolism of Kelaghayi, making and wearing women's silk headscarves (Inscribed 2014)
7. Copper craftsmanship of Lahic (Inscribed 2015)
8. The cultural heritage of Dede Qorqud/Korkyt Ata/Dede Korkut, epic culture, folk tales, and music (Joint nomination, Inscribed 2018)
9. Yalli (Kochari, Tenzere) traditional group dances of Nakhchivan (Inscribed 2018)
10. Nar Bayrami, traditional pomegranate festival and culture (Inscribed 2020)
11. Miniature Art (Joint nomination, Inscribed 2020)
12. Pehlevanliq culture: traditional zorkhana games, sports, and wrestling (Inscribed 2022)
13. Telling tradition of Molla Nasreddin anecdotes (Joint nomination, Inscribed 2022)

14. Sericulture and traditional production of silk for weaving (Joint nomination, Inscribed 2022)

15. Culture of Çay (tea), a symbol of identity, hospitality, and social interaction (Joint nomination, Inscribed 2022)

16. Tandır craftsmanship and bread baking in Azerbaijan (Inscribed 2024)

These listings not only provide international recognition and protection for these unique cultural expressions but also highlight Azerbaijan's deep historical roots and cultural diversity, counteracting the lingering effects of Soviet cultural homogenization. Furthermore, the inclusion of sites like the Walled City of Baku with the Shirvanshah's Palace and Maiden Tower (Inscribed 2000), Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape (Inscribed 2007), and the Historic Centre of Sheki with the Khan's Palace (Inscribed 2019) on UNESCO's World Heritage List has cemented Azerbaijan's place on the global cultural map. This strategic engagement with UNESCO has played a crucial role in post-independence nation-building, projecting a confident and distinct national identity to the world.

Institutions such as the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences assumed leading roles in meticulously funding critical research, curating impactful exhibitions, and commissioning significant publications aimed at promoting a more holistic and nuanced narrative of Azerbaijani history—one that equitably integrates

Turkic, Persian, Islamic, and Caucasian ethnocultural elements⁸. This proactive cultural diplomacy has been central to overcoming the legacy of Soviet efforts to distort or diminish Azerbaijan's historical connections. It has allowed its culture to become well-known beyond its borders.

The post-independence cultural revival in Azerbaijan has not been without its complexities and debates. While there is a strong drive to reclaim a pre-Soviet identity, the influence of the Soviet period, both positive and negative, cannot be entirely erased. The infrastructure developed during Soviet times, from educational institutions to industrial capacities, provided a foundation upon which the independent state could build. Moreover, the very process of “de-Sovietization” involves an ongoing reevaluation of history, prompting discussions and sometimes differing interpretations of national heroes, historical events, and even the legacy of figures such as Heydar Aliyev. This dynamic engagement with its past, including confronting the trauma of the Karabakh conflict and the challenges of inherited cultural suppression, signifies a maturing national narrative that is both self-reflective and forward-looking. This continuous process of rediscovering and redefining its identity is a hallmark of Azerbaijan's journey on the global cultural stage.

Conclusion

The profound cultural evolution of Azerbaijan, transitioning from the repressive decades of Stalinism to the pluralistic national revival of the 21st

century, stands as an enduring testament to its intrinsic resilience and strategic adaptability. While the Soviet era undeniably imposed severe constraints upon religious life, historical memory, and cultural expression—a suppression particularly acute between the 1930s and 1950s—it concurrently contributed, albeit inadvertently, to the development of critical administrative and educational institutions that would later prove instrumental in facilitating national consolidation.

The period under Heydar Aliyev's leadership represented a pivotal turning point: a time when Soviet loyalty demonstrably coexisted with a burgeoning national pride, thereby meticulously laying the foundational groundwork for the post-independence state's cultural and intellectual infrastructure. Since regaining sovereignty in 1991, Azerbaijan has embraced its rich historical inheritance with renewed vigor and profound confidence, systematically reaffirming traditions once explicitly prohibited and valiantly reclaiming historical figures once condemned. This process has been simultaneously a response to and a means of healing from the deep wounds inflicted by Soviet cultural policies and the subsequent Karabakh conflict. Through active international engagement, notably with UNESCO, Azerbaijan has not only safeguarded its unique heritage but has successfully elevated its cultural narrative onto the global stage, showcasing a vibrant civilization that transcends its tumultuous 20th-century history.

The ongoing recovery of Azerbaijan's intricate cultural narrative transcends a mere nostalgic return to the past; rather, it represents a dynamic and continuous reconstitution of that past in light of contemporary national sovereignty. Understanding this complex process necessitates acknowl-

edging both the violence and the unforeseen, yet tangible, contributions of the Soviet legacy, recognizing that genuine cultural rebirth frequently commences within the lingering shadows of enforced silence and enduring trauma.

Notes

- ¹ A. L., Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and identity under Russian rule*, Hoover Institution Press, 1992.
- ² R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: A reassessment*, Oxford University Press, 1990.
- ³ M. Aydın, "The Meskhetian Turks: The Soviet policy of mass deportation", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 27(1), 2007, pp. 29-45.
- ⁴ T. Swietochowski, *Azerbaijan: From Russian rule to independence*, Garnet Publishing, 2006.

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- ⁶ T. Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A borderland in transition*, Columbia University Press, 1995.
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