



The Russian Revolution as a National Revolution: Tragic
Rituals of Remembrance in Muslim Azerbaijan

Deaths and
(1907-1920)

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The Russian Revolution as a National Revolution: Tragic Deaths and Rituals of Remembrance in Muslim Azerbaijan (1907–1920)

“Suffering in common unifies more than joy. [...] Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort. A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future.”

Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation?* (1882)¹

Among the grand narratives in modern historiography, none is perhaps grander than the revolution. No one event quite captures the historical drama of hope and betrayal, promise and peril, victory and defeat, like it does. As revolutions go, the Russian Revolution certainly ranks with the other Goliaths. It remains “one of those great seismic upheavals” demanding the big questions and even bigger answers about genesis, cause, scope, and effect.² Historians have been all too willing to oblige these demands, transforming the Russian Revolution into one of the consummately over-determined, super events of modern time. It has become one of the last strongholds of what Hayden White has called the “archetypal plot structures” (of romance and comedy, tragedy and satire) so deeply imbedded in nineteenth-century historiography.³ Epic events, after all, demand epic narratives.

If there is a favorite plot structure for revolutions, including the Russian, it is that of the tragedy. All of the major revolutions of the modern age end up in some kind of Thermidorian reaction. No revolution can sustain a pace of intense and radical change for very long. The fever always breaks, in Crane Brinton’s tenacious metaphor, as liberty and equality give way to dictatorship and order. For traditional historians, the tragedy is the revolution itself, which disrupted Russia’s slow but steady development of a constitutional order, civil society, and market capitalism.⁴ But for leading revisionists, the tragedy is the “revolution betrayed,” in Lev Trotskii’s famed imagery. They carry the Russian Revolution far beyond the calendar year of 1917: into Iosif Stalin’s long “Thermidor,” climaxing with his notorious “revolution from above” of 1929, or with the Great Purges of 1937, or with Stalin’s death in 1953, or even with the collapse of the great experiment in 1991. The French model, which has informed so much of the historiography, inescapably informs the Russian model as well. The

¹ ERNEST RENAN *What is a Nation?* in: *Becoming National: A Reader*. Ed. by Geoff Eley and Ronald G. Suny. New York, Oxford 1996, p. 53. My thanks to Richard Stites, Tadeusz Swietochowski, Max Okenfuss and several anonymous readers for helping me to improve on earlier drafts. I am also grateful for access to the state and party archives of Azerbaijan, which I was able to use in 1994 and 1996; I thank A. A. Pashaev, Bakhtiar Rafiev, Vegif Agaev, Fikret Aliev, Arif Ramazanov, Nigar and Mammad Abbasov, and especially Sima Babaeva for their support.

² JONATHAN FRANKEL *1917: the Problem of Alternatives*, in: *Revolution in Russia: Reassessments of 1917*. Ed. by Edith Rogovin Frankel, Jonathan Frankel, Baruch Knei-paz. Cambridge 1992, p. 3.

³ HAYDEN WHITE *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore 1985, pp. 9–10, 286–287, 310, 326–327.

⁴ RICHARD PIPES *The Russian Revolution*. New York 1990, pp. xxi–xxii, framed the revolution within the themes of “agony,” “catastrophe,” and “sorrow.” See also MARTIN MALIA *The Soviet Tragedy: a History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991*. New York 1994; and HUGH RAGSDALE *The Russian Tragedy: the Burden of History*. Armonk, New York 1996.

Russian Revolution, like its predecessor, begets only tragedy. “For dramatic reasons alone,” Sheila Fitzpatrick has written in her panoramic study, “the story of the Russian Revolution needs the Great Purges, just as the story of the French Revolution needs the Jacobin Terror.”⁵ These retrospective narratives are properly ironic. They resolve nothing in time. They promise no romantic or comic triumph. From the benefit of enlightened and penetrating scholarship, they mirror only the promises of Bolshevism and of Leninism foregone.⁶

There is another kind of tragic emplotment that makes sense of revolutionary events, one that took shape from the ground up, in the death rituals and martyrologies of the Russian Revolution. These rituals and martyrologies help us to break free from the strict narrative bind of retrospective history, if only to eventually return back to it. For they tell a story about the revolution as a national revolution, about the mechanics of its prospective emplotment and ritual remembrance. Like the tragic hero of classical literature, like the tragic national myth of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these rituals were beset by ambiguity and ambivalence, by negativity and exclusion, by remembrance and forgetting. As Ernest Renan recommended in his seminal essay on the nation, written in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune of 1871, the rituals drew their very resolute power and unitary appeal from a moment of trauma and loss, albeit of dramatic proportions. The tragic event, perched dramatically at the origins of nations and bathed in a romantic triumphalism, was a knot of puzzles and contradictions.⁷

The “tragic death” had a long and rich provenance in the European revolutionary tradition. Social democrats, like most Europeans of the nineteenth century, indulged in what Philippe Ariès has called an “anthropomorphic eschatology,” investing death and the dead body with

⁵ Quoted from SHEILA FITZPATRICK *The Russian Revolution*. Oxford, New York 1994, p. 4, who based this work on Crane Brinton’s “life cycle” of revolutions. The tragic Thermidorian turn of the Russian Revolution had its most illustrious analysts in LEON TROTSKY *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*. Ed. and Transl. by Charles Malamuth. New York 1941, p. 384; and ISAAC DEUTSCHER *Stalin: A Political Biography*. New York, London 1949, pp. 569–570. In one of the most melodramatic and memorable of images along these lines, ALEXANDER YAKOVLEV *The Great French Revolution in the Present Time*, in: *Articles in Russian and Soviet History, 1500–1991*. The Russian Revolution. Ed. by Bertrand Patenaude. New York, London 1992, p. 251, called the Russian Revolution “a blood road strewn with the roses of tragic illusions.”

⁶ WHITE *Metahistory* p. 37. The hallmarks of the revisionist school include a new appreciation for the progressive social values of the Russian revolution, as well as for the intellectual and political divide between Leninism and Stalinism. In tragic-ironic terms, Stalin becomes the great spoiler of positive historical change. See STEPHEN COHEN *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917*. New York, Oxford 1985, pp. 27–70. For example, MOSHE LEWIN *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia*. New York 1985, pp. 207–210, writes of the dramatic “Walpurgis Night” of Stalinism. RONALD SUNY *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*. New York, Oxford 1998, p. 217, similarly writes of Stalinism’s tragic results, when “a popular uprising for liberation petrified into a leviathan state headed by a leader with totalitarian ambitions.” See also ORLANDO FIGES *A People’s Tragedy: a History of the Russian Revolution*. New York 1997, p. 808; and ETTORE CINELLA *The Tragedy of the Russian Revolution: Promise and Default of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in 1918*, in: *Cahiers du Monde russe* 38 (January–June 1997) No. 1–2, pp. 45–82.

⁷ On these conflicts in literature, see NORTHROP FRYE *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ 1957, pp. 207–219. For a relevant sampling of the vast literature on the contested origins of national narratives, see PRASENJIT DUARA *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. Chicago, London 1995; SHAHID AMIN *Event, Metaphor, Memory. Chauri Chaura, 1922–1992*. Berkeley, Los Angeles 1995; BENEDICT ANDERSON *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London, New York 1991, pp. 187–206; and HOMI K. BHABHA *DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation*, in: *Nation and Narration*. Ed. by Homi K. Bhabha. London, New York 1990, pp. 291–297, 308–311.

all of the morbid attraction of customs and rituals, spectacles and monuments. In this “age of the beautiful death,” Europeans shared in a civic “cult of the dead” and secular “religion of memory.”⁸ These were celebrated values in the revolutionary tradition, encompassing the funeral rhetoric and cemetery monuments of French revolutionaries, German radicals, and European socialists alike.⁹ These values demanded measures of reverence and quietism not usually expressed in the bustle of everyday life and politics. One of the architects of German national memory, Theodor Fischer, set out to create “sacred halls” of remembrance, places where man “removes his hat and woman restrains her tongue.” German social democrats likewise choreographed May Day demonstrations to still the otherwise angry voices, to impress the general public with the steadfast discipline, civic bearing, and “sacred silence” of the working masses.¹⁰

Karl Marx perhaps expressed the insight best when he wrote that revolutions could not but help to “anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service.” In an age of failed revolutions, Marx looked back upon the martyrs of the Revolution of 1848 and of the Paris Commune of 1870 as much for their tragic flaws as for their heroic sacrifices. The revolution was a struggle of biblical proportions, demanding a high price in human life, a threshold of pain and mortification, for the victory to be complete. Marx translated the tragic plot line of the revolution into the central plot line of history. The heroic bourgeois class, responsible for the most revolutionary transformation in economic production and social relations that the world had ever seen, also embodied the fated internal contradictions leading to its own destruction. The proletariat shared in this tragic employment, especially at moments of violent class conflict. For it was a mark of the bourgeoisie’s infamy that it brought down the heroes of socialist labor along with its own scoundrels. The proletariat as a whole was immortal; the historical vehicle for a transcendent age of equality and justice. But individual workers were not.¹¹ Marx’s canvassing of this tragic history was, in turn, an act of political will, a way of predicating the future upon his own unique retelling of the past. It was a recognition that all historians, in some fashion, speak from the authority of the dead.¹²

⁸ PHILIPPE ARIES *The Hour of Our Death*. Transl. by Helen Weaver. New York, Oxford 1991, pp. 419–472, 612, 508–550, 576.

⁹ On the tragic imagery and symbolism of the French Revolution, see MONA OZOUF *Festivals and the French Revolution*. Transl. by Alan Sheridan. Cambridge, MA 1988, pp. 81–82, 265–267; LYNN HUNT *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*. Berkeley 1986, pp. 34–39; and GEORGE ARMSTRONG KELLY *Mortal Politics in Eighteenth-Century France*. Waterloo, Ontario 1986. Violent sacrifice and the “cult of veneration” are prominently situated at the origins of modern mass movements, be they socialist or nationalist. See ROBERTO MICHELS *Political Parties. A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. Transl. by Eden and Cedar Paul. Glencoe, IL 1958, pp. 69–74; GAETANO MOSCA *The Ruling Class*. Transl. by Hannah D. Kahn. New York, London 1939, pp. 184–195; and JACK J. ROTH *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians*. Berkeley 1980.

¹⁰ Quoted From GEORGE L. MOSSE *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich*. New York 1975, pp. 67, 168–169.

¹¹ KARL MARX *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, in: *DERS. Werke*. Band 8. Berlin 1973, p. 115; and KARL MARX *Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich*, *ibid.* Band 17. Berlin 1973, pp. 355–356, 362. Marx’s contrasts in the latter work could not have been more vivid: between the “undisguised savagery” of the bourgeoisie and the “self-sacrificing heroism” of the proletariat. The Commune may have been suppressed, but its enemies were damned to an “eternal pillory” in hell, whereas “its martyrs” were already “enshrined in the great heart of the working class;” the Commune as a whole to be “for ever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society.”

¹² JOHN PAUL RIQUELME *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Karl Marx as Symbolic Action*, in: *History and Theory* 19 (1980) pp. 58–59. On history writing as a “secularized reliquary” of the modern world, the authoritative and “present sign of a dead thing,” see ROLAND BARTHES *Historical Discourse*, in: *In-*

The death rituals and martyrologies of Russian Bolshevism were tied to these romantic nineteenth-century traditions rather than to some abstract twentieth-century “totalitarianism.” Among its ritual commemorations were the funeral arrangements for the fallen rebels of Petrograd and Moscow in March 1917; the martyr cult fashioned for the murdered “Twenty-six Baku Commissars” in 1920; or the elaborate rituals and myths of Vladimir Lenin’s personality cult after his death in 1924.¹³ On a practical level, these losses reflected the real perils of revolutionary struggle. The funeral ritual was, for the outlawed Bolshevik party, an act of public mourning representing heartfelt grief. In perhaps the most serious, focused, and formal of all possible ritual celebrations, it virtually guaranteed a high standard of group consensus and discipline. “Never have I seen men so completely still,” wrote one eyewitness to Lenin’s funeral in 1924. “Not a muscle in their eyelids flinched, and they hardly seemed to breathe.”¹⁴ The death ritual gave Bolshevism the charismatic authority of ritual “unanimity” and “solemnity,” to quote Richard Stites. It gave them the myth of a beginning, a rite of initiation and passage, providing mundane struggles a collective memory all their own. It created meaning out of randomness, turning simple deaths into elaborate sacrifices. If the party had a story to tell, death and martyrdom helped them to tell it.¹⁵

Baku, Azerbaijan offers such an instructive case study because it was one of the sites where the Bolsheviks adapted their global, Marxist political platform to the practices of an alien national culture, where “universal” European values about death and history converged with “local” Muslim values about sacrifice and remembrance. For the Bolsheviks of Baku, the tragic death of a Muslim comrade served as an event of historical yet also practical proportions. It was a means to help the Azerbaijani Turks of Baku reinvent themselves, in a moment of shared experience and group solidarity, as a new community of national identity and class interest. It was a means of creative nation building, a way to bind the small, traditional community of Azerbaijani Turks to the Bolsheviks’ greater modernizing cause. In the story that follows, the names of the victims often change, but the tragic plot remains essen-

truduction to Structuralism. Ed. by Michael Lane. New York 1970, pp. 154–155; and WALTER BENJAMIN *The Storyteller*, in: *Illuminations*. New York 1968, p. 94.

