Order Beyond Borders:
The Azerbaijani Triangle Across Iran, Turkey, and Russia

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Michael A. Reynolds

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Cultural Anthropology
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Turkey’s neo-Ottomanism, Iran’s Shi’a Crescent, and Russia’s neo-Eurasianism: together, they evince increasing transregionalism across West Asia. As states and societies interact beyond national borders, their interactions transform them from without. Evidently, the social basis of this mutual transformation is not to be found in one country but in many, spread out through networks of trade, religion, kinship, etc. This dissertation offers a model for analyzing social orders that are constitutive of multiple political domains. The model is developed through an ethnographic and historiographical study of Azerbaijanis, a Transcaucasian people with diasporic presence across Iran, Turkey, and Russia. By stitching together biographical accounts of itinerant Azerbaijanis from past and present, this study develops a temporally capacious, diasporic perspective on post-Cold War connectivity across Iran, Turkey, and Russia. This network-centric perspective shifts the focus from old imperial centers to their shared frontier as the locus of transregional analysis. In frontiers states interact through a connective tissue woven by diasporic societies whose routes, past and present, crisscross that frontier. While diasporic ties of intimacy give states access to societies beyond their domains, states may in turn sponsor such ties, giving diasporic individuals mandate to act as cultural diplomats. This shadow diplomacy is underpinned by multidirectional, competitive engagement with shared histories across political borders.
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Introduction: Traveling like an Azerbaijani

History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.

Attributed to Mark Twain

To travel like an Azerbaijani is to begin at the foothills of Eynali in Tabriz, Iran and continue forth to the shores of the Caspian in Baku, remaining in the Shi’a Muslim geography and leaving behind a Persian landscape with its covered bazaars and green-domed shrines. Having passed the oil fields into the city of Baku, the traveler comes upon a Soviet landscape dotted by Stalinist public buildings and Khrushchyaokas, five-storied prefabricated buildings filled with cramped apartments hastily put up in the Khrushchev era. Then, our imaginary Azerbaijani might journey northward to Moscow, crossing into the post-Soviet landscape all the while stepping into a Christian Orthodox realm. Wandering around in Moscow’s markets, the visible presence of Turko-Tatar Muslims is a friendly albeit curious welcome in a foreign land. To follow the Azerbaijani traveler is to trace those Turko-Tatar ties to the shores of the Bosporus in Istanbul. There, on the eastern edges of Europe, the two heirs to the Eastern Roman Empire and to the Mongol heritage, the Ottomans and the Russians, competed for centuries. Finally, to follow the Azerbaijani home is to travel from Istanbul to Tabriz, leaving behind the Sunni Muslim geography for a Shi’a Muslim country and the familiar Turkic-speaking world.
Having thus come around full circle, the Azerbaijani-traveler has, strangely enough, never left familiar terrain even while crossing multiple borders into different countries. Each place in the itinerary has something unique of the other within it, the smell of familiarity across borders. That commonality may vary from a shared imperial history to language and religion or even religious denomination, but together, they form a single great chain that binds the political domains of Persians, Russians, and Turks to one another. This transnational space is hardly visible from within a single nation-state or an empire, but it comes into full view when seen from the diasporic perspective of the Azerbaijanis. This book looks to convey that perspective.

Azerbaijanis are a diasporic people with origins in what is today northwest Iran. Their diasporic horizons, like that of Armenians, once stretched from the shores of the Caspian to the Baltic and the Bosporus. Although those horizons were divided by the short twentieth century, they have been reconnecting since the Cold War’s end. As Azerbaijanis today move on the diasporic tracks of their forefathers, their movement, like that of our imagined traveler, reveals the historical ties lying outside national and imperial borders. If shared pasts across borders become visible—and potent—through movement between places, Azerbaijanis’ diasporic history gives us an unusual vantage point to observe the effects of such movement over time. In other words, Azerbaijanis’ diasporic mobility, past and present, allows us to build a temporally capacious, transregional view of the entangled realms of Persians, Russians, and Turks.
What the Azerbaijani perspective reveals is common experiences across national borders and old imperial frontiers. What happens in one domain affects the other, and what happens in two affects the third. One might rightly ask, however: If the political domains of Turks, Persians, and Russians differ in their imperial pasts, languages, religions, and religious denominations, what gives them their shared fate? In other words, what emboldens us to place within a single frame the cities of Tabriz, Baku, Moscow, and Istanbul which are otherwise considered part of separate historical trajectories, and thus of separate regions?

What makes this unlikely arrangement a ‘region’ in its own right is the populations shared across the former imperial domains of Turks, Persians, and Russians. It is they who tied these domains together through trade, kinship, religion, and political camaraderie. Their cosmopolitan connections across old imperial frontiers allow us to speak of a meaningful triangular connection across an otherwise divided geography. In this book we draw our inspiration from the Azerbaijanis, and it is after them that we will call this shared transnational space the Azerbaijani Triangle.

**The Azerbaijani Triangle: States and Networks**

A bribery scandal that swept Turkey at the end of 2013 brought the world’s attention to a curious phenomenon. At the height of Western sanctions against Iran, a secret financial corridor apparently carried billions of dollars in gold from Turkey to Iran in return for Iranian natural gas. The operation was simple: Payments made in
Turkish lira to purchase Iranian gas were transferred to the Turkish state-owned Halk Bank. Iranians used these funds to buy gold in Turkey, which was then carried in suitcases to Dubai to be sold for foreign currency. This “gold-for-gas” trade at once helped balance Turkey’s growing trade deficit and shored up Iran’s dwindling foreign exchange reserves in the shadow of international law.¹

Though the illicit trade involved top ministers in both countries, the central figure was a middleman named Rıza Sarraf (or Reza Zarrab in Iran), a Turkey-based Iranian Azerbaijani with dual citizenship in both Turkey and Iran.² A businessman in his early thirties, Sarraf came from a wealthy family in the Iranian city of Tabriz. After doing business in Dubai, Sarraf moved to Istanbul, where he established a gold company. Orchestrating his business and family connections within Iran and Turkey, Sarraf plugged himself into the political elite in both countries, including the former Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, and the former head of Iran’s Social Security Organization, Saeed Murtazavi. While in Turkey, he established personal connections to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and a number of his ministers. Thanks to such ties, Sarraf facilitated the transfer of some 200 tons of gold, worth $12 billion, from


Turkey to Iran via Dubai. His name betrayed his métier: Sarraf in Turkish is an Arabic loan word for moneychanger or dealer in precious metals, especially gold.

In November 2015, only two years later, another incident made international headlines: a Russian jet was shot down by Turkish forces over the Turkish-Syrian border. The news fell like a bomb on the so-called suitcase traders shuttling between Moscow and Istanbul. More was at stake than just unregulated trade, however; Turkish construction firms in Russia and Russian tourists in Turkey had bound the two economies together. So did Russian natural gas and Turkish agricultural products flowing in the opposite directions. The incident put much of this traffic at risk and caused a media frenzy in both countries.

At the peak of the Turkish-Russian crisis, a professor in Ankara named Toğrul İsmayıl received several phone calls from Russian media inviting him to convey the Turkish view to the Russian public. A former Soviet citizen from the Kürdəmir region of Azerbaijan, İsmayıl’s familiarity with Russia went back to his student years at the Lomonosov Moscow State University, where he completed his doctoral degree in history. His educational path would later take him to Baku on the Caspian and finally to Istanbul University. Now a Turkish citizen with a fluency in Russian, a qualification


hard to come by among Turkish academics, İsmayıl was indeed the perfect candidate.

Soon he was in NTV’s Moscow studio, where he responded to his Russian peers’ provocative questions in a primetime live debate. Back home in Ankara, İsmayıl continued to receive invitations, this time from Turkish media, who sought him to convey the Russian perspective to the Turkish public.

Individuals like Sarraf and İsmayıl exemplify a classic figure in the anthropological literature, namely, the broker. Their brokering, however, is no small affair. If Sarraf the gold trader became the liaison between two states, İsmayıl the scholar played the messenger between two nations. Their role is akin to that of a diplomat, though officially they bear no such title. It is not diplomatic immunity across borders but cultural immersion within them that underpins these cases of international brokerage. In each case, we have an individual who is culturally conversant with multiple political domains. Sarraf feels at home in Istanbul just as he does in Tehran. Similarly, İsmayıl’s

5. For classic anthropological accounts on the subject, see Geerts (1960) and Salzman (1974). For a review of the theme the anthropological literature on brokers and brokerage, see Lindquist (2015). Although the broker figure has retreated from anthropology, it has enjoyed a new lease on life in the recent studies in transnational history. If tribal chiefs, traditional healers, and local Muslim leaders were the classic ethnographic exemplars of brokers in the anthropological literature, brokers in the recent historical scholarship brought attention to a wider range of figures, including traders, artists, scholars, holy men, mercenaries, and such. The analytical potential of the term is laid bare in a range of historical contexts from the fluid maritime world of the early modern Mediterranean to the Cold War diplomacy across diligently guarded borders of the twentieth century. For an example of the former, see Rothman (2011) and for the latter, see Kirasirova (2011) Thanks to this revival in recent transnational history, the theme of brokers and brokerage (or its alternative formulations, such as “everyday diplomacy”) is re-entering the anthropological works of transnational scope. See Marsden et al. (2016).
deep familiarity with Turkey and Russia puts him equally at home in Moscow and in Ankara.

What should we make of this ability to become local in multiple domains at once? Are Sarraf and İsmayıl exceptional cases, entrepreneurs punching in and out of otherwise disconnected social orders? Or do they provide a glimpse of a phenomenon that is socially much thicker? If indeed Sarraf and İsmayıl move along socially crowded routes, then on the same routes we must expect to see states interacting beyond the constraints of the formal interstate system. While diasporic ties of intimacy give states access to societies beyond their domains, states may in turn sponsor such ties, giving diasporic individuals the mandate to act as cultural diplomats.

These regional dynamics, however, remain opaque to the social sciences for lack of proper analytical frames between competing fixations on the local and the global. This study offers such a frame by first researching the network broadly conceived, through historiographical and ethnographic methods, and then folding that external, network-centric analysis back to engage a number of states internally. Our analysis goes beyond borders, not by discarding them, but by relating them to circuits which move in and out of their domains. Moreover, the flows we analyze are not just new or global, but can be old, historical, in specific directions, and at varying distances.

Social sciences have long been concerned with the internal constitution of society. And the burgeoning emphasis on global flows has yet to express how these
flows articulate with internal structural conceptions of a society, leaving the inquiry at the stage of a simple proposition: societies are permeated by global flows. This study analyzes how the internal constitutions of societies are shaped by those greater flows; alongside the internal motivations for external movements that flow in the other direction. This analytical move is explicitly categorical (qualitative) rather than scalar (quantitative) because the external does not have to be big or global; nor does the internal have to be small or local. Cross-border mobility and exchanges are important not because they erode political boundaries or render state power irrelevant. They are important because they point to channels by which domestic sphere of a polity, be that of an empire or a nation-state, is transformed from without. When multiple domains are brought into the analysis, the internal-external frame can illuminate how different political domains are formed and transformed in relation to one another.

Evidently, the social basis of this mutual transformation is not to be found in one political domain but in many, spread out through networks of business, trade, kinship, religion, education, and labor. Analyzing a social order that is constitutive of multiple political domains requires an expansive vantage point, which is difficult to procure from within a single political domain. An alternative viewpoint emerges if we follow our two Azerbaijani characters back to their origins.
The View from the Frontier: Openings and Closings

Part of Azerbaijanis’ homeland, Transcaucasia, is a three-way land bridge connecting Russia (north), Iran (east), and Turkey/Byzantium/Europe (west).

Historically, Transcaucasian territory changed hands among empires from these three directions. And from Transcaucasia, Azerbaijanis spread north to Russia and east and west to Iran and Turkey as a diasporic people. With their diasporic horizons stretched across three empires, the “Iranian Turks” of Tabriz became “Caucasian Tatars” in St. Petersburg, and “Azeri” or “Acem” (Persian/foreign) in Istanbul. By extending the analysis across centuries, this book conceptualizes Azerbaijanis as a cosmopolitan people in the singular, and captures them on the move across political landscapes as they cultivate local bonds. These many bonds overlap in Transcaucasia, where Turks, Persians, and Russians shared a frontier.

In frontiers the centripetal force of the imperial center lessens, which allows the frontier peoples to be part of circulations that are not necessarily controlled or approved by the political center. In a frontier shared by three political domains, those alternative circulations are not necessarily used as back channels to run away from state power but as entryways from one political domain to the next. Transcaucasia, then, can be thought of as a portal that opens to three domains at once. Whatever seems stable and taken for granted in the capitals of Iran, Turkey, and Russia appears in a state of flux in Transcaucasia, where otherwise unrelated currents come together and test each other.
Placing frontiers at the center of analysis then allows us to see political domains not as given contexts, but as projects in the making, which are recalibrated vis-à-vis one another in the frontier. In a way frontiers operate as what Bruno Latour calls centers of calculation, where information accumulates in cycles, and new knowledge is generated and disseminated through incoming and outgoing flows of people and resources.

This study shifts the focus from old imperial centers to their shared frontier as the primary locus of transregional analysis because the frontier, though peripheral to each domain individually, lies at the center of them all. This analytical inversion of center and periphery throws light on multiple domains at once and reveals their interconnections, which are hardly visible from within a single political domain. Serving as a corrective to the lopsided perspective from any individual domain, the frontier offers us the Archimedean point, a privileged vantage point from which the object of inquiry can be viewed in its totality. In this study the Archimedean point of the Azerbaijani Triangle is Transcaucasia. It is where states interact through a connective tissue woven by diasporic societies whose routes, past and present, crisscross that frontier.

Azerbaijanis are one such society, whose diasporic history offers us an expansive vantage point that is difficult to procure from within a single political domain. And what that perspective reveals is a pattern of openings and closings in cross-border mobilities throughout the twentieth century. Times of opening, instigated by events
such as revolutions, regime changes, or reformist movements, are moments of crisis and opportunity when conversations on future possibilities and shared pasts proliferate. Diasporic societies can articulate these internal conversations across borders, fostering transnational dialogues on issues of common concern. Such potent dialogues in turn feed back into debates within each domain, giving rise to uncannily similar political movements and even outcomes in key historical moments.

One such moment came in the early twentieth century with the near-simultaneous constitutional revolutions in Tsarist Russia (1905), Qajar Iran (1906), and the Ottoman Empire (1908). The revolutionary currents, though unsettling imperial orders, also opened up a transimperial space for Azerbaijanis who, riding on these currents, went in and out of each empire by drawing on the local ties of their earlier crossings. In each realm, Azerbaijanis became part of internal political conversations; and through their diasporic mobility and cosmopolitan connections, they also tied together these internal debates, effecting a triangular dialogue across three empires on possible futures within or beyond imperial borders. Using the universal and patriotic idioms of constitutionalism, Azerbaijanis took stock of their many pasts across empires, and by recombining them in new ways, congealed alternative orders beyond borders. Pan-Turkism was one such vision produced in the diasporic space of Azerbaijanis shared with other Turkic-speaking populations across the Russo-Ottoman frontiers. But it was not the only one. As we will see, socialism, pan-Islamism, and Iranian nationalism were
also congealed and circulated in the same transimperial space, which diasporic Azerbaijani horizons contracted in the early twentieth century. Those new closures began with the Bolshevik consolidation over old Russian frontiers in 1920, followed by the Pahlavi coup of 1921 in Iran, and completed on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire with the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Just like the opening of the imperial domains earlier, their closures followed one another synchronically. Their synchronicity was hardly coincidental, as noted by the Iranian statesman and diplomat of Azerbaijani origin, Hasan Taqizadeh. “The fall of the Tsarist Empire due to the Russian Revolution,” he observed, “was the greatest historic event affecting Iran during the past 50 years. Without a doubt, if not for the Russian revolution neither Iran nor Turkey would have existed after WWI” (Taqizadeh 1959, 67 quoted in Matin-asgari 2013, 21).

Whereas open frontiers were critical to making and transforming empires, closing them off was essential for the new governments to legitimize and consolidate their rule within. Antithetical to broad, permeable frontier zones that lay between empires, the new states preferred rigid borders and thus divided Azerbaijanis’ historical geography into separate boxes. Azerbaijanis continued to be part of Iranian, Turkish, and Soviet histories, albeit separately. They would become a pop star in one horizon, like the “Soviet Sinatra” Muslim Magomayev, and a national poet in another, like
Sehriyar, whose anniversary of death is commemorated as the “national day of poem” in Iran. Within each domain, now sealed off from one another, Azerbaijanis became local nationals, except in the Soviet Union where they became a nation unto themselves pursuant to Stalin’s dictum “national in form, socialist in content.” With their horizons contracted, they had to forgo their cosmopolitan ties across the border. Over the next six decades, they learned to behave as loyal members of separate, developing nations.

The boxes did not remain isolated. As the Second World War punctuated the short twentieth century (1920s to 1980s), it also punctured the boxes and opened up new avenues for reconnection. While Hitler’s invasion of the U.S.S.R offered an opportunity for exiled pan-Turkists to claim former Russo-Ottoman frontiers, Stalin’s invasion of northwest Iran opened the former Russo-Persian corridor, where Azerbaijani leftist and nationalist activism moved in both directions. Although these openings implied alternative futures—though not necessarily better ones—their realization depended all too much on the military success of ideological superpowers. With the defeat of Hitler by the Russian winter, and the retreat of Stalin from Iran, doors closed once again.

The Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 ushered in a new period. While it closed Iran’s doors to the West, it opened many doors in the region, having reinvigorated Muslim networks and political Islam across the Middle East, including Turkey. In 1983,

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* Coined by the historian Eric Hobsbawn (1995), the term “short twentieth century” corresponds to the period from the First World War to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The term is analogous to the long nineteenth century, also coined by Hobsbawn.
Turkey opened up with the post-coup electoral success of Turgut Özal who liberalized the economy and incorporated Muslim intellectuals and businessmen into Turkish politics. Only two years later, in 1985, Gorbachev started the perestroika (restructuring) in the Soviet Union, popularizing the old Russian word glasnost (publicity) with a new meaning: openness. The openings that came at the end of the short twentieth century followed the pattern of earlier openings and closings: they were synchronic.

These three openings became the pre-history of post-Cold War connectivity across the former imperial domains of the Ottomans, Persians, and Russians. When the Iron Curtain finally came undone in 1991, several Turkish Muslim notables had already visited Baku; Khomeini’s fatwas had been smuggled to Shi’a circles in Soviet Azerbaijan in the pockets of sea captains and truck drivers; a number of Azerbaijanis from the Soviet side had visited Iran and Turkey on a mission of cultural diplomacy representing Soviet Muslims in fairs, exhibitions, and official meetings. If constitutionalism became the medium of liberation from the imperial dilemmas of the long nineteenth century, Muslim internationalism became the medium of liberation from the dilemmas of the short twentieth century, namely, the straight-jacket of nation-state.

Islam has a long history in the region. It provides idioms of connectivity that have a deeper resonance than those offered by constitutionalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Islam, in other words, provides a broader base and a more intuitive channel for Muslims in the Azerbaijani Triangle to imagine socio-cultural orders beyond
national borders. However, Muslims do not reconnect simply by evoking the abstract language of theology or by mobilizing sectarian attachments. In fact, doing so achieves little in the way of building thick social ties across borders, let alone sustaining them over time. Muslims rather reconnect by recollecting shared pasts and resuming old conversations that may or may not be Islamic in content. Connectivity in space hinges on continuity in time and Muslims may find the historical continuity in spiritual or family lineages, kinship and language ties, stories of saints and shrines, routes of scholarship and pilgrimage, or shared historical figures and imperial pasts. It is not Islam, but deep historical mindedness, that connect Muslims across borders.

**Surplus of History: Pasts and Places**

An attention to deep history, especially when conceived spatially, can offer valuable insight. For one, it connects the past to the present, not through a linear succession of pasts, each one undoing the other that comes before it, but through a set of alternative routes that were not taken, but could have been taken, and if not foreclosed, perhaps can be taken in the future. In other words, pasts can serve as repositories of possibilities that could be reactivated in the present. If pasts offer the present actors with alternative routes for the future, implications of following those routes are brought home in certain places. By moving between places, figuratively or literally, Azerbaijanis get in touch with their different pasts that they share with others across borders.
They indulge sometimes at reflecting upon the mixed pasts accumulated in the diasporic space of their ancestors, who variously belonged to Iranian, Russian, and Ottoman realms. They are also puzzled, just as we are, by the gaps and overlaps that appear among these pasts when they are spread out next to one another. Indulged or puzzled, Azerbaijanis tend to think with history and it is a sense of history that is deeply spatial, for their pasts do not belong to one place, but many.

In that regard, Azerbaijanis are like the Ilongots studied by the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo. Those Filipino tribal peoples possessed a sense of history “as movement through space in which … people walk along a trail and stop at a sequence of named resting places” (1980, 56). For Azerbaijanis too, historical time is geographically distributed thanks to their own history of diasporic mobility, and can be accessed as such, by moving between places rather than digging in one. Unlike the Ilongots, however, whose history can be pieced together through an in-depth knowledge of their local landscape in which “place names were variously given as the names of a nearby craggy rock or the closest hill or the brook for drinking water,” (42) the Azerbaijani sense of history is mapped onto a larger geographical canvas, one that stretches across West Asia.

This transregional landscape, which we call the Azerbaijani Triangle, is a historically interconnected political domain where empires left many cultural strands of their own history and generated what we call a surplus of history--in other words, an
intermixed residue of transimperial exchanges that lie beyond any single political domain. Whereas each domain in time retained only a small subset of the many cultural strands, while leaving out or suppressing others, the original surplus is maintained in the diasporic space of the Azerbaijanis, providing both meaning and means for their traveling and dwelling across Ottoman, Persian, and Russian domains. As locals, Azerbaijanis developed deep moral and kinship bonds with peoples in each of these domains; as cosmopolitans, they maintained links with diasporic Azerbaijanis elsewhere.

Azerbaijanis’ local cosmopolitanism, like that of Armenians who shared the same transimperial space, had the implication of opening one empire to another in the wake of the constitutional revolutions. As laborers and activists in the oil fields of Russian Baku with ties to their kinsmen in Iranian Tabriz, Azerbaijanis (together with Armenians) carried socialism from Russia into Iran, creating a red corridor across the Russo-Persian frontier that alarmed the rulers in both St. Petersburg and Tehran. As Iranian dissidents in Istanbul, embedded in the mercantile networks centered in Tabriz, Azerbaijanis infused the economic grievances in Iran with constitutionalist patriotism advanced in the Ottoman capital. As the Tsar’s Muslim subjects, Azerbaijanis (together with Tatars) developed pan-Turkic ideas within Russia and carried them into the Ottoman center, where it exploded in the Great War’s wake, becoming an asset to the Ottomans and a liability to the Bolsheviks.
Azerbaijanis’ local cosmopolitanism also offers an entry point to the study of contemporary exchanges and frictions among Turkey, Iran, and Russia. By exploring how the historical surplus continues to animate movements in and out of Azerbaijan—of scholars and students, mullahs and missionaries, traders and pious philanthropists—with this study offers a historically textured understanding of post-Soviet connectivity that goes beyond the gross frames of geopolitics, Islamism, and globalization. By placing local cosmopolitan Azerbaijanis at the center of Turkish Muslim outreach to former Soviet republics, Iranian Shi’a revivalism in the Middle East, and the reloaded Russian Eurasianism, we push against frameworks that present these developments as internally conceived projects emanating from old imperial centers. It shows, instead, that these projects develop in connection with one another, their entanglement analyzed not from the perspective of a single empire or a nation-state, but rather from the temporally capacious and transregional perspective of Azerbaijanis.

Today, as Azerbaijanis move along transnational tracks marked by earlier generations, the old imperial capitals of Istanbul, Tehran, and St. Petersburg are once again aligning on the same circular horizon of the Azerbaijani diaspora. Moving between these places, Azerbaijanis enter into conversations with others who share overlapping pasts across political borders. Their cross-border mobility brings to surface the surplus of history, wherein lays the unrealized futures that were nevertheless possible. In times of opening, the historically minded would find these possible futures
in the shared pasts. Others might stumble upon them elsewhere, in places where they have traveled. Either way, pieces of the puzzle are not to be found in one place, for a shared past lost on one side of the border can very well be alive on the other side. Crossing the border then has the implication of stepping into an alternative future that one would have had, could have had, or even should have had - but did not. For diasporic Azerbaijanis today, moving between places creates the effect of a time travel, into the past, and back to the future.

Azerbaijanis’ historical consciousness, just like their diasporic horizons, stretches beyond national and imperial borders. For them, looking back in time opens a transregional landscape of pasts strung together along diasporic routes. Seen from their diasporic perspective, the politically divided geography of Turks, Persians, and Russians appear as one interconnected space woven together by a set of different but overlapping historical trajectories. Pondering pasts through places juxtaposes these trajectories while laying bare their differences and parallels. Azerbaijanis’ sense of history, then, is also a comparative one, and as such, offers a rich intellectual resource for the historically-minded. If mobility helps expands one’s horizons in space, historical mindedness expands one’s horizons across time. Mobility and historical mindedness cement one another, and together, they can liberate.
Liberating the Prisoners of Time: Biographies and Itineraries

Moving between pasts and places can be liberating for scholars as well. Historians and anthropologists have grown accustomed to move between places in the past three decades. It started with the anthropologists who tried to make sense of post-Cold War connectivity under the rubric of globalization. For the minds shaped in the nationalist containers of the twentieth century, such connectivity appeared as a novel experience in human history. Inspired by the globalization studies, historians began to come forth, correcting the illusion by analyzing earlier moments of globalization, especially that of the late nineteenth century. Countless studies have shown us that if satellites, fiber optic cables, and jet planes have underpinned the wave of globalization today, telegraph cables, railroads, and steamships did the same in the past.

Attention to the infrastructures of globalization has generated interest in the broader movements of goods, peoples, capital, and ideas that crisscrossed multiple political domains, effecting all but determined by none. Although many historians continue to treat empires as natural containers of historical analysis (there should be nothing natural about being an Ottomanist!), others have analyzed imperial domains as projects made through transimperial patterns of social and cultural exchange. Oceanic studies took the lead in this and established the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Indian Ocean as coherent historical geographies constitutive of multiple political domains. This trend has been carried onshore resulting in studies that crossed the
boundaries of territorial empires by following merchants, intellectuals, pilgrims, scholars, diplomats, holy men, and their disciples who moved for, alongside, or against imperial designs. In the meantime anthropological studies of diasporas and borderlands have highlighted transnational routes of trade, smuggling, pilgrimage, education, and activism that can hardly be studied from one place alone. Today, historians and anthropologists do not hesitate to move across political boundaries; in fact they often have to do so literally in search of their documents and informants.

What they do much more rarely, however, is move across temporal boundaries. Besides the naturalized boundaries within the discipline of history, the most deep-seated one is drawn between the past and the present. This boundary, too entrenched to appear even as a problem for many, seems to rest on a convenient division of labor: Anthropologists study the present, historians the past.

Both parties have their reasons for not playing on each other’s turf. Historians refrain from making the present part of their analysis because the present concerns, they fear, may produce a teleological reading of history and lure the historian away from a more authentic reconstruction of the past. Consequently, historians rarely engage with the present beyond using it as a narrative hook or epilogue material. Anthropologists’ approach to history reflects the same timidity in the other direction. History, for them, serves as merely a background that sets the scene in the first chapter but contributes little to the analysis. In cases where it is brought into the analysis, it is often reduced to a
flattened reservoir of discourses to be mobilized by present actors at will. By giving the present the upper hand, these studies often foreclose an actual dialogue between the past and the present. Jammed in this mutual hesitancy, scholars become prisoners on the many islands of time.

This study emulates Azerbaijanis in creating a temporally capacious framework in which the present is situated as a moment in history that continues from the past into the future. Seen from the diasporic perspective of the Azerbaijanis, this continuum is not made up of a single strand but many, each one with a separate trajectory, reaching into the future in contradictory directions. Because these strands are geographically distributed, pasts and futures otherwise invisible become available for those who move across that landscape in times of opening. The many pasts of the present, spilling across borders, constitute the surplus of history, which creates a dialogue between past and present such that neither end has the upper hand.

