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Power and Violence in the Russian Revolution

The March Events and Baku Commune of 1918

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Abstract

This article investigates the March Events of 1918: city-wide fighting for control of Baku that involved the Bolshevik party, the Red Guards, and various Armenian and Azerbaijani militias. Besides many of these combatants, thousands of innocent Azerbaijanis and others (Caucasus peoples and Persians) perished in the hostilities. Focusing on the Events as an exercise of power and violence, I argue that the establishment of the Baku Commune (like the later formation of the multi-national Soviet Union) was indivisible from these circumstances of national and sectarian war. Drawing from Azerbaijani sources long-suppressed by the Communist regime, I recount some of the key contexts, mechanics, and legacies of the Events. As an elucidation of the facts, this study sets out to help historians calibrate their interpretations, better weigh the nature of Soviet power, and refine what we usually term “Armenian” or “Azerbaijani” aggression. These peoples were not preternaturally disposed to violence. Suffering was not the exclusive province of either community. Rather, political strategies have drawn them into cycles of violence and bonds of recrimination that have recurred sporadically into the present day.

Keywords

Baku Commune – Azerbaijan – March and September Events of 1918

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Надобно входить в положение каждого. Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.

LEO TOLSTOY, *War and Peace*¹

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What ever happened to the memory of the infamous “Baku Commune” of 1918? For over seventy years of the Soviet regime, the myth of the Commune played no small role in communist ideology, its narratives radiating out of the city of Baku to all corners of the Soviet Union through the media, books, and film. Its power was in defining one of the first victories of the Bolshevik regime at the imperial borderlands: amid Muslim treachery, within the cauldron of foreign capitalist intrigue, a noble commune at the gates of the “East.” Its famous victims, the Twenty-Six Commissars, came from the major ethnic groups of Baku, a mark of the Commune’s supposed international character. Ronald G. Suny’s pioneering work, *The Baku Commune* (1972), gave readers the most nuanced history along these lines, surveying the dynamics between class and nationality, those deep historical forces that shaped Soviet history, that have become the markers of a fascinating “identity” politics that we scholars need constantly analyze, weigh, and measure.²

Yet the idol of the Commune lies in ruins today, not only because of what it represented from the factual history and political ideology, but because of what it was designed to mask and falsify. There would have been no Baku Commune without the violence of the March Events of 1918 that propelled it into place; nor without the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR) that replaced it; nor without the Soviet regime’s concerted plans to deny and distort the memory of both. This was a hinge moment when the Bolsheviks wielded political power and manipulated communal violence (both national and sectarian) to subdue their enemies in Baku. Such moments are not really about the long *duree* of “class and nationality” forms. True, these are powerful analytical categories. But we tend to impose them on the history in order to shape our own ideological strategies of remembering or forgetting. Let me offer an alternative approach, one that focuses less on essential “identities” within, more on the existential relations between people; less on the social psychology of any

1 “We should enter into everyone’s situation. To understand all is to pardon all.” From Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (Part One, Chapter 28).

2 Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Baku Commune, 1917–1918: Class and Nationality in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). For critiques of “identities,” see

one group, more on the situational contexts around them. What happens when we shift the focus from the “who” and “why” people supposedly were to the “where” and “how” people were? To the elemental forces of power and violence that bore upon them, to the dilemmas they faced, to the choices they made?³

Contexts are so important because moments of revolutionary change are fluid and dynamic, forcing people to take sides, to make allies or adversaries, as in the case of the origins of the Baku Commune and the Azerbaijani Republic in 1918. These were two radically different regimes: the first of coercion and dictatorship; the second of cooperation and democracy. Their founders made decisions and policies that shaped peoples’ lives and the public memories about them. Both require some delicate untangling to sort out the historical record.

In the regional context, Russia’s February Revolution found the greater city of Baku divided. A rough census in October of 1917 counted a remarkably diverse population: 77,123 Russians; 67,190 Azerbaijani Turks; 52,184 Armenians; 12,427 Jews; 11,904 Persians; along with thousands more Caucasus peoples, Europeans and migrants.⁴ The political parties of Baku expressed this diversity. The Russian community was represented by Social Democrats (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks), Socialist Revolutionaries, and Constitutional Democrats, among other groupings. The Armenian community was represented by the Armenian National Council and by the radical “Armenian Revolutionary Federation” (*Dashnaktsiutun* or Dashnak). The “Muslim” community, as Azerbaijanis referred to themselves, and which term I will apply here, had their own political representations. These included the Bolshevik party, which had pioneered a multi-national outreach in Baku with the establishment of the Hummet (*Hümmət* or “Energy”) after 1904, a Social Democratic faction representing the Muslim workers.