¹³ ORLANDO FIGES, *BORIS KOLONITSKII Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Languages and Symbols of 1917*. New Haven, London 1999, pp. 46–48; FREDERICK C. CORNEY *Writing October: History, Memory, Identity and the Construction of the Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1927*. Ph.D. diss. Columbia University 1997, p. 119; BENNO ENNKER *Die Anfänge des Leninkults in der Sowjetunion*. Köln 1997; RICHARD STITES *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. New York, Oxford 1989, chapters four and five; E. N. BURDZHALOV *Russia’s Second Revolution. The February 1917 Uprising in Petrograd*. Transl. and ed. by Donald J. Raleigh. Bloomington, Indianapolis 1987, pp. 337–340. NINA TUMARKIN *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*. Cambridge, MA 1983.

¹⁴ Walter Duranty (correspondent for *The New York Times*) quoted in TUMARKIN *Lenin Lives* p. 140. I have defined “ritual,” from C. LANE *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society – the Soviet Case*. Cambridge 1981, pp. 12–15, as a dramatic social event binding people together by reinforcing established values or by forging new ones. On the differences between the “formal,” signifying ritual and the freer, more symbolic “festival,” see JAMES VON GELDERN *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920*. Berkeley, Los Angeles 1993, pp. 11–12; and JAMES GELVIN *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire*. Berkeley, Los Angeles 1998, pp. 225–227.

¹⁵ RICHARD STITES *Festival and Revolution: The Role of Public Spectacle in Russia, 1917–1918*, in: *Essays on Revolutionary Culture and Stalinism*. Ed. by John Strong. Columbus 1985, pp. 8–13. For more on the charismatic and apocalyptic authority of the Bolsheviks, see STEPHEN HANSON *Time and Revolution: Marxism and the Design of Soviet Institutions*. Chapel Hill, London 1997, pp. 38–43. Funeral and mourning ceremonies, as we shall explore, can incorporate rites of initiation and incorporation as well as separation – terms from ARNOLD VAN GENNEP *The Rites of Passage*. Transl. by Monika Vizedom and Gabrielle Caffee. Chicago 1960, pp. 163–165.

tially the same. For the tragic narrative was a fertile ground for mass mobilization, although the mobilizers may not have immediately realized just what a conflicted ground it truly was.¹⁶

At the turn of the century, especially during the Russian Revolution of 1905, Baku could not have been more valuable, yet also more inhospitable, to the designs of Russian social democrats. As the center of the growing petroleum industry, accounting for fully half of the world's production of crude oil, the city enjoyed a large and active industrial proletariat. But it was a proletariat severely divided along ethnic and religious lines, witness of the prolonged communal violence between Christian Armenians and Muslim Turks in 1905. To mend these divisions, the social democrats of Baku (an ethnic mosaic of Russians, Armenians, Georgians, and Jews) adapted their revolutionary program to the specific demands of the time and place. For the first time, they allowed an autonomous national unit within the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) to help represent the Muslim workers of Baku: the Himmät (Endeavor) faction, founded in 1904 by such illustrious Azerbaijani intellectuals as Sultan Majid Äfändiyev, Mammäd Amin Räsulzadä, and Abbas Käsizadä.¹⁷ By the summer and fall of 1906, the rival Menshevik and Bolshevik factions of the RSDLP waged an even more intense battle for the loyalties of Baku's diverse proletariat. The Menshevik party monopolized representation of the skilled craftsmen and elite workers in the Union of Mechanical Workers, its members predominantly Russian. The Bolsheviks established the Union of Petroleum Workers in September of 1906 to represent the Muslim underclass (Azerbaijani Turks, Volga Tatars, Lezgin, and Persians), upwards of half of all workers in the city, yet accounting for the least literate, the least skilled, and the lowest paid.¹⁸

These Muslim workers were truly the "oil miners" (*neftianye gorniaki*) of Baku, descending perilously into the shafts of the wells and derricks to keep the pumps running. The work of their Union was no easy matter. Russian Bolsheviks and Azerbaijani Turks "marched together" as partners in the "left bloc" for basic class values: the right to strike and form unions, the right to an eight hour day and workers' insurance. But this alliance also meant

¹⁶ These terms refer to the works of Eric Hobsbawm on the "invention of tradition" and of Benedict Anderson on "imagined communities," both of which see the modern nation less as a preexisting reality and more as a social construct. The latest research shows the Bolshevik party and Soviet leadership negotiating a wide variety of meanings between these two poles. See JÖRG BABEROWSKI *Auf der Suche nach Eindeutigkeit: Kolonialismus und zivilisatorische Mission im Zarenreich und in der Sowjetunion*, in: *JBfG* 47 (1999) No. 4, pp. 482–503, here pp. 498–503; RONALD SUNY *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford 1993; YURI SLEZKINE *The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism*; and TERRY MARTIN *Modernization or Neo-Traditionalism? Ascribed Nationality and Soviet Primordialism*, both in: *Stalinism. New Directions*. Ed. by Sheila Fitzpatrick. London, New York 2000, pp. 313–367.

¹⁷ For the detailed historical background and interpretive perspective, I have relied on TADEUSZ SWIETOCHOWSKI *The Himmät Party: Socialism and the National Question in Russian Azerbaijan, 1904–1920*, in: *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 19 (January–June 1978) Nos. 1–2, pp. 119–142; TADEUSZ SWIETOCHOWSKI *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905–1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community*. Cambridge, England 1985, chapter 2; ALEXANDRE BENNIGSEN, CHANTAL LEMERCIER-QUELQUEJAY *Islam in the Soviet Union*. Transl. by Geoffrey Wheeler and Hubert Evans. New York 1967, p. 56; and the comprehensive new volume, I. S. BAGIROVA *Politicheskie partii i organizatsii Azerbaidzhana v nachale XX veka, 1900–1917*. Baku 1997. Information from *Dokumenty Azerbaidzhanskoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii – Gummet*, in: *Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Politicheskikh Partii i Obschestvennykh Dvizhenii Azerbaidzhanskoi Respubliki* [hereafter GAPPOD] f. 609 (Kollektia N. N. Narimanova), o. 1, d. 25, l. 7. The archival abbreviations stand for fond or collection (f.), opis' or inventory (o.), delo or file (d.), and list or page (l.).

¹⁸ *Usloviia byta rabochikh v dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii*. Ed. by N. K. Druzhinin. Moskva 1958, pp. 62–68; and A. N. GULIEV *Bakinskii proletariat v gody novogo revoliutsionnogo pod'ema*. Baku 1963, pp. 32–33.

that the Bolsheviks had to represent particular Muslim interests: to agitate for higher pay for their unskilled work, or for separate living quarters and bathing facilities, even for separate holidays and cemeteries.¹⁹ In Baku, transforming the Russian revolution into a national revolution meant giving the Muslim poor some agency within history, a role in the revolutionary drama beyond the backward, illiterate underclass. It meant relying on the Himmät faction to reach Muslims in a dangerously heterodox blend of Marxist rhetoric and local cultural concerns, all in the Azerbaijani language and Arabic script. It also meant that, for a party bound by modern codes of secularism and atheism, Baku's traditional mosques became centers for Bolshevik propagandizing, speechmaking, and electioneering. The Bolsheviks found that revolutionary politics demanded an accommodation with the traditional "communal" (*'umma*) consciousness, with the everyday beliefs and practices, of Shi'a Islam.²⁰

This accommodation did not come easily or unanimously. Many of Baku's social democrats, Menshevik and Bolshevik alike, considered the Muslim workers to be so backward as to lie beyond the realm of conscious revolutionary activity. However useful the Himmät may have been to penetrate this world, most Muslims remained aloof: poorly literate, absent from workers' meetings, segregated in their own clan and sectarian worlds. The memoirs of Eva Broido, who worked in Menshevik circles in Baku in the early 1900s, reveal a diffuse cultural bias against the Muslim underclass. She described her first carriage ride through the city, from the railroad station in central Baku to the workers' slum of Balakhanly, as the "road to hell," framed by treeless vistas and soot-filled air, "a picture of unremitting and hopeless gloom." The local Muslims, in her view, blended indistinguishably into this scenery. They "formed completely closed national communities," except for their rapacious and savage crimes in the "Tatar-Armenian War" and anti-Armenian massacres of 1905, for which they were largely to blame.²¹

Such prejudices were bolstered by the strangeness of Muslim customs and rituals, foreign and frightening to most European transplants in Baku. Central among these practices was the Shi'ite Muslim holy season of Müharräm, which honored the martyrdom of the Imam Huseyn and several members of his family at the field of Kärbälä (in the year a.d. 680), defeated by vastly superior numbers of warring adversaries. As direct descendant of 'Ali (the prophet Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law) and third in a line of the Twelve Imams succeeding Mohammad, Huseyn represented the heart and soul of Shi'a Islam for most believers. His sacrifice at Kärbälä set the tone for the solidarity and defiance of the "party of 'Ali"

¹⁹ MICHAEL MELANCON *Marching Together! Left Bloc Activities in the Russian Revolutionary Movement, 1900 to February 1917*, in: *Slavic Review* 49 (Summer 1990) No. 2, p. 239. On workers and parties in Baku, see CHRISTOPHER RICE *Party Rivalry in the Caucasus: SRs, Armenians and the Baku Union of Oil Workers, 1907–1908*, in: *Slavonic and East European Review* 67 (April 1989) No. 2, pp. 228–243; RONALD SUNY *Labor and Liquidators: Revolutionaries and the "Reaction" in Baku, May 1908–April 1912*, in: *Slavic Review* 34 (June 1975) No. 2, pp. 319–340; A. RAEVSKII *Bol'shevizm i men'shevizm v Baku v 1904–1905 gg.* Baku 1930, pp. 149–158, 179, 207; S. EFENDIEV [ÄFÄNDIYEV] *Istoriia revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia tiurkskogo proletariata*, in: *Iz proshlogo. Stati i vospominaniia iz istorii bakinskoi organizatsii i rabocheho dvizheniia v Baku*. Baku 1923, p. 46; S. SEF *Iz istorii bakinskogo rabocheho dvizheniia*, in: *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* 7 (1926) No. 54, pp. 239–240.

²⁰ The works of ALEXANDRE BENNIGSEN, CHANTAL LEMERCIER-QUELQUEJAY, and TADEUSZ SWIETOCZOWSKI cited in these notes offer the leading perspectives on this enduring *'umma* consciousness. See also CHRISTIAN NOACK *Russische Politik und muslimische Identität. Das Wolga-Ural-Gebiet im 19. Jahrhundert*, in: *JBfGOE* 47 (1999) No. 4, pp. 525–537.

²¹ EVA BROIDO *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*. Transl. and ed. by Vera Broido. London 1967, pp. 67–71, 82–86. SWIETOCZOWSKI *Russian Azerbaijan* pp. 38–46, unravels the tangled details of the anti-Armenian and anti-Muslim violence of 1905–1906. "Tatar" was the late Russian imperial designation for Azerbaijani Turks.

(*shi'at 'Ali*). Once a year, at Mühärräm, the devout Muslim poor of industrial Baku reenacted Huseyn's martyrdom with no less emotion and zeal than their brethren elsewhere in the Shi'a world. Once a year they draped their mosques and homes in black flags and crepe, adorned with banners and standards of the "pentad" (*besh*) symbol: the raised five-fingered hand, palm facing forward. It represented the leading saints of the Shi'a "holy family:" the Prophet Mohammad, his daughter Fatima, his son-in-law 'Ali, and his grandsons Hasan and Huseyn. Once a year, believers assembled in halls and private homes to witness the elegies, passion plays, and recitations of the events at Kərbäla. The city streets filled with the processions of male flagellants, beating themselves with chains or whips or blades to the ever-quickening rhythm of "shakhsei, vakhsei," "Shah Huseyn, Va Huseyn" ("Lord Huseyn, Alas Huseyn"), women and children weeping and chanting in grief from the sidelines. These processions climaxed on the tenth (Ashura) of Mühärräm when the flagellants and observers occupied the streets of Baku late into the night with the smoky shadows of their torches and lanterns, the unrelenting beat of their drums and trumpets, cymbals and chants.²²

The Mühärräm ceremonies were communal acts of redemption and expectation, a commemoration of a mythic past; a "bridge connecting primordial time and its special history with the timeless eternity of the future." In reenacting Huseyn's sacrifices, Shi'ite Muslims looked to the past in remembrance of his loss, in atonement for their own sins, a mark of collective guilt and shame over the centuries.²³ But the Mühärräm rituals were themselves ambiguous, conflicted events; the story of Kərbäla a mosaic "paradigm" of many-layered metaphors and symbols. They represented collective acts of hope and longing for the return of the Twelfth Imam, Mohammad Al-Mahdi, who remains hidden until judgement day. In the words of one Shi'a elegy, "May he soon reappear from his secret place/And bring Truth and Justice to this world." Linking past and future, the Mühärräm reenactments gave vent to social and political conflicts in the present, protested injustice and oppression in the real world. They represented as much the urge to "active fighting" as to "passive weeping."²⁴ Shi'ite Muslim communities, by no coincidence, occasionally mixed religion and politics. During the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906, anti-government protesters in Tehran and Qum expressed their strikes and demonstrations in the language of Kərbäla, as a struggle of good against evil, justice against decadence, signaling a union of the forces of Shi'ite Islam and Iranian national identity. In the last years of the Russian empire, Baku sometimes witnessed street clashes during Mühärräm, the zealous Muslim public struggling with the

²² For vivid descriptions of the Mühärräm commemorations in Baku at the turn of the century, see IVAR LASSY *The Muharrem Mysteries Among the Azerbaijani Turks of Caucasia*. Helsingfors 1916, chapter three, pp. 55–131. For historical reviews of the origins and development of the Ashura ritual, see HEINZ HALM *Shi'a Islam. From Religion to Revolution*. Princeton, NJ 1997; and Ta'ziyeh Ritual and Drama in Iran. Ed. by Peter J. Chelkowski. New York 1979.