In this study we capture that dialogue by digging into biographical accounts and following lines of travel within them wherever they take us. We move between pasts and places by taking our clues from the biographical trajectories of itinerant individuals. Because biographies rarely abide by scholarly conventions about time and space, they offer clues which, if followed properly, can help illuminate connections that have remained in the blind spot of scholarship. As Benjamin Disraeli once said, “Read no history: nothing but biography, for that is life without theory.” The threads from which
the narratives of this study is woven come from biographies and itineraries collected through many ways and in many places; together, they paint us a historically textured and geographically integrated portrayal of an order beyond borders.
1. Homecoming

“I was once a Sunni,” Anar said, his matter-of-fact tone a stark contrast to the poignant tunes in the background of a *marsiya*, an elegy sung to commemorate the martyrdom of Shi’a imams.¹ In the Iranian city of Mashhad, where Anar and I met, *marsiyas* have a pervasive presence; one can hear them played loudly from the speakers at a charity stall on the street or in a teahouse filled with the heavy, aromatic smoke of *galyan*, the ubiquitous water pipe in Iran. The teahouse where Anar told me his story of conversion was one such place, located on one of the many streets that converge around the majestic shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Shi’a imam whose martyrdom gave the city its name—*mashhad* in Arabic means the place of martyrdom.

Anar is one of hundreds of Azerbaijanis who study in the Shi’a seminaries of Iran, known as *hawza ‘ilmiyya*, or simply *hawza*, where Shi’ites from all around the world come for clerical training. The *hawza* in Mashhad is only second to the one in Qom, the city which, like Mashhad, holds a holy sanctuary at its center: the shrine of Fatimah Masumeh, sister of Imam Reza. The kinship between their guardian saints binds the two cities together in the minds of millions who come to visit the shrines every year. The circulation of scholars, students, and pilgrims in and out of these two transnational centers of Shi’ã scholarship and pilgrimage give the ruling jurists of Iran influence among populations beyond their domain. Among them are Azerbaijanis, who come to

¹ Anar is a pseudonym.
Iran from places like Baku, Istanbul, and Moscow, where they have a significant presence as local nationals and diasporic communities.

Anar, like some of his friends in Mashhad, often volunteers to guide the visiting Azerbaijanis in and around the sanctuaries. He gets a bit tense, however, when prayer time hits. To this day, Anar catches himself folding his arms during prayers like the Sunnis do, rather than keeping them at his sides like the Shi’ites. “Can’t help it sometimes—that’s how I prayed for years,” he said, after savoring the mild smoke of his galyan. Our conversation about his Sunni past has begun.

Anar was born in Baku to a Shi’a family, though such qualifications meant very little after seven decades of communist rule. That is probably why his parents were hardly bothered when Anar began to take Qur’an courses from Sunni Turks who had come to Baku in the wake of the Soviet collapse. For over a year, Anar went to the Baku office of an Istanbul-based philanthropic foundation that runs a network of schools, charities, dormitories, and mosques within Azerbaijan. The spiritual leader of this network, Osman Nuri Topbaş, comes from a family of pious businessmen and leads a Naqshbandi-Khalidi Sufi community in Istanbul. His foundation bears the name of a prominent Sufi saint from the sixteenth century, Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi, whose shrine complex in the neighborhood of Üsküdar has hosted the foundation’s headquarters since

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2 The shrine is a vast complex made up of mosque, museum, library, cemetery, dining hall, seminaries, and prayer halls.
1986. Topbaş’ office within the shrine is at the center of a wide network of teachers, students, and businessmen stretching from the Caucasus to the Balkans and Africa. Anar’s Qur’an teachers in Baku too were part of this Istanbul-centered transnational network.

After almost a year of attending the Qur’an classes in Baku, Anar took a test to enter the madrasa run by the same foundation to train hafiz, those who can recite the Qur’an from memory. Located in the town of Shaki in northern Azerbaijan, the madrasa is one of the many schools opened by Turkish Muslim communities across the former Soviet space. Having passed the test and relocated to Shaki, Anar was now under the tutelage of Turkish and Turkey-educated Azerbaijani teachers who attended to students’ needs and supervised them in the madrasa complex, which also includes a dormitory and a mosque. The madrasa was a busy place, receiving Turkish teachers and guests and sending students to Turkey, only to welcome them back years later as teachers or scholars. Anar soon realized that madrasa was a gateway of sorts to Turkey. He remembered during our conversation how students in higher grades were taken on trips to Turkey, where they would stay in the dormitories of the foundation, visit historical and sacred sites in Anatolia, and participate in short training programs in the foundation’s center in Üsküdar. Once they graduate, many of these students end up in Turkey, pursuing careers in a variety of professions while maintaining family ties in the former Soviet space. Their travels and correspondence between the two countries
constitute a busy highway of commerce and communication between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

While Anar was entangled in this Turkish-Azerbaijani network in Shaki, he also had Shi’a friends there, with whom he would spend nights discussing matters of history and theology. Such casual debates among inquisitive youth of different persuasions were commonplace not only in Shaki but also many other cities of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, where Shi’as and Sunnis are mixed. When he brought up in class the questions aired in those private debates, Anar raised a few eyebrows among his Turkish teachers. They would have tolerated it had he not kept importing those discussions into the classroom. Although Anar graduated the madrasa as a hafiz, he was discouraged from applying to the high school in Shaki run by the same network. “I was very disturbed by the news. You see, I had been mentally prepared to continue my education in Istanbul, and they don’t send you there without a diploma from that high school.” With the road to Istanbul blocked, he returned to Baku.

Confused and disappointed, Anar withdrew from religion altogether, though he could still recite the Qur’an by heart. In search of an alternative career, he enrolled in a teknikum (vocational school), and upon finishing it, worked in different jobs, albeit none to his satisfaction. “Then I considered going to Moscow for work. I have cousins there; I see them every other summer when they come to visit us in Baku.” It is an exception for an extended family in Baku not to have one of its members live and work in Russia.
Today, over one million Azerbaijanis live in Moscow alone, mostly working as petty traders but also as import–export merchants. Their family ties and remittances constitute a socioeconomic corridor between Moscow and Baku, replenishing the economy of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Thus, it doesn’t take much to persuade a young Azerbaijani to try his luck in Russia, especially when all other alternatives fail in Baku. Anar’s Russian was poor, but that mattered little. The extensive Azerbaijani network of market sellers and traders offered tasks that would buy him enough time to improve his Russian.

Just as Anar was readying himself to go to Moscow, his mother went on a pilgrimage to Imam Reza’s shrine in Mashhad, not least to secure divine blessings for her son’s upcoming journey. She brought back some memorabilia and a couple of books gifted to her by Azerbaijani students in Mashhad. The books were all in Azerbaijani Turkish (Anar did not speak Persian then); they were translations made in Iran of books such as the Tunisian scholar Muhammad Al-Tijani’s Then I Was Guided, which addresses a range of questions to Sunnis that Al-Tijani himself had grappled with as a Sunni scholar before his conversion to Shi’ism. Another one was Seyed Mohammad Shirazi’s Peshawar Nights, which provides an account of a public debate between Shi’as and Sunnis. These books, banned from countries like Saudi Arabia, spoke to pious Azerbaijani youth in search of the right creed. Flipping through the pages of these books rekindled Anar’s interest in religion.
Having postponed his trip to Moscow, he began to attend different mosques in search of answers to his questions. Some of these mosques were—and still are—shared by Sunnis and Shi’as who did not shy away from intersectarian debates. His conversations with an elderly Shi’ a mullah drew him into a circle of Iran-educated Azerbaijani mullahs, who encouraged Anar to pay a visit to Mashhad. In the summer of 2011, after a long bus drive from Baku to Mashhad, he finally arrived at the gates of Imam Reza’s shrine, just a stone’s throw away from where we were sitting. The Azerbaijani students who had hosted him during that visit were sitting at the next divan, chatting and singing along to the marsiya in the background.

Baku is a place of conversions. Transition from one creed to another is hardly an exception in the personal and family histories of pious Azerbaijanis, Shi’a or Sunni. Their conversion narratives, like that of Anar, are interwoven with stories of travel and encounter, revealing shifting geographical orientations within a single biography.\(^3\) Unpacking these biographies exposes roots and routes that have resurfaced since the Cold War’s end. Although Anar did not end up in Russia or Turkey, those unrealized journeys were part of his story as possible routes that could have been taken. In fact, Anar was hardly cut off from those routes even after settling in Mashhad. The routes he didn’t take, trod in the other direction, bring Shi’a Azerbaijanis to Iran as local nationals.

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\(^3\) I have come across similar conversion stories (Shi’a-to-Sunni, Sunni-to-Shi’a, Shi’a-to-Salafi) in Baku, Moscow, Istanbul, Madina, and Qom.
of Turkey and Russia. Today in Mashhad, if you want to meet a Shi’a Turk from
Istanbul, or seek a hawza student who can guide your Russian friend, or need a group of
local Iranians who can speak Turkish, the person you will find is most likely an
Azerbaijani who has come home.

For diasporic societies homecoming means a return to homeland. For the
Azerbaijanis, whose homeland has been divided across multiple countries, it implies a
return of a different kind. After a period of disconnect, rather than returning home from
a host country, Azerbaijanis have been returning to a state of feeling at home in multiple
places. For Azerbaijanis, the post–Cold War opening implies a homecoming to their own
expansive geography, where they can move across political landscapes by variously
holding and dropping the many strands of their own diasporic history. Each political
domain retains a different subset of these strands, but diasporic Azerbaijanis have the
full set—and Baku is where they converge. Seen from there, cities such as Mashhad,
Istanbul, and Moscow appear as vertices of the same triangle.

As Azerbaijanis move between different corners of that triangle, their passages
and transactions constitute a transnational social web across Iran, Turkey, Russia, and
post-Soviet Azerbaijan. This web is interwoven by ties of pilgrimage, education,
business, philanthropy, and trade. To build transnational influence over societies
elsewhere, states move toward or away from each other along the same web.
These cross-border ventures are often analyzed under such rubrics as Iran’s Shi’a
Crescent, Turkey’s neo-Ottomanism, and Russia’s neo-Eurasianism. When seen from within a single state, this entangled web appears lopsided. Placing Azerbaijanis at its center, however, offers a different perspective: an expansive social base that is shared by multiple political domains.

By developing a network-centered view, this chapter shifts our focus from old imperial centers to their shared frontiers as the loci of new regionalisms. In frontier spaces states connect through a shared social tissue interwoven by old diasporas whose routes crisscross these frontiers past and present. By placing Transcaucasia and its erstwhile Azerbaijani diaspora at the center of contemporary regionalisms, this chapter pushes against frameworks that present these developments as internally conceived projects emanating from old imperial centers. This chapter shows how such projects develop in connection with one another, and their entanglements become visible from the temporally capacious, transregional perspective of diasporic networks. That perspective allows us to bring together an otherwise unrelated set of persons and places as part of the same story. And that story starts in the heart of Iran.

1.1 Of Shrines and Seminaries

Mullahs on motorbikes vigorously charting their paths through the congested traffic are an everyday sight in the city of Qom. Their casual presence on the streets of what was the power base of Iran’s Islamic Revolution captures something of the city’s spirit. Mullahs with their ironed clerical robes and ammamehs (turbans) are ubiquitous in
the city, much like professors in their wrinkled oxford shirts and tweed jackets in a Western college town. In the hawza, these clerics teach thousands of students from around the world. Besides harboring this multinational scholarly network, the city receives millions of foreign visitors who come for Fatima Masumeh’s shrine. The assertive presence of women in chador, chatting, praying, and shopping around the shrine, is indispensable to the city’s multi-ethnic outlook and vibrant economy, typical of major pilgrimage centers. All this movement lies at the center of what some call the “Shi’a Crescent,” code for Iranian expansion in the Middle East, first articulated by King Abdullah of Jordan following the 2003 invasion of Iraq.⁴

At the center of that crescent, on a winter day in 2013, an Iranian mullah named Jafar received me in his two-story house located in a quiet neighborhood of Qom.⁵ Jafar and I met in the summer of 2012, when I first visited Qom. The conversations we had during that first visit brought me back to his house a year later. Jafar was one of the first four Iranian clerics who crossed the border into Soviet Azerbaijan following the Soviet breakup. He was at the time a young aspiring cleric in the Qom hawza, where he had come after a traditional madrasa education in his hometown of Tabriz. He was now in his early fifties, the memories of his travels still vivid two decades after his first foray into the former Soviet territory. I wasn’t the only one interested in Jafar’s story. In the


⁵ Jafar is a pseudonym.
calming quiet of his library, we were accompanied by a hawza student from post-Soviet Azerbaijan who had facilitated the meeting.

Figure 1: Mullahs on motorcycles. Qom, Iran. Photo by author.

Figure 2: Mullahs in the hawza. Qom, Iran. Photo by author.
It was the early days of 1992, and the Soviet Union was no more when Jafar embarked on a journey to Baku, with several stops along the road. Having crossed the border, he came upon a Soviet landscape dominated by kholkozes in the countryside and Stalinist public buildings and khrushchyovkas in urban centers. He saw mosques too, but many of them were used for purposes other than worship: youth center here, storage space there. The public visibility of Shi’a Islam that he took for granted in Iran had simply waned on the Soviet side of the border. The damage left behind by seventy years of Soviet rule was evident in the conspicuous absence of Islam in public space.

Having acknowledged the historical disjuncture between Iran and post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Jafar “still didn’t feel like [he] was in a completely foreign land.” He could
see the residue of a deep past in the rundown shrines and in the veneration of Shi’a imams, which he was happy to see in the towns he visited. The future he and his friends were to offer to their brethren on the other side was to be found in that deep past, the sacred landscape of which was entangled with that of the Soviet past. All they needed to do, as Jafar put it, “was to brush the dust off to see what had been hidden close to the surface.” For him the presence of shrines on the Soviet side, though many of them were rundown or overshadowed by Soviet high-rises, implied that what had been lost textually seemed relatively intact architecturally. Nestled in those shrines were not only the saintly spirits but also the echoes of a deep past that could be summoned to build a common future across borders.

The shrines Jafar was referring to were those of imamzadehs, family members of Shi’a imams. Because the imams’ shrines in Iraq and Iran were beyond the reach of Soviet Azerbaijanis, the shrines of their immediate kin would serve as a bridge. Particularly popular then, as it is today, was the shrine known as Goy Imam, where Ibrahim, son of the fifth imam, Muhammad Bagir, is believed to be buried. During Soviet times Goy Imam attracted tens of thousands of pilgrims from Azerbaijan SSR and beyond. During Muharram 1970, the shrine received over 40,000 pilgrims (Ro’i 2000, 375). Though most popular, Goy Imam was not the only imamzadeh shrine in Soviet

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On Ashura, the day of Imam Hussein’s martyrdom, the train passing though Gence “made an unscheduled stop at Goy Imam for the convenience of pilgrims, while most of the 646 vehicles which brought pilgrims to
Azerbaijan. In the outskirts of Baku, where oil extraction machinery dominates the landscape, stands Bibi Heybat (Grandeur’s Aunt), the shrine of Hakeema Bint Musa, daughter of the seventh imam, Musa Qasim. Hakeema was one among Imam Qasim’s many children who were scattered across Iran fleeing the Abbasid persecution in the ninth century. Their historic flight has been spatially marked by the many shrines that emerged across greater Persia. Bibi Heybat is part of that sacred landscape that also includes the shrines of her sister Fatima Masoumeh in Qom and her brother Ali al-Rida (Imam Reza) in Mashhad. Other shrines on the northern shore of the Absheron Peninsula, in the villages of Nardaran, Bilgah, and Barda, are also believed to belong to imamzadehs, although the attribution there is rather tenuous. Together with Bibi Heybet, these shrines, each one an oilfield away from Baku’s center, forms a circle of guardian saints around the city.

These shrines, along with private homes, have become the spaces where hagiographical stories about the exemplary lives of imams and their miraculous deeds pass from one generation to another. This oral transmission takes on a collective form the pit belonged to state enterprises and institutions and kholkozy” (Ro’i 2000: 380). The shrine also attracted Shi’ite Azerbaijanis from Dagestan (Ro’i 2000: 381).

7 The shrine is located where an old cemetery meets the Caspian; lines of tombs descend from a hilltop and converge at the shrine as if to a vanishing point in a perspective painting. Although the mosque next to it was demolished by the Soviets in 1934, the shrine has lived on in the midst of the mosque’s rubble and the surrounding oilfields, attracting visitors—especially from the villages in the outskirts of Baku.
during Muharram commemorations, when Shi’ites mourn the martyrdom of the third
imam, Hussain. Even during times when the Soviet leadership was vigilant about
religious congregation, many Azerbaijanis would inconspicuously partake in these
commemorative rituals, being highly circumspect about it in public. They would gather
at someone’s house or even fake a burial ceremony to cry over an empty coffin—
something that impressed Jafar immensely when he found out about it in 1992. In times
of relative laxity on the part of Soviet leadership, such gatherings also occurred around
shrines. In 1970 the seventy-two “better known” shrines were said to attract thousands
of pilgrims during Muharram. Another three hundred shrines were also operating on a
minor scale (Ro’i 2000, 374). These minor pilgrimages, unlike the hajj pilgrimage, which
only involved a dozen individuals from the entire Soviet Union, were local, crowded
affairs. Hagiographical stories circulated in such tight crowds and even inspired some to
request official permission to visit the shrines of Shi’a imams in Mashhad and Karbala.

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8 A video recording of an elaborate public reenactment of Karbala in the town of Lenkeran in 1990 attests to
the frequency of such ritual performences during the Soviet period, albeit underground.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBveIlkBHRHk

9 The Spiritual Directorate in Baku (DUMZ), a Soviet institution for overseeing religious affairs in the
Caucasus, would receive dozens of such requests. In 1956, for instance, the directorate received twenty-eight
requests for permission to go to Mashhad and fifty to Karbala (Ro’i 2000: 173).
Figure 4: Bibi Heybet Mosque in Baku, 1930.

Figure 5: Bibi Heybet Mosque being demolished, 1934.

Figure 6: Bibi Heybet Mosque rebuilt, 2014. Photo by author.
In 1983, a decade before the Iranian clerics crossed the border into Azerbaijan, the shadows of the Twelve Imams appeared through the gates of a house on Nagornaia Street in Baku. So claimed the people pouring out of several neighborhoods to gather on that street and witness this extraordinary occurrence. Miracles were certainly not an everyday affair in Soviet Azerbaijan, but they were expected nevertheless. When the borders came down in 1991, what attracted Soviet Azerbaijanis to Iran was not its political regime but its shrines and imams and their miracles, stories with which they were deeply familiar. During the 1990s buses carried thousands of pilgrims every year from Baku to the shrines in Qom, Mashhad, and Karbala.

For the Azerbaijanis going into Iran, the shrines in Qom and Mashhad were nothing like the ones on the Soviet side. They were embedded within a network of seminaries and universities where a wide range of Islamic sciences, such as kalam (theology), fiqh (jurisprudence), hadith (traditional account of things said or done by Muhammad or his companions), and philosophy are taught. These hawzas are closely linked to the offices of marja’, which collect legal inquiries and khums (tax) and in turn produce fatwas and funding for students. Iranian Azerbaijanis had been part of this institutional tradition for centuries, and it was they who carried the banner of Shi’ism into the former Soviet space.

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10 I thank Altay Goyushov for bringing this to my attention. For a brief account of this event, see Göyüşov and Əşgərov (2009: 199)
In the meantime, on the Soviet side, even the basic knowledge of Shariah (Islamic law) was lost to earlier generations, let alone any opinion on matters of theology and jurisprudence in Twelver Shi’ism. Without the presence of socially networked scholars to police theological distinctions, even the veneration of imams, considered characteristically a Shi’a practice within Iran, became enmeshed with the quintessential Sufi practice of venerating saints and visiting their shrines. The sectarian differentiation simply dissolved at the doors of those shrines, which were shared by Sunni and Shi’as alike. Without a textual tradition and scholarly gatekeepers, Sunni and Shi’a traditions merged in the Sufism of the layman.

This gap energized the efforts to close it. The first group of four Iranian clerics who crossed the former Soviet–Iran border were followed by other Iranian Azerbaijani clerics, who became regular sojourners in post-Soviet Azerbaijan during the 1990s. Some were coming with the official endorsement of the regime and others on their own initiative, but all had the financial and moral support of the jurists in Qom. Conversing with those Iranian Azerbaijani clerics in and out of their homes and offices in Qom brought up recurring references to the mobility of Shi’a scholars, which had bound Transcaucasia to Iran for centuries prior to the Soviet period.

1.1.1 Routes of Shi’a Learning

For centuries landed Azerbaijani families have sent their youth to hawzas in Iran and Ottoman Iraq, where some of them would reach the highest ranks of Shi’a clergy,
such as mujtahid (authoritative interpreter of the Islamic law) or the most prestigious marja’ al-taqlid (source of emulation). Badkubai (Bakuvi), Lenkerani, Irevani (Yerevani), Tabrizi, and Ardabili were common last names in these hawzas, reflecting different corners of the Azerbaijani homeland, and in certain cases, a prominent family associated with that city.\textsuperscript{11} For those families invested in land and trade, placing a family member among the Shi’a clergy was a matter of cultural prestige and social power. These ties of scholarship, along with pilgrimage and trade, have bound the Azerbaijanis to the Persian realm since the sixteenth century, when the Safavids institutionalized Twelver Shi’ism in greater Persia. This pattern was not broken even as the Safavid rule (1501–1736) ended in political fragmentation in the eighteenth century and even after the Russian annexation of the Caucasus divided the Azerbaijani homeland in the nineteenth century.

What broke the tradition was the Bolshevik consolidation over former tsarist territories. In the 1920s and 1930s, many Iran- or Najaf-educated Azerbaijani clerics of Russian Transcaucasia were jailed, killed, or exiled to Siberia. Those who fled resettled in Najaf, Qom, Tabriz, and other cities of Iran, where their offspring continued to fill the ranks of Shi’a clergy. Well-known among them is Ayatollah Mohammad Fazil Lenkerani (1931–2007), the Qom-born marja’ al-taqlid whose Najaf-educated father was a native of

\textsuperscript{11} Their biographies are available to us in the biographical dictionaries prepared by Azerbaijanis from both sides of the border. See Mövlayi (2013), Abbasov (2007), Velioglu (2000), and Bakhshayeshi (1997).
Russian Transcaucasia and had to resettle in Qom following the Bolshevik takeover. These resettled families from what was now Soviet Azerbaijan produced the last generation of Azerbaijani Shi’a scholars with origins in Russian Transcaucasia. In the meantime Azerbaijanis from Tabriz and other cities of Iran continued to raise prominent clerics throughout the twentieth century, among them the Qom-based incumbent marja’, Ja’far Sobhani (b. 1928).

It was through the endorsement of marja’s such as Lenkerani and Sobhani that the young Iranian Azerbaijani clerics in Qom crossed the border into Transcaucasia, where the Soviet collapse had thrust millions of nominal Shi’as into the open. These mullahs began to spread to several towns in Azerbaijan, including Sunni ones in the north such as Quba and Shaki. In these towns they often found eager groups of youth interested in what these charismatic men of religion, sporting long robes and turbans, had to say. Their popularity quickly grew, especially in Shi’ite-majority cities such as Lankaran, Baku, and Ganja. Having traveled from town to town and village to village, these young clerics became Iran’s cultural diplomats to post-Soviet Azerbaijan. They opened Shi’a madrasas, delivered sermons in mosques, facilitated pilgrimage to major Shi’a shrines in Qom and Mashhad, and recruited students for the hawzas in these two cities. These efforts worked in tandem with the Iranian regime’s official initiative to set up tent cities and distribute social aid for those Azerbaijanis displaced during the Nagorno–Karabakh war with Armenia.
The spark of curiosity about these Turkish-speaking Shi’ite brethren coming from across the border soon led to an interest in whence they hailed: the holy city of Qom. Since 1994, growing numbers of Azerbaijanis from the former Soviet space have traveled to Qom—and also to Mashhad—every year to study in the hawza. Azerbaijanis today constitute an important portion of non-Iranians studying in the seminaries of Qom and Mashhad. Over five hundred Azerbaijanis are studying in the hawza today, making them the fourth largest student group after Afghans, Indians, and Pakistanis. In fact, Azerbaijani students may be the group of students whose numbers are highest in proportion to the population of their home country. In the classrooms and dormitories of the hawza, these students get acquainted with other Shi’ites coming from over seventy countries. Although some settle there permanently, most return to Azerbaijan for *tabligh* (propagation of faith), creating a Shi’a current in their homeland.

Although the Iranian clerics were banned from post-Soviet Azerbaijan as a result of American pressure after 9/11, Azerbaijanis from the former Soviet side who followed their brethren back to Iran have kept the cross-border communication alive. Becoming part of a transnational Shi’a network in the hawza endows these students with not only knowledge but also social skills and cultural confidence. When they go back to Azerbaijan during the summertime and in the months of Muharram and Ramadan, they are sought after to reanimate the scholarly and sacral aura of Qom or Mashhad, in mosques or in private gatherings of the pious.
It is not just Shi’á scholarship that attracts Azerbaijani to Iran today. Buses leaving Baku for Qom and Mashhad carry thousands of pilgrims every year to the shrines of Fatima Masoumeh and Imam Reza. And just as in the case of Anar, students, scholars, and pilgrims often interact. Iran is also a major medical tourism destination for Azerbaijani. Many seek treatment in the hospitals of Tabriz and Tehran, which they find cheaper and more trustworthy than those at home. To heal the body in the hospital and the soul in the shrines, Azerbaijani go to Iran. These routes of medicine, pilgrimage, and scholarship often weave together to create thick sociocultural ties to Iran. Pilgrimage to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq are a natural extension of these routes.

The post-Soviet transnational route connecting several towns in Azerbaijan to Tabriz, Qom, Mashhad, and Najaf echoes the pre-Soviet transimperial route that connected Russian Baku to Qajar Tabriz and Ottoman Najaf. Shi’a scholars, pilgrims, and traders had threaded this route ever since the conquests of Shah Ismail spread Shi’a Islam to Azerbaijan in the sixteenth century. Although today medicine seems to have replaced trade as a major motivator for travel, shrines, seminaries, and commemorative rites provide the route with historical continuity.

1.1.2 Stars of the Caucasus

Azerbaijanis’ newfound mobility along the transimperial routes of their forefathers has generated growing interest in the history of those forefathers. Prominent
Azerbaijani Shi’a mujtahids and ayatollahs of the past centuries have found new life in the pages of biographical dictionaries written by Azerbaijani scholars on both sides of the border. These books, published in Persian or Azerbaijani Turkish, detail the lives and deeds of Shi’a scholars from the Caucasus. Appearing a decade after the post–Cold War opening, each collection became a reference point for the next. One of them, entitled *The Scholastic Stars of the Caucasus (Qafqazda Ələm Dünyasının Ulduzları)*, came under the spotlight when the Caucasus Muslims Board in Baku—the official board on religious affairs in Azerbaijan—launched it with much fanfare in December 2013.

The book was a shortened Azerbaijani translation of a longer study in Persian, prepared by the late Adil Mövlayi, an Ardabil-born Iranian Azerbaijani who was a senior Shi’a scholar (*hujjat al-Islam*) in the hawza of Qom. His study was based on extensive field and archival work, in which he collected biographies of prominent Azerbaijani Shi’a scholars since the nineteenth century. Just as he was putting the finishing touches on his Persian manuscript, selections from his work were translated into Azerbaijani Turkish by the initiative of the Baku-based Caucasus Muslims Board.