Yet this latter project soon lost its momentum as leading Hummetists broke off to form the Musavat (*Müsavat* or “Equality”) party in 1911, which united with the

James Meyer, “Turkic Worlds: Community Representation and Collective Identity in the Russian and Ottoman Empires” (PhD diss., Brown, 2007), 183; and John Samuel Schoeberlein-Engel, “Identity in Central Asia: Construction and Contention in the Conceptions of ‘Özbek,’ ‘Tājik,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘Samarquandī’ and Other Groups” (PhD diss., Harvard, 1994).

3 For pioneering approaches to my topic, see Leslie Sargent, “The ‘Armeno-Tatar War’ in the South Caucasus, 1905–1906: Multiple Causes, Interpreted Meanings,” *Ab Imperio* 10, no. 4 (2010): 143–168; S.M. Iskhakov, *Rossiiskie musul'mane i revoliutsiia* (Moscow: Mysl', 2004), 467–468; Jörg Baberowski, *Der Feind ist Überall: Stalinismus im Kaukasus* (Munich: Anstalt, 2003), 104–136; and Marco Buttino, *La rivoluzione capovolta: L'Asia centrale tra il crollo dell'impero zarista e la formazione dell'URSS* (Naples: Mediterraneo, 2003), 331–341.

4 From Dzh. B. Guliev, ed., *Azerbaidzhanskaia respublika: Dokumenty i materialy, 1918–1920 gg.* (Baku: ELM, 1998), 337 (301), hereafter *ARDM*. Muslim Azerbaijanis and Persians comprised about half the workers, also the poorest and least skilled; see Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks* (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1992), 36.

more conservative “Turkic Federalist Party” (*Difai*) in mid-1917. The months before the March Events were marked by the increasing popularity of the Musavat, especially given its powerful union of socialist and nationalist values. Threatened by this surge, the Bolsheviks (in collusion with their Russian and Armenian allies) engineered a campaign of disenfranchisement, exclusion, and demonization against it. Thanks to the thousands of poor and illiterate Muslim men (and veiled women) voting for the first time, the Musavat won a series of impressive votes through the revolutionary months of 1917: to the Trans-Caucasus Assembly, to various Baku city committees, and to the Baku Soviet itself. Yet in the latter case, the Bolsheviks and their allies invalidated the Musavat’s commanding gains.⁵ They may have claimed the mantle of class internationalism, but the Bolsheviks denied the Muslims participation in it, unless governed by them. As Musavat founder M.E. Resultzade put it, the first “all-Russian” (*Rossiiskaia*) Revolution in February 1917 promised autonomy and federalism for the oppressed Azerbaijani nation; the second “ethnic Russian” (*Rusaskaia*) Revolution of October betrayed it, engineering a Bolshevik coup for state power, a “struggle for the sake of struggle.” Bolshevik internationalism became little more than a guise for Soviet-Russian state interests.⁶

These regional circumstances were closely linked to international contexts. By early 1918, as the fronts of World War I collapsed between the Russian and Ottoman empires, retreating Russian and Armenian soldiers (who tended to bond against a common Turkish and Muslim enemy) brought the fight to the rear, marauding and skirmishing with Muslim militias through the countryside.⁷ The situation was made worse by the influx of Russian and Armenian troops and arms into Baku proper, the underpinnings of a Bolshevik-Dashnak alliance. Soldiers mingled with civilians. Politics and war embedded the national and sectarian communities in rumor and fear, the dread of communal violence to come. The city remained a tense neutral ground, at least until March of 1918, when the Bolshevik party finally leveraged violence in order to secure a monopoly of power. Its leaders chose ethnic war and dictatorship over civil peace and coalition government, a pattern they repeated elsewhere in Russia’s Muslim borderlands.⁸

5 On this campaign, mounted between September and November of 1917, see the issues of *Izvestiia Komiteta Bakinskikh Musul'manskikh Obshchestvennykh Organizatsii*, a supplement to the Muslim newspaper, *Kaspiia*; and the documents in *Revoliutsiia 1917 goda v Azerbaidzhane: khronika sobytii*, ed. S. Belenkii and A. Manvelov (Baku: Azgiz, 1927), 174, 203.

6 “Baku, 23-go Marta 1919 g.,” *Azerbaidzhan* 61 (23 March 1919): 5.

7 See Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Leiden: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 197–98.