²³ Quoted from MAHMOUD AYOUB *Redemptive Suffering in Islam. A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism*. The Hague 1978, p. 148. For more on Mühärräm as a "vicarious atonement" rather than a "militant assertion of the Shi'a cause," see HAMID ENAYAT *Martyrdom, in: Expectation of the Millenium. Shi'ism in History*. Ed. by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Albany 1989, pp. 53–54.

²⁴ The terms are from MICHAEL M. J. FISCHER *Iran. From Religious Dispute to Revolution*. Cambridge, MA 1980, pp. 21–27, 175, 213. The elegy is from LASSY *The Muharrem Mysteries* p. 94. For more on Mühärräm as fulfilling Shi'ism's "eschatological hopes of triumph over tyranny and injustice," see MOOJAN MOMEN *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam. The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*. New Haven 1985, pp. 233–237; ABDULAZIZ A. SACHEDINA *Islamic Messianism. The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*. Albany 1981, p. 182; YANN RICHARD *Shi'ite Islam: Policy, Ideology, and Creed*. Transl. by Antonia Nevill. Oxford 1995, pp. 29–48; and GUSTAV THAISS *Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The Drama of Husain, in: Scholars, Saints, and Sufis. Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East Since 1500*. Ed. by Nikki R. Keddie. Berkeley 1972, pp. 349–366.

Russian police forces intent on confining them to their own ethnic neighborhoods, as if the city were no longer theirs.²⁵

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the Müharräm ceremonies were strange sights indeed for such an otherwise cosmopolitan and westernizing city, filled with its share of foreign oilmen, nightclubs, movie houses, and restaurants. Progressive Muslim intellectuals had already been agitating against the worst excesses of the Müharräm rituals, especially the bloodletting and scarring – along with other perceived recidivisms like the veil, arranged marriages, and the blood feud – throughout the last half of the nineteenth century. Bolsheviks and social democrats looked upon the rituals with disdain, marks of the obscurantism and superstition rampant among the “dark” Muslim masses and their fanatical clerics.²⁶ Yet Baku’s Bolsheviks, however discreetly, were not above tapping into the reservoir of religious symbolism and popular emotion that lay beneath the Müharräm celebrations. Himmätists sometimes joked that they ran between Baku’s workers’ meetings, from one tribune to another, passionately exhorting the Muslim poor to revolutionary consciousness, just like the devotees who narrated the stories of Kərbälä at Müharräm.²⁷ This was a moment of self-satire. But there were indeed times when the Bolshevik party appealed to the traditional customs and eschatological fervor of Baku’s Shi’ite majority.

The funeral for Khanlar Säfäräliyev (aka “Khallar”) – a member of the Bibi-Eybät regional committee of the RSDLP and a leader of the Himmät – was one such case. He had been severely wounded on 19 September 1907 during a strike at one of the city’s petroleum manufacturing corporations; shot in the chest by an unknown assailant, perched atop one of its oil derricks, apparently under the direction of one of the firm’s managers (a certain Abuzarbäk). Over the next eight days, driven by the suspense of whether Säfäräliyev would live or die, workers’ committees throughout Baku met in sessions large and small to demand speedy justice for the crime. The party reacted with great style too, organizing a major protest strike on 24–25 September. Over 10 000 people participated, half of them workers from some twenty-four industrial firms, a spontaneous and lively outpouring of concern for Säfäräliyev, still lingering near death in his hospital bed. A “shot aimed at him was a shot aimed at us,” proclaimed one banner.²⁸

This demonstration and the funeral that followed were not the first such phenomena in the recent history of the Bolshevik party. They followed a pattern already in place since the dramatic rites performed for N. E. Bauman, the thirty-two year old leader of the Moscow Bolshevik party organization, killed by a sympathizer of the Black Hundreds after a labor

²⁵ JANET AFARY *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism*. New York 1996, pp. 55–56; M. E. RASULZADÄ *Müharräm günləri* [Müharräm Days], in: *Achiq söz* [Free Word] 590 (17 October 1917) pp. 2–3; *Shi’ism and Social Protest*. Eds. Juan R. I. Cole and Nikki Keddie. New Haven, London 1986.

²⁶ See the discussions in AUDREY ALTSTADT *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity Under Russian Rule*. Stanford 1992, pp. 52–53; and in SWIETOCHOWSKI *Russian Azerbaijan* pp. 23–36, 56–58. On Müharräm as evidence of cultural and therefore political “backwardness,” see IOSIF STALIN *Mark-sizm i natsional’nyi vopros* (1913), in: *Sochineniia*. Tom 2. Moskva 1952, p. 341; and A. L. POPOV *Iz istorii revoliutsii v Vostochnom Zakavkaz’e* (1917–1918 g.g.), in: *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* 7 (1924) No. 30, pp. 111–112.

²⁷ A. R. *Istoriia revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia tiurkskogo proletariata*, in: *Iz proshlogo. Stati i vospominaniia*, p. 41.

²⁸ Khanlar Gasanoghli Säfäräliyev (1885–1907) was born in Elisavetpol province to a family of poor peasants, eventually rising to become an industrial lathe operator in Baku. Quoted from *Da zdravstvuet dvukh dnevaia obshchaia zabastovka*, in: *Listovki bakinskikh bol’shevikov* (1905–1907 gg.). Ed. by Institut Istorii Partii. Baku 1955, pp. 299–300. *Dvadsat’ piat’ let bakinskoi organizatsii bol’shevikov*. Ed. by Bakinskii Komitet AKP. Baku 1924, p. 203.

action in October of 1905. Moscow society, both liberal and socialist, united in protest and anger at the murder. His funeral became a spectacular public display of opposition, a powerful means to mobilize the masses and to demonstrate the coming victory of socialism in the city streets and public square. Drawing freely from Russian Orthodox religious practice, filled with raised banners and biblical references, Bauman's funeral procession was distilled with emotional impact.²⁹ The Baku funerals for Ali Mikayilov, a revolutionary agitator, and Petr Montin, member of Baku Committee of RSDLP, both killed by the Black Hundreds on 5–6 December 1905, followed the same pattern. They too were buried with mass political demonstrations, under the slogan, "Two New Victims," with fiery appeals to political struggle, earthly sacrifice, and rewardful death.³⁰ These secular rituals represented the best in the Bolshevik collectivist and "god-building" repertory between 1905 and 1910. They were intimations of the "collective immortality" of the proletarian future, as Robert Williams has called it, when the selfish sense of "I" was to give way to the expansive and generous sense of "We." They were palpable acts of spiritual transcendence: carrying a fallen comrade through the streets of the city, the catafalque held high just above the heads of demonstrators and spectators, perched between heaven and earth, moved along through the quiet throngs of people toward the victim's grave.³¹

The funeral rites for Sāfārāliyev certainly fell within these general parameters of early Russian social-democratic political culture. But they were a sign of something more, the Bolsheviks improvising beyond their usual abandon, transforming the working-class Russian revolution into an other-worldly national revolution with profoundly Islamic religious undertones. Sāfārāliyev's funeral was a point of contact, an entry into the communal life of the Muslim poor. For when the Bolsheviks buried Sāfārāliyev, they were not merely burying a dead Bolshevik, but also reenacting Mūhārrām: as all funerals in the Shi'a tradition reenact it; as all cemeteries recall the hallowed ground of Kārbāla; as the cult of the dead in Shi'a Islam echoes the cult of Huseyn. In Sāfārāliyev's case, his funeral was postponed from 26 September (Wednesday), the day he died, until 29 September (Saturday), in violation of the local Muslim custom favoring a speedy burial (usually by midnight of the day of death, or by the early morning of the next day at the latest). These three days of mourning granted to Sāfārāliyev were a practical maneuver, allowing the Bolsheviks to prepare for a funeral demonstration much grander than otherwise possible. But they were also exceptional, highlighting the dignity and incorruptibility of his person, a status usually granted to Shi'a "martyrs" (*shāhidlār*), in its broadest sense meaning any person killed by an act of injustice.³²

²⁹ ABRAHAM ASCHER *The Revolution of 1905. Russia in Disarray*. Stanford 1988, pp. 262–264. On funeral rites in Bolshevik political culture more generally, see RICHARD STITES *The Origins of Soviet Ritual Style: Symbol and Festival in the Russian Revolution*, in: *Symbols of Power*. Ed. by Claes Arvidsson. Stockholm 1987, pp. 23–24; and CATHERINE MERRIDALE *Death and Memory in Modern Russia*, in: *History Workshop Journal* 42 (1996) pp. 7–9. For eyewitness testimony about early Bolshevik ritual politics, see ANGELICA BALABANOFF *My Life as a Rebel*. Bloomington, London 1973, p. 219; and SERGEI MSTISLAVSKII *Five Days Which Transformed Russia*. Transl. Elizabeth K. Zelensky. Bloomington, Indianapolis 1988, p. 139.

³⁰ *Istoriia kommunisticheskoi partii Azerbaidzhana*. Volume 1. Baku 1958, pp. 112–113; RAEVSKII *Bol'shevizm i men'shevizm* p. 118; BAGIROVA *Politicheskie partii i organizatsii Azerbaidzhana* p. 33.

³¹ ROBERT C. WILLIAMS *Collective Immortality: the Syndicalist Origins of Proletarian Culture, 1905–1910*, in: *Slavic Review* 3 (September 1980) pp. 391–393. Alexander Dovzhenko's film, *Earth* (1930) beautifully immortalized this ritual in the climactic funeral for the martyred collective-farm enthusiast. I thank GEORGE O. LIBER *Death and Alexander Dovzhenko*, unpublished manuscript, for sharing this and other insights.

³² For background, see LASSY *The Muharrem Mysteries* pp. 134, 161.

Meanwhile, the funeral commission, on which a twenty-eight year old Iosif Stalin took a prominent place, made deliberate preparations to organize a grandiose farewell for his close friend Sāfārāliyev, up to 20 000 people eventually joining the demonstration.³³ The memorial followed an established morphology of European funeral ritual. The marchers, like those in Paris or Berlin, occupied downtown Baku as a “sacred center of power,” joining their sense of apocalyptic time with their mastery of urban space.³⁴ But in this unique case they joined the profane messianism of secular Marxism with the sacred salvation faith of traditional Shi’a Islam, an odd but effective marriage of convenience. The funeral procession began at the Tāzāpir mosque in central Baku, where Muslim clerics read *Qur’anic* prayers for the dead over Sāfārāliyev’s body, a small orchestra playing Chopin’s funeral march from the courtyard. Workers then raised his body, draped in two traditional funerary shrouds, one from the Orujev Brothers publishing house, the other from the Himmāt party, inscribed with the words, “A Victim of the Workers’ Struggle.” Dozens more workers carried the thirty or so funeral wreaths sent to honor Sāfārāliyev. Hundreds more workers, joining the procession from their distant workers’ clubs and factory cells, marched together as a great human chain, locked arm in arm and hand in hand, keeping order along the funeral route. They sang Russian revolutionary hymns. “You fell victim in the fateful struggle (*Vy zhertvoiu pali, v bor’be rokovo!*) / To you dead brothers, eternal rest (*Pogibshie brat’ia, vam vechnyi pokoi!*)” They sang traditional Azerbaijani “folk lamentations” (*baiaty*) mourning Sāfārāliyev as they might the martyr Huseyn. From the mosque they proceeded down the funeral route through the main streets and finest boulevards of central Baku, then on to the large Muslim cemetery at the heights of Bibi-Eybāt. Khanlar Sāfārāliyev was buried, according to one reporter, on “hallowed ground,” near the shrine honoring Hukeyma Hanim Hazrat Musa Kazim Kyzy, daughter of the Seventh Imam.³⁵

“Khanlar is dead, but his work lives on,” wrote the Himmātist S. M. Āfāndiyev in his obituary. He will inspire still more Muslims to struggle for that “sacred ideal of workers – socialism.” These were familiar refrains in the nineteenth-century socialist and early twentieth-century god-building repertoires.³⁶ Stalin spoke similar words at his friend Sāfārāliyev’s grave, exalting him as a hero of socialist labor to be honored and emulated. All workers and socialists, presumably, were to risk their life as he did, were even to follow him to the grave as a sacrifice for goals loftier than life itself. No other references from Stalin’s speech remain, except for a brief reminiscence from 1926, when he described his work in Baku between 1907 and 1909 as a “baptism in revolutionary combat,” when he “first discov-

³³ For more on Stalin’s years in Baku, where he first became known for his leadership skills, see DEUTSCHER Stalin pp. 98–119; RONALD SUNY A Journeyman for the Revolution: Stalin and the Labour Movement in Baku, June 1907 – May 1908, in: Soviet Studies XXIII (January 1972) No. 3, pp. 373–393; and M. D. BAGIROV Iz istorii bol’shevistskoi organizatsii Baku i Azerbaidzhana. Moskva 1946, p. 79. Vladimir Lenin was impressed enough to call the 47 000 Baku strikers of 1908 (partly under Stalin’s guidance) the “last of the Mohicans of the mass political strike,” as quoted in Z. IBRAGIMOV Revoliutsiia 1905–1907 gg. v Azerbaidzhane. Baku 1955, p. 248.