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12 One of these was Aghighi Bakhshayeshi’s *Mafakher-e Azerbaijan* (1997), published in Tabriz in Persian. It is a colossal work comprising five volumes, each one focusing on Azerbaijanis as Iran’s poets, jurists, martyrs, gnostics, and philosophers. It was followed by Faig Valioglu’s *Azerbaycanın Korkemli İslam Alimleri* (2000), published in Qom in Azerbaijani Turkish in Cyrillic script, and Yaqub Abbosov’s *İslam Alimleri: Dünyaca Tanınmış Azerbaycanlı Müctehidler, Ayetollahlar — XVI–XX Asırlar* (2007), published in Baku in Azerbaijani Turkish in Latin script.

The initiative came out of a visit by the board’s chair, Allahaşükür Paşazade, to Tehran and Qom in May 2013. Upon hearing about Mövlayi’s work during a meeting in Qom, in which the author was also present, Paşazade ordered its translation into Azerbaijani Turkish. What was eventually launched in Baku later that year was more of a monument than a book. A selected number of biographies printed on high-quality paper were presented with portraits drawn by a painter from Ardabil, based on actual photographs and descriptions, all protected by a heavy, engraved cover and placed within an additional case.

The monumental book became a token of the rapprochement between Iran and Azerbaijan that year, coming as it did after a period of mutual rancor. Paşazade played a key role in that rapprochement, which hearkened back to the similar role he played in Soviet diplomacy to Iran in the 1980s. As the chair of the Spiritual Directorate in Baku then, Paşazade attended meetings with visiting Iranian diplomats and made visits to Iran himself as the official Shi’a mujtahid of the Soviet Union. His role as a cultural diplomat has not changed since then. Though the Spiritual Directorate was closed down following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus Muslim Board was established

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http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69081

15 The Spiritual Directorate in Baku (DUMZ), a Soviet institution for overseeing religious affairs in the Caucasus, was established in 1944 along with three other such directorates to oversee religious affairs of Soviet Muslims. These directorates were modeled on the spiritual directorates in Tsarist Russia that were created in the eighteenth century by Catherine the Great. In that respect the Caucasus Muslim Board in Baku has a long institutional history that reaches back to eighteenth-century Russia.
as its post-Soviet incarnation and, as its long-serving chair, Pașazade has continued to be at the forefront of Baku diplomacy to Iran.  

At times diplomacy entails the commissioning of projects that bring to light deep, historical connections between two societies. In that regard the launching of the book was cultural diplomacy at its best. Besides Mövlayi and Pașazade, the high-profile meeting included participants such as Iran’s cultural representative in Baku, who is himself an Iranian Azerbaijani; an Iranian scholar of Fuzuli, the Turko-Persian poet of Iran from the sixteenth century; and the former president of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, whose father, Sheikhuism Agha Alizadeh, is among the scholars included in Mövlayi’s book. The cross-border ties reflected in the cast of participants were further highlighted in their speeches. Adil Mövlayi, for instance, reminded the audience that his father was born in Russian Baku and then moved to Ardabil in Iran. It was from his father, he said, that he had first heard about the scholars he included in his book. Similar anecdotes were conveyed in the book as well, both in Mövlayi’s introduction and Pașazade’s foreword to it.

In his introduction Mövlayi reflects on the legacy of two centuries of Russian rule in Transcaucasia, both in its tsarist and Soviet forms. Though he characterized this modern history as a period full of pain and suffering, he differentiates between the

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36 As typical of such Soviet-made, post-communist cadres, Pașazade holds significant wealth and power within post-Soviet Azerbaijan.
tsarist and Soviet periods. Under tsarist rule, he notes, “people could still be schooled in the madrasas with Qur’an recitation, with Saadi’s Gulistan and Bostan, and other works like Badr al-Din Abu Nasr Farahi’s Nisab al-Sibyan” (2013, 16). For centuries, until the Bolshevik rule, he adds, “It was common to have books of history, biography [Şerh-i Hal], and science of hadith [rical] written by scholars named Badkubei, Gencevi, Lenkerani, Tiflisi, Irevani, Bardali, Qarabagi, etc.” (17). These names appear in the pages that follow, which lay out the biographies of a hundred and one Azerbaijani mujtahids and ayatollahs. Their stories begin in Transcaucasia, in cities such as Lankeran, Baku, Salyan, Shamaxi, Tiflis, and Erevan, and then take us to cities such as Mashhad, Qom, and Najaf.17 These biographies reveal a contiguous cultural landscape that cuts across imperial borders.

This continuous landscape is laid bare not only in biographical dictionaries but in family histories, like that of Hacı İlqar İbrahimoğlu, who was among the first group of Azerbaijanis to go to Iran for education. “Life is very curious,” wrote the Shi’a preacher on his Facebook status days before Mövlayi’s book was launched in Baku,

[j]In the early twentieth century, my mother’s grandfather was sent away for education. In 1908, my dear grandmother Xədicə Mirbabayeva was born in Karbala. Her parents returned to homeland [Russian Azerbaijan] in 1911. God

17 Here are some examples: Ibrahim Hairi Lenkerani (1815–1896): Lenkeran (b) - Karbala - Najaf (d); Abaselt Badkubai (?–1907): Buzovna near Baku (d) - Ardabil - Zencan - Qazvin - Necef -Buzovna (d); Mirza Ebu Turab Axundzade (1817–1910) Iceriseher-Baku(b) - Necef - Baku (d); Mehdi Tebatebai Sirvani (1829–1911): Samaxi (b) - Necef - Samaxi (d); Abdulvehhab Badkubai (1842–1912) Mashtaga near Baku (b) - Mashhad - Najaf - Damascus - Merdekan near Baku (d); Abdulqeni Mastagai Badkubei (1845–1913) Mashtaga near Baku (b) - Najaf - Mashtagha (d).
willing, tomorrow we will send my dear mother off to Karbala. 1911-2013 … May God grant all followers of Hussain this ziyarah [visit, pilgrimage].

Hacı İlqar’s mother is among the thousands of Azerbaijaniis who trod the southern route to cities like Mashhad and Karbala, and like them, she is now called a Karbalai, much like someone having made the haj pilgrimage would be called a hajji (pilgrim). Post-Soviet Azerbaijan is full of Mashhadis and Karabalais, who have pilgrimage memorabilia displayed in different corners of their home. The most popular of such objects is the composite photograph, in which the pictures of the pilgrim, the shrine, and the Shi’a imam are transposed (See Figure 7). In the homes of those who harbor political attachment to the Iranian regime, such memorabilia is often juxtaposed with pictures of Khomeini or of the current supreme leader, Khamenei. Pilgrims bring back books too, as Azerbaijani translations of a variety of books can easily be found in Qom and Mashhad (See Figure 8). These books, memorabilia, and pilgrims do not return only to Transcaucasia, but also to Turkey and Russia, where millions of Shi’a Azerbaijanis live as diasporic communities and local nationals.

18 “Hayat çok maraqlıdır. 19-cu asrın sonlarında anamın bahası təsilsə yollanğı. 1908-ci ildə rəhmətlək xəzər nənnə Xədicə Mirbahayeva Karbala dünya yolu qalıb. 1911-ci ildə vəlidəxtərəfə təsilsən Vatnə dönürt. İnşallah, sabah xəzər anamın Karbala dünya səltə. 1911–2013…Allah bütün Hüseynseverlər (ə) bu xəzərlə özəb etsin.” In the original post, it says “in the early nineteenth century,” though what is meant is the early 1900s.

19 For the role of pilgrimage memorabilia in creating transnational attachments, see Paulo G. Pinto (2007).
Figure 7: Pilgrimage memorabilia on the wall hung below the poster of Khomeini. *Photo by author.*

Figure 8: Books brought from Iran into post-Soviet Azerbaijan in the late 1990s. Books on display here are Azerbaijani translations (in Cyrillic) of a Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsir*) on the left, Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* on the right, and a work by the late Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Bahjat Fouman in the middle. *Photo by author.*
1.2 Of Merchants and Mullahs

Kharkiv, Ukraine; November 2013 (or Muharram 1435 AH.) In the spacious basement of a newly built, luxurious house in Kharkov’s outskirts, dozens of men are beating their chests, crying “Ya Hussein!” They are mourning for a holy man whose martyrdom some fourteen centuries ago has marked the Shi’ite Muslims’ ritual calendar ever since. The cries and tears now fill the air in the dimly lit basement where these men, none native to Ukraine except one convert, are remembering the battle of Karbala, where their beloved Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet, was massacred. Many of them are Azerbaijanis, though there are a few Persians and a Lebanese, all dizzied at this point by the emotionally charged litanies performed by a 23-year-old Azerbaijani mullah named Elshad.

Elshad was invited from Mashhad where he, despite his young age, is well-networked as a seasoned preacher. Born in the Soviet city of Lankaran in the south of Azerbaijan, Elshad was only six when his family moved to Mashhad in the mid-1990s. Having received a rigorous madrasa education sponsored by his pious parents, Elshad started giving sermons at the age of fifteen. By the time we met, he not only had preached in several towns and villages across Iran, he could hardly count the number of Russian cities that he had visited for Muharram commemorations. This time, he had been invited to Ukraine for the first time.
The invitation had come from an Azerbaijani merchant named Ali, who, like Elshad, was originally from Lənkəran. At the time Elshad’s family moved to Iran, Ali moved to Moscow in search of work. Picking up various jobs here and there, Ali soon established connections to Azerbaijani traders in the city, which opened his eyes to opportunities in the wider post-Soviet space. After moving to Kharkiv in the early 2000s, he tried his hand at the import–export business and, together with his brother, imported agricultural products from Azerbaijan and Turkey. During a visit to his hometown, he met his future wife, who moved to Kharkiv with him. Having set up his business and settled down with a family, he could now realize his vow to make a pilgrimage to Imam Reza’s shrine in Mashhad.

Ali and Elshad met during Ali’s visit to Mashhad in 2011. Ali was impressed by this young preacher, whose name he had heard from other Mashhadi merchant friends in Ukraine. His meeting with Elshad inspired him to put a portion of his modest wealth to good use. A year after his return to Kharkiv as a Mashhadi himself, he decided to invite his fellow townsman Elshad to lead the Muharram commemorations in Kharkiv. Ali was going to host the week-long evening gatherings in the basement of his new house, where pilgrimage memorabilia from his Mashhad visit are displayed in different corners, on a wall over here, a table over there. He was also to provide lavish food for the attendees every night. Thanks to his initiative, Kharkov’s Shi’ite community, mostly
comprised of diasporic Azerbaijanis, were now spending quality time with their
kinsman from Mashhad, or the “shaykh,” as they called him.

The connection forged at a shrine in Iran between the merchant and the shaykh
had borne fruit in the Ukrainian city of Kharkov. What seems like an odd set of
connections to find in such a city, however, displays a pattern once we zoom out of
Kharkov’s outskirts to a bird’s-eye view over the eleven time zones of the former Soviet
Union. In every major city from St. Petersburg to Yekaterinburg, there is a Hussainiya
(congregation hall for Shi’a commemoration ceremonies) behind an unexpected door:
the basement of a merchant’s house in one town, an old bar converted to a community
center in another, or, as in the case of Kiev, the additional halls of a dentistry owned by
an Iranian Azerbaijani. In such unusual Hussainiyas, one would find local Shi’ite
communities comprised mostly of diasporic Azerbaijanis but also Iranians, Lebanese,
Afghans, Pakistanis, and Russian or Ukrainian converts, who gathered every Muharram
to commemorate the Battle of Karbala.

These diasporic communities invite reputable Azerbaijanis studying in the
hawzas of Mashhad and Qom to lead their commemorative rites, preach to the
community, and act as a go-to person for any inquiries related to Islam, from daily
manners to theological puzzles. Many of these aspiring clerics, in their elaborate
sermons punctuated by mass weeping, effortlessly switch from Azerbaijani Turkish to
either Persian or Russian, and, in the case of some students, among all three. During the
evening gatherings in Kharkov, Elshad delivered his sermons in Azerbaijani Turkish first before redelivering them in Persian. He was accompanied by a Qom-educated Tajik preacher from Donetsk, who would do another round in Russian. In a similar gathering in Kiev at the same time, a Kiev-based, Qom-educated Azerbaijani preacher was shifting among three languages in his sermons to a mixed crowd of Azerbaijanis, Iranians, Lebanese, and Pakistanis. Such peculiar scenes repeat themselves every Muharram across the former Soviet lands. If the annual cycle is marked by the Battle of Karbala, its vast geography is a matter of Azerbaijani mobility.

These far-flung connections are sustained by pious Azerbaijani merchants who sponsor their Iran-educated kinsmen during their stay in Russia. Today, over 1.5 million Azerbaijanis live in Moscow alone, mostly working in the bazaars as petty traders but also as import–export merchants and businessmen. One of these Azerbaijani businessmen, Telman Ismailov, used to own the famous Cherkizovsky Market—the largest in Moscow—until it was closed in 2009. Although its closure was officially framed as an effort to curb the spread of counterfeit goods from China, some British dailies tied it to Putin’s rage over the lavish party Ismailov threw in Turkey, celebrating the opening of his $1.65-billion resort hotel there, despite having made his fortune in Russia.20

Although the mass movement of Azerbaijanis to Russia took place within the context of the post-Soviet economic crisis of the early 1990s, the formation of the Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia goes back to Soviet times. The quasi-legal trade in fresh produce (which we will look at more closely in Chapter 5) and long, compulsory military service would bring Azerbaijanis to various corners of the Soviet empire. Some of these traders and soldiers ended up settling in the cities they went to, constituting the kernel of the Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia that swelled in the post-Soviet period.

During the 1990s, even as Moscow lost its political grip on its peripheries, the people of the peripheries strengthened their grip on Moscow as guest workers, traders, and organized crime groups. For millions of Azerbaijanis who could speak Russian and were deeply familiar with the Soviet space, Russia became a second home in the post-Soviet period. Today, around three million Azerbaijanis (approximately one-third of the entire population of the Azerbaijan Republic) are estimated to live and work in ex-Soviet states, particularly in Russia and Ukraine.

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21 The Russian world was rooted in two hundred years of Russian rule in Transcaucasia, both in its tsarist and Soviet incarnations.
These diasporic Azerbaijanis have family ties to Transcaucasia, through which a high volume of remittances flow from Moscow to Baku. This socioeconomic corridor is critical for the post-Soviet economy of Azerbaijan, where, unlike in the Gulf countries, the oil wealth does not trickle down to the majority but remains in the hands of the former Soviet cadres who have held on to power in the post-communist era. The indispensability of remittances to the Azerbaijani economy gives the Kremlin a strong say in the internal affairs of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. And when push comes to shove, the Russian leadership does not hesitate to use that economic corridor to convey its message to the politicians in Baku, as they did on the eve of the Azerbaijani presidential elections in 2013. Prior to the elections, when relations between Moscow and Baku were rather strained by President Aliyev’s courtship of the West, the murder of a Russian by an Azerbaijani immigrant in Moscow made headlines in Russia. Though such street crime was not novel, this one was brought to the spotlight by the Moscow police department and the Russian media alike. The resultant anti-immigrant protests in Moscow unsettled Azerbaijani guest workers and their families, who feared the possibility of mass deportation.22 Those in Baku heard the message loud and clear.

Azerbaijani networks of trade, market sellers, and businessmen are part of a larger infrastructure through which the Kremlin projects influence across states and

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societies beyond its borders. This post-Soviet Russian hegemony over former Soviet territories has been analyzed and critiqued under the rubric of neo-Eurasianism.

Inspired by the Eurasianist movement of the 1920s that had emerged among the Russian émigré communities in Europe, neo-Eurasianist thought became popular following the collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly through the writings of Alexander Dugin. Neo-Eurasianism places Russia both culturally and historically at the center of territorial Eurasia and attributes to it a mission to create a sociopolitical network across its former imperial territories (and even beyond) to rival its American-dominated Euro-Atlanticist counterpart.23 As a geopolitical rallying point for the revival of greater Russia, neo-Eurasianist thought provides an ideological grounding for Putin’s foreign policy and his support for the Eurasian Economic Union, an integrated single market that was established in 2015 among the countries of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Although the Kremlin hasn’t been able to bring Azerbaijan into the union, it can still keep tabs on it through the Azerbaijani corridor between Moscow and Baku.

Figure 9: Orthographic projection of greater Russia.

Along the same corridor circulate Iran-educated Azerbaijani clerics from Transcaucasia, extending this north–south axis into Iran. Whereas the Russian zone of influence unfolds through family networks tied together by trade and remittances, Iranian Shi’a revivalism unfolds through pilgrimage, scholarship, and commemorative rites. These two axes overlap in Baku, where they become part of a single axis extending from the shrines of Iran to the bazaars of Russia. The articulation of the two axes becomes crystal clear to individuals like Elshad and Ali when they move between Mashhad and Kharkiv. In one of our kitchen conversations at Ali’s house, Elshad expressed the meaning of this articulation in historical and religious terms. “Shi’ism is such that,” he said,
no matter how cunningly it is attacked by the enemy, Allah would ensure the end result to unfold in favor of Shi’ism. We had the Turkmenchay and Gulistan treaties [two Russo-Persian agreements through which Russia annexed the Caucasus from Iran], which dealt a huge blow to the Shi’ites, yet thanks be to God, those Azerbaijani Shi’as who were separated from Iran are carrying the banner of Shi’ism to the far corners of Russia today.

Every time Elshad travels from Mashhad to a Russian city to preach to the Shi’ite community in the house of an Azerbaijani merchant, he connects with a diasporic network by means of an old transimperial route. His mobility and mission patch together far-flung places and disparate pasts.

The Kremlin is hardly bothered by this movement, seeing Shi’a Islam as less of a threat than—even an antidote to—the Sunni Islam sponsored by the Turks and the Gulf. Thanks to this accommodation, Iran’s Shi’a revivalism reaches northward toward the Baltic while Russia receives a warm welcome in the Caspian, where its missiles are launched to hit targets in Syria. Russian Eurasianism overlaps with Shi’ä revivalism in the expansive space of the Azerbaijani diaspora. The politically minded Azerbaijanis in Baku are aware of this overlap; a small group of self-described Eurasianist youth even promote it as a political axis alternative to that of the Euro-Atlanticists, as pro-Western groups are known in Baku. This Eurasianist group has an interesting cast, including an atheist advocate of Iran’s Shi’a Crescent and a devout Shi’ite who is also an ardent supporter of Putin’s foreign policy. I have encountered Azerbaijanis with such composite views not only in Baku, but also in places like Qom, Mashhad, Kiev, Kharkiv, and Moscow. The political purchase of this Eurasianist-Shi’a overlap is brought home in
the strong support those Azerbaijanis express for the Assad regime in Syria, which has emerged as a new frontier where Iran and Russia are allied against the West.

1.3 Of Endowments and Entrepreneurs

Just as Iran’s Shi’a revivalism and Russian Eurasianism are intertwined across the former Russo-Persian frontier, Turkish regionalism—popularly dubbed neo-Ottomanism—is entangled in the same web on the east–west axis. Although Turkish regionalism is associated today with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu as the architect of his foreign policy, it started with neither of them. The roots of Turkish regionalism lie with Turgut Özal, a unifying right-wing figure of the 1980s whose leadership as prime minister (1983–1989) and as president (1989–1993) have transformed Turkey’s outlook, both at home and abroad. Özal opened Turkey to the world by replacing import-substitution industrialization with free-trade policies, and his populist conservative discourse at home emboldened Muslim entrepreneurs from several Anatolian cities, later to be known as Anatolian Tigers, to benefit from his economic liberalization.

Growing wealth in Muslim hands was channeled into acts of piety and social solidarity through the inalienable religious endowments known as waqfs.24 Waqfs gave the newly thriving Muslim businessmen a platform to engage in pious philanthropy.

24 Waqf as a social institution in Turkey has a long history going back to the Seljukids and Byzantines whose imperial traditions of beneficent endowment were inherited by the Ottoman. For more on the waqf tradition in the Ottoman Empire, see Singer (2002).
And thanks to that funding, devout Muslim circles that had hitherto kept a low profile came to the fore, particularly in the educational sector. This was how the two Turkish Muslim communities that have become active in post-Soviet Azerbaijan took shape in the first place. Urban followers of a state-employed preacher in Izmir and wealthy disciples of a Naqshbandi sheikh in Istanbul were the original communities that eventually developed, in both cases, into an ever-growing web of businesses, schools, dormitories, charities, and media outlets.

One of these communities was an Istanbul-based Naqshbandi congregation known as the *Erenköy cemaati*. The community was originally formed around a Naqshbandi-Khalidi Sufi shaykh, Mahmud Sami Ramazanoğlu, whose sermons in the neighborhood of Erenköy had a wide audience among Istanbul’s affluent, pious businessmen. Upon his immigration to Madina in 1979 (he died there in 1984), one of his followers back in Istanbul, Musa Topbaş, began to lead the community and organized its philanthropic activities under a waqf, the Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation, established in 1986. The group also published an Islamic journal named *Altinoluk* (Golden Groove), which gave wide coverage in the 1980s to the plight of Muslims living under communist rule.²⁵

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²⁵ The journal has been in continuous publication to this day.
The other community is globally known as the Gülen movement, after its leader Fethullah Gülen, a former preacher who is now self-exiled in rural Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{26}

Although his followers call the movement \textit{Hizmet} (the Service), in Turkey it was simply known as \textit{Cemaat} (the Community) until its recent falling out with Erdogan’s government, after which it was defamed as Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETÖ). This much is enough to demonstrate its significance for Turkish society and politics. The community was an offshoot of the faith movement inspired by the Kurdish Sunni Muslim theologian Said Nursi (1877–1960), who deemed secular education to be essential to Muslim progress. Gülen put to use Said’s idea in the 1970s by encouraging his followers to buy land, establish waqfs, and provide free summer school to intelligent students of poor conservative families. In the meantime, his emotionally charged sermons in Izmir were turning him into a cult figure who attracted many a pious wealthy man ready to sacrifice his riches for Gülen’s blessings. As the follower base grew in the 1980s, so did the financial resources of the community, which now funded, through various waqfs, a number of private schools, dormitories, and media outlets (Balci 2003, 152).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a godsend to these emboldened Turkish Muslims, who, being on the winning side of the Cold War, were ready to claim

\textsuperscript{26} Gülen moved to Pennsylvania in 1999 as a result of increasing pressure from the secularist establishment, which made a comeback after the president Özal’s suspicious death in 1993.
the spoils. As the newly emerged republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia promised new markets for the Anatolian Tigers, their Turkic-speaking Muslim populations gave the two aforementioned communities a new mission to bring their brethren into the fold of Islam after seventy years of communist rule. Then President Turgut Özal played an important role by bringing these communities and their sponsors to the forefront of Turkish outreach to the former Soviet space. By giving them the lead in establishing a Turkish presence in the Caucasus, Crimea, and Central Asia, Özal married the internal transformation of Turkey to the post–Cold War opening.²⁷ Turkish regionalism had thus begun, not in the bureaucratic corridors of Ankara, but on the rubble of a collapsing Soviet Union.

1.3.1 To the Victor Belong the Spoils

Azerbaijan became the first stop for both the Erenköy and the Gülen communities, which spread across the country, spinning a web of schools, businesses, and charities in just a few years. The Erenköy community limited its focus to religious education, building madrasas and mosques, organizing charities including free circumcision, opening Qur’an courses, and publishing Islamic books and journals. The madrasa in Shaki, where Anar enrolled to become a hafiz, was part of this network, which was coordinated by a waqf called Gəncəliyo Yardım Fondu (Foundation for Youth Support). It was headquartered in the old city of Baku, where Anar went for the Qur’an

²⁷ This was a major departure from Turkey’s isolationist nationalism of the earlier decades.
course before enrolling in the madrasa in Shaki. The foundation later opened the
regional branch of Baku Islam University in the north of Azerbaijan with a faculty
composed of Turkey-educated Azerbaijani theologians. These students and teachers are
part of a network that also comprises businessmen and Naqshbandi followers in both
Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Gülenists have had an even more diffuse presence in Azerbaijan, where they ran
a number of high schools with a secular curriculum. These schools were reputed to be
the best, with the highest college acceptance rates in the country. Post-Soviet elites sent
their children there, and a new generation of elite cadres have been raised. Besides these
high schools, the community later opened a university in Baku and ran prep schools
across the country, as well as dormitories known as the cemaat evleri (community
houses), where students live together under the supervision of an abi (elder brother) or
an abla (elder sister). Although some of the funding came from tuition-paying families, a
network of businessmen who were either part of the community or made donations to it
provided the rest.

The way these communities organized within Azerbaijan revealed the
operational logic that underpinned their further expansion to different parts of the
world. As orderly movements focused on education and business, both communities are
invested in the political stability of the countries they expand into. This implies a hands-
off approach to domestic issues, corresponding to the Chinese model of imperial
expansion today and to political quietism in the Islamic tradition. Both movements prioritize close relations with state elites and adaptation to the legal regime in place, regardless of how autocratic the political system may be. In fact, autocratic governments interested in capitalist development offer an advantageous setting where these movements, once they establish trust with the political leaders, can proceed swiftly to set up business ventures and link them with their wider network, through which they finance the construction and management of schools, bring teachers from abroad, and provide scholarships to students.28

From the perspective of the autocratic governments that receive these foreign Muslim volunteers, the advantages are many: politically loyal foreign capital and education of future elite cadres at no cost. Not only does the regulatory power lie with the government, the latter has a say in the curriculum of these schools. In Azerbaijan, where both movements have had a strong presence, the schools have to display the busts of Haydar Aliyev, the ex-communist, post-Soviet leader whose son now rules the country. The portraits of father and son are to be placed in classrooms, their sayings and messages displayed on the walls and at the beginning of textbooks. All the materials

28 For students who attend Gülen schools, piety is at best encouraged but not enforced. Adab (good manners, morals, and decency as prescribed by Islamic etiquette) is as important as piety and prayers. The goal of the community is to produce a socially upright, intellectually promising, and economically dynamic generation of Muslims (the “golden generation” in the community’s parlance) who are linked up in an international web of businessmen, statesmen, scientists, professionals, and cultural producers. A successful educational career coupled with access to business and professional networks means upward mobility within and horizontal mobility abroad.
used in the classroom are also inspected by the government. This compromise on the part of these foreign communities renders them trustworthy in the eyes of the state elites, who in turn depend on them for their business and education. It is this symbiotic relationship based on political quietism and capitalist development that allowed these movements to survive the so-called War on Terror. Both communities managed to stay and even flourish in Azerbaijan, whereas Iranian mullahs and Gulf charities were expelled after 9/11.

It is worth noting that this Turkish-Azerbaijani network was, in terms of political Islam, a Sunni-Islamist ally of the United States, a vector projecting into Soviet Central Asia, paralleling the Sunni-Islamist-U.S. alliance from the Gulf that went into Soviet Afghanistan in the 1980s. Through what has been known as the Green Belt Strategy, the United States was investing in Islamism along the southern borders of the Soviet Union as leverage against Moscow. Following the Soviet breakup, however, the Green Belt implied a potential zone of Iranian influence, and the United States did not want to lose to Tehran what it had gained against Moscow. This is when the Turkish model of moderate Islam in agreement with Western capitalism came to the fore. In his historic visit to the Caucasus and Central Asia in 1992, then U.S. Secretary of State James Baker strongly endorsed the “Turkish path” against the Iranian one.

Emboldened by this regional-global collaboration and their own achievements across the former Soviet space, Turkish Sunni communities extended their networks of
education, business, and philanthropy to other regions. The Erenköy community extended its presence first to the Balkans and the Crimea, and then to Sub-Saharan Africa, where it raises the next clerical generation, many of whom will fill official state positions as imams, huffaz, preachers, and Muslim scholars. The Gülen community, on the other hand, went truly global, opening its schools, universities, businesses, and media outlets from Southeast Asia to Latin America. Flag followed trade and network in this case; Turkish embassies and airlines expanded in their wake, underwriting Turkish transregionalism in the 2000s, a process often analyzed under the rubric of neo-Ottomanism. The social infrastructure of Turkey’s neo-Ottomanism thus was first laid down and extended across the crumbling Soviet space by the Turkish-Azerbaijani diasporic networks.