8 See Adeeb Khalid, “Tashkent 1917: Muslim Politics in Revolutionary Turkestan,” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 270–97; Alan W. Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars* (Stanford: Hoover

The March Events were, in effect, an opening salvo in the Russian Civil War at the peripheries of empire, culminating several months of intrigues against the Muslim community. Thanks to the work of Azerbaijani historians, we now have a definitive chronology, as well as a new appreciation for the nature of the communal violence: spiraling from military altercations into street battles and finally the robbery and murder of civilians.⁹ The Events began on Saturday 29 March with a confrontation at the docks, as about fifty Muslim soldiers were preparing to depart the city after the funeral of one of their comrades, Mammad Tagiev, son of a prominent Baku millionaire and philanthropist. They were a remnant of the “Savage Division” (*Dikaia Diviziia*), officially known as the “Caucasus Native Cavalry Division,” come from the scene of earlier Bolshevik-Muslim fighting at Lenkoran. The Baku Soviet had marked these soldiers as enemy combatants conspiring against Bolshevik power in Baku. Local Muslims considered them as guests, the honor guard for Tagiev’s funeral. Most testimonies recount that the Bolshevik Red Guards fired first on the Muslim troops at the docks, followed by their disarmament and detention.¹⁰ This was not yet the beginning of the wider conflict, but it does highlight how the Muslim community was under continuing provocation and siege.

Tensions built into the next day, Sunday 30 March. Political leaders attempted to end the confrontation. Stepan Shaumian (for the Bolsheviks) negotiated with Resulzade (for the Musavat). Yet neither side could be pacified in the streets. Bolshevik and Dashnak forces took up positions against Muslim crowds and neighborhoods. Armenian residents began to leave the danger zones for the safety of the Armenian quarter. Crowds of Muslim protestors, rather disorderly and angry, collected at the “Ismailie” (*İsmailiyə*) the building of the “Muslim Charitable Society” in central Baku, demanding the release

Institution Press, 1978), 120–121; and Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 158–159.

- 9 For the testimonies and reports of the “Extraordinary Investigation Commission” (comprising eminent Muslim and Russian jurists), formed by the ADR to investigate the March Events, see Solmaz Rustamova-Togidi, ed., *Mart 1918 g. Baku: Azerbaidzhanskie pogromy v dokumentakh* (Baku: Ministerstvo Nacional’noi Bezopasnosti, 2009), hereafter *APVD*. See also Aidyn Balaev, *Fevral’skaia revoliutsiia i natsional’nye okrainy: Martovskie sobytiia 1918 goda v Azerbaidzhane* (Moscow: Flinta, 2008), 26–36; and Dzhamil’ Gasanly, *Russkaia revoliutsiia i Azerbaidzhan* (Moscow: Flinta, 2011), 103–127. According to Russia’s Julian calendar, the Events fell between Saturday the 17th and Wednesday the 21st of March.
- 10 On the fifty some soldiers of the Savage Division at the docks, see “Dəhşətli mart hadisəsinin müxtəssər tarixçəsi,” *Azərbaycan* 147 (21 March 1919): 3–4; and “Iz nedavnogo proshlogo,” *Azerbaidzhan* 67 (30 March 1919): 1–3. On the Bolsheviks firing first, see the testimonies in *APVD*, 84 (2), 87 (3), 89 (4), 679–680 (1009); and 687–688 (1012).

and rearming of the Muslim honor guard. Other Muslim men built defensive barricades and improvised redoubts to protect their neighborhoods from the expected Bolshevik-Dashnak assault.¹¹

The situation was exacerbated by a variety of rumors spreading through the city, exciting the various communities: that the whole Savage Division (even though its few members were leaving) was preparing to overthrow the Baku Soviet; that a possible alliance was in the works between the Armenian and Muslim communities to overpower the Bolsheviks; that the Muslims were arming so as to massacre Russian residents.¹² Each had at least an element of truth. Troops of the Savage Division were engaged in hostilities against the Bolsheviks in other parts of the country; the national communities were in negotiations for peace; and the Muslim community had begun to arm itself (though really for defensive purposes). Yet the rumors were essentially lies, the means that some opportunists took to provoke hatreds and incite violence in a city already on edge.