³⁴ See AVNER BEN-AMOS The Sacred Center of Power: Paris and Republican State Funerals, in: Journal of Interdisciplinary History 22 (Summer 1991) No. 1, pp. 27–48.

³⁵ As reported in Sredi rabochiikh, in: Kaspīi 216 (30 September 1907) p. 4. EFENDIEV Istoriia revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia tiurkskogo proletariata p. 50 has testified that such funerals were successful in drawing Muslim workers to the Bolshevik cause.

³⁶ Quoted from the obituary for Sāfārāliyev, signed by MUFTIZADE, in: Gudok 5 (Baku, 14 October 1907) p. 8; and from: Ocherki istorii kommunisticheskoi partii Azerbaidzhana. Ed. by M. S. Iskenderov. Baku 1963, pp. 132–133. Istoriia Azerbaidzhana. Vol. 2. Ed. by I. A. Guseinov. Baku 1960, p. 643.

ered what it meant to lead large masses of workers.”³⁷ Stalin likely meant his whole experience in Baku during these years, not just Sāfārāliyyev’s funeral. But for a young man experiencing his first lessons in political leadership, that thrill of tens of thousands of people filling the streets to demonstrate and bury a lost comrade must have had a formative impact on Stalin’s character. The young Stalin, enamored with the collectivist and god-building ideals within Bolshevism, discovered that death was not just the great equalizer but the great vindicator, empowering a political party with martyrs all its own. This was a lesson he likely took to his sponsorship of the Lenin cult in later years, replete with Russian Orthodox religious symbolism and the saintly appeal of the embalmed corpse; and certainly took to his own cultural and political initiatives of the 1930s.³⁸ The funerals for Moscow’s and Baku’s Bolsheviks were grassroots political events, a proletarian culture in the making. They highlight a performance ethic so crucial to the early successes and popularity of the Bolshevik party. Party members represented themselves as the *dramatis personae* of revolutionary struggle. They erased the false boundaries between reality and ideology; between how the world was and they imagined it ought to be. They not only acted out their beliefs; they also believed in what they acted out. The funeral rite was just such a moment of theatrical transcendence. The Bolsheviks did not simply appropriate “artistic space” after the Revolution of 1917, nor did they casually reinvent it as the “total art of Stalinism,” in Boris Groy’s terms. They had already occupied part of it as their own “territory” from the creative street politics of the early Bolshevik underground.³⁹

For the young Stalin, Sāfārāliyyev’s funeral was also a lesson in leading the “large masses” of the Muslim Turks, held in contempt by most Russian social democrats as the “dark” and “backward” tumult, undeserving of serious attention. Baku’s Bolsheviks, on the contrary, appreciated how the Mūhārrām traditions, packed with eschatological tension, had prepared these very Muslim Turks for the rigors of mass political mobilization and historical consciousness. The funeral rite worked so well at mobilizing the diverse crowds because it combined two distinct traditions – the secular collectivism of the Bolsheviks and the sacred faith of Shi’ite Muslims – into one symbolic language. The funeral rites for Sāfārāliyyev did not, once and for all, close the gap between the Bolsheviks and the Muslim poor. The Bolsheviks, for example, apparently never participated in any traditional Mūhārrām ceremonies. The two communities still looked each upon the other, even during their joint marches, with suspicion and caution. The funeral brought them together only for a moment: on the common ground of industrial Baku, for a shared fallen comrade and “brother” (*gardash*), in a shared discourse of mourning.

³⁷ Quoted from SUNY A Journeyman for the Revolution p. 373.

³⁸ ENNKER Die Anfänge des Leninkults pp. 317–340 argues persuasively (in a debate with Robert Tucker and Nina Tumarkin) that neither Stalin nor the god-builders played an active or certain role in the creation of the cult of the dead Lenin. But Sāfārāliyyev’s funeral is one more piece in a puzzle that highlights Stalin’s sympathies with the god-builders, as well as his and their pre-dispositions toward a death cult. See ROBERT C. WILLIAMS The Other Bolsheviks. Lenin and His Critics, 1904–1914. Bloomington, Indianapolis 1986, pp. 3–4, 120.

³⁹ BORIS GROYS The Total Art of Stalinism. Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond. Transl. Charles Rougle. Princeton, NJ 1992, p. 35. For some of the latest studies of this performance ethic at work in Soviet history, see RICHARD STITES Trial as Theatre in the Russian Revolution, in: Theatre Research International 23 (Spring 1998) No. 1, p. 7; JULIE A. CASSIDAY Marble Columns and Jupiter Lights: Theatrical and Cinematic Modeling of Soviet Show Trials in the 1920s, in: Slavic and East European Journal 42 (1998) No. 4, pp. 640–660; LARS LIH Introduction, in: Stalin’s Letters to Molotov, 1925–1936. Ed. by Lars Lih, Oleg Naumov, and Oleg Khlevniuk. New Haven 1995, pp. 1–63; and footnote 85 below.

Säfäräliyev's funeral represented a high point in this tenuous alliance. But it did not last. Circumstance drew the two communities apart just as quickly as it had drawn them together. By March of 1918, amid the stormiest days of the famed "Baku Commune," the two former allies were already at war, writing a new and even more tragic chapter in the saga of the Russian Revolution in Azerbaijan. The Bolshevik-Muslim alliance broke under the weight of the political reaction and economic depression between 1908 and 1911, when the workers' movement in Russia reached one of its lowest ebbs. Membership in the Union of Petroleum Workers plummeted from its all-time high of 9000 to a mere few dozen. The work of the Baku Committee of Bolsheviks and Himmät virtually ceased. Socialism was very much in decline, the Muslim social democrats of Baku seemingly abandoned by their Russian comrades.

The very name that Baku's Muslims chose for their new underground party in 1911, *Musavat* (Equality), suggests that they saw Bolshevik appeals to the Muslim poor more a result of proprietary, even "colonial" self-interest rather than of any altruistic revolutionary solidarity. The earliest extant platforms of the party (between 1911 and 1913), although few and far between, spoke in broad and abstract terms of pan-Islamic unity, likely inspired by the experiences of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran and the Young Turk movement in the Ottoman Empire. But the more reliable party platforms of 1917 clearly mixed the ideals of European social democracy and *Qur'anic* social justice, with a decided accent on ethno-religious pride and national self-determination. This was an imperative which reached back to the Himmät party's own contentious debates a decade earlier over the need for, in its own words, a "national social democracy" in Baku; as well as to the Azerbaijani intelligentsia's elaboration of the geographic, linguistic, religious, and civic foundations of a national "homeland" (*vätän*). Räsulzadä even once hinted that the Musavat was the new Himmät, a social democratic party no longer beholden to Russian guidance but governed by and for the Muslims themselves, a "populist" party of the Azerbaijani "nation" (*millat*).⁴⁰ The proper means to socialism, in other words, was not a union of all-Russian forces, in which the Muslims would take a subservient role. Social justice and equality were not values that could be imposed or legislated from above. They were, by definition, values that could only be inspired and legislated by the people's representatives themselves. The proper means to socialism was national self-determination and national-territorial autonomy.⁴¹

⁴⁰ On a "national social democracy," see EFENDIEV *Istoriia revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia tiurkskogo proletariata* p. 50; and M. A. RÄSULZADÄ *Azerbaidzhanskaia respublika, 1918–1920*, in: *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii Azerbaidzhanskoi Respubliki* [hereafter GANI] f. 894 (Ministerstvo Vnutrennykh Del Azerbaidzhanskoi Respubliki), o. 10, d. 148, ll. 11–18. For the broader regional context, see SWIETOCHOWSKI *Russian Azerbaijan* pp. 64–75; SERGE ZENKOVSKY *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia*. Cambridge, MA 1960; MOHAMAD TAVAKOLI-TARGHI *Refashioning Iran: Language and Culture During the Constitutional Revolution*, in: *Iranian Studies* 23 (1990) No. 1–4, pp. 77–101; and ADEEB KHALID *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*. Berkeley 1998, pp. 209–210.

⁴¹ Räsulzadä proposed this notion in his article, *On Socialism*, in *Achiq söz* [Free Word] (June 1917) cited by RAUF KHUDIEV *Idei sotsializma v programme i taktike partii Musavat 1917–1920 gg*. An unpublished paper delivered at the conference. *Obshchestvenno-politicheskaia mysl' v Azerbaidzhane v nachale XX veka*. Khazar University, Baku, Azerbaijan. 12 May 1996. A wide variety of Muslim commentators repeated it throughout the press in the summer and fall of 1917. On the religious principles supporting these social platforms, see the discussion of the meeting of Musavatists and Muslim workers (at the Tüzäpir mosque) in: *Musul'manskai zhizn'*. *Miting musul'man*, in: *Izvestiia Komiteta Bakinskikh Musul'manskikh Obshchestvennykh Organizatsii* [hereafter IKBOO]. Published as a supplement to *Kaspii* 171 (2/15 August 1917).

Over the course of 1917, the Musavat virtually monopolized representation of the Muslim poor of Baku through this innovative political program. Emboldened by a new-found political strength among Muslim voters, the party went public in mid-1917 and sought with increasing vigor to join the “democratic community” (*demokratiia*) and share power in the Baku Soviet. The Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, masters of the Soviet, met them with the politics of rebuke and exclusion. Baku’s Bolsheviks were less severe for a time, willing to negotiate an accommodation with their former allies, inspired by their party’s relatively tolerant policies toward minority nationalism in the crumbling Russian state. But even their accommodation broke down through the late fall and winter of 1917 as the Transcaucasus front collapsed and Anatolian Turkish troops began their slow advance upon Baku. The city and countryside filled with retreating Russian and Armenian soldiers, wary of the native Muslims all around them, suspected as being more loyal to the advancing Turks than to the Russian empire in collapse.⁴²

These antagonisms and preparations culminated in the infamous “March Events” of 1918 (*Martovskie sobytiia* or *Mart hadisäläri*) when Bolshevik and Armenian nationalist (Dashnak) troops vied with armed Muslim bands for control of the streets of Baku (between 30 March and 3 April). The Muslims were soundly defeated, first by the combined forces of the Baku Soviet; later from the reckless violence of Dashnak forces. Thousands of Muslims died in the fighting and pogroms that followed and spread to nearby cities and villages. For both the “Baku Commune” (March–June of 1918) and the “Azerbaijani Democratic Republic” which succeeded it (September 1918–April 1920), the March Events were a baptism by fire. Here were the makings of the two foundation myths, one for a Soviet-style socialist commune, the other for a Musavat-backed national socialism, which competed for authority over the next several years of the Russian civil war. They were rival foundation myths of tragic proportions, containing all the ambiguities and conflicts of any tragic event. But for the participants who experienced them, they were also turning points, anchors in time which provided all the necessary weight and tension for political legitimacy and democratic sovereignty, albeit with different degrees and consequences.

To the Bolsheviks, the Baku Commune arose besieged by hostile forces, much like the Paris Commune of old, which had been surrounded and crushed by French reactionaries and German imperialists. “Soviet” Baku was encircled by its own hostile sea – the counter-revolutionary Muslims of the southeast Caucasus.⁴³ These were partly legitimate charges; for the region was already in the throes of war. At the Caucasus front, the Turkish army was slowly but surely advancing eastward. Muslim Mountaineers were threatening from the North Caucasus and Dagestan. From Ganja and Shemakha, Mugan and Lenkoran, Muslim forces were, in the words of the Bolshevik commissar, Alesha Dzhaparidze, “closing a counter-

⁴² RONALD SUNY *The Baku Commune, 1917–1918: Class and Nationality in the Russian Revolution*. Princeton, NJ 1972, offers the fascinating context.