Turkish leadership played an active role in this process by politically sponsoring these communities and opening Turkey to their clients and students. Through this state-sponsored network, thousands of Azerbaijanis from Transcaucasia have entered Turkey, where they pursue careers today in a variety of professions while maintaining family ties in Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis who have become part of these networks have done so for various reasons. For some, like Anar, it was partly about the opportunity to get an education in Turkey or even build a career there. For others it was

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29 Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which was established in 1992 as a technical aid organization under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to respond to the former Soviet Union’s Turkic republics’ development needs, has expanded its operations to the Balkans and Africa.
a business opportunity or simply a Moscow-free route to the West. Those who have genuinely identified with these communities and their mission, however, see in the image of Turkey a bigger story unfolding: Ottoman grandeur reloaded. In its vagueness “Ottoman grandeur” allows for multiple interpretations: an Islamic golden age under Ottoman guardianship, an empire of justice, and so on. Beyond these nostalgic reconstructions, however, the Ottoman past implies for these communities a certain way of being a Muslim: an orientation toward a streamlined Sufi Islam, humility before the state, or simply political quietism, and an emphasis on Turkish (not Arabic) as the medium of *tabligh* (propagation of faith). All together, these constitute the hallmarks of Turkey-based, missionary Muslim communities—or what one might call *Turkish Islam*.

### 1.3.2 Made in Azerbaijan: Turkish Islam

“Turkish-Islamic synthesis” (*Türk-İslam sentezi*), the idea of a primordial harmony between Turks and Islam, was developed in the 1980s by a group of nationalist-conservative intellectuals organized around the association called *Aydınlar Ocağı* (The Hearth of Intellectuals). The association was founded in 1970 as an ideological bulwark against the Turkish left’s prominence in the country’s intellectual production and public debates. Its then chair, Nevzat Yalçıntaş, was a key proponent of the doctrine and had, in his words, “always been interested in the fate of Turkic and Muslim populations of the Soviet Union” (Yalçıntaş 2012, 551–552).
The Soviets had been interested in Yalçıntaş too. In 1967 the Russian Embassy’s cultural attaché in Ankara, Kalashnikov, personally invited Yalçıntaş to Moscow for the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution. He was invited for his expertise on labor economics and his then affiliation with Turkey’s State Planning Organization (DPT). Yalçıntaş, though willing to take Kalashnikov up on his offer, was not looking forward to being dragged to cities like Leningrad or Minsk, where Soviet officials would give him a tour of factories and labor unions to proudly display Soviet methods of organizing labor and production. “Mr. Kalashnikov,” he addressed the cultural attaché

The cities to which you are planning to take me are European cities. But I have seen the best European cities in Western Europe. I have been a student in Paris; I lived in London. I have been to Berlin and other cities. I am not that excited to see cities of similar kind. Besides Moscow, I would like it if you could take me to the cities of Turkistan; that is, to Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Baku.

After an exchange with Moscow, “Mr. Kalashnikov” responded positively, except that Baku was off the list. Yalçıntaş did not even ask why, because he knew that officials in Moscow were watchful of a group of pan-Turkists in Baku. He had heard about them from Süleyman Demirel, the prime minister of Turkey at the time, who had just returned from an official visit to Baku. Apparently, Soviet officials did not want any Turks to touch base with this aspiring group. Though Yalçıntaş could not go to Baku, his tour of Soviet Central Asia in 1969 was to leave a strong impression on him. When he visited the same cities in 1990, he was not there to be lectured on the feats of Soviet socialism but to
give lectures on the virtues of free-market economy. On his second visit to Baku in 1991, he delivered one such lecture under a bust of Lenin (See Figure 11).

Figure 10: Nevzat Yalçıntaş with Uzbek men (Uzbekistan, 1969), from the photo album of Nevzat Yalçıntaş in Türkiye’yi Yükselten Yıllar. 2010.

Figure 11: Nevzat Yalçıntaş giving a lecture on free-market economy, a topic pertaining to his area of expertise, under Lenin’s bust. (Baku, 1991). From the photo album of Nevzat Yalçıntaş in Türkiye’yi Yükselten Yıllar, 2010.
The caption reads: “Prayers in Khansarai after 74 years.” Following Cumhuriyet’s article, all other major newspapers in Turkey brought the news to their front pages the next day.

In between the two visits, Yalcintaş had cast a wide net among the right-wing circles on Turkey’s intellectual and political scene. Besides his connections to bureaucrats, politicians, professors, and pious businessmen, he had the president’s ear.³⁰

³⁰ He was a man deeply entangled in politics without much of a political career until late in his life. His father, an Ankara merchant, partook in founding the Demokrat Parti following Turkey’s transition to a multiparty system in 1946. After his college years in Istanbul, he went to Caen, France for his doctoral studies in labor economics. During his long career, Yalcintaş swapped one top bureaucratic position for another in important state departments such as the State Planning Organization (DPT) and the Turkish State Channel (TRT) and in international organizations like the Islamic Development Bank in Jeddah and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in the Europe Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA). Under his belt were also post-doctoral work in London, authorship of countless newspaper columns, and professorship at Istanbul
When the Soviet Union began to unravel, Yalçıntaş mobilized all these connections to organize trips to the former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia. He involved not only businessmen and journalists but also Turkish citizens with heritage—Crimean Tatars on visits to Crimea, Uzbeks to Uzbekistan, and Azeris to Azerbaijan. Back home in Turkey, many closely followed his trips to former Soviet countries. His visit to Crimea in 1991, for instance, was covered in newspapers with photos of him leading prayers in the courtyard of the Bakchesarai Palace, a structure from the sixteenth century when Crimea was an Ottoman protectorate (see Figure 12). After that visit he was invited to a breakfast with Fethullah Gülen to convey his impressions to the man who led the Turkey’s most powerful and prosperous Muslim community at the time.

Yalçıntaş had a similar meeting with Musa Topbaş, then leader of the Erenköy community, following his visit to Baku in 1991. This is what he had to say about the process leading up to that meeting:

As we were giving out Islamic publications during our visits in Azerbaijan, we came across some Iranian mullahs a few times. They had arrived in the city of Şamaxı before us. During a conversation with Mehmet Bey [a businessman from Ankara who sponsored the trip] on the way back, he said: “Hocam [Sir], if we could facilitate a liaison between a religious Turkish foundation and here [Azerbaijan], it would help us level the Iranian influence.” He said this knowing that I was closely in touch with several religious communities. I took his suggestion seriously and thought about it throughout the trip. I knew almost all the religious communities and their leaders except a few. I knew very well how University, where he mentored prominent political figures of Turkey including the former president Abdullah Gül (2007 to 2014).
each Sufi order operated and what methods they used. My deceased father had been a follower of a Naqshbandi order. He was a trader in the day, and a worshipper at night. My mother too was a Naqshi … The foundation that was to establish a liaison with Azerbaijan had to be solely focused on service, and had to teach Islam as it was [dogru düzgün], with no heretical beliefs, or strange and marginal rituals; they had to win over the hearts and minds of the people there, and show them the true path [dini irşadda bulunmak]. As it is well known, there are many [Sufi] orders in Islam. The most widespread amongst them, however, is Naqshbandi, which came from Turkistan. As I was thinking about these, I recalled Musa Topbaş Hocaefendi, God bless his soul. He was suited to put to right the religious and moral destruction in Azerbaijan. He could get across the true message of Islam, build mosques, make contacts and handle the rest. As we know, Russians had entered Baku in the early 1800s. For almost two centuries Azerbaijan had been under Russian yoke. Although there was a short-lived experience of independence [Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918–1920)], it was not consequential. The destructions brought in this long period could be repaired only through grand efforts. And those who could undertake such efforts are people who are committed to this cause in earnest and with self-sacrifice.

When we remember that one of the most important attributes of Sufis is this very self-sacrifice, it should be clear why it was preferable to connect our Azerbaijani brothers and sisters to a Sufi order. In any case, Islam has spread mostly through Sufism. (Yalçıntaş 2012, 583–584)

Yalçıntaş’ emphasis on Sufism as a connective tissue between Turkey and Azerbaijan was shared by the Turkey-based Muslim communities. On the one hand, these communities highlighted their ethno-linguistic ties to post-Soviet republics in Transcaucasia and Central Asia. On the other hand, they infused those ties with a Sunni bond by invoking the millennial past of Sufi orders; their historical expansion is intertwined with Turkic migrations from Central Asia into Iran, the Caucasus, and Anatolia. The invocation of this deep past projects a contiguous historical landscape that precedes the institutionalization of Shi’ism in Iran in the sixteenth century as well as the Russian expansion into inner Asia in the nineteenth century. These communities spread across former Soviet space in a bid to reinvigorate this historical geography.
To inspire his followers to move to the newly emerged republics, Fethullah Gülen invoked the name of Ahmed Yesevi (1093–1166), the Turkic mystic and poet from Central Asia who had great influence in the development of Sufi orders throughout the Turkic-speaking world as far as Anatolia. If Muslim Turks of Anatolia were indebted to Ahmed Yesevi and his followers, it was on Gülen’s followers to pay that debt by bringing Turkish Islam back to where it was first made. “We are here to pay our debt of gratitude [gonul borcu]” has become the Gülenists’ token answer to questions about their mission in the former Soviet space.

Ahmed Yesevi was not the only Sufi figure to connect Turkey to the former Soviet space. In Azerbaijan a number of Turkey-educated professors have been unearthing the roots and legacies of Sufi currents that tied the Caucasus to Ottoman Anatolia. Several books on prominent Sufi masters such as Sayyid Yahya Bakuvi (1410–1464), Ismail Siraceddin Sjirvanî (1782–1844), and Mir Hamza Nigari (1805–1885) have appeared on the shelves. The routes of these religious charismatic men and their followers reveal a contiguous Sufi landscape that runs deeper than the Ottomans’ intermittent political presence in the Caucasus.

Bakuvi, for example, is considered to be the second founder of the Khalwati order, and his followers spread the order across the Ottoman lands, where it enjoyed great social and political influence for centuries through the many branches that

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31 I thank Mustafa Tuna for bringing this to my attention.
developed out of it. Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi (1541–1628), the namesake of the philanthropic foundation run by the Topbaş family, led one of those branches in Istanbul and had the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed I among his audience. According to the author of Bakuvi’s biography, Mehmet Rıhtım, who at the time we met was a professor at Baku’s Qafqaz University (run by the Gülen community), Bakuvi’s legacy in the Ottoman Empire points to the formative influence of Transcaucasia for the wider region. “Azerbaijan, where different currents arrived and mingled,” he said, “became the taproot of new Sufi currents which were then carried out in different directions.”

Rıhtım has worked on the biographies of other Sufi masters as well, such as Ismail Siraceddin Şirvanî. Known for having brought the Naqshbandi-Khalidiyya lineage to the Caucasus, Şirvanî’s spiritual lineage would later reach Dagestan, where it underpinned the legendary anti-Russian resistance led by Sheikh Shamil in the mid-nineteenth century. While one strand took the Khalidiyya lineage up north into Russian Dagestan, his other followers spread the order into Ottoman Anatolia. Following the Russian annexation of the Caucasus, Şirvanî himself moved to the Ottoman town of Amasya, where his shrine is located today. During his research on Şirvanî, Rıhtım not only dug through the Sufi master’s books, he hunted for his offspring and eventually located them in Baku and Istanbul. As he was writing Şirvanî’s biography, he facilitated a meeting in Baku between his descendants from Turkey and Azerbaijan. The account of that meeting by the Turkish descendent, along with her impressions of Baku, was
published as a preface to Şirvanî’s biography, prepared by Rıhtım and his Azerbaijani colleague Fariz Xellili.³²

Biographies of itinerant religious men and their shrines lend meaning to the newfound routes of Azerbaijanis who move between Turkey and Azerbaijan as teachers, preachers, and students. Amasya, where Şirvanî’s shrine is located, hosts the shrine of another Azerbaijani Sufi master named Mirza Hamza Nigarî, who moved back and forth between the Caucasus and Ottoman Anatolia in the nineteenth century. His travels produced writings, followers, and descendants in both lands, and they, like those of Şirvanî, draw the interest of young Azerbaijani scholars affiliated with the Turkish Muslim communities.

The biographies, genealogies, and itineraries of these religious figures provide the historical basis on which Azerbaijan is situated as part of an interconnected geography stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia. Uncovering these shared figures serves to highlight a cultural order that transcends national and imperial borders. And what was once shared can be shared again. “By bringing these connections to the fore,” Rıhtım said, “we are trying to tell Azerbaijanis that we are not bringing anything foreign to Azerbaijan, like Wahhabism brought by Arabs; we are simply returning what belongs to them in the first place”—Turkish Islam that was made in Azerbaijan.

³² See Rıhtım and Xelilli (2011, 6-9).
1.4 Ghosts of History

Today, historically informed projections of cultural orders compete and overlap in the diasporic space of Azerbaijanis. Each projection brings Azerbaijanis into its fold by conceiving their homeland as an extension of a singular sociocultural order. These competing orders, variously anchored in shrines, seminaries, bazaars, lineages, or biographies, tie Transcaucasia to the former imperial domains of the Iranians, Russians, and Ottomans. Though peripheral to each regionalist project individually, Transcaucasia is thus at the center of them all. When seen from that old frontier, the otherwise disconnected projects of the Shi’ā Crescent, neo-Eurasianism, and neo-Ottomanism appear as alternative invitations for Azerbaijanis like Anar, whose story opened this chapter, to empower themselves by becoming part of these orders.

As Azerbaijanis take up these offers and move across borders as pilgrims, students, preachers, merchants, or businessmen, their exchanges with others reveal their many pasts shared across borders. Shrines, schools, endowments, seminaries, and biographical dictionaries become the vehicles through which these shared pasts are unearthed, interpreted, and harnessed for building social ties across political boundaries. This is what drives the cultural production around these itinerant historical figures, be they Shi’ā scholars or Naqshbandi sheikhs.

Although historical mindedness and cross-border mobility break the deterministic hold of history over the present, they do not turn history into a reservoir of
discursive resources to be orchestrated by the present actors at will. Azerbaijanis’
geographically distributed roots imply an uneven historical terrain that accommodates
competing claims from all directions. The inability to mold them into a single political
project implies a gap that affects these very projects. Efforts to close the gap result in
further trips and correspondence, bigger endowments, more books, and so forth. Seeing
it all from a diasporic angle reveals a transnational dialogue on pasts and futures. It is
that dialogue that is the stuff of Muslim connectivity and competition across the Middle
East and post-socialist Eurasia.

Resources otherwise dormant become available for those who move in time or
between places. When pasts and places are cast as repositories for possibilities,
recolletion of history acquires a particular force that orients human action and
facilitates cross-border connection. In that connective space, older conversations could
be resumed, stories swapped, rusty ties polished. Crossing borders then implies an
interpretive opening in which shared figures of the past can become the reference
points—or stumbling blocks—for imagining alternative futures. This interpretative
effort, coupled with physical movement, can give new weight to old figures of the past
and charge them with an arcane potency that can be called upon to resolve moral and
political dilemmas in the present. When called upon like that, the ghosts of history come
to life.
In 2012, two decades into the Soviet Union’s collapse, a public debate swept the post-Soviet country of Azerbaijan. At the center of it was Shah Ismail (1487–1524), the founder of the Safavid Empire. “Shah Ismail lies at the root of Azerbaijan’s tragedy,” claimed the parliamentarian Fazil Mustafa, whose remarks started it all: “Shah Ismail bastardized Azerbaijanis’ mentality and corrupted their religion; we need to disavow his legacy!” His derogatory comments soon reverberated across the country through passionate debates in teahouses, around dinner tables, and on social media.

For Mustafa and his supporters, it all began with Shah Ismail. His messianic movement popularized cultic and intercessional practices and consolidated the Shi’ite creed in Greater Iran, which included the historical lands of Azerbaijan. Shah Ismail’s imperial ambitions and messianic zeal, as Mustafa saw it, not only “tainted” the religious landscape of historical Azerbaijan, which had been predominantly Sunni, it also cut Azerbaijan off from the rest of the Muslim (read Sunni) world.

Fazil Mustafa’s historical exegesis might carry a strong Sunni bias, but it reveals how religious creed in the Republic of Azerbaijan is understood to be a historical problem or even, as we will see, a problem of historiography. For its mixed population of Shi’ites and Sunnis, sectarian differences are less a matter of theology than one of

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33 Fazil Mustafa made these comments in a TV interview and reiterated them thereafter in a number of platforms including a TV debate on Azerbaijan’s ANS channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhtaUSgGG6c&dl=1156

34 Charles Weller (2014) observes a similar entanglement in Kazakhstan.
historical geography. That is perhaps why the strongest reaction to Fazil Mustafa’s remarks came not from a Shi’ite cleric but from a pan-Turkist historian named Dilaver Azimli. Azimli critiqued Fazil Mustafa on a number of points. For one, Mustafa had mistaken the present-day religious landscape of Iran for the legacy of Shah Ismail, collapsing the five centuries in between and attributing to Shah Ismail what came after him. Shah Ismail, according to Azimli, was a Turkic leader who espoused a syncretic faith that had roots in Islam and ancient traditions of the Turkoman tribes that followed him. In short, Shah Ismail was a Sufi Turk, and in Azimli’s opinion, a great one at that. His legacy lived on in the Sufism of rural Azerbaijan, not in the Shi’a seminaries of Qom or Mashhad.35

With the debate unfolding, Shah Ismail’s potency was not lost on the regime’s leadership. The head of the presidential administration, Ramiz Mahdiyev, also reputed to be the chief ideologue of the regime, responded with an article that defended Shah Ismail as an Azerbaijani hero, neither Turkic nor Persian. In doing so he continued the Soviet historiographical tradition that canonized Shah Ismail, along with others like Bābak Khorram-Din (d. 838), as heroes of a distinct Azerbaijani ethnos, indigenous to the Caucasus and separate from both Turkic and Persian. Speaking from within this Soviet tradition, Mahdiyev situated Shah Ismail within a long line of great historical figures of

35 See the aforementioned TV debate on Azerbaijan’s ANS channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhtaUSgGG6c&tl=1156s
Iran from Rashīd al-Dīn Fadhīl-ALLĀH Hamadānī (1247–1318), a Judeo-Persian statesman, historian, and physician, to Nasir al-Dīn al-Tūsī (1202–1274), a Persian polymath and prolific writer. He even included in his list the Persian mystic Ayn-al Qudat Hamadhānī (1098–1131), whom he called another “compatriot of ours” (həmvətənimiz). Shah Ismail, championed as an ethnic Azerbaijani by the Soviets, degraded by Fazil Mustafa as a Shi’a Persian, defended by Dilaver Azimli as a Sufi Turk, was now reclaimed by Ramiz Mehdiyev as Azerbaijani, bringing the debate full circle.

As the heated debate swirled around the country, Shah Ismail’s multifaceted origins and legacies surfaced in alternative alignments of historical arguments, political positions, and geographical orientations. Participants in the debate felt the powerful connection between their own fate and that of Shah Ismail despite the half millennium between them. It seemed as though the last saintly king of medieval Persia held the key to the future of a post-Soviet country. Long gone in Turkey and Iran, Shah Ismail is alive and well in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Within the bounds of this small nation-state, however, he appears like a chimera with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent.

We shall see how what seems like a monstrous aberration of history within the territorial bounds of a nation-state makes perfect sense from the diasporic perspective of

Azerbaijanis. Shah Ismail's Persian, Turkic, Shi’a, Sufi, and even Soviet traits make him a
typical Azerbaijani. Yet his capacious persona does not fit the contracted space of a
nation-state. The puzzle of Shah Ismail remains unresolved within the Republic of
Azerbaijan, where a new generation of Azerbaijanis seek answers elsewhere. Some
follow the Sunni Sufi ties to Turkey; others thread Iranian routes of Shi’a pilgrimage and
scholarship to the holy cities of Qom and Mashhad. The many pasts they discover along
these separate routes accumulate in Transcaucasia, creating an unusual historical depth
in an old frontier, much like a vortex where currents converge. In Transcaucasia breadth
of space is converted into depth of time. It is where routes become roots.

In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, historian James
Clifford (1997) offered cultural routes as a critical alternative to cultural roots, or
bounded concepts of culture. For the Azerbaijanis, it is not a question of one or the other,
for their roots lay in their routes. The depth of Azerbaijani roots is not to be found in one
place but in the many landscapes of history held together by diasporic routes. To gain
perspective on Azerbaijani roots, therefore, one has to examine Azerbaijanis en route. At
least that is what Shah Ismail, knocking on the doors of the twenty-first century in a
post-Soviet country, is trying to tell us. This study responds to his call.
2. Roots and Routes

This chapter explores the roots and routes of Azerbaijanis by way of three historical and thematic incursions. Each incursion illustrates a different vector of the Azerbaijani mobility, by following them across Persian, Russian, and Ottoman frontiers. These historical illustrations also follow one another chronologically and thus articulate different geographical axes along a timeline that stretches from the 1300s to the beginning of the 1900s. Altogether, they offer a canvas broad enough to capture the range of identifications and geographical orientations that mobile Azerbaijanis accumulated through time. The sedimentation from their geographically distributed pasts offers them a surplus of ties that, if engaged, allow them to go in and out of different imperial domains.

Since Azerbaijanis’ geographically distributed historical roots cannot be captured from within a single empire, we place them beyond imperial borders. They are the products of hybrid cultural spaces of Turko-Persia and Turko-Tatar Russia, which preceded—and in certain cases produced—those borders. For a re-location of this sort to be accomplished, we adopt a transregional vantage point, one that does not follow conventional geographical divisions such as the one between the Middle East and post-socialist Eurasia. Such divisions are of no help when individual biographies and itineraries puncture them in and out. In addition, we extend the temporal scope across centuries in order to identify a series of cultural hybridizations that made Azerbaijanis
part of different imperial domains. With a temporally capacious, transregional vantage point of this kind, we can string together a range of historical episodes and a cast of different characters as part of the same story. And that story, once again, starts in the heart of Iran.

2.1 The Beating Heart of Iran

Tehran’s bazaar is often evoked, by scholars and laymen alike, as being the “beating heart of Iran.” Indeed, it appears that way when one enters the colossal labyrinth of halls and passageways lined with stores of every kind. As customers, commodities, credits, and rumors flow in and out, the whirlwind of their movement imbues the bazaar’s merchants with an arcane potency, one that reveals itself in tumultuous times. Tehran’s Bazaar-e Bozorg (the Great Bazaar) has been the barometer of Iranian politics ever since the bazaaris’ historic alliance with Shi’a clerics against the Tobacco Régie of 1890, the concession granted by the Qajar Shah to the British for a monopoly over the production, sale, and export of tobacco. While the concessions brought much needed cash for the financially strained Shah, they also enraged the local merchants whose livelihoods depended on the lucrative tobacco business. The ensued protests by merchants soon received the support of senior Shi’a clerics, whose status and ties of patronage within Iranian society were compromised by the concessions. The merchant-cleric solidarity, having emerged victorious over the Shah’s alliance with the British, has proven to be a long-lasting one with many iterations, including the Persian
constitutional revolution of 1906 and the Islamic Revolution of 1979. As a matter of fact, it was the *bazaaris* who sponsored Ayatollah Khomeini during his Iraqi exile in Najaf and later in Neauphle-le-Château in France, and it was on account of their strong backing that the Cleric ultimately toppled the Shah. Indeed, one can hardly appreciate Iran’s modern history without understanding the *bazaaris’* deep ties within the Iranian society.

Many merchants in this bazaar, a hinge of sorts in Iran’s modern history, are *Torki* (Turkic). Their presence in Tehran’s Great Bazaar reflects deep roots in Persian lands. Centuries of Turko-Persian exchanges in language, kinship, and customs render these Turks typically Persian in the eye of the outsider, while subtle differences in accents and manners could give them away to insiders. Even with such differences being picked up and accentuated in ethnic jokes circulating around dinner tables, cultural differentiation of this sort only reveals the social proximity between Turks and Persians in Iran. This proximity often produces kinship ties through marriage, although ‘mixed-family’ is a misnomer when centuries of mixing have already produced common ancestors. Turko-Persian interpenetration is a fact of life in Iran, such that it always takes an outsider to spell it out. When the then Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, on a visit to Iran in 2012, referred to Tehran as possibly the second-largest Turkish-speaking
city after Istanbul, he surprised the Turkish audience in Turkey while he stated the obvious for Iranians.¹

Davutoğlu is right; today millions of Iranian Turks live in Iran’s great metropole, Tehran. Historically, however, Tehran lay on the fringes of their homeland, the region known as Azerbaijan, largely comprised of modern northwest Iran and parts of Transcaucasia. This territory changed hands between Iranian, Hellenic, Arab, and Turkic dynasties and has been home to Iranian Turks since the wave of Turkic migrations from Central Asia to the Iranian plateau a millennium ago. From the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, Turks came to Iran as nomads on horses in search of graze and booty; as mercenaries outbound for Islam’s imperial frontiers; as slaves in the courts of Arab and Persian dynasties and soldiers in their armies; and finally, as the new rulers of old Persia and the Islamic world.² As the nomadic Turks became enmeshed with the


² Although Turkic migrations to Persia have been a familiar theme in Islamic history, especially since Marshall Hodgson’s (1972) The Venture of Islam, cultural legacies of this world-historical phenomenon have not been adequately conceptualized. A notable exception is Robert Canfield’s (1991) edited volume entitled Turko-Persia in Historical Perspective, which offers the category of “Turko-Persian ecumene” to differentiate a distinctive cultural zone that emerged with the separation of eastern Iran from the caliphate control in Baghdad and increasing assertiveness of the Iranian peoples which, by the eleventh century, included Persianized Turks. This new cultural zone, for Canfield, was “marked by the use of New Persian language as a medium of administration and literature, by the rise of Persianized Turks to administrative control, by a new political importance for the ulama, and by the development of an ethnically composite Islamicate society.” (6) Stephen Frederic Dale (2010) points to the wealth of comparative opportunities in examining early modern empires as an intertwined economic and cultural geography that emerged across Turko-Persia from the Balkans to the Bay of Bengal. The late scholar Shahab Ahmed also recognizes the importance of such conceptualization though he prefers to define this shared geography not in terms of a common culture, but in terms of “a common paradigm of Islamic life and thought by which Muslims (and others) imagined,
lettered, sedentary world of Persians, they became integral to Iranian society and politics. That was especially true in Azerbaijan where a Turko-Persian people took shape over centuries, absorbing in its make-up Turkic, Persian, and ancient Caucasian elements. While the Turkic language gradually replaced various local Caucasian and Iranian languages, growing linguistic uniformity both enabled and concealed centuries-long hybridization in the region. It is in Azerbaijan where Turks, or Azerbaijanis as we

canonicalized, valorized, articulated and gave mutually-communicable meaning to their lives in terms of Islam” (2015, 75). These varying approaches aside, we agree with the Ottoman historian Metin Kunt that “[s]cholars of the world of Islam neglect the concept [Turko-Persia] at their own peril” (2011, 4). The potential in an integrated analysis of this broad region is evident in the parallel studies on Indo-Persia, such as those by Moin (2012) and Subrahmanyam (2000).

3 For a breakdown of these plural roots, see Tapper (1988). The plural make-up of Azerbaijanis can also be traced in their language. See Yarshater (1988); Johanson (1988); and Doerfer (1988). Azerbaijanis’ origins lay in the mist of Turko-Persian intermixing, prompted by the arrival of nomadic Turks into the Iranian plateau from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. In a way, Azerbaijanis are like the Franks, who would gradually emerge out of the dust cloud raised by the confused movement of Germanic tribes in the Roman Gaul. But unlike them who, once the dust settled gave their name to the land, making it Francia (“Land of the Franks”), Azerbaijanis took the name of the land, where culturally Persianized Turks and linguistically Turkified Persians continued to mix under Mongol rule. As a Turkic-speaking population molded in Persian customs, Azerbaijanis became part of both the Turkic and the Persian worlds, which significantly overlapped in the late mediaeval period.