Most of the testimonies recall that the battles began on the early evening of Sunday 30 March when shots began to ring out across Baku. Violence now spread along the very streets where rumors had circulated before. The classic novel of Azerbaijani literature, *Ali and Nino*, recounted the clashes: the “first shots” shattering the beauty of the old city, its “streets become battlefields,” opening “the door to another world.”¹³ We simply do not know who fired first. The Bolsheviks claimed that the Muslims fired on them, part of their enduring fiction of a “mutiny.” This might indeed have been the case. After all, the Muslims were intimidated. Theirs was the community excluded and threatened. Yet even if one of the Muslim militias fired first, this does not absolve the Bolshevik and Dashnak leadership from their complicity: in provoking the Muslim community at the docks on Saturday; and in firing back with coordinated offensive volleys on Sunday. The March Events began, Serge Zenkovsky quite properly wrote, as a “Bolshevik upheaval.” Shaumian himself admitted that “we exploited” the situation and launched a “full-frontal” assault against the Muslims.¹⁴ The Bolsheviks enjoyed predominance in the city, masters of

11 On the agitated Muslim crowds, some threatening “war” (*müharibə*), see Səid Axundzadə, *Mart hadisəsi 1918* (Baku: n.p., 1919), a manuscript in the Akhundov State Library (Baku); along with confirmation in the accounts of Məhəmməd Muradzadə, *Mart hadisə-i elimesi* (Baku: Azerneshr, 1996), and Akhmed Akhmedov, *Natsional'noe dvizhenie, partii i obshchestvennye deiateli Azerbaidzhana v 1918–1925 godakh glazami ochevidtisa*, ed. Irada Bagirova (Baku: Nurlan, 2006), 43–44.

12 On these rumors, see *APVD*, 458 (603), and 421–427 (569).

13 Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino*, trans. Jenia Graman (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1999), 162–69.

14 Quoted from Serge Zenkovsky, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 259; and confirmed in Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union*, 199.

the Baku Soviet and of some 6,000 to 8,000 well-armed and experienced troops (the Red Guard, including Russians and Europeans of various parties and loyalties), allied with 4,000 more Dashnak soldiers. Shaumian later claimed that the Muslim forces of the Savage Division amounted to 10,000 strong, but this was most certainly an exaggeration, as that the soldiers of the Division were scattered in and around Baku in smallish numbers, part of the poorly organized and armed Muslim militias (mostly civilians), numbering somewhere in the thousands.¹⁵ Musavat leaders later clarified their own participation in the March Events. As Rezulzade put it, his meager forces fought back, refusing to surrender their political rights, to “bow our heads in submission to the enemies of our freedom.”¹⁶ The initial street fighting of Monday morning very quickly turned from battles into routs, such were the disproportionate numbers of better outfitted Bolshevik and Dashnak troops.

A widespread retelling of the March Events, based largely upon on the Soviet position, marks its two alleged phases: the first of a Bolshevik “political war” between Sunday and Monday (30–31 March); and the second of Dashnak sectarian violence between Tuesday and Wednesday (1–2 April).¹⁷ Yet this version can no longer stand under the scrutiny of the varied new sources. The political war was already a sectarian war on Monday 31 March, the Bolsheviks maneuvering anti-Muslim violence to win the day. Their shelling of Muslim neighborhoods and landmarks began on that morning, including against the Tazapir and Shah mosques, a deadly artillery barrage from the Red Caspian Fleet, coinciding with the first “Armenian” Dashnak attacks on those neighborhoods, the targeted zones of fire and attack. In effect, the Bolsheviks initiated the violence as a pogrom: declaring war against the Muslim parts of the city. This was essentially a military war of “terror” against the civilian population, as one eyewitness remembered. In their street operations, roaming Dashnak

Shaumian cited in Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 116.

15 On these numbers, and the Bolshevik-Dashnak alliance, see A. Popov, “Iz istorii revoliutsii v Vostochnom Zakavkaze, 1917–1918,” *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* 11, no. 34 (1924): 156–57; Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia, the First Year, 1918–1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 386; and Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan*, 112–18. The real nature of the Muslim militias (likely filled with thousands of inexperienced recruits) remains obscure, as noted by Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 221.

16 Rezulzade (2–11 December 1919), in *ARDM*, 384–385 (357).

17 See Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917–1921* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 74–75; Richard Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 148–49; and Suny, *The Baku Commune*, 219–20.

troops were sometimes accompanied by one or more Red Guard or Russian soldiers. But for the most part the Bolsheviks held back, relying on the Dashnak as proxies on the ground to confront Muslim barricades, send them into retreat, and advance into their neighborhoods.¹⁸

These ground operations were ostensibly meant to find and kill the members of the Savage Division, or any other armed Muslims, or at the very least disarm and arrest them, and search their homes and neighborhoods for more arms. As search and seizure operations, they were sudden, if also calculated and systematic. People remembered just waking up, or drinking their tea, on Monday morning as they heard shouts and firing in the streets, fists pounding on their doors. Some of the Bolshevik and Dashnak troops had lists of wanted Muslims. Non-Muslims caught in the dragnets were spared. The troops cleared residents from their homes, corralling them into makeshift concentration camps in police stations and cellars, theaters and schools. At least one account recorded how Muslim men were separated from their families, hauled away for later execution.¹⁹