⁴³ For more on the myth of the Paris Commune in Bolshevik thought, see FRANZ BORKENAU *State and Revolution in the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, and the Spanish Civil War*, in: *The Sociological Review* 29 (1937) No. 1, pp. 41–75; NEIL HARDING *Socialism, Society and the Organic Labour State*, in: *The State in Socialist Society*. Ed. by Neil Harding. Albany 1984, pp. 5–29; G. I. IL’INA *Obraz evropeiskikh revoliutsii i russkaia kul’tura (mart 1917 g. – noiabr’ 1918 g.)* in: *Anatomiia revoliutsii. 1917 god v rossii. Massy, partii, vlast’*. Ed. by V. Iu. Cherniaev. S.-Peterburg 1994, pp. 383–393; S. G. SHAUMIAN *Lektsiia o kommune (22–23 May/4–5 June 1918)* in: S. G. SHAUMIAN *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*. Vol. 2. 1917–1918 gg. Moskva 1958, pp. 283–290; and SUNY *The Baku Commune* pp. 353–362.

revolutionary circle around” Baku.⁴⁴ But the Baku Soviet, well attuned to the rhythms of history, was unwilling to repeat the past mistakes of the Paris Commune. According to the Bolshevik version of events, on 30 March troops of the Muslim Savage Division (*Dikaia Divisiia*) fired on Soviet forces from their steamer, the *Evelina*, docked at the Baku port. The reaction was swift and severe. The Baku Soviet, backed by some 10,000 Russian loyalists and Armenian Dashnak troops, quarantined and disarmed the offenders, then turned on the armed Muslim bands (10,000 in all) which had raised barricades and mutinied against Soviet authority. The result was an all-out “civil war,” in the expression of Bolshevik commissar, S. G. Shaumian.⁴⁵ In the end, Soviet historians acquitted the Bolsheviks from willful complicity in the March Events, blaming the Musavat for initiating them as a class “mutiny” against the Soviet, and the Dashnak for ending them as an ethnic pogrom against Muslim civilians. Instead, they raised the myth of a peaceful Baku Commune, a government moved by tact, caution, and toleration, established on a principle of social and national peace. These are ideals that Ronald Suny has woven through the distinct arguments of his own pioneering historical work. “No more corpses at the morgue,” Marx had written of his beloved Paris Commune, which he presumed had conquered even death. No more state terrorism, proclaimed the historian Suren Shaumian, who noted that the secret police (Cheka) executed only two people – embezzlers at that – during the brief existence of the Baku Commune.⁴⁶

The Musavatists had a much different story to tell; one that later became a central building block, more perhaps for ill than for good, of Azerbaijani national identity. Their March Events were sparked not by a mutiny but by a funeral. An honor guard of about one hundred officers and soldiers of the Savage Division had come to town in the middle of March aboard the steamer *Evelina*, carrying the remains of Mohammad Taghiyev, son of Baku’s premiere Muslim oil millionaire, Haji Zeynal ‘Abdin Taghiyev. The young man, an officer in the Muslim cavalry corps, had been killed during fighting between Muslim and Russo-Armenian forces in Lenkoran on March 23, his body transported homeward for the requisite period of “mourning” (*matäm*) and final burial on March 27. By all accounts, the funeral was one of the grandest Baku had seen in many years. Taghiyev the father spared no expense in honoring Taghiyev the son. The ceremonies and processions at once cast a mournful pallor over the Muslim quarters of the city and provoked them to anger and frustration. One of their own had died in defense of the homeland against Russian and Armenian marauders. Muslim crowds now expressed their grief for the young man just as they expressed their

⁴⁴ P. A. DZHAPARIDZE Telegramma v Tiflis (9 April 1918) and Doklad na chrezvychainom zasedanii soveta rabochikh, soldatskikh, i matrosskikh deputatov bakinskogo raiona (8 April 1918), in: Izbrannye stat’i, rechi i pis’ma, 1905–1918 gg. Moskva 1958, pp. 223–226; A. B. KADISHEV Interventsiia i grazhdanskaia voina v Zakavkaz’e. Moskva 1960, pp. 84–89.

⁴⁵ S. G. SHAUMIAN Stat’i i rechi 1917–1918 gg. Baku 1929, p. 154; SHAUMIAN Izbrannye proizvedeniia pp. 208–215.

⁴⁶ MARX Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich p. 349; SUREN SHAUMIAN Bakinskaia kommuna 1918 goda, in: Proletarskaia revoliutsiia 12 (1926) No. 59, p. 81. Although his work gives the most complete description of the traumatic violence of the March Events, SUNY The Baku Commune pp. 143, 147, 257, 299, 351, still yet proposes that the Baku Commune was much less violent and much more “moderate” than the Petrograd center. Several of his latest works inexplicably fail to mention the anti-Azerbaijani pogroms perpetrated during the March Events. See SUNY The Soviet Experiment pp. 99–100; SUNY Nationalism and Class in the Russian Revolution: A Comparative Discussion, in: Revolution in Russia: Reassessments of 1917, p. 234; and SUNY The Revolution in Transcaucasia, in: Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution, 1914–1921. Ed. by Edward Acton, Vladimir Cherniaev, and William Rosenberg. Bloomington 1997, p. 725.

grief for the fallen Imam Huseyn.⁴⁷ The March Events began, according to the Muslim version, when the Baku Soviet unjustly disarmed the small honor guard for the younger Taghiyev, with the assistance of Musavat mediators, and quarantined them on their ship. The news of these acts, understood by elements of the Muslim population as an insult against the grief-stricken elder Taghiyev and as yet another provocation against them, set the stage for the upcoming confrontation. The situation was aggravated by news that a joint Bolshevik-Dashnak expeditionary force had just conducted anti-Muslim searches and seizures in provincial Shemakha. On 31 March, a mob of several thousand Muslim men gathered at the headquarters of the Muslim Charitable Society in Baku and demanded the return of the weapons to the troops of the honor guard. Soviet forces displayed some restraint and a willingness to negotiate through the intervention of the Himmät and Musavat. The Armenian National Council of Baku remained diplomatically neutral. Armed Muslim bands probably instigated the wider conflict.⁴⁸ They had by now gathered on the streets and raised barricades in their neighborhoods and were beyond pacification, a “dark mob” (*gara dästä*) in the anxious words of one Musavat intellectual, heeding only their own mob fear and anger.⁴⁹

There is little evidence of a Musavat conspiracy behind these mob actions, or of a well-organized, counter-revolutionary “mutiny,” facts reinforced by the rather mild terms imposed on the Musavat by the Baku Soviet at the end of the hostilities. Almost all of the sources are in agreement, after all, that the troops of the Savage Division were already preparing to depart Baku for Lenkoran on 30 March; and that the Musavat party assisted the Baku Soviet in disarming them. Moreover, the charges repeated by diverse historians that the March battles pitted 10 000 Soviet troops against 10 000 “troops” of the Savage Division, appear to lack foundation. The latter, which may have reached those numbers during World War I, was nowhere near its prior strength in March of 1918. Muslim sources claim convincingly that there were no more than 200 men of the Savage Division in the city at the time; that the true nature of the conflict pitted battle-worn Russian and Armenian soldiers against some 10 000

⁴⁷ Baky khäbärläri [Baku News], in: Achiq söz [Free Word] 700 (13/26 March 1918), 701 (14/27 March 1918) and 703 (16/29 March 1918). Iz nedavnogo proshlogo, in: Azerbaidzhan 67 (30 March 1919).

⁴⁸ Several new sources which I have relied upon to understand the March Events, besides those noted below, are several eyewitness accounts: Dähshätli mart hadisäsinin mukhtäsar tarihchesi [A Brief History of the Terrible March Events], in: Azärbaijan 147 (21 March 1919) pp. 3–4; MÄHÄMMÄD MURADZADÄ Mart hadiseyi älimäsi [The March Events]. Baki 1996; and a manuscript in the Akhundov Library (Baku), SEID AKHUNDZADÄ Mart hadisäsi 1918 [The March Events of 1918]. Baki 1919. These Muslim sources match well with the memoirs of an eyewitness, the journalist HENRY BARBY *Le débacle russe: les extravagances Bolcheviques et l'épopée Arménienne*. Paris 1918, pp. 59–73; and with the most detailed accounts in SUNY *The Baku Commune* pp. 215–226; KAZEMZADEH *The Struggle for Transcaucasia* p. 75; PIPES *The Formation of the Soviet Union* p. 200; SWIETOCHOWSKI *Russian Azerbaijan* pp. 112–119; ALTSTADT *The Azerbaijani Turks* pp. 85–86; and SERGE AFANASYAN *L'Arménie, L'Azerbaïdjan, et L'Georgie de L'Indépendance à L'Instauration du Pouvoir Soviétique (1917–1923)*. Paris 1981, pp. 50–53. These latter sources share most of the same details, albeit with radically different interpretations, ranging from those sympathetic to the Commune (Sunny and Afanasyan) to those sympathetic to the Musavat (Kazemzadeh, Pipes, Swietochowski, Altstadt).

⁴⁹ The Musavatist's words were telling proof of the political gap between the Musavat elite and the Muslim masses. Note RANAJIT GUHA *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. Cambridge, MA 1997, p. 139: “‘Mobocracy’: an ugly word, greased with loathing [...] lifted directly out of the lexicon of elitist usage as a measure of the distance between those on the side of order and others who are regarded as a threat to it.”

poorly-armed and hastily-organized Muslims.⁵⁰ Their pistols and antiquated hunting rifles were no match for well-armed Soviet and Dashnak troops, a fact highlighted by the brevity of the initial battles (lasting some intense hours between the evenings of 31 March and 1 April), and by the singular violence against Muslim civilians that followed. In a sad turn of events, the white flags of surrender which Muslims hoisted above their homes late on 1 April only marked the points of entry for anti-Muslim criminal elements.

Räsulzadä's own perspective on these events, echoing what other Muslim eyewitnesses said in their memoirs, revealed a sense of powerlessness and despair on the part of the Muslim elites, not bullishness or political will. "All the so-called left-wing parties directed their blows against the Musavat," leading up to the "nightmarish" events of March 1918, he recalled. "If perhaps we had obediently bowed our heads before the enemies of freedom, then perhaps they might never have occurred." The nascent Baku Commune had, in other words, trapped the Musavat and its rank and file in a corner and helped to destroy them there, scattering the Muslims of Baku to the four winds in a "bacchanal" of violence. The March Events were little more than a national war waged by Russian Bolsheviks and their Dashnak allies against the helpless Azerbaijani people.⁵¹ Even leading Himmätists, as well as Bolshevik authorities after the revolution, admitted in discreet ways that the March Events were far more a national massacre than a class mutiny.⁵² Far more died on the streets of Baku and Shemakha in those three days than died during the several weeks of street fighting in Petrograd in February of 1917 or in the "bloodless" Bolshevik coup d'état of October. Absent the victims of March, the foundation of the Baku Commune looks peaceful enough. Count them and it becomes one of the most costly and violent events of the Russian revolution (excluding the "civil war" which followed). The Musavatists certainly represented them as such, in terms condescending not only of their rivals, the Bolsheviks and Dashnaks, but also of themselves.⁵³

The March Events represented a dramatic shift from the heyday of the Bolshevik-Muslim alliance in 1907. What had begun as a tactical union of Russian-speaking Bolsheviks and the Musavat-lead Muslim masses had become a "crushing defeat" (*razgrom*) of the one by

⁵⁰ SUNY The Baku Commune pp. 215–226; and ALTSTADT Azerbaijani Turks pp. 85–86, offer the one view. AIDYN BALAEV *Azerbaidzhanskoe natsional'no-demokraticeskoe dvizhenie, 1917–1920 gg.* Baku 1990, pp. 18–19; and AKHUNDZADÄ *Mart hadisäsi 1918*, offer the other.

⁵¹ Räsulzadä quoted in *Vtoroi s'iezd partii Musavat*, in: *Azerbaidzhan 264* (December 1919).

⁵² NARIMAN NARIMANOV *Itogi sovetskogo stroitel'stva* [15 September 1921, a report to the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party], in GAPPOD f. 609, o. 1, d. 34, l. 23; and NARIMANOV *K istorii nashei revoliutsii v ukrainakh* [December 1923, another report to the Central Committee], in GAPPOD f. 609, o. 1, d. 119, ll. 32–33. Other Himmätists agreed with his assessment, as in the *Dokladnaia zapiska*, [not dated], in GAPPOD f. 609, o. 1, d. 25, l. 11, among the papers of the Azerbaijani Communist Party – Himmät. See also ALEKSANDR V. KVASHONKIN *Sovetizatsiia Zakavkaz'ia v perepiske bol'shevistskogo rukovodstva 1920–1922 gg.*, in: *Cahiers du Monde russe* 38 (January–June 1997) No. 1–2, pp. 163–194, here p. 171.