4 Turks as newcomers to Islam led to a dynamic process of hybridization in the region as they assimilated. The Mongol and Timurid raids catalyzed this hybridization by intensifying Turkic migrations (Canfield 1991, 18). Azerbaijanis’ origins lay in the mist of this Turko-Persian intermixing, prompted by the arrival of nomadic Turks into the Iranian plateau from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. In a way, Azerbaijanis are like the Franks, who would gradually emerge out of the dust cloud raised by the confused movement of Germanic tribes in the Roman Gaul. But unlike them who, once the dust settled gave their name to the land, making it Francia (“Land of the Franks”), Azerbaijanis took the name of the land, where culturally Persianized Turks and linguistically Turkified Persians continued to mix under Mongol rule. As a Turkic-speaking population molded in Persian customs, Azerbaijanis became part of both the Turkic and the Persian worlds, which significantly overlapped in the late mediaeval period. The legacy of such hybridization is most clear in the long-standing historiographical controversy over the question of whether Azerbaijanis were originally Persian or Turkic. Because Azerbaijanis straddle the line between Persianized
may now call them, became part of Persian history, the city of Tabriz being their main entryway into the Persian realm.

When Tabriz, an ancient town in Azerbaijan, emerged in the 1300s as a cosmopolitan entrepôt of Pax-Mongolica, it also became a prominent center of greater Iran, now rivaling Baghdad.\(^5\) The surplus of transcontinental trade that accumulated in Tabriz would draw to the city more than just merchants. Travelers, captives, and missionaries from distant lands passed through the city, whose affluence and cosmopolitan outlook captivated them. Marco Polo, who visited “the noble city of Tauris” in the wake of the Mongol invasions, observed

> the city is set in so good a place that the other merchandise comes there conveniently from Indie and from Baudec [Baghdad] and from Mosul and from Curmos [Hormuz] and from many other places, and therefore many Latin merchants and especially Genoese come there often to buy of those foreign goods that come there from strange distant lands and to do their business...It is a city of great trade so that the traveling merchants make great profit there...For many Christians of every sect may be there; there are Armenians, Nestorians, and Jacobites, and Georgians, and Persians, and there are also men who worship Mahomet, and there are the common people of the city who are called Taurisin [Tabrizi], and they have different speech among them (Moule and Pelliot 1938, 104.)

As the city that brought the riches of the world to the Mongol rulers of Iran, Tabriz was coveted by aspiring Turkic leaders whose forefathers had ruled Iran before Turks and Turkified Persians, it is more of a problem of a dog chasing its own tail. For a summary of this debate, see Altstadt (1992, 5–7). Also, see Golden (1992, 127-136).

\(^5\) For a history of Tabriz as a commercial and intellectual center of the late medieval Iran, see Pfeiffer (2013).
the Mongols. When the Mongol power waned in the 1400s, Turkic leaders would stake their claim to Iran through Tabriz: Jahan Shah of the Kara Koyunlu (1397-1467), Uzun Hassan of Ak Koyunlu (1423-1478), and finally Shah Ismail of the Safavids (1487-1524) all launched their empires from Tabriz. Under the changing patronage of Mongol and Turkic rulers, socio-cultural transformation of a less spectacular kind - albeit with profound implications - had unfolded in Azerbaijan. By the sixteenth century, sedentarization of nomadic Turks and linguistic Turkification of indigenous Iranian peoples had produced a Turkic-speaking people acculturated in Persian ways, or in other words, the Azerbaijanis. They were part of both the Persian realm and of a contiguous Turkic space formed by a plethora of Turkic-speaking communities stretching from Khorasan to Anatolia. Their Turkic language bore extensive Persian vocabulary even as it became the lingua franca in Azerbaijan. Today, one rarely hears Persian on the streets of Tabriz, but the ease with which Tabrizis juxtapose Persian phrases and idioms within their Turkish vernacular speaks volumes about the Azerbaijanis’ hybrid roots.

On the historical distribution of Azerbaijani Turkish across Iran, see Floor and Javadi (2013). The authors draw attention to the connection between the diffusion of Azerbaijani Turkish and the dissemination across Iran of Qizilbash tribes (the core base of the Safavids) in the sixteenth century. With the break-up of the Qizilbash links in the seventeenth century, the use of Azerbaijani Turkish withdrew to northwest Iran where it has remained concentrated until today (570). Also see Doerfer (1998).

The process by which Azerbaijani Turkish became the lingua franca in Azerbaijan was gradual and it only matured in the Safavid period. (Floor and Javadi 2013, 581).
Tabriz is not only where Azerbaijanis ruled Iran, it is also where they transformed it from within. When Shah Ismail proclaimed his allegiance to Imamate Shi‘ism (also known as Twelver Shi‘ism or Athnā‘ashariyyah) upon capturing Tabriz in 1501, he ushered in a new era that eventually produced the Shi‘a majority-Iran with which we are familiar today. Iran’s transformation into a Shi‘a realm unfolded in competition with the Ottomans, who in their turn consolidated their empire as a Sunni realm. Iran’s historic conversion would transform Ismail himself from an unorthodox messianic leader into an imperial protector of Shi‘a orthodoxy. Straddling the politically fragmented and religiously syncretic Iran of the late medieval era and its subsequent consolidation under the Shi‘a banner, Ismail has become a man of both epochs, leaving behind a historiographical puzzle that has long occupied modern observers. More is shrouded in mystery than his religious legacy, such as his disputed Turkish-Kurdish-Persian origins or his concurrent engagement with Turkic and Persian traditions. After all, we are speaking of an Iranian Shah who is known for his Turkish poetry and whose belligerent letters to the Ottoman Sultan were written in the Azerbaijani Turkish. Yet the same Turkic leader, in his poetry addressed to his Turkoman followers, would associate himself with the classic heroes of Persian mythology.

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8 For the debate on the Safavids’ origins, see: Togan (1959) and Mazzaoui (1972).
9 Shah Ismail used the pen name Khatai (sinner). For a scholarly treatment of his poetry, see Minorsky (1942).
10 These included Fereydoun, Khosrow, Jamshid, Zahak, and Rostam. On Shah Ismail’s syncretic origins, see Mazzaoui (1972) and Babayan (2002).
If the majority of Persians became the followers of Imamate Shi’ism under the rule of Shah Ismail and his descendants, Azerbaijanis themselves have been among the prominent clerics of the country ever since. Landed Azerbaijani families for centuries have sent their youth to the Shi’a seminaries in Najaf, Qom, Isfahan, and Mashhad, where some of them would reach the highest clerical ranks such as that of a mujtahid (authoritative interpreter of the Islamic law) or that of the most prestigious marja’ al-taqlid (source of emulation). Among them is the current supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, who prefers to address the crowds in Tabriz in Azerbaijani Turkish, his father’s mother tongue. Like Tabrizis, he too speaks Azerbaijani Turkish with a distinctively Persian melody, using gestures and expressions typical of the Persian social etiquette.

Tabriz looms large in the modern political history of Iran as well. Azerbaijanis’ role in the making of Iranian history gained new visibility in the nineteenth century, when Tabriz became once again Iran’s gateway to the world thanks to the revival of overland trade routes.
by an Azerbaijani named Mir-Hossein Mousavi, his father a well-known tea merchant in Tabriz. Like Mousavi, many of the merchants in Tehran and clerics in Qom also trace their origins to Tabriz; they are the Azerbaijanis whose hands cradle “the beating heart of Iran.”

Figure 13: Ismail Soppy, Rex Persarum (Persian King). Portrait by a Venetian artist, original in Uffizi Museum in Italy.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} “Ismail Sophy,” a title derived either from his family name, Safawi, or from his religious role as head of a powerful Sufi order of mystics, was attributed to him in 1502 by the Venetian diarist Marino Sanudo (Meserve 2009, 232).
2.2 **Scratch a Russian, you will find a Tatar**

When Napoleon famously said “Scratch a Russian, you will find a Tatar,” he put his finger on a subterranean current in Russian empire-making. Various Turkic and Turko-Mongol populations of northern Eurasia, or “Tatars” as Russians indiscriminately called them, have been integral to the Russian realm since the Mongol invasion of the Rus’ in the 1200s. From the so-called Tatar Yoke of the Turko-Mongol nomads in the late Middle Ages to the Russian expansion across the Caspian Basin during the nineteenth century, Russo-Tatar exchanges constituted the crux of the Russian imperial enterprise. If Russia became an empire by way of incorporating the Tatar capital Kazan in the early 1500s, it was through Kazan that the empire later claimed a privileged

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13 For the legacy of Golden Horde on the nascent Russian empire, see Otrowski (2002); Halperin (1987); and Vernadsky (1969).
connection and historical mission vis-a-vis the Orient. In the mid-nineteenth century, when Russia was expanding fast and wide in the East, Kazan emerged as a pioneering center of Russian Orientalism, the “Kazan school” becoming an important stop for aspiring Russian minds, including that of young Tolstoy, to take stock of the country’s Asian character (Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2010, 106). While there, Tolstoy particularly enjoyed studying with the professor of Turko-Tatar letters Alexander Kasimovich Kazem-Bek (1802-1870). Although he would eventually switch from Oriental Studies to Law, Kazem-Bek would remain a favorite of his.

At the time Tolstoy met Kazem-Bek, the latter was on his way to become a major figure of Russian Orientology. The distinguished member of the Kazan School of Orientology was to be the first dean of the Department of Eastern Languages at St.

14 The nature of the Russian imperial rule in Asia and its similarities and differences from that of European colonial powers is a long-standing scholarly debate that has its roots in the eighteenth-century Russian elites’ efforts to situate Russia’s imperial origins in the “West.” See Bassin (1991); Lazzerini (1994); Burbank & Ransel (1998). The Russian elites’ anxiety to draw thick boundaries between the Western core and the Asian frontiers was evident in the Russian intellectuals’ investment in the debate amongst the European geographers over where to draw the line between Europe and Asia in the Russian lands. (Lewis and Wigen 1997, 27-28.) Notably, these debates did not translate into a long-term Tsarist policy for the Caucasus. An outstanding territorial stretch from the Eastern Europe to Japan with no official colonial policy led to what Khodarkovsky (2011) aptly describes as a “particular Russian hybrid of hyperaccentuated empire and underarticulated colonialism.” (168.) On the other hand, Tsarist officials’ perception of the Russian Empire as the bringer of European civilization and progress to backward people beyond the reach of civilization kept the colonial impulse familiar to European colonial empires strong and pervasive. (Jersild 2002, 11). Scholarly and political investments overlapped in the question of Russia’s place in the world. The political movement of Eurasianism, developed in the 1920s and revived in the 2000s, advanced the idea that Russia is neither European nor Asian, but a unique blend of both as a Eurasian power. The alleged uniqueness of Russia has been the subject of a major polemical debate among the Russian historians Adeeb Khalid (2000) and Nathaniel Knight (2000). Also see Todorova (2000).
Petersburg University, which he helped form in 1855. St. Petersburg was the final destination on his route that began in his hometown of Derbent on the Caspian shore, the northernmost city of the Azerbaijani homeland, and roughly followed the Volga northward to the Baltic shore. Kazem-Bek was born to a prominent Azerbaijani family from Derbent, his mother a Persian from the port town of Rasht on the Caspian. He studied Islamic sciences and law under the supervision of his father, an official of the Qajar Shah before the Russian annexation of the Caucasus and later the chief qadi, or judge, for Derbent’s Muslims under Tsarist rule. Kazem-Bek’s contacts with Scottish Presbyterians in the town of Astrakhan, where his father was later exiled by Tsarist authorities, led to his eventual conversion. Baptized into the Presbyterian Church, he took the Christian name of Aleksandr. However, neither his conversion to Christianity nor his eventual relocation to the Tsarist capital prevented Kazem-Bek from embracing his Persian roots, which he proudly displayed by sporting a silk turban and colorful robes on the streets of St. Petersburg. The Persian would father three children from a Russian wife, and four others out of wedlock.

Kazem-Bek’s career and his northward route reflected the new reaches of Azerbaijani mobility in the nineteenth century. While the Russo-Persian wars of the early 1800s struck a blow at Qajar Iran, bringing the Caucasus into the Russian fold, once the

15 For Kazem-Bek’s biography, I rely on Schimmelpenninck van der Oye (2010, 101-121).

16 One of his great-grandsons would become the leader of Russian émigré monarchists during the interwar years. See note 57 in Chapter 5, in Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2010, 106.
dust settled, a new horizon opened up for the Azerbaijanis that stretched from the Caspian to the Baltic. Situated on the Persian side of the Russo-Persian trade routes, the Azerbaijanis’ historical homeland was now divided by the two powers. Azerbaijans on the Russian side, now the Tsar’s new subjects, began to navigate this space through routes leading to the imperial capital, St. Petersburg, where they would become the scholars, writers, military officers, or, as in the case of Kazim-Bek, orientalists of the Russian empire.

Like Kazem-Bek, many Azerbaijanis who followed this northern route to St. Petersburg were the children of wealthy landed families of Transcaucasia. Those clans traditionally sent their children to prestigious Shi’a seminaries in the Iranian cities of Isfahan and Mashhad or to Najaf in the Ottoman Iraq. These notable families continued to underwrite the education of future clerics. But they were now discomfited by a new trend among the younger generation. A growing number of Azerbaijani youth were turning their backs on rigorous training in Islamic sciences to pursue Western education in the schools of Tbilisi, the administrative center of the Russian Caucasus. There, these young Azerbaijanis, though small in numbers, would rub shoulders with a cosmopolitan crowd of Armenians, Georgians, and Russians, whose own intellectual networks extended to Europe via Istanbul and St. Petersburg.

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Such cosmopolitan mixing in the fringes of the empire was essential to the success of Russian expansion in the nineteenth century, a connection perhaps most clear to the British, who had a far-flung empire to protect against this rival colonial expansion from the north. One worried English traveler-writer, after visiting the Russian Caucasus in 1883, would complain about the British quiescence, “though we see the vigorous roots of Russia deriving sustenance from the vitals of Tartary, Persia, and Turkey, and every year thrusting out suckers further and further east” (Marvin 1891, 314)

Modern Muslim intellectuals of Transcaucasia were born out of this new educational and intellectual orientation toward Russia during the nineteenth century. An early and cultic figure of this historic transformation is the playwright Mirza Fath ‘Ali Akhundzadah (1812-1878), or Akhundov in Russian/Soviet rendering. Coming from a wealthy landed family of the Caucasus with origins in Iranian Azerbaijan, Akhundzadah had originally been groomed for a career in the clergy with a southward itinerary to Iran or Najaf (Algar 2014). His decision to pursue a Western secular education brought him to Tbilisi instead, moving there in 1834. Working there as an interpreter to the Viceroy of the Caucasus, Akhundzadah would come in contact with the luminaries of Russian, Armenian, and Georgian literary circles. One of his earliest literary works, an elegy for Pushkin, was to be born out of this intellectual milieu he found in Tbilisi. The young admirer of Pushkin was only twenty-five when he wrote the “Eastern poem on the death of Pushkin” (Poema-ye šarq dar wafāt-e Pūškīn) and translated
it from Persian to Russian in prose. When a versified version by his friend Bestuzhev, a Decembrist exile in Tbilisi, was published in the journal Moskovskii Nablyudatel’ (Moscow Observer), it was accompanied by an editorial note “welcoming the poem as a tribute not merely to Pushkin but to Russian culture as a whole” (Algar 2014). Later in the century, the enigmatic author of the “Eastern poem” was to become a cult figure among the Azerbaijani intelligentsia whose careers were similarly launched from the Russian schools of Tbilisi, where they were likely to come after a madrasa education centered on Persian classics such as Saadi’s Gulistan and Hafez’s Divan.  

If Tbilisi became for the Azerbaijani elite an intellectual and educational gateway to a Westernized Russia, Baku became the city where Azerbaijanis entered Tsardom en masse. After the world’s first oil well was drilled on the outskirts of Baku in 1846, a petroleum industry gradually emerged around the oil reserves that had once lighted the Zoroastrian fire temples of pre-Islamic Persia. With the recognition of private rights to oil, the city rose to fame as the oil capital of the world with a population growth rate higher than that of major Western metropolises. The Nobel Brothers were among its new residents. The belle époque mansions built by the oil barons (now the major museum venues of Baku for art and history) became the highlights of a new urban landscape rising beyond the mediaeval walls that guarded the caravansaries, madrasas, 

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18 Ahmed Ağaoğlu, a Russian-educated Azerbaijani intellectual of the past century, remembers such classics as part of his madrasa education in Baku. (Akçura 1928, 422, quoted Shissler 2002, 46)
bathhouses, and minarets of the old city. The city where ‘new Russia’ met ‘old Persia’ became a land of opportunity and survival as many flocked to the city from its wider hinterland. While Armenians and Russians managed the oil business, Azerbaijanis from Iran worked the fields. They eventually turned Baku into a hotbed of revolutionary activity by the turn of the twentieth century. Young revolutionaries like Stalin would refine their rhetorical skills amongst Azerbaijani workers and activists, whose cosmopolitan connections to Tbilisi and Tabriz created a subversive triangle across the Russo-Persian frontiers, alarming both Tsarist Russia and Qajar Iran.

With their diasporic horizons stretched across Iran and Russia, Azerbaijanis inhabited an expansive geography. They took on multiple identifications without having to resolve their would-be contradictions. Tatars in Russian eyes, Azerbaijanis could also pass as Persian. These alternative strands did not necessarily present incompatibility, certainly not for the Russian photographer Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky (1863-1944) who used the title *Persidskie tatars* (Persian Tatars) for a photo he took in the Azerbaijani region of Saatli of two men leaning against a boat in a field. In what is possibly the earliest color photo of the Azerbaijani people, they were defined as Persian Tatars. Such juxtaposition apparently presented no contradiction to our Russian photographer who himself had Tatar origins.

With one leg in the culturally hybrid Russo-Tatar space and the other in the similarly hybrid Turko-Persian space, Azerbaijanis could hold many cultural strands at once, as did Kazem-Bek, Tolstoy’s teacher of Turko-Tatar letters. In a letter to his fiancée’s aunt, he would introduce himself as “[o]f Persian ancestry, faithful to the Protestant Church, a subject of the Russian Empire and Professor of Turco-Tatar Letters at the Imperial Kazan University” (Kazem-Bek 1893, 220 quoted Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2010, 101). Suited to his composite persona, the professor kept the Persian honorific title of “mirza” in his preferred form of address, which also included his given name with a Russian patronymic. Mirza Aleksandr Kasimovich, as he came to be known, was certainly not an ordinary figure. Self-identified as Persian and well-known for his works on Turko-Tatar languages, the Russian orientalist was like a chameleon that has many colors to him. Yet, what would seem like a contradiction from a Persian or Russian perspective alone falls into place once considered from the diasporic perspective of Azerbaijanis during the nineteenth century. Napoleon, then was only half right when he said, “Scratch a Russian, you will find a Tatar.” For the other half, we need to scratch a Tatar like Kazim-Bek, only to fathom the various Turkic, Persian, and Russian strands that account for Tatars like him in the first place. Only then can we fully unstack the matryoshka that lies at the heart of modern Russia.

20 Although most well-known for his work on linguistics, Kazem-Bek was a prolific and multilingual author who wrote on a range of subjects including history and Islamic jurisprudence.
Figure 15: Kazem-Bek in Persian robes. Mirza Aleksandr Kasimovich Kazem-Bek.

Figure 16: Kazem-Bek in the attire of Russian nobility.
2.3 The Original Young Turk

Central to Turkey’s modern history is a group of political actors called the Young Turks (Jön Türkler), or the Unionists (İttihatçilar), after their organization, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). What began as a secret society of medical students in the Military Medical College of Istanbul soon evolved into a political movement that eventually orchestrated the Ottoman Constitutional Revolution of 1908, also known as the Young Turk Revolution.²¹ Coming as it did after the constitutional revolutions of Russia (1905) and Iran (1906), the Young Turk Revolution (1908) fostered a constitutional triangle among these three empires, giving each imperial capital a political angle facing the other two. This transimperial opening came as a blessing for Russia’s Muslim activist intellectuals, who had witnessed the narrowing of mass politics in Russia following the Coup of June 1907 that restricted the electoral rights brought by the Revolution of 1905. When the ground they lost in St. Petersburg opened up in Istanbul, many of them made the Ottoman capital their new base, whence they continued to negotiate a dignified status for the Muslim populations of imperial Russia. Becoming a part of the Young Turk movement in Istanbul and maintaining ties to Russia’s Turkic-speaking Muslims, these intellectuals pioneered the ideology of Turkism in the cross-border Turkish-language media, and thus laid the foundations of modern Turkish nationalism (Meyer, 2014). If

²¹ On the Young Turks, see Hanioglu (1995; 2008) and Zurcher (1984; 2003).
the Young Turks lay at the heart of Turkish political history, the ideological origins of
Turkish nationalism lay with Russia’s Muslims.22

Among them was Ali Bey Hüseyinzade from the city of Salyan in Russian
Azerbaijan, who, before coming to Istanbul in 1889, followed the typical route of
educated Azerbaijanis within Tsarist Russia.23 Born to a family of Shi’a clerics (his
grandfather was the first Shi’a Sheikh-ul Islam of the Caucasus under Tsarist rule),
Hüseyinzade received his primary education in Tbilisi, before going off to the Russian
capital to study mathematics at St. Petersburg University. While there, he became
familiar with the Narodniks, whose populist movement carried strong anti-Tsarist
overtones. His affinity to anti-monarchist populism made him receptive to similar ideas
in the Ottoman capital, where he came to study at the Medical School of Istanbul
University. Within a year of his arrival, Hüseyinzade would join other medical students
in establishing an anti-monarchist underground network that would eventually evolve
into the Young Turk movement. Hüseyinzade, now a Young Turk, retained his Russian
subjecthood, even as he became an Ottoman subject.

Harassed by the Ottoman government for his underground anti-monarchist
activities, Hüseyinzade left Istanbul in 1903, for Baku. There his fellow Azerbaijanis as-

22 A growing body of literature has revealed a dense network of social and cultural ties across the Russian
and Ottoman empires. The geopolitical competition between the imperial centers did not prevent (in fact,
often prompted) the movement of people and exchange of ideas across their shared frontiers. See Khalid

23 For Hüseyinzade’s biography, I largely rely on Meyer, 2014: 153-156.
Russian-subjects were embroiled in debates regarding the empire’s future and their place in it. As a cosmopolitan industrial city with a significant Muslim population located on the edge of a Christian empire, Baku was both the recipient of and the breeding ground for ideological currents. When the constitutional revolution of 1905 opened up space for mass politics in Russia, Baku’s dynamism surged through an explosion of print media, turning the city into a marketplace of ideas with liberal, socialist, nationalist, and pan-Islamist currents competing and combining without end. The journals published during this period debated not only Russia’s future but also the affairs of Iran and the Ottoman Empire.

Hüseyinzade arrived in this emergent platform as the editor of the journal Hayat (1905-6) and Fiyuzat (1906-7), both sponsored by the Azerbaijani oil baron Zeynel Abidin Tagiyev. Through these two journals, Hüseyinzade would air his own political views, including his argument for Ottoman Turkish to become the common literary language of Turkic-speaking communities across Eurasia. In Hayat, he published a series of articles entitled “Who are the Turks and from whom are they constituted?” (Türkler Kimdir ve Kimlerden İbare?). While his stance on language created fierce debates among the Azerbaijani intelligentsia in Baku and Tbilisi, his views on Turkism would greatly

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24 Some sixty journals and newspapers were published in Azerbaijani Turkish from 1905 to 1916. (Altstadt, 1996: 207.) Baku was not only where most of these papers were printed, it was the recipient of many other papers issued elsewhere. For a catalogue of these papers printed or collected in Baku, see Atabaki and Rustamova (1995).
influence intellectuals elsewhere, the most prominent being Ziya Gökalp, arguably the most consequential figure of modern Turkish nationalism (Meyer 2014, 154).

Following the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, the Unionist leaders invited Hüseynzade back to the Ottoman capital, where he would become a presiding member of the Unionists in 1910. He was not the only Azerbaijani intellectual to join the Young Turks during this period, however, others like Ahmed Agayev and Mammad Amin Resulzadah followed similar routes, eventually bringing them to Istanbul in the wake of the Young Turk Revolution. With their experience in writing and editing newspapers and journals elsewhere, these Azerbaijanis thrived in the newly opened publishing market of Istanbul where the locals lacked the skills and experience (Meyer 2014, 156). The newly established journal of Türk Yurdu (Turkic Homeland), a product of this environment, became the platform that thrust our Azerbaijani activists to the limelight of Istanbul’s intellectual scene as the advocates of pan-Turkism.

The capital for the project came from the Russian city of Orenburg, where the merchant and philanthropist Mahmut Bey Huseyinov, who passed away in 1910, had left in his will ten thousand gold rubles to be given to the Russian Muslim community of Istanbul. The money, smuggled to Istanbul by a Muslim pilgrim from Russia en route to Mecca, was to be used for the construction of a dormitory for Russian-born Muslim students and the establishment of a journal relating to Russian Muslims (Meyer 2014, 159-160). With this fortuitous funding, Russian-born Muslim activists, including the
Tatar intellectual Yusuf Akçura, joined with Ottoman Turks in founding the journal in 1911. Assembled by Russian-born Tatars and Azerbaijanis out of their local and diasporic ties in Ottoman Istanbul and Russia, Tük Yurdu emerged as a transimperial product of the constitutional era.

Ali Bey Hüseyinzade and Ahmed Aghayev, the two Russian-born Azerbaijani intellectuals in Istanbul, were among the journal’s founders and its regular contributors. As a publishing venture that attracted large audiences from Russia and the Ottoman Empire, the journal fulfilled an idea that the Muslim reformist intellectuals in Russia had stressed for years, namely, the need for a common Turkic-language press addressing readers on both sides of the Russo-Ottoman frontier on matters of shared concern. Tük Yurdu became that transimperial platform for these activists who, now based in Istanbul, could speak both to the Ottoman public and the Muslims in Russia alike. Their agenda was not the unification of Turkic-speaking people under a single polity, but the enabling of a progressive cultural order sustained by educated Muslim publics beyond imperial borders (Meyer 2014: 161).

The new ideology of Turkism, developed in the cross-border Turkic-language media, gained political purchase when both sides of the border were left in political disarray in the wake of the Great War. The Ottoman Empire lost its cosmopolitan heartland during the Balkan Wars (1912-3) and was on the verge of collapse by the end of the Great War (1914-1918), with its capital Istanbul under Allied occupation. The
Russian Empire on the other hand was thrown into a full-fledged civil war between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks following the overthrow of the Tsarist regime in 1917. With the great imperial orders around them collapsing into chaos, Russia’s Muslim intellectuals began to invest in alternative political projects. In the meantime, the Unionist leadership was in search of geographic space to create buffer zones between an emerging Bolshevik empire and theirs (Reynolds, 2009). As the fate of Russian Muslims and that of the Unionist leadership aligned, this alignment became visible in the Unionists’ political patronage of a state-making project in the Caucasus in 1918, resulting in the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. The Unionists’ hand in the project was brokered by the Azerbaijani bankers from Istanbul, Hüseyinzade and Aghayev, who were once again drawn back to Baku, where they became the representatives of a state of their own making.

Meanwhile the independence movement led by Mustafa Kemal from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire would receive significant military and financial support from the Bolshevik leadership that emerged victorious from the civil war in Russia. In return for this vital support, the emergent Turkish leadership relinquished the Caucasus, which allowed the Bolsheviks to take over the former Tsarist territories in the Caucasus with

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25 As Russian frontiers disarrayed into chaos under a civil war between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, they provided fertile ground for self-made leaders of the constitutionalist opening to engage with state-making projects of their own. Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918-20) was one of them. Others included the Crimean People’s Republic (December 1917 to January 1918), the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (February-May 1918), the Menshevik-sponsored Transcaspian Government (November 1918 - July 1919), and Azadistan (June-September 1920). Though short-lived, these projects anchored alternative futures now lost to view.
comparative ease. With this mutual settlement across Russo-Ottoman frontiers, Azerbaijan Democratic Republic came to a quick end two years after it was born. As the Azerbaijani state-making project ended with the Bolshevik take-over of Baku in 1920, many of the intellectual-turned-leader Azerbaijanis returned to Istanbul once again, where they were soon to become Turkish citizens of the new republic founded by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923. Amongst them was Ali Bey Hüseyinzade, the original Young Turk from the Caucasus. Back in Istanbul, he continued to teach medicine in Istanbul University, where he and his friends had once formed the initial cadre of the Young Turks. With Ataturk having pacified the Young Turk cadres in 1925, the new republic would draw a curtain over its own trans-imperial roots.