The initial zones of fire now turned into mass looting and killing zones, beginning at the “Inner City” (also called the “Fortress”), extending northward along a straight line through the city’s Muslim quarter, targeting rich and poor alike. Russian and Dashnak troops stole what valuables they could carry away, moving from street to street, house to house, day after day. Men who initially resisted were shot. Wives (and children and the aged) who resisted were killed. There were cases of torture and violations of people and corpses.²⁰ Residents were forced into the western heights, toward some of the city’s main cemeteries near Nagornyi Park, where victims of the March Events were eventually buried in mass plots. The city merged with its cemeteries; the living mingled with the dead. Half of Baku burned, including the “Ismailie” and the famous *Kaspüia* publishing house, as well as several leading Muslim hotels.. The worst of the violence ended only when Russian forces and elements in the Bolshevik party demanded an end to the pogrom on the morning of 2 April, a final surrender of the Muslim elites and public to the new authority of the Baku Commune. In the final count, hundreds of Bolshevik and Dashnak lay dead. The Muslim community lost about 12,000

18 Quoted from the testimony in *APVD*, 253 (256); with confirmation about Dashnak attacks early on 31 March in *APVD*, 81 (1), 92 (8), 133 (51), 148 (65), and 439 (573).

19 Testimonies in *APVD*, 133–134 (151), 367 (470), and 442 (576).

20 See the eyewitness descriptions of this “atrocious and savage struggle” in Henry Barby, *Le débauche russe: Les extravagances Bolcheviques et l'épopée Arménienne* (Paris: Michel, 1918), 59–73; and Peter Hopkirk, *Like Hidden Fire: The Plot to Bring Down the British Empire* (New York: Kodansha, 1997), 284–87.

fallen, most of them innocents, though twice that number perished in the surrounding countryside.²¹

Why the violence? We can only speculate about causes, but the class values of the Bolsheviks seem to have played very little role. More decisive were their ambitions for power, their acceptance of coercion and conflict as a means to resolve political disagreements. They were not naïve. As Caucasians themselves, they were well aware of the rising enmities in the city and of the battles raging beyond. They understood the belligerence of their allies, the Dashnak troops. They understood the martial values of their Muslim neighbors, so intent on defending their homes and honor. By sending in Dashnak troops to invade Muslim neighborhoods, the Bolsheviks were inviting communal violence.²² Why the atrocities? Armenians and Azerbaijanis were not locked into irreconcilable “age-old” animosities. National values seem far less important than a struggle for power and revenge.²³ The Dashnak were battle-hardened troops, who had already participated in World War I and its after-effects. They also shared memories and reports of Ottoman violence against innocent Armenian civilians (the genocide of 1915); and personal memories of the mutual Azerbaijani-Armenian pogroms of 1905–1906. From the testimonies of those who suffered, simple criminality was also at work. This was a moment of rage and license, a “bunt” against the Muslims.

Some people broke out of these ideological and agitational molds, attempting to share power rather than monopolize it, to avoid violence rather than engage it. For them, class cooperation and national concord were the best means of politics. Members of the Armenian National Council attempted to ally with the Muslims, though they were checkmated by the Dashnak. Musavat national leaders tried but failed to ally with the Armenian community, lacking full sway over the rather unformed Muslim crowds, ruled not by national purpose but by weak “national sentiment” (*etirafi-milliā*).²⁴ Baku’s mosques and churches were sometimes sites of inflammatory sermons, but they were also places where Baku’s residents (*Bakintsy*) met to seek out and pray for accord.

21 See *APVD*, 421–427 (569); and “Krovavyi zagovor’ 17-21-go Marta 1918 goda v Baku,” *Azerbaidzhan* 67 (30 March 1919): 3. On the approximately 12,000 dead in Baku proper, twice as many beyond, see the ADR reports in *APVD*, 691 (1012); and 702 (1013); and Balaev, *Fevral’skaia revoliutsiia*, 33–36, 47. Thousands of Muslims also fled Baku.