⁵³ About 1 224 people were killed in Petrograd during February, as reported by BURDZHALOV *Russia's Second Revolution*, pp. 337–338; fewer still (several dozen) were killed or injured in October. S. G. Shaumian counted three thousand dead on all sides during the March Events (for Baku alone), a figure which PIPES *The Formation of the Soviet Union* p. 200; SWIETOCHOWSKI *Russian Azerbaijan* p. 117; and ALTSTADT *Azerbaijani Turks* pp. 85–86, all accept. Scattered Azerbaijani sources claimed from ten to twelve thousand dead during March, from communal violence in Baku, Shemakha, and surrounding villages. See *La Republique de L'Azerbaidjan du Caucase*. Paris 1919, p. 19; GAPPOD f. 277 (*Delo Musavata*), o. 2, d. 13–16, l. 27; and the comments of leading Musavatists in *Vtoroi s'iezd partii Musavat*, in: *Azerbaidzhan 268* (11 December 1919) and 270 (13 December 1919). I tentatively accept the latter figures (awaiting further evidence), supported by BARBY *Le debacle russe* p. 69, which cites 3 000 dead among the Bolsheviks and Armenians, 7,000 dead among the Muslims.

the other.⁵⁴ But the victory of the Baku Commune was rather hallow and short-lived, lasting only a few months after March. In June of 1918, the Socialist-Revolutionary “Central Caspian Dictatorship” took its place until September, when the country was liberated by Anatolian Turkish troops and the ADR finally took power. It lasted but a few difficult years between 1918 and 1920, plagued by a host of domestic crises, as well as war with Armenia to the west, and the threats of the White and Red Armies to the north (although occupying British troops soon replaced the Turks and provided an element of stability between November of 1918 and August of 1919). This September “liberation” followed upon the extensive and premeditated communal violence, perpetrated by Turkish military forces and Muslim mobs, in vengeance against the Armenian community. Thousands of Armenian civilians lost their lives.⁵⁵

The founding of the ADR, amid this recurring cycle of interethnic violence, also coincided with the murders of the famed “Twenty-six Baku Commissars,” including the Armenian S. K. Shaumian and the Georgian Alesha Dzhaparidze, who fled the city by boat on or around September 17, bound for Soviet Astrakhan. Arrested by anti-Bolshevik forces during a stopover at Krasnovodsk, they were summarily executed on 20 September in the desert sands of Turkmenistan, British imperial officers possibly colluding in the act, although this has been a much contested issue. The hagiography for the murdered “Twenty-six,” which became one of the most memorable and enduring in all of Soviet political culture (second only to the Lenin cult), had a rather inauspicious beginning. The Bolsheviks first raised the banners of remembrance for them in March of 1919 after several leading party members (among them the lucky Anastas Mikoian, who had accompanied the “Twenty-six” to Krasnovodsk but narrowly escaped death) were released from prison on the occasion of the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution. They brought the first credible news of the dead commissars back with them to Baku, organizing demonstrations and agitational meetings among workers on 20 March 1919, a full six months after the murders. To the ideals of counter-revolutionary encirclement and the peaceful Baku Commune, Bolshevik agitators now added a third – the myth of the revolutionary “Twenty-six” Baku martyrs. They had died in the dark of the night, unarmed, at the hands of the most corrupt and vile of counter-revolutionaries and British imperialists. They had died as heroic witnesses to the nobility of the Baku Commune, perishing along with it in a tragic loss.⁵⁶

But the Bolsheviks were victims of bad timing. Their memorials for the Twenty-six came just a week before the first anniversary of the “March Events.” The Muslim community met their marches and demonstrations with scorn. How dare they, the Bolsheviks, presume to honor the memory of the Twenty-six Commissars, most of whom were in some way responsible for the tragic March Events? The Events now became, in the words of one official ADR editorial, a slaughter of Muslim innocents, a rite of national passage, when the Azerbaijani republic was “born out of the depths of anarchy and license” of the Russian Revolution. The

⁵⁴ The final result was “a dictatorship of the socialist parties in full measure with a decisive hegemony of the Bolshevik party.” A. POPOV *Iz istorii revoliutsii v Vostochnom Zakavkaz’e 1917–1918 g.g.*, in: *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* 11 (1924) No. 34, pp. 158–161. The “March Events” were necessary, then, to defeat the Musavat and “clear away a foundation” for Soviet power; A. MIKOIAN *Bakinskaia organizatsiia bol’shevikov v 17–18 g.g.*, in: *Iz proshlogo: stati i vospominaniia*, p. 33.

⁵⁵ At least ten thousand casualties, from SWIETECHOWSKI *Russian Azerbaijan* pp. 130–139.

⁵⁶ The story is told in SUNY *The Baku Commune* pp. 337–443; IOSIF STALIN *K rasstreliu 26-ti bakinskikh tovarishchei agentami angliiskogo imperializma*, in: *Izvestiia VTsIKK* 85 (23 April 1919); and E. N. BURDZHALOV *Dvadsat’ shest’ bakinskikh komissarov*. Moskva 1938, pp. 108–112, a classic in the high style of Stalinist tragedy.

March Events became the “new Ashura,” the “civic” Mühərrəm for the Shi’ite Muslims of Azerbaijan. As Räsulzadə wrote, “the innocent blood shed on the streets of Baku has only increased the flame of independence in our hearts.”⁵⁷ The progressive Muslim community, which had once denigrated the Mühərrəm rituals as an “aimless sacrifice of an ocean of Muslim blood,” softened its stance through the revolutionary months of 1917 and 1918. Räsulzadə spoke of the first Mühərrəm after the revolution as a day of great pride and national self-worth. Before a crowd of some 2 000 Muslim workers, he pronounced that the Imam Huseyn, fighting a huge force of opponents against all odds, did not lose his battle, did not die; but won a great victory through his sacrifice. Huseyn became a founding father of the Azerbaijani national cause, a hero worthy of emulation.⁵⁸ Räsulzadə was no doubt appealing to mass religious sensibilities in order to buttress his fledgling nation-state. But this was a strategy based perhaps on his party’s own precarious support among the Muslim masses, who identified themselves by those very religious sensibilities more than any politicized nationalism, and who were otherwise drawn to the pan-Islamic ideals of Baku’s Ittihad (Unity) party. It was also a strategy fraught with risks, building walls of separation between the Musavat and the Slavic and non-Muslim workers of Baku.⁵⁹

ADR politicians drew from an even more diverse arsenal of myths and symbols, all the conventional trappings of European nationalism, to promote their cause. The country’s official flag joined the colors of Turkic national identity (blue), with those of European social democracy (red) and Islamic civilization (green), centered by the star and crescent moon. Räsulzadə spoke in high and mighty terms of the historical monuments of Baku – the Zoroastrian Fire Temple at Surakhanli, the old city (*Ichəri Şähär*), and the Maiden Tower (*Giz Galası*) – as the earthly symbols of Azerbaijani national destiny. But beneath these trappings, too, were layers of uncertainty and division. Among the country’s official holidays were 28 May (the day the Azerbaijani National Council first declared “independence” in 1918), when the Musavat decorated the historical monuments and mosques of Baku with blue stars and electric lights; 14 March, “our first independence day,” the anniversary of the “all-Russian Revolution for the Turkic peoples;” and 14 January 1920, what some Musavatists called Azerbaijan’s first “true” independence day, a celebration of the European Entente’s recognition of the country’s de facto existence.⁶⁰ On the latter holiday, huge crowds filled the main streets. Troupes from the State Operatic Theater, dressed as Azerbaijani historical figures, strolled about the downtown entertaining the public. Veiled Muslim women, decorated with their best jewelry and head dresses, congregated at the intersections to peek at the military parades and army bands making their way through the city. Residents hung the national flag and dazzling oriental carpets from their balconies and rooftops. The city was literally ablaze

⁵⁷ M. E. RÄSULZADÄ Unudulmaz fəjia [An Unforgettable Tragedy] in: *Azərbaycan* 147 (21 March 1919) p. 1. K godovshchine martovskikh’ sobytii, in: *Azerbaidzhan* 70 (4 April 1919) p. 4; and *Azerbaidzhan* 69 (3 April 1919) p. 2.

⁵⁸ ASAD MAMEDOV-AKHLIEV Po povodu Magerrama, in: *IKBOO* 222 (5/18 October 1917); M. E. RÄSULZADÄ Mähərrəm günləri [Mühərrəm Days], in: *Achiq söz* 590 (4/17 October 1917) pp. 2–3.

⁵⁹ For compelling arguments about the weak national identity among the Azerbaijani Turks through the revolution and independence, see SUNY Nationalism and Class in the Russian Revolution: A Comparative Discussion, in: *Revolution in Russia: Reassessments of 1917* pp. 234–238; and SWIETOCHOWSKI *Russian Azerbaijan* p. 193.

⁶⁰ Zasedanie organizatsionno-propagandicheskogo otdela Musavata [23 May 1919], in: *GANI* f. 894, o. 10, d. 77, l. 2. Räsulzadə’s comments in a diplomatic note to the charge d’affaire of the German Imperial Embassy in Constantinople (1918), in: *GANI* f. 970s (Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del Azerbaidzhanskoi Respubliki), o. 1s, d. 8, l. 8.

with national colors.⁶¹ The spectacle was impressive. But with whom and where did Azerbaijani national identity lie? With Russia and its revolution? Against Soviet Russia and with Europe? Even the holidays could not tell.

All of these images paled in comparison to the popular memory of Imam Huseyn. Räsulzadä and his compatriots applied the imagery of Kərbälä most effectively to the first anniversary (31 March 1919) of the March Events. This was less a day of “mourning,” more a day of national “unity” (*birlik*), for the sacrifices of the “martyrs” (*shähidlär*) were not made in vain. At six in the morning on 31 March, factory whistles sounded throughout the industrial regions of the city, signaling the one-day strike (organized by the Musavat and the Muslim Workers’ Conference) in honor of the victims of the March Events. Even the otherwise busy bazaar merchants, dock workers, and street porters joined the strike. Ships in Baku harbor lowered their flags to half-mast. The bustling city was stilled. People quietly left their homes and workplaces to join the public commemorations. They hung black flags and crepe, in the manner of Mühärräm, from their balconies and windows. People assembled at the Tüzäpir mosque and at the newly consecrated cemetery for the March victims high above central Baku, at Nagornyi (Hilltop) Park. Clerics read the Muslim office for the dead from the *Qur’an*, mixing religious metaphors about collective sacrifice with political metaphors about the tragic origins of the Azerbaijani nation.⁶²

When the Muslims mourned now, they mourned not for Säfäräliyev, and certainly not for the Twenty-six Commissars, but for the thousands of their own co-believers who had fallen between 30 March and 3 April. The Musavat elites had deftly transformed the March Events from what they had originally designated a humiliating defeat into what they were now calling a magnificent victory. They had collected the scattered tribes of Azerbaijan back into a new nation. They had transformed the simultaneity and solidarity of the Mühärräm rituals into the first foundations of popular sovereignty. They had, in other words, discovered the Azerbaijani cult of the nation in the Shi’a Islamic cult of the dead. The March Events were no longer a simple turning point on the calendar of revolution but a “realm” or “site of memory,” the beginning of civic consciousness and national history. The Azerbaijani Turks had discovered their own unique national sacrifice amid the greater sacrifices of the Great War, a handy way of convincing the Entente powers at Versailles that they had earned the precious right to self-determination.⁶³ In this respect they joined their Muslim brethren in

⁶¹ Prazdnovanie nezavisimosti Azerbaidzhanskoi Respubliki, in: Azerbaidzhan 10 (16 January 1920) p. 1.

⁶² Quoted from M. E. RÄSULZADÄ Misal nümunäsi olan bir kun [The Day of Example], in: Azärbaijan 148 (2 April 1919) p. 1; and KHÄLIL İBRAHİM 18–31 Mart [31 March], in: Azärbaijan 147 (21 March 1919) pp. 1–2. The descriptions are from Traurnyi den’, in: Azerbaidzhan 68 (2 April 1919) p. 3; and Protokoly obshchikh sobranii musul’manskikh rabochikh [31 March 1919], in: GANI f. 894, o. 10, d. 26.