Figure 17: Ali Bey Hüseyinzade in traditional Caucasian attire.
2.4 Onion or Garlic?

Following Azerbaijanis diasporic routes crisscrossing imperial frontiers reveals their roots in Iran, Turkey, and Russia. These roots are aired in the popular debates around Shah Ismail, who variously appears in them as a Turkic poet, a Persian king, a Sufi leader, or a Shi’a emperor. Shah Ismail is now a figure of popular history for the Turkish public, who are familiar with a recurrent debate on his identity and legacy: Is Ismail first and foremost a Turkic poet and leader to be embraced as part of Turkish history despite his Shi’a creed? Or is he ultimately an Iranian Shah who challenged the Ottomans and, as such, remains an outsider to the Sunni-Ottoman past of modern
Turkey? Shah Ismail is no less ambivalent a figure in Iran: Is he a Sufi leader to be downplayed for his unorthodox origins at odds with the Shi‘a orthodoxy of modern Iran? Or is he a traditional figure of Persian kingship, one to be celebrated for having restored the grandeur of ancient Iran under the Shi‘a banner? For those in post-Soviet Azerbaijan who take Shah Ismail to be their ancestor, the debate becomes somewhat of a collective parley on national identity: Are Azerbaijanis part of Persian history, or Turkish history, or neither?

Following the controversy around Shah Ismail from one country to another reveals shared cultural strands across political borders. These strands present nothing short of a contradiction when seen from within a single country. But why not keep the strands together rather than unravel them? That would embrace fully the controversy around Shah Ismail as opposed to proposing a spurious resolution in any specific direction. The controversy itself illuminates Azerbaijanis’ possible roots—whether seen as noble or rotten—as well as their past routes, some foreclosed and others still open. Shah Ismail’s capacious persona, rooted in the Turko-Persian exchanges of the mediaeval era, reflects both the historical specificity and the cultural complexity of the Azerbaijani figure that we are concerned with in this study. In his seemingly exceptional hybridity, we thus argue, Shah Ismail is a typical Azerbaijani.

Casting Shah Ismail as a typical Azerbaijani within the Persian realm is not a political investment of sorts in salvaging a ‘minority history.’ In fact, until the turn of the
twentieth century, Azerbaijani would hardly mean anything beyond a provincial identification. Rather, it is an analytical move to make visible the constitution of the Iranian realm from without by a larger historical geography, one that is made through Turko-Persian exchanges and facilitated by shared idioms of Islam. In the first instance, then, Azerbaijani is a Turkic-speaking Muslim from Azerbaijan, who is enmeshed in Persian customs. Conceptualized as such, the term does not stipulate a single origin but leaves the category open to Persianized Turks, linguistically Turkified Persians, and those with a mixed ancestry. It is less an ethnohistorical category than a historically-informed conceptual one. It requires active engagement with Turkic, Persian, and Islamic traditions to become a Turko-Persian Muslim of Azerbaijan, or as we call him, an Azerbaijani. What makes the category capacious is also what gives its specificity. Conceptualizing Shah Ismail as an Azerbaijani in the singular, then, helps us retain the seemingly contradictory strands together such as his disputed Turkish-Kurdish-Persian origins, his Turko-Persian bilingualism, his Turkish poetry, and his Persian kingship, rather than artificially strip them off from him.

The Azerbaijani figure, as construed in this study, is more like a garlic than an onion, to borrow the flavorful metaphor once used by historian Cemal Kafadar to discuss sources on early Ottoman historiography (1995, 99-102). Whereas the onion suggests the presence of ‘a core underneath,’ a core that can be reached by peeling off the layers around it, a garlic can hold many cloves at once without a single core. In other
words, if the former’s ‘essence’ is reached by dispensing with the additional layers around it, the latter’s singularity is given by the many cloves it holds at once.

The analytical purchase of the garlic metaphor is thrown into sharp relief when we extend our temporal scale across centuries, because with time, the Azerbaijani character becomes more capacious even as she retains her singularity. In the early nineteenth century, as the Tsar’s forces conquered the Caucasus, they also opened up a new landscape for Azerbaijanis who acquired new roots within it. By the end of that century, a typical Azerbaijani is someone who could variously become part of the Iranian and Russian realms, passing as Turk, Persian, Tatar, or even as “Persian Tatar.” If these many associations, old and new, make our Azerbaijani figure more capacious, they also make her more singular, for the many strands she now holds across the Russo-Persian frontier are not arbitrary but historically specific. Such capacious singularity finds its clear expression in a figure like Kazim-Bek, who can articulate his Turko-Persian roots with the newly acquired Turko-Tatar ones within the Russian realm.

Once placed within the culturally hybrid geographies of Turko-Persia and Turko-Tatar Russia, Azerbaijanis’ entrance to the Ottoman realm at the turn of the century appears hardly a stretch of the imagination. As Turko-Tatar Muslims of Russia, Azerbaijanis could easily became locals within the Ottoman space, as is the case with Ali Bey Hüseyinzade, whose ventures we followed earlier in the chapter. Coming from a prominent family of Shi’a clerics in the Caucasus, Hüseyinzade was educated in the
cities of Tbilisi and St. Petersburg before arriving to the Ottoman capital, only to move back and forth between Istanbul and Baku, as both a Young Turk and a Russian Muslim.

Like ripened garlic with a full bulb, a typical Azerbaijani like Hüseyinzade, by the turn of the twentieth century, is someone who is able to become a local within Qajar Iran, Tsarist Russia, and the Ottoman Empire. That multiplex orientation allows them to travel across empires as cosmopolitans. Such local cosmopolitanism is not a given property of a people, but a historically configured potential that is fulfilled by those who move on those routes and articulate their different roots along the way. If there is no movement across borders or no engagement with roots, then there is no Azerbaijani as we understand it in this study. In other words, it is through mobility and historical mindedness that the subject of this study walks the earth to begin with.

If traveling like an Azerbaijani across the imperial domains of the Ottomans, Russians, and Persians means to be an outsider to these places without being a stranger to any of them, in the same vein, dwelling like an Azerbaijani in any of these domains is to be an insider without the parochialism of a local. Whether a familiar outsider crossing borders or a cosmopolitan local engaging with multiple roots, an Azerbaijani is likely to be someone with an expansive perspective on what is shared culturally and politically among the three domains and what sets them apart. Such comparative perspective is not given, but rather built through an active engagement with shared pasts across borders with a view to building the future. If there is no such engagement, then a shared
transimperial space across borders is simply non-existent; the objective presence of a shared past cannot make up for the absence of an actor who engages with that past as a moral resource to shape the future. The distinction is essential, for the shared cultural strands we observe among imperial domains are not simply there; they emerge only in the process of being reconfigured by those actors who invoke them in the first place. In other words, what we call “shared cultural strands” are, in fact, traces of them being scattered around and assembled anew. Without an actor to assemble them, they simply disappear.

What connects the three empires then are not some dormant cultural strands, but actors who argue for the presence of those strands and vigorously act upon them. Traveling and dwelling like an Azerbaijani is therefore indispensable to the formation of an interconnected cultural space across imperial borders. In other words, emergence of a shared transimperial space goes hand in hand with building a diasporic perspective. It is in this regard that we speak of an Azerbaijani Triangle in the first place. Without people traveling like an Azerbaijani, there is no Azerbaijani Triangle to speak of. In the next chapter, we follow the Azerbaijanis as they make their own Triangle in the wake of the constitutional revolutions.
3. The Triangle

May 2, 1903—Tbilisi, Tsarist Russia. Readers of Sharq-i Rus (Russia’s East), a newspaper issued from Tbilisi in Azerbaijani Turkish, came upon an article sent from Baku. “Thank God,” rejoiced the author, “a thousand thanks to God indeed, we Caucasian Muslims have our own newspaper at last” (Yagublu 2015, 18). The enthusiastic author, Mammad Amin Resulzadeh, was a nineteen-year-old anti-Tsarist with socialist leanings. Just as his short articles appeared on the Tbilisi-based Sharq-i Rus, he himself was busy mobilizing Muslim laborers in Baku. His activism soon drew the attention of Ioseb Jughashvili, a Georgian socialist from Tbilisi who would later become better-known as Stalin. The two would meet in 1904, when Jughashvili visited Baku looking to recruit Muslims to the Bolshevik cadres. Their meeting at an oil refinery resulted in the foundation of Hümmet (Power), the Muslim branch of the Bolsheviks in Baku; Resulzadeh became the editor-in-chief of its partisan newspaper. When the constitutional revolution of 1905 opened the gates for mass politics in Russia, the Muslim Bolshevik would make his name in the burgeoning press milieu of Baku and Tbilisi and voice his opinions on Russia’s future from the cosmopolitan corner of a vast empire.

August 23, 1909—Tehran, Qajar Iran. Iran-e Now (New Iran), a European-style newspaper in Persian, often noted as the first of its kind in modern Iran, printed its first
issue. Its debut came in the wake of a tumultuous decade in Iran. First came the constitutional revolution in 1906, followed by its repression in 1908, when the shah bombarded the parliament with support from the British and the Russians. Finally a new pro-constitutionalist effort restored the parliament in 1909, merely a month before the release of Iran-e Now’s first issue. “We know,” the editorial of the first issue addressed the readers, “for history reminds us, how many times Iran has risen back to the heights of glory from the brink of vanishing...Especially the recent events have demonstrated to the whole world that we, Iranians, can consider ourselves as one of the world’s robust nations.” The man behind the words was none other than our Muslim Bolshevik from Baku, Mammad Amin Resulzadeh. Here in Iran, we find him next to the liberal constitutionalists who had recently been organized under Ferqa-ye Demokrat-e Iran (the Democratic Party). In fact, Iran-e Now operated as the party’s media organ and brought its outspoken editor to the political spotlight. Resulzadeh, now a liberal Iranian nationalist, would soon find himself at the center of heated public polemics over the future of the Iranian nation.

November 30, 1911—Istanbul, Ottoman Empire. The pan-Turkist journal Türk Yurdu (Turkish Homeland) launched its first issue amid much fanfare. Funded by a

1 The British Orientalist Edward Granville Browne described Iran-e Now as “the greatest, most important and best known of the Persian newspapers, and the first to appear in the large size usual in Europe” (1914, 52).

2 The Azerbaijani translation of this article can be found here: http://rasulzade.org/articles/2_2.html
Tatar Muslim merchant from Orenburg in Russia and led by a Muslim Tatar émigré in the Ottoman capital, the journal provided pan-Turkist writers a common platform and a public voice in the Ottoman capital. Only weeks into its debut, the journal attracted much attention with a series of articles on Iranian Turks. The first article began with the following note: “Turks comprise a significant portion of this unfortunate country [Iran], the majority of which is Persian. Turk Yurdu, whose goal and occupation is to work for the benefits of Turks, surely wants to inform its readers about the Iranian Turks. Upon Turk Yurdu’s request, and in the capacity of an Iranian journalist…I would like to deliver a partial description of Iran, whose sorrows I have shared and whose interests I have served.” This heartbroken Iranian patriot was the same Resulzadeh who addressed the Iranian readers in Tehran. He had fled to Istanbul after the dissolution of the Iranian parliament in 1911. The ground he had lost in Iran was wide open in the Ottoman capital, thanks to the constitutional revolution of 1908, also known as the Young Turk Revolution. Now among the Young Turks, Resulzadeh regularly contributed to their journals and newspapers issuing from Istanbul.

December 1, 1914—Baku, Tsarist Russia. A decade has passed since Resulzadeh had addressed the Caucasian Muslims through the Tbilisi-based Sharq-i Rus and the Baku-based Hümmet. Back again, he asked: “O Turkish youth, who will safeguard the

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3 Transliteration of this passage from Perso-Arabic to Latin can be found here: http://www.rasulzade.org/articles/2_35.html
future of the nation, where are you?!”⁴ Evidently, the pan-Islamist and socialist overtones of his earlier writings had given way to pan-Turkic ideas, which he espoused in a number of Baku-based newspapers and journals.⁵ His anti-tsarist activism was now focused on achieving political autonomy for the Azerbaijani Turks living under Russian rule. The secret political party he led, Musavat (Equality), would become a major political force in Transcaucasia following tsardom’s collapse in 1917. Soon after the empire was thrown into a civil war with the October Revolution, Musavat members declared the independence of a Transcaucasian state called the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918–1920), with Resulzadeh as its founder and speaker. Yet only two years later, the founding father of that short-lived republic became a prisoner of the Bolsheviks, who took over Baku in 1920. Coming to his rescue at this critical moment was his old friend Jughashvili, or as he was now known, Stalin. The former comrades headed to the Bolshevik capital, Moscow, for the last time their friendship, forged at an oil refinery some fifteen years ago, outweighed their ideological falling out.

What do these snapshots tell us about a figure like Resulzadeh? If one only viewed one, it might be possible to imagine him as a stationary figure firmly immersed

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⁴ The question came at the end of an article which can be found here: http://www.rasulzade.org/articles/2_124.html. It was the first of a series of articles that appeared in the biweekly journal Dirilik [Vitality].

⁵ These included the daily newspaper Açıq Söz (1915-8) and the biweekly journal Dirilik (1914-16).
in the local context. Yet the reality was a man extraordinarily on the move. His
movement does not unfold on a single ideological current. Just as he reorients from
Bolshevism to liberalism in Tehran, he comes to a pan-Turkist bent by the time he leaves
Ottoman Istanbul for Russian Baku. Nor does he travel with a single identity card. He
variously identifies with his readers as Russia’s Muslims, Iranians, or Turks. At times, he
holds onto more than one.

By variously picking up and letting go of different ideas and identifications,
Resulzadeh moves between places. When he comes under pressure in one domain, he
finds refuge in another. Unlike refugees, however, for whom movement often implies
uprooting and deprivation of local power, he relocalizes himself by drawing upon
previous ties of shared history, language, or kinship. And as a local, he is empowered by
his ability to engage with faraway audiences and to mobilize resources elsewhere.
Rerouting across three empires does not prevent Resulzadeh from rooting himself
within each domain. If anything, it makes him more influential in these varied settings.

In the literature on diasporas, this ability to establish deep cultural and moral ties
with multiple political domains has been referred to as local cosmopolitanism (Ho 2002,
2006). Local cosmopolitans, according to Engseng Ho, are “persons who, while
imbedded in local relations, also maintain connections with distant places” (2006, 31).
Developed in the oceanic context of the Hadrami diaspora, the concept questions the
binary of home and abroad. It rather suggests the presence of a single diasporic
geography, where different places are interconnected by historically accumulated ties of language, religion, kinship, trade, and so forth. When a member of the diaspora moves between these places by engaging any one of these historical ties, his mobility articulates at least two different contexts.⁶

### 3.1 Triangle of Local Cosmopolitans

Identifying Resulzadeh as a local cosmopolitan enables us to explore his travels, dwellings, and writings in a single thread that goes in and out of different local contexts. As none of these locales alone can provide a vantage point that captures the thread in its entirety, our camera has to move with the protagonist and follow him to different contexts. Only by putting together the footage from that moving camera can we make out the bigger sequence. And this sequence, more like a moving film sequence than fixed snapshot, would reveal a collection of pathways trod by diasporic Azerbaijanis, whose local cosmopolitan ties opened one empire to another beyond the control of imperial centers.

These transimperial pathways overlapped in Transcaucasia, where Iran, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire shared a frontier. Though being peripheral to each domain individually, this frontier region was at the center of them all. When we project this inverted perspective onto a map, its unmistakable geometry strikes the eye (see Figures ____________).

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⁶ In a way, local cosmopolitanism is the conceptual articulation of what we tried to convey through the metaphor of garlic in the previous chapter.
19 and 20). Two triangles, one inside the other, provide a geometric illustration of Azerbaijanis’ diasporic horizons at the turn of the twentieth century. While the cities of Baku, Tabriz, and Tbilisi constitute the center of this interconnected geography, the imperial capitals lay at its fringes. It was through the smaller triangle that Azerbaijanis could become part of different imperial realms and circulate in the larger triangle.

As we will see in this chapter, the three cities that constituted the smaller triangle were not simply places of transit, where currents generated elsewhere went through unchanged. Rather, they were places of translation and transformation. Together, these three cities constituted a shared transimperial space where traces of various passages across imperial borders were deposited, reassembled, and put back into circulation. By producing currents of its own, this smaller triangle did more than just intermediate between separate imperial realms; it transformed them from without.\footnote{In this respect, the role Azerbaijanis played among the three empires can be characterized as mediation rather than intermediation. For a discussion of the difference and the analytical import of such differentiation, see Latour (2005, 37-42).} In this geographically tight, historically cosmopolitan triangle, the three empires shared a back room where the fate of each imperial domain was worked out in relation to one another. This process was mediated by diasporic societies that went in and out of that shared back room.

If Azerbaijanis were one such society, Armenians were another. In fact, one may easily speak of a congruent Armenian Triangle for the same period. Diasporic
Armenians similarly tied together Iran, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire through their mobility and local cosmopolitanism. In terms of their visibility within each empire, the two diasporas were mirror images of each other. Whereas Muslim Azerbaijanis were a religious minority in Russia, Orthodox Christian Armenians shared the same creed with their tsar. The relationship was reversed in the Muslim-ruled domains of the Ottomans and Qajars. In terms of their visibility as a diaspora, the two populations typified two opposite ends. The long history of Armenian self-representation set them apart in archives and literature, rendering their diasporic presence historically visible for scholars today. Azerbaijanis, on the other hand, did not run the show under a single name, leaving that burden to the poor scholar who has to make the case. We begin our journey in Tbilisi, the city of intellectuals where Resulzadeh published his first ever article.

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8 For a study of Armenian activism across empires during the Constitutional period, see Berberian (2001).

9 Now associated with two small post-Soviet states squeezed side by side like the wrongly placed pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.
Figure 19: Azerbaijani Triangle with Tehran, St. Petersburg, and Istanbul at its Vertices.

Figure 20: Azerbaijani Triangle with Baku, Tabriz, and Tbilisi at its Vertices.
3.1.1 The City of Intellectuals

With its many hills rising between the curves of the Kura River, Tbilisi provides a breathtaking panorama for its visitors. In the nineteenth century, the city hosted such figures as Leo Tolstoy and Alexander Pushkin, who waxed lyrical about its charms. By that time, the ancient Georgian capital had become the seat of the Russian viceroy in the Caucasus. As Russia’s administrative center, the city’s nineteenth-century outlook emulated that of the imperial capital, St. Petersburg. The view from its ancient fortress revealed a neoclassical landscape of museums, parks, government buildings, schools, and a theater that would impress Alexander Dumas who visited the town in 1858. It was not just neoclassical architecture that was imported from St. Petersburg, however, but also modern education, scientific societies, and intellectual currents. These imports turned Tbilisi into a major cultural center by the second half of the nineteenth century. Along with these currents came artists, statesmen, poets, dissidents, and writers, including young Tolstoy, who applauded Tbilisi’s efforts to imitate St. Petersburg (Jersild 2002, 64).

It was predominantly a Christian city, comprised mainly of Armenians and Georgians. Just as Russians came as officials and dissidents, the city also had a Muslim quarter where Azerbaijanis, or Tatars in tsarist nomenclature, lived. Azerbaijanis came to the city from other places as merchants, low-wage laborers, and students to study in the Russian and Armenian schools. Huseynizadeh, the Young Turk whom we followed in
the previous chapter, owed much of his intellectual formation to these modern, European-style schools. His early acquaintance with Narodnik ideas there would remain with him as he moved to St. Petersburg and Istanbul, where some Young Turks would look up to him as a “distinguished prophet” (Hanioğlu 1995, 22).

Perhaps the most influential of the Azerbaijani luminaries whose careers were launched in Tbilisi schools was Akhundov, the Pushkin admirer whom we encountered in the previous chapter. Working as an interpreter to the viceroy of the Caucasus and teaching at an Armenian school, Akhundov was in touch with the broader intellectual currents in the Russian Empire. His close acquaintance with Russian romanticists like Yakov Polonsky and exiled constitutionalists such as Alexender Bestuzhev-Marlinsky molded his reformist views on state and society (Swietochowski 1995, 51). Yet the primary target of his reformist agenda was Iran, not Russia. Akhundov considered himself “almost an Iranian” (Swietochowski 1995, 28). He was invested in the modernist transformation of Qajar Iran; in an open letter to the Iranian shah, he wrote

> The stability of kingship and the continuity of the dynasty go hand in hand with learning and the freeing of the people from superstitions. Having fulfilled this precondition, the Shah ought to set up Free Masonic Lodges and representative assemblies, and to effect concord with the people, so that he would be of one mind and heart with them. He should not regard the kingdom as his property, but rather see himself as the people’s trustee…He should act in accordance with the requirements of the law and have no right to a willful action…The people, knowing his excellent qualities, will love him, and will pay no heed to anyone

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10 Swietochowski notes that Akhundzadeh used the term _vatan_ (fatherland) in reference to both Iran and Azerbaijan without compromising his loyalty to the Tsarist Empire (1995, 28).
claiming his rights...mindful that the Shah has given them security, public
order, justice, and well-being. In such a way they will become patriots: in his
name, they will sacrifice their lives and property for the country
(Swietochowski, 1995, 27–28)

Akhundov’s reformist ideas would give him an eager audience within Iran,
among them the Iranian-Armenian diplomat and journalist Mirza Malkum Khan and
the Qajar prince in Tabriz, Jalal-al-Din Mirza. Akhundov’s correspondence with these
prominent Iranian figures largely pertained to the administrative reform in Qajar Iran.
However, these conversations were perfused with hints of an unmistakable nostalgia for
pre-Islamic Persia and a passionate call to recuperate its political and cultural glory. This
was because the territorial losses of Qajar Iran were understood to be not only a matter
of political stagnation but also one of cultural degeneration. Thus, the drive for imperial
glory could only be achieved through both political reform and cultural revival.

Akhundov’s reformist agenda for Iran was a holistic one and as such carried the marks
of Russian romanticism prevalent among the literary circles of Tbilisi and St. Petersburg.
His writings and correspondence prefigured the romantic Iranian nationalism of the late
nineteenth century and lured the minds of many an Iranian reformer, including Malkum
Khan, Mirza Agha Khan Kermani, Zein ul-‘Abdin Maraghe’i, Mirza ‘abd ul-Rahim
Talibof, and Ahmad Kasravi (Swietochowski 1995, 28).

Akhundov’s hostility to Islam and his strong identification with pre-Islamic
Persia underpinned his passionate anti-Arab sentiment and drove his staunch advocacy
for reform of the Arabic alphabet in its application to Turkish and Persian. Although
Akhundov wrote his poetry in Persian, most of his prose was written in the language of his native land: Turki. And he saw to it that these languages were simplified in their script and “purified” of Arabic influences, an agenda he shared with a number of reformists in Tabriz and Tehran.\(^{11}\) Akhundov also sought audiences for his language reform in Istanbul, where he came in 1863 hoping to convince the Ottoman pashas for a comprehensive alphabet reform.\(^{12}\) His proposals were considered twice by the Ottoman Scientific Society, albeit with no immediate tangible results. Though he returned from Istanbul to Tbilisi empty-handed, Akhundov continued to propose reform through correspondence with the Russian administration in the Caucasus, Orientalists in St. Petersburg and Paris, and reformists in Iran.

Akhundov’s tireless campaigns to simplify the Arabic alphabet made a great impact on Qajar Prince Jalal-al-Din Mirza (1826–1870), whose *Nama-ye Khosravan* (Book of the Monarchs) was a pioneering attempt to write a national history of Iran in simple Persian. Others followed suit, such as Mirza Agha Khan Kermani (1854–1896), who in his *A’ina-ye Skandari* (Alexandrian Mirror) provided a sweeping history of Iran, contrasting its ancient glory with its current plight (Ashraf, 2006). His literary activism had a spiraling effect within Iran, but Akhundov kept refining his proposals until he

\(^{11}\) One of them was the Iranian Armenian Mirza Malkum Khan, who was similarly active across empires as a journalist, diplomat, and writer. For his biography, see Algar (1973).

\(^{12}\) For the details of his proposals and his correspondence with Malkhum Khan on alphabet reforms, see Parsinejad (2003, 101-105).
finally opted for a total replacement of the Arabic alphabet with a mixture of Roman and Cyrillic, prefiguring the language reforms of the early twentieth century both in Turkey and the Soviet Union (Algar, 2014).

From Tbilisi, where he was stationed as a tsarist officer, Akhundov could engage the political and intellectual worlds of Russia, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire. Today, it is hard to encapsulate Akhundov’s legacy in one place. Although many scholars consider him to be the founding father of modern literary criticism in Iran, others dub him the pioneer of modern Azerbaijani literature. Even harder to encase in one place is the legacy of his campaigns for alphabet reform, which evolved through his correspondence with the literary circles and administrators in Tabriz, Tehran, Tbilisi, St. Petersburg, and Istanbul. Without ceasing to be a loyal subject of Tsarist Russia, he became the forerunner of romantic Iranian nationalism (Swietochowski 1995, 28). And this early Iranian nationalist also became a major figure of the Turkic literary renaissance. Although he had anti-Ottoman sentiments, his efforts to reform and revive Turki were exemplary for the next generation of Azerbaijani intellectuals who became part of the pan-Turkist circles in the Ottoman Empire. His immersion in Russian modernity, his reformist views on Iran’s state and society, and his activism for language reform in the Turkic world left a strong legacy among the next generation of Azerbaijani intellectuals,
who moved about the same space at the turn of the past century.\textsuperscript{13}

One steward of Akhundov’s legacy was Neriman Nerimanov, who studied in the Tatar Department of the Transcaucasian Teachers Seminary in Gori, established in 1879 as a result of Akhundov’s efforts.\textsuperscript{14} Born in Tbilisi into a Shi’\textquoteleft a Azerbaijani family, he became a keen observer of Russian modernization from an early age. A paper he wrote in his senior year at the Teachers Seminary explored the significance of Peter the Great’s modernization programs, and his exposure to Russian literature inspired him to produce a number of plays, novels, short stories, and translations from Russian, such as Gogol’s \textit{Inspector General} (Bayat 1991, 80). But it was in Baku that he finally made his break, thanks to the Azerbaijani oil magnate Zeynalabdin Taghiyev (d. 1924). Sponsoring the young writer through the Taghiyev scholarship and propelling his plays onto the Taghiyev theater, the wealthy philanthropist played a key role in the life of Nerimanov, as he did for many other aspiring Muslims of Transcaucasia. Having studied medicine in Odessa on the Taghiyev scholarship, Nerimanov returned to Baku as a revolutionary—much to his benefactor’s dismay.

\textsuperscript{13} Akhundov, because of his modernist views and secular outlook, was celebrated by the Constitutionalist circles. His legacy continued in the Soviet period; in fact the efforts of Soviet historians in discovering anti-Islamic and modernist elements in the heritage of the Azerbaijani thinkers amounted to a virtual cult of Akhundov (Swietochowski 1995, 118).

\textsuperscript{14} This Russian-language seminary was a specialized educational institution for those interested in pursuing careers at regional primary schools across the Caucasus. The language of instruction was Russian. Other Russian-language schools, modeled on the ones in Tbilisi, were established in Baku, Shusha, Elizabethpol (Gence), and Erevan.
3.1.2 The City of Revolutionaries

The spontaneous flames erupting from the ground in Baku must have lured the Zoroastrians, who continued to visit the city long after having fled from the Muslim conquest of Persia. A fire temple these visitors built during the eighteenth century even became a Zoroastrian pilgrimage site frequented by Parsi merchants coming from India. While the pilgrims and merchants revered the holy fire reaching up to the sky, by the mid-nineteenth century, Russian industrialists were inquiring into its source under the ground—namely, the fossil fuel reserves. By the end of that century, a number of oil and gas plants had sprung up within view of the temple, but the spontaneous fires on the oil gushes did not remind anyone of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda anymore. In fact, rumor has it that the holy fire fizzled out when a nearby plant cut the flow of natural gas to the temple.