22 As the Bolshevik apologist, A. Popov, “Iz istorii revoliutsii,” 159, vaguely admitted.

23 Quoted from Sargent, “The ‘Armeno-Tatar War,’” 143–68, about the earlier 1905–1906 violence.

24 On the Dashnak as beyond the control of the Armenian National Council, see Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 148–49. On the Muslim crowds as beyond the control of the Musavat, see the quote in Xəlil İbrahim, “18–31 Mart,” *Azərbaycan* 147 (21 March 1919): 1–2.

Armenians saved Muslims from violence; Muslims did the same for them. Russians, Georgians and Jews saved the lives and properties of their Muslim neighbors. Normal people answered the fury of violence, allegedly committed in the name of class and national ideals, with acts of charity and kindness, all in the name of their shared humanity.²⁵

These peacemakers ultimately failed, overwhelmed by the “March Days” or “March Events,” as they were soon named in the first recollections. These terms implied several nuanced meanings. In one sense, the Events were inexplicable, confused, a prolonged moment of anarchy. They simply happened, a kind of blind force of nature imposed from without. But the terms also expressed the shock of duration and the certainty of results. They left incalculable damage in terms of families broken, individuals traumatized, properties lost. They shattered civic concord, trust between neighbors. These were Events of such trauma as to mark a tear in the fabric of time, a decisive break in history.

For both the Baku Commune and its successor, the Azerbaijani Republic (ADR), the March Events soon became the pivot around which both crafted their distinct political cultures. The Baku Commune lasted only about four months (March to June of 1918), owing its precarious existence to the violence of the March Events. From the start, and in tones repeated in the Moscow press, Shaumian admitted that his victory was “brilliant:” a total “hegemony” for the Bolshevik Party, standard bearer of the new communism; total “destruction” for the counter-revolutionary Musavat, a party of “Beks and Khans.”²⁶ He and his Commissars now set about establishing a dictatorial regime: forbidding demonstrations, arresting opponents, closing newspapers, confiscating private properties, nationalizing the oil industry for export to Soviet Russia. They never punished the Dashnak troops for the crimes of March; in fact, many of them were now integrated into Baku’s Red Guards.²⁷ None of this lasted. The famed Twenty-Six Commissars were arrested several times by the Commune’s first successor government, the Centro-Caspian Dictatorship, finally fleeing Baku (with some of the treasures stolen during the March Events) and perishing in the deserts of Turkmenistan at the hands of their enemies (a faction of Socialist Revolutionaries).

The Commissars fled just as advancing Ottoman troops and Azerbaijani militias were about to seize Baku for the ADR (proclaimed as a government in

25 On these peace initiatives, see Dəhşətli mart hadisəsinin müxtəsər tarixçəsi,” 3–4; “İz nedavnogo proshlogo,” 1–3; and Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, 148–149.

26 Shaumian cited from Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia*, 75. Also cited from “Sobytiia v Baku,” *Izvestiia* 80 (23 April 1918): 3.

27 Suny, *The Baku Commune*, 226.

exile in May of 1918). Elements of these militias now engaged in the “September Events,” pillaging and murdering Armenian civilians in their path, perhaps 10,000 or more victims, an explosion of violence that answered March.²⁸ Here was an anti-Armenian pogrom bound up with the struggle to recoup property and honor from past Muslim defeats. As wrongful and inhuman as the earlier anti-Azerbaijani pogrom, it demands from us historians its own detailed study of what happened, though I cannot address the facts here.

Remarkably, the ADR’s premier national leaders saw the September Events in just this way, a mark of dishonor on the country requiring full recognition and understanding. Fatali Khan Khoiskii (first chair of the Council of Ministers) recognized Muslim culpability for the September Events, for which the ADR punished some one hundred criminal offenders. Resulzade recognized the basic parity of the “March and September Events,” this so as to never “repeat” them, to break the cycle of violence and “revenge.” They were based not on true national sentiments but on pure criminality: “people killing people.”²⁹ ADR reports and policies likewise set out to promote democratic pluralism and civic peace during the few years of its existence. These were the themes, for example, that filled the news of the first anniversary of the March Events, commemorating the tragic birth of the Azerbaijani nation through its victims and “martyrs.” The Bolsheviks actually tried to upstage them by instead celebrating the sacrifices of the Twenty-Six Commissars on 20 March 1919 (the half-year anniversary of their murders), though the demonstrations fizzled. Instead, most of Baku (including Armenian entrepreneurs and workers) came out to honor the victims of March.³⁰ The calls were to avoid the kinds of violence in March that “seeded” September, to suppress the furies of the “adventurists” (*avantiury*) who had profited from the havoc. The calls were to isolate these criminals from what was authentically “national,” probably in part to absolve some of the living, but also in substance to promote “mutual trust” and “peaceful coexistence.”³¹

28 See Bakhshi Ishkhanian, *Velikie uzhasy v gor. Baku: Anketnoe izsledovanie sentiabr'skikh sobytii 1918 g.* (Tiflis: Eprikian and Mailian, 1920); Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia*, 226; and Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan*, 130–39.