⁶³ AKHUNDZADÄ Mart hadisäsi 1918 p. 1, portrayed the March Events as Azerbaijan’s tragic, bloody chapter in the Great War. Other, more official ADR sources, cited both the efforts of the Savage Division in World War I, and the “March Events” (when Azerbaijan bore the worst of the “bandes bolshevikues,” who destroyed “two cities,” meaning probably Baku and Shemakha, and several hundred villages). Letter Memorandum to Woodrow Wilson from the Peace Delegation of Azerbaidzhan (undated), in GANI f. 970, o.1, d. 143, l. 32; SWIETOCHOWSKI Russian Azerbaijan p. 214. The terms are from JAY WINTER Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War in European Cultural History. Cambridge 1995, pp. 1–11; and PIERRE NORA General Introduction: Between Memory and History, in: Realms of Memory. Vol. 1. Conflicts and Divisions. Ed. by Pierre Nora. New York 1996, pp. 1–20.

other parts of the Middle East, notably the Syrian and Palestinian Arabs in the crumbling Ottoman empire, in the forging of a national narrative of tragic origins.⁶⁴

Through spring and early summer of 1919, the Bolsheviks were stunned by these developments. They had, quite simply, underestimated the power of the Musavat to manipulate the March Events into a creation myth for the new Azerbaijani nation. The Musavat seemed to be making incredible advances among the Muslim poor of Baku. Muslim workers, in turn, seemed to be integrating their tradition-bound *'umma* consciousness into what some Muslim workers called a “feeling of patriotism” and a devotion to their “homeland.” Musavat agitators were always on hand, as well, to remind their brethren that if they were prepared to shed their blood simply because they were Muslims and Turks (as they did in March of 1918), then surely they were prepared to defend Azerbaijani independence now, to carry the ADR’s “three-colored flag” with the crescent moon.⁶⁵ These sentiments reached their most vocal and popular pitch over the spring and summer of 1919, during the campaigns against A. I. Denikin’s “White” Volunteer Army, then in occupation of most of the Muslim North Caucasus and Dagestan. Diverse elements from Baku’s political stage – from Musavatists to Bolsheviks – successfully rallied the Muslim poor against Denikin by raising national and patriotic slogans in defense of the “homeland.” “Freedom or Death,” the social-democratic cry from 1905, now became the standard in defense of Azerbaijani Turkic democracy.⁶⁶

By their own admission, the Bolsheviks of Baku learned two important lessons in 1919: first, that they would ignore the significance of the March Events, the “new Ashura” for the Azerbaijani Turks, only at their peril; second, that a recognition of Azerbaijani national and state claims was a recipe for political success. By May, the Baku section of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) had already drafted its major revisionist platforms: “For an Independent Soviet Azerbaijan” (2 May 1919) and for a distinct “Communist Party of Azerbaijan.” These platforms were absolutely essential, noted A. Mikoian and others, if Bolshevism ever hoped to steal away the influence of the Musavat among the Muslim poor

⁶⁴ On the founding Syrian and Lebanese national “martyrs,” those executed by Ottoman officials in World War I for political rebellion and those having suffered in the war at large, see GELVIN *Divided Loyalties* pp. 168–181. On the war years between 1914 and 1918 (and between 1939 and 1949) as the foundations of a national “narrative of failure as triumph,” see RASHID KHALIDI *Palestinian Identity. The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*. New York 1997, pp. 158–161, 190–197.

⁶⁵ Quoted from Pis'mo ego vysoko prevoskhoditel'stvu predsedatel'iu soveta ministrov Azerbaidzhanskoi Respubliki ot rabochiikh G. Z. A. Tagiev zavoda na Zukhe [July 1919], in: GANI f. 894, o. 10, d. 67. The nationalist (anti-Bolshevik and anti-Russian) references to the “March Events” are: Vozzvanie bakinskogo komiteta tiurkskoi demokraticeskoi partii Musavat [1 May 1919], in: GAPPOD f. 276 (Istoriia Partii), o. 71, d. 172; Vtoroi s'iezd partii Musavat, in: Azerbaidzhan 268 (11 December 1919); and N. Usubbekov o politicheskom moment, in: Azerbaidzhan 36 (22 February 1920). For discussions about the compatibility of *'umma* and national consciousness, see HANS BRÄKER *Die sowjetische Politik gegenüber dem Islam*, in: *Die Muslime in der Sowjetunion und in Jugoslawien. Identität, Politik, Widerstand*. Ed. by Andreas Kappeler, Gerhard Simon, and Georg Brunner. Köln 1989, pp. 131–153, here p. 133; and GELVIN *Divided Loyalties* p. 188, which offers an interesting comparison with the Syrian case in 1920 when, “as the numbers of Syrians participating in politics increased dramatically, the bonds of Islam came to exemplify, not contravene or replace, the bonds of nation [...]”

⁶⁶ Miting protesta, in: Azerbaidzhan 121 (13 June 1919); materials from spring and summer of 1919, in: *Bor'ba za pobedu sovetской vlasti v Azerbaidzhane (1918–1920). Dokumenty i materialy*. Baku 1967, pp. 152–153; Dz. B. GULIEV *Bor'ba kommunisticheskoi partii za osushchestvlenie leninskoi natsional'noi politiki v Azerbaidzhane*. Baku 1970, p. 300–315. For substantiation of the Musavat-Bolshevik alliance, see A. I. MIKOIAN *Dorogoi bor'by*. Moskva 1971, pp. 471, 515; and the commentary by the Himmätist, Samäd Agha Agamal'iohli, in GAPPOD f. 1 (Sekretariat TsK AKPb), o. 85, d. 298, ll. 73–74.

and, in the words of the party's Central Committee, "undercut its claims that Soviet Power had organized the pogroms against the Tatars" [Azerbaijani Turks] in March of 1918.⁶⁷ The national consciousness of the urban Muslim masses, however tentative and unformed, was a significant factor in Bolshevik political calculations. Or, more to the point, the Bolsheviks could not but help to answer the Musavat's elite mobilization of the Muslim masses without a comparable mobilization campaign of their own. Beneath all of the high rhetoric about the Baku Commune, then, lay a subtext of unmasked confession that its collapse had been sealed by the March Events, that it had perished out of its own disengagement from the Muslim community. "The fate of the Commune, its very tragedy," wrote the Soviet historian Ia. A. Ratgauzer, "was its failure to win over the native masses."⁶⁸ The Bolsheviks may have won in March of 1918, but they had staked their victory on Russian and Armenian soldiers at the expense of the native Muslim poor. But by 1919 the Bolsheviks had finally learned, at a high price for both their victims and themselves, that the Russian revolution in Azerbaijan was nothing if not a national revolution; that reconciliation counted more than coercion.

There may be no better proof of these developments than the death rituals and martyrologies that the Bolsheviks and Himmätists choreographed for several new victims of the revolutionary struggle in September of 1919. Mir Fattah Mūsävi and Ashum Aliyev, two of their leading organizers and propagandists, were gunned down and killed in the early morning hours of 6 September as they sat in a popular downtown café. The assailant, so the Bolsheviks reported, was none other than a "secret agent" acting for reactionary elements within the ADR government. Within hours after the murders, the Bolsheviks had already organized a series of colorful, mass demonstrations to honor the two victims, thus proving the pithy observation of one reporter that they had the unique talent of being able to turn "a dead Bolshevik into a saint."⁶⁹ Carrying red stars and portraits of Karl Marx, singing revolutionary songs and marching to the Marseillaise, columns of some five thousand workers and party faithful made their way through downtown Baku, from the central Tazäpir mosque, to the Muslim cemetery at Bibi-Eybät, and on to the ADR parliament building. Newspapers proclaimed, in a style fired by the religious symbolism of Shi'a Islam, "dear comrades, you always looked up to the stars, which you have made even more beautiful with your own blood." The words spoke of a heavenly reunion with the "divine light" (*nur*) through the sacrifice of one's earthly body. They spoke of the spirituality of the stars and the corporeality of blood, two poles in the material symbolism of Shi'a Islam. This memorializing was made all the more poignant since the burial of Aliyev and Mūsävi fell on the Muslim holy day of

⁶⁷ Quoted from Pis'mo TsK RKP(b) Kavkazskomu kraevomu komitetu partii o meropriiatiakh po usileniu revoliutsionnoi raboty v Azerbaidzhane [sent on 20 August 1919, received in Baku on 1 September 1919], in: *Bor'ba za pobedu* p. 257. For background, see GULIEV *Bor'ba* pp. 278–281; and SWIETOCHOWSKI *The Himmät Party* pp. 129–131. For similar patterns of compromise in Central Asia, see DANIEL E. SCHAFER *Building Nations and Building States: the Tatar-Bashkir Question in Revolutionary Russia, 1917–1920*. Ph.D. diss. University of Michigan 1995, pp. 452–454.

⁶⁸ IA. RATGAUZER *Revoliutsiia i grazhdanskaia voina v Baku (1917–1918)*. Baku 1927, p. 177; S. EFENDIEV *V Azerbaidzhane*, in: *Zhizn' natsional'nostei* 40 (19 October 1919); A. MIKOLIAN *Velikoi pamiatii 26 bakinskikh komissarov*, in: *Pravda* 260 (20 September 1933); SWIETOCHOWSKI *Russian Azerbaijan* pp. 135–137.

⁶⁹ The quote is from the Doklad Ministerstva Vnutrennykh Del Azerbaidzhanskoi Respubliki [September of 1919], in: *GANI* f. 894; o. 10, d. 81.

Gurban bayram (Feast of Sacrifice), devoted to honoring Ibrahim's ritual sacrifice of his son, Ismayil, one of the several narrative precursors of Imam Huseyn's sacrifice at Kərbälä.⁷⁰

The *cause célèbre* of the murders, fancied a new Bolshevik "Mühärräm," helped to mobilize the Muslim working classes behind the Bolshevik cause. The funerals were surely a reminder, perhaps a kind of reenactment, of the funeral for Säfäräliyev. Both followed the same routines and processional routes. But there was one obvious difference. The unitary appeals to religious and national symbolism were much more acute in 1919. Mūsävi and Aliyev were named the "roses of Muslim socialists," as if they had already ascended to the "heavenly garden of roses" promised by Mohammadan revelation.⁷¹ They were buried with all the pomp and circumstance of new Shi'a "martyr militants" (*fädailär*), honorable fighters for truth, justice, and the Azerbaijani "homeland" (*vätän*). "We too have made a sacrifice," announced one Azerbaijani-language Bolshevik newspaper on the eve of *Gurban bayram*. But rather than slaying a market lamb bought as the price of eternal salvation in heaven, the Muslim workers had sacrificed two of their own in the struggle for "justice, brotherhood, and human rights" right here on earth. Like their forebears in faith, recalling the events of Mühärräm, Mūsävi and Aliyev had died as martyrs. They had died as heroes, the way all revolutionaries should die, in the midst of the struggle, sanctifying and enriching the red flag of communism with their own blood. "Death cannot stop us," noted one commentator in a language halfway between the sacred memories of Mühärräm and the profane collectivism of god-building. "Mūsävi's and Aliyev's bodies may be buried under the ground, but their souls [*ruhlar*] and ideals live on."⁷²

The Bolsheviks had proven themselves quite adept at navigating the shifting politics of the Baku stage. The first anniversary of the murder of the Twenty-six Commissars came and went on 20 September 1919 without the grand public commemorations of future years. The ADR and Musavat press took the occasion to remind the Baku public that the Twenty-six were largely responsible for the disastrous "March Events" the year before. In a muted response, the Bolsheviks limited their commemoration of the Commissars to special newspaper editions and closed, sparsely attended workers' meetings.⁷³ Instead of panegyrics to the Baku Commune and the Twenty-six, the Bolsheviks conspicuously repeated their slogans for "An Independent Azerbaijani Republic" and "Freedom to the Nations of the East," both framed within the traditional forty days of mourning for Mūsävi and Aliyev, their new national martyrs for the revolutionary cause.

The Musavatists, on the other hand, ultimately proved their March Events and their civic Mühärräm a weak set of paradigms for nation building. Their very own self-representations

⁷⁰ For more on this symbolism, see LASSY *The Muharrem Mysteries* pp. 12, 52, 136. Huseyn is known by one of his titles as the "Ismayil" of Kərbälä. To the Muslim poor of Baku, the sacrifice of Ibrahim and Ismayil at *Gurban bayram*, like the sacrifices made during pilgrimages at Mina (near Mecca), recalled for them the very sacrifices of Huseyn and his son 'Ali Akbar at Kərbälä. As one poem recited, "Just as the pilgrims, on the Feast of Sacrifice, bring the victims to the place of Mina/So the Martyr of Kerbelä brought Ali Akbar to the battlefield, as a sacrifice for the people." Quoted from LASSY *Muharrem Mysteries* pp. 39–40, 78–81, 167.

⁷¹ Ibrahim Abilov's words at the Tüzäpir mosque, from *Defin merasimi* [Funeral Ceremony], in: *Zähmät sädasy* [Voice of Labor] 8 (10 September 1919) p. 3.

⁷² Quoted from *Biz dä gurban käsdik* [We Too Have Made a Sacrifice], in: *Zähmät sädasy* 8 (10 September 1919) p. 2. *Yoldashlara bir vida* [Farewell To Comrades], in: *Zähmät sädasy* 11 (September 1919) p. 3. *Ganlı bir hadisä* [The Blood of One Event], in *Bäsirät gäzeti* [Insight] 45 (9 September 1919) p. 3. See also the *Obrashchenie Prezidiuma Bakinskoi Rabochei Konferentsii* [6 September 1919], in: *Bor'ba za pobedu* p. 271.