A booming petroleum industry transformed the medieval landscape of Baku into a modern metropolis during the later nineteenth century. The labyrinthine streets of its center were dwarfed by the emerging outer city with its wide boulevards, belle époque mansions, and a public square with dozens of enchanting fountains, an attraction to this day for visitors and locals alike. Russians and Armenians came to this new city, seeking their fortunes as investors, bankers, and factory managers. In stark contrast to their

15 Instead, those fires were now the harbinger of a looming hell, as captured by the mini silent movie “The Oil Gush Fire in Bibiheybat” shot by Alexandre Michon in 1898. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLuCljukduSw
propitious mood were the miserable conditions of laborers working the oilfields on the city’s outskirts. Many of these wretched souls were Iranian Azerbaijanis who had come from Tabriz and its environs. Their numbers reached twenty-four thousand by 1897, and increased each year by thousands, as evidenced by a total of 312,000 entry visas issued by the Russian consulate in Tabriz from 1891 to 1904 (Bayat 1991, 98). This continuous influx of expatriates changed the demographics of Baku. The city had long been inhabited by an indigenous Iranian people called the Tats, who were now surpassed by a mixed crowd of Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Russians.

As the world’s oil capital, Baku was rife with class conflict and revolutionary activism by the beginning of the twentieth century. Major strikes were mobilized by local Muslim activists organized under the Hümmet party, established by Resulzadeh and his friends. The Hümmet leaders were exposed to Marxism and social democratic ideas in the Russian-language schools where they studied in Baku, Tbilisi, Kazan, Odessa, Moscow, or St. Petersburg. These schools served as nodal points of intellectual currents blowing from Russia’s European frontier and played a formative role for the Russian-educated Muslim socialists of Transcaucasia, including Neriman Nerimanov, who left Baku in 1902 to study at the Russian medical school in Odessa. There, the

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16 By 1897, the number of Iranian Azerbaijanis in Russia was 73,920, of whom 60,405 lived in Transcaucasia—23,968 in Baku and 8,142 in Tbilis (Bayat 1991, 98).

17 Although Hümmet was largely composed of Muslim socialists, its leadership included Armenian and Georgian Bolsheviks as well, such as the Armenian Stepan Shaumian and the Georgian P. A. Dzjaparidze, Lenin’s close associate in Transcaucasia (Bayat 1991, 87).
young literary luminary discovered the works of Marx and other socialist thinkers and began to take part in student movements. In 1905 he was among the organizers of a student strike staged in solidarity with the riots in St. Petersburg earlier that year, known as Bloody Sunday (Bayat 1991, 81). Upon his return to Baku, he was a changed man with a revolutionary zeal. He joined the Hümmetists, providing them with much-needed organizational experience and oratory skills. As a Hümmet leader, he helped stage strikes among the Iranian Azerbaijani laborers, including Taghiyev’s textile workers, inciting the wrath of his former benefactor (Bayat 1991, 92).

It was in this atmosphere of rampant activism that the Iranian émigré community, together with local revolutionaries in Baku, founded Ferqa-ye Ejtema‘iun-e ‘Ammiun (Social Democratic Party) in 1905. This party of Iranians was closely linked with the Hümmet group. In fact, its program was adopted from Hümmet, just as Hümmet’s own program was adopted from the Bolsheviks (Russian Social Democratic Worker’s Party). And it was Neriman Nerimanov who apparently translated the Bolshevik program from Russian to Azerbaijani Turkish for the Hümmet party and later modified it to adopt as the party program of the Iranians’ Social Democratic Party (Afary 1998). Although the party was connected to Hümmet in Baku, it also had a secret branch in Tabriz, established in collaboration with local merchants there. Known as Markaz-e Gahibi, or Secret Center, this group was led by a Tabrizi merchant, Ali “Monsieur,” who frequently visited Hümmet members in Baku and Tbilisi and distributed leaflets from
there to various part of Iran (Afary 1998).

This Secret Center in Tabriz would play a crucial role in the Iranian constitutional revolution through its volunteer group of *mojaheds* (fighters). This group included a money changer from the bazaar, who assassinated Prime Minister Mirza Ali Asghar Khan in 1908; chivalrous brigands like Sattar Khan and Bar Khan, who assumed the leadership of resistance against the shah’s siege of Tabriz in 1908–1909; and the Russian-educated revolutionary Haidar Khan Amu oglu Tariverdiev (1880–1921), who eventually became the general secretary of Iran’s Communist Party, founded in 1920. The latter was a Tbilisi-educated electrical engineer who worked at Taghiyev’s oil plant in Baku before he moved to the Iranian cities of Mashhad and Tehran as a revolutionary.

Industrial Baku was thus connected on one end to major Russian cities through students and intellectuals that circulated through Russian-language schools. On the other end lay Iran. There, Azerbaijani workers, activists, and merchants carried the revolutionary currents from Transcaucasia via Tabriz. The two vectors converged in Baku, where reform-minded Azerbaijanis scrutinized Russian and Iranian affairs with equal fervor. This busy traffic across the Russo-Persian frontier had a number of wealthy patrons, but at the top of the list was Zaynalabdin Taghiyev, whose philanthropic projects, like his residences, extended from St. Petersburg to Tehran. Anchored in Baku, Taghiyev sponsored the education of Muslim youth, men and women, in various Russian schools and universities. His own daughters studied in St. Petersburg
University, of which his Russian wife, Sonya, was an alumna. In Baku he opened a school for girls. His patronage extended to several Iranian intellectuals, politicians, and journalists, who relied on Taghiyev’s helping hand for their travels, publications, and other projects, such as Hasan Roshdiyeh’s experiments with founding European-style schools in Iran and Transcaucasia (Bayat 1995, 99). Taghiyev also sponsored the free distribution of Baku periodicals and newspapers, which he financed (Bayat 1995, 98).\textsuperscript{18}

The primary motive behind Taghiyev’s philanthropy was the enlightenment of the Muslim world. That agenda was shared by the reformists of this period whether they were pan-Islamists or pan-Turkists, liberal or socialist. That is why Taghiyev could become a patron of many Azerbaijani activists with otherwise conflicting paths. And, like Taghiyev, Azerbaijani activists could harbor a mélange of ideological strands, stressing one or the other depending on the political context. Resulzadeh, for instance, could raise money for his cash-strained friend Stalin just as he wrote in nonpartisan newspapers to defend the Iranian constitution against its critics in Tehran.\textsuperscript{19}

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\textsuperscript{18} Taghiyev’s patronage was noted by Seyid Jafar, the son of Azerbaijani poet Seyid Azim Shirvani, with a story relayed by Manaf Suleymanov (2002): “Taghiyev wanted to publish the first collection of my father’s works in Baku at his own expense, but the clergy and censors wouldn’t let him. So Taghiyev sent the manuscript to Tehran and printed it by lithograph there. He owned a printing house there, where he published newspapers and magazines in Azeri [Arabic script] and Russian [Cyrillic]. At first, Taghiyev would send 10 rubles each month to my father; later he sent 20 rubles. He would often invite my father to Baku, treat him warmly and then send him back with gifts and money. But Taghiyev was good to others, not just my father. For example, the first book of poet Muhammad Hadi was published at the Caspian Printing House at Taghiyev’s expense.”
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\textsuperscript{19} One of those articles appear in Irshad in 1906, entitled “Long Live Freedom in Iran, Long Live Iran’s Constitution” [Yaşasın Iran’da Hürriyet, Yaşasın Iran’da Anayasa] (Yagublu 2015, 20). Two years later, upon
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Russian Azerbaijanis’ emotional and political investment in Iranian affairs became the lifeline of Iranian anti-monarchists in Tabriz. After the Russian constitutional revolution in 1905, Baku enjoyed a free press and considerable freedom of political association, whereas Tabriz was strained under government pressure. The joint activism of Russian and Iranian Azerbaijanis in Baku made the city the revolutionary backyard of Iran. Over twenty thousand Iranian émigrés came to Baku from 1905 to 1907 alone (Bayat 1998, 98). This traffic of people and ideas made Tabriz the epicenter of the Iranian constitutional movement, which lasted from 1905 to 1911.

Just as the Russian revolution made Baku a safe haven for Iranian Azerbaijani activists, post-revolutionary Tabriz offered a similar prospect for Russian Azerbaijanis. When the Russian coup of 1907 deprived the Hümmetists of legal means to propagate their ideas, they vested their hopes and commitment in the Iranian revolution across the border. When Resulzadeh felt the growing scrutiny of the Tsarist regime, for instance, he didn’t have to deliberate much on where to go. As a journalist of the Baku daily Terakki, accompanied by a Russian reporter from Moscow daily Russkoe Slovo (Russian Word) and his wife, he moved to Iran in 1909 (Yagublu 2015, 22). Naturally, his first stop was Tabriz, the city of merchants, where his kinsmen had just defeated the royalists.

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Stalin’s request, Resulzadeh also on “The Victory of the Young Turks” for a Russian-language journal Volna (Wave) (Yagublu 2015, 22).
3.1.3 The City of Merchants

A walk in Tabriz’s covered bazaar is a journey into the city’s medieval past, for
the bazaar stands as the most tangible legacy of that history. Its miles-long labyrinthine
streets were once strolled by Venetian merchants, who would go from store to store
examining the latest Chinese goods that had arrived there via Central Asia. Merchants
and goods from faraway lands had found each other in the bazaar’s many alleys since
the end of the thirteenth century. That was when the Mongol rulers of Persia made
Tabriz the seat of their government and thus enabled the city to flourish as a commercial
entrepôt of the Pax Mongolica. It remained the center of Persia until the Safavid kings,
weary of Ottoman incursions into Tabriz, moved their capital first to Qazvin in 1548 and
then to Isfahan in 1598. Deprived of the imperial cachet, Tabriz lost its glamour to the
new capital Isfahan, where the Armenian merchants, relocated there from the city of
Julfa, connected Iran’s economy to the rest of the world. Dwarfed by the global trade
network of Isfahani Armenians, some Tabrizi merchants must have strolled the bazaar’s
old alleys with an inescapable melancholy, thinking that its glory days were over for
good. They were wrong.

The city reemerged in the nineteenth century as the main commercial hub of
Qajar Iran, its population surpassing that of Isfahan and the new capital, Tehran. The
revival of overland routes across Transcaucasia in the nineteenth century had a major
impact on the trade of Tabriz with the Ottoman and Russian empires.²⁰ One route, opened in the 1830s, connected the city to the Ottoman port of Trabzon via Erzurum. The other route, opened in the 1860s, stretched north from Tabriz to Tbilisi and joined there with another route traversing Transcaucasia from Baku to Batum (Sakamoto 1993, 215). This was an important hajj route that channeled Muslims from Persia, Central Asia, and the Russian Volga into Istanbul, whence they continued south to the Hejaz. The same routes were used by merchants who brought Russian and European goods, the latter via the Ottoman Empire, into Iran. Thanks to the mercantile networks sprawling from its medieval bazaar to Russian and Ottoman lands, Tabriz became Iran’s commercial outlet in modern times.²¹ Given its commercial significance, the city became home to the consulates of countries trading with Iran. In the other direction, Tabrizis served as Iran’s diplomats in Istanbul, Astrakhan, Tbilisi, and St. Petersburg. With this commercial and diplomatic traffic, Tabriz became to Iran what Canton was to China during the same period, or Alexandria to Egypt. It was not a coincidence that Tabriz also became the seat of Qajar’s heir-apparent. When Iranian princes had to run away from dynastic disputes, they fled to the Russian Caucasus or Ottoman Empire, following the

²⁰ Before reemerging as a commercial hub, Tabriz rose to prominence as Iran’s main garrison against Tsarist forces during the Russo-Persian wars of the early nineteenth century. For the Qajar rulers who lost their Transcaucasian territory to Russia, Tabriz remained as a strategic base where the first Iranian forces based on the European mode and new European technologies were established.

²¹ The relative stability of the country under Qajar rule together with trade agreements made with Russians and the British (through Russo-Iranian treaties of 1813 and 1828 and the Anglo-Persian commercial treaty of 1841) increased the volume of trade with Iran (Zarinebaf-Shahr 1993, 206-7).
same routes used by diplomats, merchants, and pilgrims.

Tabriz-centered mercantile networks were largely comprised of Azerbaijanis who had established trading communities in the cities of Istanbul, Izmir, Trabzon, Tbilisi, and Erzurum (Zarinebaf-Shahr 2003, 209). In Istanbul, for instance, Azerbaijanis comprised three-fourths of the Iranian residents there by the end of the century.\textsuperscript{22} They had neighborhoods on both sides of the Bosporus, where they had their own schools, coffeehouses, and even a cemetery.\textsuperscript{23} In many instances these merchants served as consular representatives and translators whose main mission was to protect the interests of the growing Iranian merchant communities and pilgrims in the Ottoman capital (Zarinebaf 2008, 158).\textsuperscript{24} Some had become Ottoman subjects and married Ottoman women despite the Ottoman prohibition against marriage between Sunnis and Shi’as.\textsuperscript{25}

Among these merchants was Zeyn-al Abedin Maraghe’i (1838–1910), who became the pioneer Iranian novelist best known for his fictional travelogue

\textit{Siyahatnamah-i Ibrahim Beg} (Travel Diary of Ebrahim Beg). Born to a family of merchants in Maragheh, a town eighty miles south of Tabriz, Maraghe’i engaged in the family

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\textsuperscript{22} These Azerbaijanis were mostly from the cities of Tabriz, Khuy, Salmas, and Shabistar (Zarinebaf-Shahr 1993, 209).

\textsuperscript{23} On the Iranian-Shi’a cemetery in Üsküdar, see Kurşun (2007).

\textsuperscript{24} Lale Can (2012) observes similar dynamics among the diasporic community of Uzbeks in the turn-of-the-century Istanbul.

\textsuperscript{25} On the history of prohibition of Sunni-Shi’a marriages in the Ottoman Empire, see Kern (2011).
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trading in Iranian Azerbaijan. After a series of failures, he sought his fortune in Russian Transcaucasia. He picked up commerce in Tbilisi, where a community of Iranian émigrés worked as low-wage laborers. Overwhelmed by the miserable conditions of his kinsmen, Maraghe’i channeled much of his profits into charity, becoming a benefactor of indigent Iranians in the city. His efforts were appreciated by the Iranian authorities, who appointed Maraghe’i as Iran’s consul general in Tbilisi. Having ruined his business helping the poor, Maraghe’i eventually resigned from his position and left the city.

Maraghe’i later resurfaced as a cloth merchant shuttling between Russian Crimea and Istanbul. Having married in Istanbul, he settled in the city of Yalta on the southern coast of the Crimean Peninsula. The city had become a fashionable resort for the Russian aristocracy and gentry during the nineteenth century. Maraghe’i sold goods to the distinguished visitors of the city including the imperial family. Encouraged by his customers from Russian aristocracy, he became a Russian subject. His immersion in this Russian context was such that his three children grew up learning only Russian. As the years wore on, however, he was burdened by a guilty conscience for having renounced his Iranian subjecthood and detaching himself from the troubles of his kinsmen. Around 1890 he sold his commercial enterprise and left for Istanbul, where a large community of Iranian merchants and exiles lived at the time.

In Istanbul Maraghe’i found himself in a reformist milieu largely made up of Azerbaijani merchants and dissidents with strong links to Tabriz and Russian
Transcaucasia. This new environment imbued Maraghe’i’s idealist patriotism toward Iran with strong reformist overtones. He began to contribute to the Persian-language weekly _Akhtar_ (Star), which was issued by a group of Tabrizis in Istanbul. He also wrote for _Habl al-Matin_ (Strong Cord), the illustrious weekly published in Calcutta in Persian. These two newspapers were the most influential media among the Iranian reformists in exile and played a key role in the developments within Iran at the turn of the nineteenth century. Istanbul thus became Maraghe’i’s gateway into Iran, and it was only fitting that he regained his Iranian subjecthood there in 1904. The process was facilitated from Tehran by Mirza Mahmud Khan Ala ol Molk Tabataba’i, an Iranian Azerbaijani diplomat from Tabriz. The two knew each other from Istanbul, where Mahmud Han served as Iran’s ambassador to the Ottoman Empire (1895–1901). Like Maraghe’i, Mahmud Han had also come to the Ottoman capital via Russia, where he served as Iran’s consul general in Tbilisi (1877–1883) and Iran’s ambassador in St. Petersburg (1886–1895).

While in Istanbul, Maraghe’i performed the hajj pilgrimage, going to Mecca. His stops along the way became the basis of his popular three-volume novel _Siyahatname-i Ibrahim Beg_ (Travel Diary of Ebrahim Beg). The main character of the book, Ebrahim Beg, is the son of an Iranian merchant living in Egypt. His mental and spiritual preoccupation with his homeland prompts Ebrahim to embark on a journey to Iran following his father’s death. The route he follows passes through Alexandria, Istanbul, Batum, Tbilisi,
and Baku. His conversations and observations in these cities sketched out for him what Iran would be like before he even reached it. He deplores, for instance, the wretched conditions of Iranian émigré communities in Russian Transcaucasia. By the time he arrives in Iran, the idealized image of his homeland fully dissipates in the face of corrupt officials, deceitful clerics, an ignorant populace, and the absence of things like clean water, meritocracy, and rule of law. When his efforts to convince the officials in Tehran to institute reforms fail, he keeps his suggestions to his diary and heads back to Egypt, this time passing through Tabriz and several other cities of Iranian Azerbaijan before getting back to the port town of Batum on the Black Sea Coast.

The book was an instant success and inspired many of the constitutionalist revolutionaries based in Tabriz. Though banned in Iran, copies continued to circulate among reformists, including some clerical circles that would read passages from the book during their gatherings (Bayat 1991, 73). The book provided in clear prose a scathing critique of Iranian affairs and a clear articulation of a reformist agenda. What gave this biting narrative its appeal, however, were the changing cityscapes in the background. Drawing on his own travels and encounters, Maragheʿi used his fictional Ebrahim beg was able to amass a rich set of characters, places, and ideas to articulate different contexts, using one context to illuminate another. Maragheʿi’s own mobility was anything but incidental to his literary accomplishment.

Among the avid readers of his work was Sayyid Hasan Taqizadeh from Tabriz,
remembered today as an influential Iranian diplomat and statesman of the twentieth century. At the time he was a young enthusiast of modern sciences and part of a literary circle made up of Russian-educated young men and reform-minded mullahs and merchants. Together they founded a school, issued a weekly, and built a library/bookstore with the intention of importing European, Ottoman, and Egyptian books on modern science. Taqizadeh also wrote a letter to the philanthropist Taghiyev in Baku, requesting an annual stipend to study at the American University of Beirut. Although he did not receive the scholarship, this did not prevent him from leaving the country. Even though he could not benefit from oil money, he could still rely on a colony of Azerbaijani merchants for lodging and other support during a year-long trip he took in 1905 to make contacts with reform-minded kinsmen in Russian Transcaucasia, the Ottoman Empire, and Egypt.26

He wasn’t mistaken. The hospitality of sympathetic merchants enabled Taqizadeh to stay in Baku, Erevan, Tbilisi, Batumi, Istanbul, and Cairo. Merchants had their reasons to support the dissidents. For one, Iran’s growing maritime commerce with the British via the Persian Gulf was incurring great financial losses for the Iranian

26 As their activism was met with strong reaction from senior clerics, the group members began to espouse a strong liberal outlook and did not refrain from making contacts with political circles critical of the religious establishment. This also made them receptive to the dissident political views flowing in Tabriz through Persian-language newspapers issued in the diaspora, such as Akhtar in Istanbul, Habl al-Matin in Calcutta, and Hekmat in Cairo. Thus, when Taqizadeh decided to leave Tabriz in 1904 to make contacts with his like-minded kinsmen in the diaspora, he was already well-informed about the places on his route and the people he would meet.
merchants connected to Tabriz and its overland routes. Second, economic concessions granted by the cash-strained Iranian shah to British and Russian subjects generated significant resentment against the shah. The anti-shah sentiments of disgruntled merchants brought them closer to Iranian dissidents both at home and in the diaspora. The mutual sympathy between the two groups became palpable in places like Istanbul, where a sizable community of Iranian intellectuals lived in exile. This diasporic alliance turned the mercantile networks into political conduits, rendering Qajar rulers’ economic lifeline their soft underbelly. The news of increasing government repression in Tabriz spread through the mercantile networks of Iranian Azerbaijanis and reached the dissidents in Istanbul. Dissidents’ fervent responses to such news moved in the other direction in the form of newspaper articles clandestinely distributed in Tabriz.

If Tabriz was where Azerbaijanis acquired their plural roots, it was also where they opened Iran to the world in the nineteenth century. At least that is how Sayyid Hasan Taqizadeh would describe the role of his hometown in Iran’s modern history.

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27 Although the maritime route had been in use for a long time, the Trabzon and the Erzurum routes via Tabriz had been the dominant route, especially for the materials that were central to the Ottoman-Iranian trade such as cotton and carpet (Sakamoto 1993, 224). In the late nineteenth century, however, the route for much of the international trade in and out of Iran shifted to the Persian Gulf. As the volume of trade over the land routes significantly declined, it caused an economic setback to Tabriz and thus brought financial losses to the Azerbaijani merchants connected to the city. The blame fell on the Qajar Shah for collaborating with the Russians and the British and allowing them to dominate the Iranian trade through economic concessions (Zarinebaf-Shahr 2003, 201-212).

28 The accumulated discontent exploded through the protests against the 1890 tobacco monopoly granted to the British. Merchants forged an alliance with Shi’a clerics and together they forced the Shah to retract from the concession.
Preliminary steps to acquire western accomplishments began in Tabriz in the time of Abbas Mirza. One important thing which helped progress on the road of civilization was that, because of the presence in Tabriz of Abbas Mirza and his vizir, Qaim Maqam Farahani, who was a very intelligent man, this city became the exclusive center of Iranian foreign relations. Foreign ambassadors usually came here and Iranian envoys abroad, with a few exceptions, went out from Tabriz. As far as I know, in the hundred years up to the middle of the reign of Mozaffer ed Din Shah, almost nine-tenths of Iranian representatives abroad were Tabrizis or Azerbaijanis. In later periods also many of the leaders of modern civilization were from this province. Modern civilization came to Azerbaijan primarily from two sources: through knowledge of the Turkish language there were intellectual ties (which were close to the other parts of Iran), first with Istanbul and Ottoman territories and second with Russian territories, especially Transcaucasia and to a degree Haji Tarkhan (Astrakhan) and Ashqabad. Aqa Mohammad Taher, the founder and the owner of the newspaper Akhtar in Istanbul, which for a time was the only modern style newspaper in Persia, was a Tabrizi. So were the two editors of that newspaper. Hajj Mirza Mehdi and Mirza Mehdi, later called Za’im od Dowleh. The latter afterwards went to Egypt and founded the newspaper *Hekmat* (1892) in Cairo, which lasted almost until the beginning of the constitutional movement and whose articles were very influential (Taqizadeh 1960, 457).

Taqizadeh knew those cross-border intellectual channels well. He had moved along them himself. So did other Azerbaijanis, who came his way as Iranian exiles or subjects of the Romanovs or the Ottomans. Through that network of places and people, revolutionary ideas infiltrated Iran, synching it with the intellectual and political

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\[29\] This is Nikki Keddie’s translation of a speech Taqizadeh delivered in April 1959 at the National Library in Tabriz.

\[30\] In Tbilisi he met with Mirza Abdul’Rahim Talibov Tabrizi, whose book *Ketāb-e Ahmad yā Safineh-ye Talebi* (Ahmad’s Book or the Talibian Vessel) had been a popular read among the Iranian reformers. He also met there with the owner of *Sharq-i Rus* newspaper, Mohammad Aqa Sah Taxtinski and its editor Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, who later created the popular satirical magazine *Molla Nasraddin* in 1905. His contacts in Istanbul included a number of prominent reformists such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Mirza Agha Khan and Zeyn al-Abidin Maragha’i, the author of the Travel Diary of Ebrahim Beg. In Cairo he met Mirza Mahdi Tabrizi, the editor of *Hekmat* issued from Cairo and the former editor of Akhtar issued from Istanbul.
currents in the Russo-Ottoman space. Taqizadeh’s contacts with reformists in Russia, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire and his familiarity with these political contexts enhanced his stature upon returning to Tabriz. He quickly rose to prominence among the constitutionalists in the city and was elected to the first *majlis* (parliament) opened in Tehran in 1906. The Democratic Party, founded in 1909 under his leadership, became the home of radical liberals in the country, Resulzadeh from Baku among them. Having moved to Iran in 1909 fleeing tsarist scrutiny, Resulzadeh had joined Taqizadeh’s party and edited the party’s media organ *Iran-e Now*. When the shah closed down the parliament in 1911, the two fellows, along with other Iranian constitutionalists, were on the move once again, this time to Istanbul, where the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 provided ample ground for their anti-monarchical activism.

The route Taqizadeh followed during the constitutional opening resembled that of the fictional Ebrahim Beg created by Maraghe’i. Their congruence was hardly a coincidence, for these were the routes shared by many Azerbaijanis, who moved across as students, laborers, merchants, diplomats, writers, and revolutionaries. In fact, for some Azerbaijanis, such as Maraghe’i himself, cross-border movement entailed taking up different occupations (trade, diplomacy, writing), shifting between imperial subjecthoods (Iranian to Russian and back to Iranian), and engaging with a range of groups (indigent Iranian émigrés in Tbilisi, Russian aristocrats in Crimea, Iranian dissidents in Istanbul, and Muslim pilgrims en route to the Hejaz). Maraghe’i’s local
cosmopolitanism, though it may seem exceptional at first glance, was shared by many other Azerbaijanis, whose stories, when laid next to one another, cast light on the modus operandi of a Transcaucasian diaspora at the turn of the past century.

Russian-language schools in Tbilisi, oilfields in Baku, and mercantile networks centered in Tabriz generated and transmitted currents that could not be controlled from the imperial centers around them. At the same time, Azerbaijanis riding on those currents went in and out of each empire, tapping into resources of each realm to empower themselves and their various agendas. From Transcaucasia, Azerbaijanis followed trajectories that may seem completely disconnected if seen from their end point. Taqizadeh, for instance, passed away in Tehran as a prominent Iranian statesman and diplomat. His fellow patriot Resulzadeh was a Turkish citizen when he passed away in Ankara. Resulzadeh’s former comrade Neriman Nerimanov, on the other hand, had his ashes put in Kremlin’s necropolis, not far from Stalin’s. Their burial places, each one a national capital now, mark different corners of the Azerbaijani triangle that emerged during the Constitutional opening.

### 3.2 Constitutional Opening

The Constitutional opening of the early twentieth century began in St. Petersburg, the seat of the Romanov rule in Russia. 1905 was the hardest year for the Romanovs. Having suffered a humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, they also faced various domestic oppositional movements that went into open rebellion. Tsar
Nicholas II’s heavy-handed response only aggravated the situation, making his imperial rule even more vulnerable. The only way to save the centuries-long imperial order, as it soon became clear to him, was to give these oppositional movements a place within the political system. And that is exactly what he did. Following a well-established model that matured in the nineteenth century, he agreed to change the regime into a constitutional monarchy. The legal pillar of this model was a constitution, which laid out a set of fundamental laws that would bind everyone, including the king. Its political pillar was a legislative assembly called the parliament, where elected parliamentarians would make laws and oversee government on behalf of their electorate. Safeguarded by these two pillars, people would then form coalitions, propagate their ideas, and compete with rival opinions and coalitions. Therefore, a third pillar was essential for the system to work: a free press.