29 Khan Khoiskii’s speech of 7 December 1918, in *ARDM*, 95 (62); Resulzade’s of 14 January 1919, in *ARDM*, 98–101 (64), and his “Unudulmaz faciə,” *Azərbaycan* 147 (21 March 1919): 1.

30 See the reports in “Traurnyi den,” *Azerbaidzhan* 68 (2 April 1919): 3; “K godovshchine martovskikh sobytii,” *Azerbaidzhan* 70 (4 April 1919): 4; and M.Ə. Rəsulzadə, “Misal nümünəsi olan bir gün,” *Azərbaycan* 148 (2 April 1919): 1.

31 Quoted from “Baku, 30-go Marta 1919 g.,” *Azerbaidzhan* 67 (30 March 1919): 1; and “K martovskim sobytiim,” *Azerbaidzhan* 72 (5 April 1919): 4.

The ADR was not a perfect government; its comprehensive history, like that of the Musavat, remains to be written. But it did attempt still more bonds of reconciliation. The Dashnak party held an electoral presence in the parliament. Armenians attended the courses offered at the new Baku State University. The ADR sought to integrate Armenian national minorities within the new civic institutions, even offering an amnesty for perpetrators of the March Events and other communal violence.³² Yet the new democratic state was overwhelmed. Territorial clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani militias continued in force, a horrendous war whose victims (in the tens of thousands) quickly overshadowed the losses of the March and September Events: “disorders” and “aggressions” that mounted into “bloodshed” and “national carnage.”³³ Muslim brigands scoured the countryside. Migrants filled the towns, including Baku, bringing poverty and epidemic diseases. Oil exports fell into precipitous decline; unemployment and inflation ravaged the economy. In these trying conditions, people seemed to lose their class and national values altogether, becoming simply hungry and broken, exhausted and desperate. Social disorder ruled. The ADR finally succumbed to the Red Army in April of 1920, the Musavat surrendering the city (and an independent Azerbaijani nation-state) rather than risk more innocent life.

In the wake of this military conquest, over the next seventy years of the Soviet regime (1920–1990), the Baku Commune became one of the great myths of communist origins, especially for the Transcaucasus republics, though strangely centered not so much on the achievements of the Commune as on the accidental murders of the Twenty-Six. By the second anniversary of their deaths (20 September 1920), the new occupation government buried their remains at a central Baku square, outfitted with an eternal flame, and in time a series of stone sculptures. This was all part of a concerted campaign to selectively remember and forget. Some of the very men who perpetrated the March Events were now celebrated, their victims forgotten. When the Soviet government press did recognize the vast human losses of March and September of 1918, it blamed the national hatreds of the Musavat and Dashnak, applauding the class dictatorship of the Twenty-Six Commissars. They had saved Baku from its sorry self.³⁴ Between 1923 and 1927, through the illegal Musavat

32 On the problematic amnesty, freeing prisoners and ending the work of the Extraordinary Investigation Commission, see the “Legislative Plan for Amnesty” (9 February 1920), in *ARDM*, 459 (414). For government calls for civic peace, see *ARDM*, 112 (2), 432 (387).

33 ADR reports (1918–1920) tended to focus on the battles of Armenian militias to “cleanse” (*ochistit'*) the land of Azerbaijani Turks, as in *ARDM*, 108 (73), 117 (78); see also the quotes in *ARDM*, 339, 385, 388, 491, 517–20.

34 G., “Azerbaidzhan: natsionalnyi vopros,” *Izvestiia* 265 (22 November 1923): 5, recognized from 30,000 to 35,000 dead in each widespread “event.” See also “Bakinskaiia kommuna,”

underground, Azerbaijani rebels rejected this claim, taking advantage of Soviet “nativization” policies (the promotion of co-opted national cadres) to promote truer national values in the schools and teachers’ colleges: “national independence,” pan-Turkism, and the patriotic martyrology of the March Events.³⁵

Over time, the tragedy of the “Twenty-Six” eclipsed the March massacre of the “twelve thousand.” Soviet propagandists raised the few over the many. Film-makers represented the dead Bolsheviks as casting bold shadows across the desert sands, bravely walking to the firing squad; portrayed the Musavatists and Muslims as cowards and connivers set against the bestiality of Shiite Muslim religious rituals or the suffocating spaces of dark mosques.³⁶ In 1939, Sergei M. Kirov became a Twenty-Seventh Commissar, in a figurative sense, also the victim of the “White Terror,” so the official version held. For his work as Communist chief in Azerbaijan between 1921 and 1926, and to commemorate his murder in 1934, Moscow raised a massive bronze statute in his memory at Nagornyi Park, casting its shadow over the very site of the mass burials of the March victims, renamed Kirov Park, eventually outfitted with a funicular and the Friendship of Peoples (*Druzhiba narodov*) restaurant.