⁷³ From the Bolshevik broadsheet. *V sviazii s godovshchinoi rasstrela 26 bakinskikh komissarov* [20 September 1919], in: *Bor'ba za pobedu* pp. 279–280.

of the March Events, as we have already seen, were of innocent slaughter rather than of conscious revolt. The March 1919 commemorations were colorful secular theater, a moment of emotional remembrance and release, the first time for many people to publicly mourn their losses. But as events soon proved, this did not inspire the Azerbaijani Turks to emulate Huseyn in defense of their new nation. Or as Renan put it, the nation may indeed have been “constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past,” but was woefully lacking in the sacrifices the people were “prepared to make in the future.” The Musavat had defined the Azerbaijani nation in quasi-religious terms. The crowds certainly received it as such, but they did not reciprocate by allowing their religious convictions to fully flower into a new nationalism. The ADR was not the earthly vessel for the end of time in Shi’a consciousness. Circumstances dictated the terms of this unhappy truth just as much as religion and culture. For throughout winter and spring of 1920, the Azerbaijani Turks, for lack of national interest and military readiness, lost the border wars with Armenia to the west. On 28 April, the Red Army marched into Baku with hardly a shot fired, an Azerbaijani “Soviet Socialist Republic” declared within the week. No mass demonstrations stood in their way.⁷⁴

On coming to power, the retribution of the new Soviet regime was swift and severe. It deported Musavatists and their sympathizers to the Solovki labor camp in the Arctic circle. The Azerbaijani Cheka executed the engineer, Abuzarbäk, suspected of organizing the murder of Khanlar Säfäräliyev years before. It found the assassin of Müsävi and Aliyev and executed him too. By 1923, the Musavat party was disbanded in full, its “decayed corpse” finally laid to rest, in the words of one Bolshevik editorial.⁷⁵ The grand funeral rites for the fallen Muslim martyrs of the Bolshevik cause were quickly forgotten. Over the course of the 1920s, the Soviet regime gradually but methodically eradicated the Mühärräm commemorations from public and even private life. What had once been a strategic lever for engaging the Muslim poor now became a cause of embarrassment, reminders not only of so-called religious backwardness but also of the power of the tragic March Events.⁷⁶ One could read about Säfäräliyev or Müsävi or Aliyev on street signs or in the history books. But no great central monuments were erected in their name. The fates of these Muslim martyrs were simply not big enough to carry the full weight and significance of Soviet power. They were able representatives of the Azerbaijani revolutionary masses, but the experiences of the Russian Revolution showed that Azerbaijan was not alone in the world. Its fortunes were tied to fortunes far greater than its own, best represented by other tragedies.

Most official Bolshevik texts preferred to pay homage to Slavic martyrs, both real and imagined. By 1923, mournful poems and pictorials honored the exclusive memory of Petr Montin, the “modest, loyal, and strong” leader of the Baku underground, the “star of the revolution” with the “warm Russian eyes.” In the film “They Came from Baku” (*Bakintsi*,

⁷⁴ SWIETOCHOWSKI *Russian Azerbaijan* p. 183. This is not to say that the Kärbälä “paradigm” was ineffective as an instrument of political mobilization. The clerical establishment applied it most successfully in the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979 to unite diverse interests against the perceived tyranny of the Shah. See FISCHER *Iran. From Religious Dispute to Revolution* pp. 181–244; and NURUL FAJRI *The Role of Religious Symbols in the Iranian Revolution of 1979*. M.A. thesis. McGill University 1994.

⁷⁵ Konets Musavata, in: *Bakinskii rabochii* 181 (14 August 1923) p. 1 and *K razvalu Musavat* 186 (20 August 1923) p. 1. On the initial terror of the Soviet regime in Azerbaijan, see BAKHTIAR RAFIYEV *Um, Chest’, Sovest’ Epokhi?* in: *Vyshka* (25 September 1993).

⁷⁶ The Azerbaijani Communist Party outlawed the Mühärräm ceremonies in a series of acts. From the *Protokoly zasedaniia prezidiuma, bakinskogo komiteta i tsentral’nogo komiteta AKP(b)* [6 September 1921], in *GAPPOD* f. 2, o. 22, d. 123, l. 47; for 9 August 1923, in *GAPPOD* f. 1, o. 74, d. 133, l. 41; for 26 July 1925, in *GAPPOD* f. 2, o. 22, d. 136, l. 28; and for 27 June 1926, in *GAPPOD* f. 2, o. 22, d. 140, l. 83.

1938), it was the Russian Dr. Vanechka Mikhailov (not Săfărălijev) who fell to the Tsarist police during the 1905 revolution and who, under the direction of the masterful “Koba” (Stalin), was given a great funeral and political demonstration. The movie ended with Jafar, the rather naïve local Bolshevik, gazing absently into the future with the coffin of the dead Russian at his side, the slow Muslim masses following behind.⁷⁷ But the murdered Twenty-six Commissars took first place in the pantheon of Soviet hero-victims, icons of a nascent pan-Soviet statism. For they represented the truly international character of the Bolshevik Revolution, by way of the “wise” Armenian, S. K. Shaumian; the “fiery” Georgian, Alesha Dzhaparidze; the “manly” Azerbaijani Turk, Măshadi Āzizbăkov; and the “native-born” (*rodnoi*) Russian, Vanechka Fioletov. Their bodies were returned to Baku from their desert graves in September of 1920, to coincide with the second anniversary of their deaths and the calling of the First Congress of the Peoples of the East. In the best tradition of Bolshevik funeral rituals, they were buried with full pomp and circumstance in the center of downtown Baku, eventually dedicated with an eternal flame and stone monuments. The Twenty-six were laid to rest in a mass grave at this site, a common ground that brooked no national distinctions or barriers, as Sergo Ordzhonikidze put it. Monuments to the leading Commissars were placed at the far corners of Baku as well, to the north and south, to the east and west, completing the heroic rendering of city space.⁷⁸ Soon thereafter, the Soviet regime razed the Muslim cemetery at Nagorni Park, removing the corpses buried there, the very same victims of the March Events, renaming the site in honor of another Bolshevik Commissar of the Transcaucasus, Sergei Kirov.⁷⁹

This hagiography grew in scope and effect over the next decade. The Baku Commune, “citadel” of Bolshevism in the East according to Mikoian’s expression, became one of the metaphors for Russia as the “fortress” state of the civil war years, surrounded “on all sides” by the counter-revolutionary Czech troops on the Volga, by Cossacks in the North Caucasus, Germans in the Ukraine, Allied troops in Arkhangel and Murmansk, and by the British in the Transcaucasus and Central Asia. The poets of the revolution – from Vladimir Maiakovskii to Sergei Esenin and Nikolai Aseev – sang laments and praises for the “Twenty-six” in romantic verse.⁸⁰ They were further immortalized in Isaac Brodskii’s painting, “Execution of the Twenty-six Baku Commissars” (1925), as much a paeon to the Paris as to the Baku Commune. The canvas bore a remarkable similarity to those depicting the executions of the Parisian martyrs in 1871. Arcs of receding soldiers, aiming from their firing lines, frame the left hand sides of both scenes, conspirators standing idly by as their orders are carried out. The victims at Paris accept their fate muted and forlorn. But the Twenty-six bare their chests

⁷⁷ Quoted from the poem, Petr Montin, in: *Iz proshlogo* p. 156. Scenes from the film at Azerkinovideo (Baku), with thanks to the director, Oktai Mirkasimov.

⁷⁸ BURDZHALOV Dvadsat’ shest’ bakinskikh komissarov p. 108. S. ORDZHONIKIDZE Svetloi pamiati 26 bakinskikh komissarov, in: *Bakinskii rabochii* 211 (20 September 1922).

⁷⁹ A gigantic statue of Kirov eventually marked the site, as did a popular restaurant, “Friendship of Peoples” (*Druzhba narodov*). But Azerbaijani mobs toppled the statue in 1990 and the city government returned the land back to the nation’s war dead (what became known as *Shăhiidlăr Kھیabani* or Martyr’s Cemetery). The new victims of the Azerbaijani nation were buried there, both those killed during “Black January” of 1990 (when Soviet troops suppressed anti-Armenian violence in the city along with pro-independence demonstrators) and some of the victims of the Karabagh War. At the same time, mobs destroyed most of the monument to the Twenty-six Commissars in downtown Baku, although the bodies remained buried under the earth.

⁸⁰ MIKOIAN Velikoi pamiati 26 bakinskikh komissarov. The earliest tragic histories of the Twenty-six, beginning with force in 1927, are listed in SUNY The Baku Commune. One of the last histories that I have been able to find is N. G. SMIRNOV *Ushedshie v bessmertie: ocherki istorii bakinskoi kommuny*. Moskva 1986.

and wave their fists in angry defiance. They even seem to welcome the bullets, befitting their famous last words, “Long Live Communism” (*Da zdrastvuet kommunizm*). The same setting and theme were represented in the acclaimed film, “The Twenty-six Baku Commissars” (*Dvadsat’ Shest’ Bakinskikh Komissarov*, 1933), which the Central Committee of the Azerbaijani Communist Party micro-managed with deliberate care to highlight the depth of personal sacrifice, national tragedy, and final victory.⁸¹

The young Soviet state had found, in the Twenty-six Commissars, the makings of one of its own creation myths, the locus for its own “realm of memory” and “site of mourning.” In the official narrative of the Russian Revolution in Azerbaijan, the tragic event was too powerful to ignore: a means to legitimize revolutionary struggle, to raise heroes and castigate villains, to quell dissonance. Tragedy proved, as either ironic revelation or romantic resolution, a leading trope in the master narrative of Soviet history as well. For revisionist historians in the West, the pathos of the “Twenty six,” or the tragic turns of Soviet history more generally, served to highlight the revolution’s hopes dashed and heroes fallen. But for those generations that fought the revolution, the tragic death was a rite of initiation, the beginning of their history. For Soviet generations yet to come, it became a rite of passage, punctuating their history with the solemn drama of a weighty crime, with the eventual triumph of good over evil.⁸² These are all legitimate and important approaches to history. They remind us of its moral dilemmas, its human dramas. They remind us that the “tragic vision” is at the heart of historical remembrance. It is the dramatic expression of human mortality. It is the very “symbolic content of narrative history.”⁸³

The tragic event, like the myth of the nation, was not without ambiguity and conflict. It was a cornerstone of the Soviet “gothic” style of the 1920s, centered on such highly charged emotions as anxiety and fear, defeat and loss. The cult of the Twenty-six, like the cult of Lenin, matched well with the fixation of early Soviet ideology upon the gothic struggle between the communist future and bourgeois past, with all its graveyard symbolism and morbid fascination with ghosts and the dead body. The death cults from before and during the revolution predisposed the Bolshevik party, under the leadership of Iosif Stalin, to the manufactured solemnity of Sergei Kirov’s funeral, to the tragic dramas of the purges, and to the struggle between the superheroes and supervillains of “high Stalinist ontology.”⁸⁴ In the

⁸¹ Compare the paintings in PETER HOPKIRK *Like Hidden Fire. The Plot to Bring Down the British Empire*. New York 1994, pp. 272–273; and GEORGES BOURGIN *La Guerre de 1870–1871 et la Commune*. Paris 1971, pp. 389, 407.

⁸² BURDZHALOV *Russia’s Second Revolution* pp. 337–340 perfected the “tragic” style by uniting its ironic and romantic dimensions. Acclaimed as a contribution to the revisionist school, the book ends with a heartfelt tribute to the victims of February 1917. But this was a style the author first assumed in his *Dvadsat’ shest’ bakinskikh komissarov*, the Stalinist classic. In another sense, the concerns of the Western revisionists and Soviet historians overlap: for the former are romantic in their praise for the social revolution, the latter ironic in their references to conflicted, ambiguous events as rites of initiation and passage.

⁸³ Quoted from HAYDEN WHITE *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore, London 1987, p. 181; WHITE *Metahistory* pp. 7–11, 27. See also STITES *Revolutionary Dreams* p. 10, on the need for “sympathetic tears.”

⁸⁴ See ERIC NAIMAN *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*. Princeton, NJ 1997, pp. 148–180; WILLIAMS *The Other Bolsheviks* pp. 3–4; AMY KNIGHT *Who Killed Kirov. The Kremlin’s Greatest Mystery*. New York 1999, pp. 3–7; J. ARCH GETTY *Samokritika* *Rituals in the Stalinist Central Committee, 1933–1938*, in: *The Russian Review* 58 (January 1999) pp. 49–70; JEFFREY BROOKS *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War*. Princeton 2000. Quoted from KATERINA CLARK *The Soviet Novel. History as Ritual*. Chicago 1981, pp. 121, 151.

actual rituals of public mourning and historical remembrance, these conflicts and ambiguities gave way to unanimity and consensus; and, except for the sad cadences of the funeral hymns, to a triumphal silence. The tragic death taught the Bolsheviks how to carry history into the future much as they carried the martyred corpses of the Russian Revolution to their graves.