Yet this was not the end of the history. The memories of the Baku Commune and the March Events received their latest transformations, both upon the landscapes of Baku and in the pages of the history books, with the collapsing Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991, as the region spiraled into the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, outbreaks of violence against civilians, and the Soviet killings of “Black January” (1990). Along the way, Azerbaijani demonstrators felled the monument to the Twenty-Six. The newly-independent government replaced Kirov’s statue and park with “Martyr’s Lane,” a popular memorial to the nation’s victims (including Kirov’s) who perished after March of 1918. Even the seventy years of the Soviet regime had not stifled the memories of many Baku families about those initial March Events. Publicists and historians began to wage a battle of competing genocides with their Russian and Armenian rivals: holding the moral high ground, finding the origins of present injustices in past wrongs, in all the threads and loops of

Izvestiia 212 (20 September 1923): 1; S. Shaumian, “Bakinskaia kommuna 1918 goda,” *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* 12, no. 59 (1926): 70–78.

35 Quoted from the Communist Party report, “On the Status of the Teachers’ Seminars” (1925), in Baku’s Archive of Political Parties and Social Movements of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Siyasi Partiyalar və İctimai Hərəkətlər Arxivi) f. 1, o. 74, d. 142, ll. 157–63; and the file, “Excerpts from the ‘Musavat’ Affair” (1926), in f. 1, o. 88, d. 5, ll. 47–48. See also Akhmedov, *Natsional’noe dvizhenie*, 39–47, 70–73, 88.

36 Scenes from the films by Nikolai Shengelaia, *Dvadtsat’ shest’ komissarov* (Baku: Azerkino, 1933); and Adzhar Ibragimov, *Dvadtsat’ shest’ komissarov* (Baku: Azerbaidzhanfil’m, 1965).

power and violence exercised against Azerbaijanis.³⁷ Some western historians joined these politicized debates, privileging one national community over another; doing selective history, raising some victims as more meritorious than others.³⁸ The violence against people on the ground did not translate into the full truth of the printed word.

The March and September Events teach us, in the end, that good history is hard. Good history demands attention to detail, not in isolation but in judicious relation to all of the details. Good history means entering into everyone's situation, as Tolstoy's introductory quote counsels, and at least trying to understand all. It is a mark of civic maturity and courage. As in the case of the Azerbaijani historians who have recognized the facts and injustices of both the March and September Events.³⁹ Or in the case of western historians who have rewritten the history of Russia with attention and equanimity to the diverse national contexts, to both Azerbaijani and Armenian suffering.⁴⁰ Or take the case of the Azerbaijani government's recent reburial of the Twenty-Six. For almost twenty years their remains lay hidden under a broken monument site. But in 2009, the government provided for honorable re-interment at new cemetery plots across town, following Muslim and Christian and Jewish rites. The bodies of these onetime heroes, later to become villains, were at last put to rest, and with them at least part of a contentious chapter in the history. The Azerbaijani Republic formally recognized the humanity of its historical "enemies," including the Armenian Bolsheviks. That is one important lesson of this whole episode. Our approaches to objective history, our attempts at a successful politics, ultimately depend on such moments of recognition and reconciliation.

37 As for example, Vaqif Arzumalı and Mustafa Nazim, *Tarixin qara səhifələri: Deportasiya, soyqırım, qaçqınlıq* (Baku: Qartal, 1998).

38 Ronald G. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 113–114, ignores the March massacres against Azerbaijanis, citing only the "Muslim" September massacres against Armenians. Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 83, mentions the March "massacres" against Azerbaijanis but ignores the September massacres against Armenians.

39 Solmaz Rustamova-Togidi, "Martovskie sobytiia 1918 g. v Baku," in *APVD*, 38–39; and Fuad Akhundov, "Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan," *Azerbaijan International* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 26–29.

40 Catherine Evtuhov, David Goldfrank, Lindsey Hughes, and Richard Stites, *A History of Russia: People, Legends, Events, Forces* (Boston and New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2003), 622.