It was not a coincidence that the Russian revolution was accompanied by a resurgence in print media. In Transcaucasia some sixty journals and newspapers were published in Azerbaijani Turkish from 1905 to 1916 (Alstadt 1983, 207). A vibrant publishing industry allowed Russia’s educated Muslims to propagate their ideas, communicate cultural sensibilities, and negotiate over alternative political projects. Hümmetists, as we saw earlier, defended a socialist future within Russia, whereas Ittifaq

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31 The model of constitutional monarchy developed through trial and error in several revolutions that swept across Europe and Latin America during the nineteenth century.
al-Muslimin (Union of Muslims) opted for a liberal one, also within Russia. Although Hüseyinzade’s articles in Fiyuzat situate Baku as part of a Turkic geography, articles in Azerbaycan, Joz’-e la-yansfakk-e Iran placed the same city within the Persian realm (Atabaki 2006, 8-9). These competing agendas were not always mutually exclusive. More often than not, activists espoused a mélange of liberal, socialist, nationalist, and pan-Islamist ideologies. Resulzadeh was one such activist who, while writing for socialist weeklies Tekamul (1906–1907) and Yoldash (1907), also wrote for nonpartisan newspapers such as Irshad (1905–1908) and Fiyuzat (1906–1907). The former was edited by a pan-Islamist and the latter by a pan-Turkist with the financial support of the oil baron Taghiyev. Such overlaps and crossovers were commonplace in Baku, which became a marketplace of ideas with several ideological currents competing and combining without end.32

Even as the constitution-parliament-press trio opened the ground for mass politics, it could not determine its content or its overall direction. The Russian revolution of 1905 was not, as Lenin understood it, “a dress rehearsal” for the October Revolution of 1917. It was rather what Abraham Ascher described as “a critical juncture that opened up several paths” (1988, 2). If indeed constitutional revolution implies an opening of possibilities, then we can consider the Iranian (1906) and the Ottoman (1908) revolutions too as moments of opening which, not coincidentally, were similarly accompanied by an

32 For a full catalogue of the journals and newspapers published and/or collected in Baku during this period and beyond, see Atabaki and Rustemova (1995).
explosion of print media. These nearly synchronous openings generated a momentum that propelled reformists to move between places seeking niches, fellows, and audiences for their political projects. Resulzadeh, for example, could remain an activist journalist even as he moved from Russia to Iran and from there to the Ottoman Empire by piggybacking on the revolutionary currents. The congruence between his itinerary across empires and the chronological order of revolutions was hardly a coincidence. It pointed to a shared historical momentum beyond political boundaries. We can call it the constitutional opening.

This regional opening was underpinned by the circulation of newspapers and journals across imperial borders, which popularized concepts such as mashrutiyyat (constitutionalism) and watan (fatherland). These and various other ideas also circulated through projects of translation and adaptation. Almost all the figures we have followed in the preceding pages were involved in such projects. Translations and adaptations were carried out in multiple directions with varied content. A quick overview of Resulzadeh’s translations alone testifies to such multi-directional variety. In Baku he translated into Azerbaijani Turkish a socialist treatise in Russian and Hafez’s poetry in Persian. In Tehran his Persian translation of a fable from the “Russian La Fontaine” Ivan Krylov appeared in Iran-e Now. And in Istanbul his Turkish translations included Tolstoy’s Esarhaddon, King of Assyria from Russian and Cemaleddin Afghani’s The Philosophy of National Unity and the Truth about Unity of Language from Persian (Yagublu
Circulation, translation, and adaptation of texts generated shared cultural idioms, which rendered local concerns communicable across imperial frontiers. This transimperial dialogue induced among its participants a sense of shared fate across political boundaries and thus drove parallel reformist projects. Just as ideas moved people, people moved with their ideas, generating a feedback loop of cross-border mobility and cultural exchange. As people and ideas spilled across imperial frontiers, an opening in one place could hardly be contained within the same domain. After the Russian revolution, it was not only Russia’s future that was debated in the journals in Baku; affairs of Iran and the Ottoman Empire were scrutinized with equal fervor. Thus, whereas Young Turks were under scrutiny in Istanbul, Ali Bey Hüseyinzade could propagate his pan-Turkic ideas in Baku. Similarly, Iranian activists found ample space to mobilize in Baku and Tbilisi while their books and leaflets clandestinely entered Iran through Tabriz. Following the Russian revolution, Transcaucasia became the shared backyard from which each domain was pressured to open from without.33

With one opening following another, earlier circuits that had separately linked any of the two empires were now interlinked. A vast political space thus opened up for those who had a perspective of matching breadth. The sedimentation from their

33 It goes without saying that there were other pressure points for each these political domains, but this was the one they all shared.
geographically distributed pasts offered Azerbaijanis a surplus of ties that, if engaged, allowed them to act from within multiple domains at once. As insiders they became part of local conversations on the fate of each domain. As outsiders they articulated these internal conversations across borders, fostering transnational dialogues on issues of common concern. These potent dialogues would then inform the debates within each domain, creating a feedback loop that synchronized the developments in these domains.

In this interlinked and synchronized geography, if one place closed up, an opening elsewhere could provide a refuge. Upon losing ground for his socialist activism within Russia, Resulzadeh was able to move to Tehran, where he continued his activism among his kinsmen as a liberal Iranian patriot. When banished from there because of the suppression of the revolution in 1911, he could anchor his constitutionalist activism among the pan-Turkists in Istanbul before he came back to Baku as a pan-Turkist himself. Resulzadeh’s routes were crowded with other Azerbaijanis who moved across imperial frontiers as laborers, merchants, writers, diplomats, and dissidents. Having stakes in the fate of each empire and aware of their interdependence, diasporic Azerbaijanis were able to navigate—and to a certain extent modulate—the political transformations in each empire. Their ability to do so offers a distinctive angle on the synchronicity of the revolutions in Russia, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire.

During the constitutional opening, reassessment of the past with a view to a better future intensified on both sides of the border. By articulating these efforts across
borders, diasporic societies brought internal transformations onto an external plane where each domain was transformed in relation to one another. We have called this external plane the Azerbaijani Triangle. As the external dimension of historical change, the triangle was hardly visible from within a single political domain. But it came into full view in Transcaucasia, where it spilled from the pages of a satirical magazine called *Molla Nasraddin*.

3.3 The Wise Fool

*Molla Nasraddin*, the polyglot magazine published in the wake of the triple constitutional revolutions, was created and edited by Jalil Mammadguluzadeh (1866–1932). The first issue of *Molla Nasraddin* was published in 1906, within a year of the Russian constitutional revolution. Over the next twenty-five years (1906–1931), through its 748 issues, *Molla Nasraddin* would touch upon all kinds of issues: Western education, modernization, and the critique of the clerical class became dominant themes, reflecting the priorities of the early twentieth-century Azerbaijani intelligentsia.\(^34\) This shared ideological outlook certainly enabled the magazine’s creative editor to connect common discourses on the issues of the day. But that alone could not explain the magazine’s remarkable popularity, which rather lay in the eclectic presentation of its material.

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\(^{34}\) Mammadguluzadeh shared the ideological outlook of the turn-of-the-century Azerbaijani intelligentsia who held admiration for the intellectual and technological achievements of Western culture, critiqued the Western powers’ political encroachment over Muslim lands, and derided the traditional clergy as the guardians of Muslim scholastic traditions. Those received traditions, in their view, constituted the very obstacle that prevented Muslim East from participating in Western achievements.
Molla Nasraddin’s cover, dominated by an imposing illustration, typically included three scripts (Perso-Arabic, Latin, and Cyrillic), and although much of the magazine’s content was in Azerbaijani Turkish, it also included Persian, Russian, and Ottoman Turkish. Although the eight-page satirical weekly offered content ranging from jokes to essays, poetry to humorous telegrams, and tongue-in-cheek open letters for avid readers, it also catered to a broader audience of illiterates and non-speakers of Azerbaijani Turkish, who could enjoy the featured colorful illustrations with their diverse set of characters, costumes, and cultural references. The magazine’s cosmopolitan presentation reflected the diversity of the editorial team, which included the Azerbaijani poet Mirza Alakbar Sabir, the German illustrator Oskar Ivanovich Schmerling (1863–1938), who was director of Tbilisi’s School of Drawing and Sculpture, and his colleagues Josef Rotter and Azim Azimzadeh, whose caricatures made Molla Nasraddin a cult magazine. The colorful illustrations created by this editorial team prevailed over linguistic limitations and reached a readership that, according to one account, extended from Morocco to India, making it on par with Al Manar, the most popular Islamic magazine of the time, issued from Cairo in Arabic.

Molla Nasraddin was a quintessentially Azerbaijani enterprise, taking on dimensions that crossed imperial borders and tapped into the depths of many cultures. Mammadguluzadeh was an admirer of the Russian satirist Gogol, and his unconventional satire had an undeniable influence in the conception of Molla Nasraddin.
Persian classics were equally important in providing sophisticated source material. The Persian influence was particularly visible in the case of Molla Nasraddin’s most celebrated poet, Mirzə Ələkbər Sabir, who engaged with the poetry of Fuzuli, Ferdowsi, Hafez, and especially Sa‘adi. The Persian classics not only served as a sign of literary refinement and noble values, they also became the very object of satire insofar as they represented “undesirable” aspects of the Iranian mindset. (Siegel 2004)

Although Russian satire and Persian classics gave Molla Nasraddin a footing on the north–south axis, its very name placed it along an east–west one. The magazine’s namesake, Molla Nasraddin, is the witty and wise personage shared by the humanistic folklore of several societies across the former geography of Turko-Persia, stretching from the Balkans to western China. Greeks call him Anastratin, Turks Nasrettin Hoja, Uyghurs Nasurdin Afandi, and Azerbaijanis Molla Nasraddin. With his transregional presence, the medieval wise fool was instantly recognizable for Molla Nasraddin’s wide readership across empires. Like an experienced master of ceremonies with a charming persona, Nasraddin made a regular appearance on the magazine’s cover, presenting to the audience a familiar face that drew their attention time and time again to the material inside.

Molla Nasraddin’s rich content and cosmopolitan presentation had something to do with the place where it emerged. Transcaucasia was a portal that opened to three different empires at once. Ideas, idioms, and stories from these three domains were
deposited here, thanks to the transimperial channels of communication opened up by the triple constitutional revolutions. *Molla Nasraddin’s* editor Mammadguluzadeh could tap into this rich pool of cultural resources and use their surplus to give Molla Nasreddin a creative edge. The cultural surplus of three imperial domains, sedimented in the diasporic space of Azerbaijanis, spilled off the pages of *Molla Nasraddin* in an excessive multiplicity of influences, languages, scripts, and cultural references.

If *Molla Nasraddin’s* cosmopolitan outlook reflected Azerbaijanis’ diasporic horizons, the magazine’s own story reflected a set of closures that divided those horizons. Although the magazine thrived during its Tbilisi years (1906–1918), the Bolshevik consolidation over the former tsarist frontiers left no space for *Molla Nasraddin’s* liberal cosmopolitanism in the Russian Caucasus. Thus, Mammadguluzadeh, after marrying a wealthy Azerbaijani widow from Iranian Azerbaijan, moved the magazine’s editorial offices from Tbilisi to Tabriz in 1920, where he published a total of eight issues in 1921, during which period the Qajar rule came to a de facto end with the Pahlavi coup. As the new Persian government signed a treaty of friendship with the Bolsheviks in 1922, thinning the broad imperial frontier, *Molla Nasraddin* was forced to move once again, this time to Baku, under Soviet rule. In the meantime the Ottoman Empire too came to an end, yielding to a plethora of colonial mandates and independent states that would further unravel the cosmopolitan *Molla Nasraddin*. One by one, the many veins that nourished its cosmopolitan character were
cut off by the mutually reified borders among Pahlavi Iran, the Soviet Union, and the Turkish Republic. Under the watchful eyes of Soviet censorship, *Molla Nasraddin* died a natural death, its creator Mammadguluzadeh following a few months after.

According to one account, both Mammadguluzadeh and the historic Nasraddin shared origins in the city of Khoy, Iran. When Nasraddin of Khoy, the character, inspired Mammadguluzadeh of Khoy, the writer, seven centuries later, the two embarked on a journey that would take them from Tbilisi to Tabriz, and from there to Baku, where they both met their end. If they had their arms and legs in multiple domains during the time of openings, those limbs were butchered by parallel closings of the new era. There was no place for them in the age of parochialism.

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35 Mikayil Bayram (2001), a Turkish scholar with origins in Iranian Azerbaijan, argues that Nasraddin, the person who gave rise to Nasraddin the folkloric character, was Ahi Evren, the thirteenth-century leader of Ahîs, a religious fraternity and craftsmen's guild in mediaeval Anatolia. Ahi Evren came from the city of Khoy.
Figure 21: A collection of Molla Nasreddin Covers
4. Parallel Parochialisms

If the Constitutional opening had conjured up notions of law, order, and progress, the opening brought by the Great War was permeated with chaos, destruction, and uncertainty. In Russia the Romanovs’ costly involvement in the war delivered their end in 1917, while the ensuing power struggle between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks threw the country into a devastating civil war that lasted until 1921. In the south, across the Black Sea, the Ottoman Empire lay in ruins; its capital Istanbul occupied by the Allied forces in 1918, remained so until 1923. The Qajar dynasty in Tehran was similarly dysfunctional, its prestige having crumbled to dust as it virtually lost all its power beyond the capital, leaving the country to the competing militias variously backed by the Bolsheviks and the British. By the war’s end, the hopeful dawn of the Constitutional era had turned into a gloomy twilight set on the horizons of the three empires.

With the dust of the war still in the air, new actors came forth in each realm to wrest the state from the old regimes that were hardly in place. In Russia the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, emerged victorious from the civil war by 1921. While they were consolidating their rule over the former Tsarist territories, the fleeing Mensheviks had already formed émigré communities across Europe. Meanwhile a former Ottoman general, Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), had begun to mobilize a resistance movement against the Allied occupation of Ottoman Anatolia. Heading a government of his own making
and having emerged victorious over the Allied forces, he would finally end the country’s diarchy by abolishing the Ottoman Sultanate in 1922. In the meantime, a Brigadier General Reza Khan had marched on Tehran under a British directive and turned the Qajar rule into a rubber stamp for his de facto rule in Iran. His rule became de jure in 1923 when the parliament granted him dictatorial powers in the absence of the Qajar shah, who remained in exile thereafter. A new political landscape came into view across the former imperial domains of the Russians, Iranians, and Ottomans. From the twilight of empires emerged the new regimes of the Soviet Union (1922), Turkish Republic (1923), and Pahlavi Iran (1925).

The new regimes, as it soon became clear, responded to the imperial dilemmas of the nineteenth century in the extreme. Classical empires ruled over diverse populations through a rich repertoire of imperial instruments, sustaining state power by diffusing it through alliances with local dignitaries. Modern territorial empires of the nineteenth century, however, found themselves increasingly deprived of such tools as they opted to centralize state power to keep up with the maritime European powers. The need for effective centralization restrained the imperial rulers from deploying legal and administrative pluralism to govern different peoples and territories, and the resultant tension eventually broke apart their multi-ethnic and multi-religious realms in the Great War’s wake. The new regimes aimed to resolve this potential dilemma by turning the classical imperial logic on its head. Whereas empires preferred to rule over
differentiated subjects, the new regimes preferred a homogenized citizenry. Similarly, whereas empires shared populations with other empires through porous frontiers, nation-states sought the maximum differentiation possible from the outside through rigid borders.

As each realm mutually disengaged, cross-border contact became an exception to the rule. And within their respective borders, the new regimes privileged a single root as the primordial basis of the nation. Engaging with multiple roots, just like crossing borders, became both futile and troublesome in this new transregional order. Without people dwelling and traveling like Azerbaijani, the Azerbaijani Triangle vanished. Unmaking the triangle, just like its making, required a concerted effort from all corners. Not only were borders diligently guarded on both sides, histories within them had to be revised as well so that traveling in time and space could be controlled entirely from the new political centers.

Centers, thus empowered, deprived the frontiers of their vital energy. In this new age, Transcaucasia was no longer a place where persons and texts from different political domains circulated in and out. And without such circulatory movements, it ceased to be what Bruno Latour (1987) calls a “center of calculation,” where new ideas were formulated, tested, and disseminated. Deprived of its lifeblood, the triangle of local cosmopolitans unraveled into islands of parochialism. This called for a new social contract.
4.1 The New Contract

The synchronous emergence of the new regimes was hardly accidental. Like the triple Constitutional Revolutions, they were interconnected. Reza Khan’s rise to power, for example, could not have unfolded without the Bolsheviks moving in and out of Iran. The British-induced coup that brought Reza Khan to Tehran was a response to the news of Soviet-backed Iranian communists being prepared to march on Tehran in late 1920.\footnote{The irony of it all was that the brigade led by Reza Khan to dispel the Soviet threat was an elite cavalry modeled on the Caucasian Cossack regiments of the Imperial Russian Army. Russian officers commanded this Persian Cossack brigade until 1920.}

The Bolshevik threat was so critical that just as Reza Khan and his brigade arrived in Tehran, a Persian envoy left for Moscow to negotiate for the Soviet forces’ withdrawal from Iran. With the Russo-Persian Treaty of Friendship signed in 1921, Reza Khan secured the Bolsheviks’ recognition, and the Bolsheviks secured their southern border against a possible Menshevik retaliation. This mutual recognition proved critical for the survival of the new government in Tehran. If the Bolshevik-British rivalry had prompted Reza Khan’s rise to power, the Bolsheviks’ withdrawal from Iran helped him consolidate his power thereafter.\footnote{For more on the rise of Reza Pahlavi from the murky waters of the Constitutional period, see Cronin (2010).}

The Bolsheviks played a similarly vital role in the emergence of the Turkish Republic. When Mustafa Kemal wrote to Lenin on April 26, 1920, about the possibility of an alliance against Europe, the Bolsheviks responded with gold and guns that proved...
crucial in the Turkish War of Independence. In return, the Grand National Assembly convened by Mustafa Kemal let go of the Caucasus, rendering it easy for the Bolsheviks to take Baku in 1920. It was in Baku, later in the same year, that the Bolsheviks organized the Congress of the People of the East, which marked the Comintern’s commitment to support various national and anti-colonial movements in the East, Mustafa Kemal’s being one of them. With the Treaty of Moscow signed in 1921, between the Bolsheviks in Moscow and the Grand National Assembly in Ankara, the two regimes mutually recognized one another before either of them had fully emerged. Today, very few of those walking in Istanbul’s Taksim Square notice the statues of two Bolshevik figures in the famous Republic Monument, unveiled in 1928 as a tribute to the founders of modern Turkey. These statues, placed next to Ataturk’s, belong to the Red Army Commanders Mikhail Frunze and Kliment Voroshilov, who supervised the Bolshevik support for Mustafa Kemal’s movement. Their presence in the monument, ordered by Ataturk in 1925, stands to this day as a reminder of Turkey’s shared trans-imperial roots with Bolshevik Russia.

The three regimes constituted one another externally, not only by recognizing each other’s sovereignty in advance, but also by mimicking each other in the form of

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3 Turks received the supplies “via boats across the Black Sea and a corridor through the Caucasus” (Hirst, 2013, 22). Gold, weapons, and ammunition supplied by Moscow helped the Turks defeat the Greek forces in Anatolia. For more on the role of Soviet aid in the Greco-Turkish war, see Karal (1967) and Kincaid (1979).

4 On the Bolshevik consolidation’s impact on early republican Turkey, see Tunçay (2009 [1967]), Yerasimos (1979), and Gökay (2006).
that sovereignty. Although operating through different regimes (constitutional monarchy in Iran, parliamentary democracy in Turkey, and a union of socialist republics in the Soviet Union), the new state elites shared a strong interest in building a form of sovereignty that was national, territorial, and centralized. Even as the new centers consolidated their realms by emulating each other, they disavowed such “constitutive imitations” in their internal narratives, exposing a shared governmental logic across borders.⁵ If recognizing one another was key to the internal constitution of these new political domains, misrecognizing this external history as purely an internal development was equally vital to the consolidation of each realm. For the new regimes, controlling the past was as important as controlling the borders. Nationalism, well fitted for the task of internal consolidation, became the ideological pillar of this process. It provided both a moral resource and a set of idioms that sanctified endeavors to centralize the state, homogenize the society, and cultivate (read modernize) the country. Nationalism thus was only an afterthought to the process of mutual closures, not its cause. In other words, it was the period of closures that jumpstarted the age of nationalism in the Azerbaijani Triangle, not the other way around.

Whereas the new nationalist ideologies drew from earlier intellectual currents

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⁵ Prasenjit Duara (2008) points to a similar dynamic in twentieth-century East Asia, where Chinese, Korean, and Japanese nationalisms have been constituted in relation to one another through regional interaction. He also notes that “nations become nations not only through recognition by other powerful nations, but also through a disavowal or misrecognition of these constitutive imitations” (323).
that traveled across imperial borders, the new regimes tailored the final form to the needs of building a nation-state. The content of Turkish nationalism, for instance, was drawn from pan-Turkism, an ideology developed by Russia’s Muslims across the Russo-Ottoman frontiers during the Constitutional era. However, the expansive geographical scope of this ideology was radically reduced to fit the new borders of the republic. Any possible irredentist claims based on ethnic fraternity were thus dropped beyond the borders determined in the misak-i milli (the national oath), six parliamentary decisions that became the political manifesto of the Turkish Independence War. Circumscribed and territorialized at once, the expansive agenda of pan-Turkism was muffled within Turkish nationalism as the latter became the ideological fulcrum of authoritarian modernization under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

Known to be an admirer of Ataturk, Reza Khan emulated his authoritarian modernization within Iran, and just as in Turkey, nationalism became the language of his enterprise. Iranian nationalism in the Pahlavi era also drew from earlier intellectual trends that were made across imperial borders, such as the romantic glorification of pre-Islamic Iran popularized by intellectuals like Tbilisi-based Akhundov. Yet, whereas these earlier trends promoted a civilizational conception of Iran with expansive and flexible boundaries, such unguarded cultural patriotism was chained to a specific territory in the Pahlavi period. Just like the misak-i milli borders of Turkey, mamalik-i

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6 For a comparison of the modernist reforms under Ataturk and Reza Shah, see Atabaki and Zürcher (2003).
mahrusah (guarded domains) of Iran comprised the remaining territories of a shrinking empire that were sanctified as *watan* (homeland), a conception popularized by the Iranian dissidents in Istanbul during the late Qajar era. Although diasporic Iranians in Russia and the Ottoman Empire have advanced the idea of Iran as homeland, the attribution of its exclusive ownership to the Persian ethnicity was a novelty of the Pahlavi era.

Unlike the Turkish and Iranian cases, the Bolsheviks emerged as the imperial patrons of a universalist ideology. Maintaining an empire in the age of nationalism resulted in a unique political system in which the old multi-ethnic empire was reorganized as a union of nation-states. The transformation required a renewed attention to borders, not only from the outside, but also within. The Kyrgyz had to be separated from the Kazak, and the Uzbek from the Tajik, and all had to be divorced from their brethren across the Soviet border. These territorial divisions were nationally-conceived, and vast resources were channeled to prove the historical and anthropological existence of these ethno-nationalities within the designated borders. The universalist culture of socialism was to be cultivated within these borders through national cadres. In other words, centralization and modernization under Soviet leadership were to be achieved in the form of territorialized nations that would have

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their own state, internal history, and national borders (Martin 2001).

4.1.1 An Empire of Nations

In the Soviet Union, the inward-looking, protectionist logic of nation-state existed side by side with the outward-looking, expansionist logic of empire. Their simultaneous presence was laid bare in Baku, the Bolsheviks’ springboard to revolution in Asia. The Bolsheviks were keen on capitalizing on Baku’s transregional ties from the very beginning. When they decided to hold the Congress of the Peoples of the East in 1920, months after they took over the city, some 1,800 delegates from the colonial and semi-colonial parts of Asia convened in Baku (Yılmaz 2013, 515). The city also served as the primary Soviet channel into Iran: While the Baku Trade Fair (1922–1930) brought high numbers of Iranian merchants and goods into the Soviet Union, Comintern activism flew in the other direction, invigorating communist cadres within Iran.\(^8\)

Although Baku remained the center of Soviet outreach across the southern frontier, it was also where the Soviet leadership laid out the ideological and academic bases for the cultural transformation of Turko-Tatar populations within. In 1926 the First All-Union Turcology Congress was organized in Baku to ensure a “scientific consensus” for enforcing the Latinization of alphabets used among Turkic populations, who until then had shared the same Perso-Arabic script with their brethren across the Soviet border. Even as the state-sponsored conference aimed to consolidate the Soviet grip over Turko-

\(^8\) On the Baku Trade Fair, see Forestier-Peyrat (2013) and on the Comintern activism, see Atabaki (2012).
Tatar populations, it also looked to build international prestige by inviting prominent scholars from beyond the Soviet Union, including the internationally renowned Turkish historian Fuad Kopru.

These cross-border openings via Baku implied a certain risk for the Soviet leadership, who were concerned about giving too much power to the periphery, a tension evident from a trail of letters exchanged between Moscow and Baku preceding each international event, be it an academic congress or a trade fair. The tension eventually resolved in favor of further centralization in the 1930s, culminating in Stalin’s Great Purge from 1936 to 1938. During this period the cross-border channels of communication that had kept Baku relatively open to the wider region in the 1920s were all choked off. There has never been a second Turcology Congress, and the last trade fair in Baku was held in 1930. The Comintern activity toward Iran also ended by 1937, the same year the name for the titular nation of Soviet Azerbaijan was changed from Turkic (Türk in native tongue, or Tiurk in Russian) to Azerbaijani. Two years later, in 1939, Soviet Azerbaijanis began to use the Cyrillic alphabet to read and write in their mother

\[\text{\textsuperscript{9}}\text{ For examples of such correspondence between Moscow and Baku, see Altstadt (2016) and Forestier-Peyrat (2013).} \]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{10}}\text{ In fact, until 1937, the Bolsheviks used Turkic (Türk in native tongue, or Tiurk in Russian) as the name for the titular nation while Azerbaijan was kept as the name of the territory and the republic (Yılmaz 2013, 515).} \]
tongue, which was now called Azerbajanskii (Azerbaijani) instead of Tiurkskii (Turkic).\textsuperscript{11}

The changes within the Soviet Union did not follow from an internal logic only, but were largely a response to the developments in Turkey and Iran, where the nation-building processes reached their pinnacle by the 1930s, with full-fledged nationalist historiographies circulating through textbooks, novels, newspapers, and journals. In Turkey the early republican historians evaluated the imperial past of their country within an ethno-national framework, as epitomized by Afet Inan’s “A Study of Turkish-Ottoman History’s Characteristic Features,” written for the very first issue of the Turkish Historical Society’s journal in 1937. Inan identified an unadulterated Turkish genius behind the early Ottoman expansion and the Ottomans’ success in creating a centralized state. The period of “stagnation and decline” that followed, she argued, resulted from the gradual infiltration of foreign elements since the end of the sixteenth century. As reform efforts to stop this “retrogression” failed because of the prevalence of religious dogma, it thus fell upon “the greatest of all Turks to teach us through his actions that harmful practices could only be fixed with revolution, not reform” (Inan 1937, quoted in Danforth 2014, 658). Atatürk’s leadership and his reforms, though future-looking, were essentially a matter of restoring a nation’s pristine ethnic foundation, a single root stretching from deep in the past into the future.

\textsuperscript{11} In Turkic languages, there is no distinction between Turkish and Turkic. In Russian Tiurskii is used for Turkic, and Turetskii for Turkish. For the importance of this differentiation in Soviet language policy in Azerbaijan, see Altstadt (2016, 62-94).
A similar framework was on display within Iran’s nationalist historiography: Pristine Persian foundation behind the ancient imperial glory, cultural contamination by foreign elements ushering in political decline, and finally, the restoration of ancient glory in the form of a modern nation-state. The hero of the story on the Iranian side was Reza Khan Pahlavi, whose historical role, similar to Ataturk’s in Turkey, was abstracted from the murky waters of the Constitutional era. Sa’id Nafisi’s Pishrafthay-e Iran Dar Dorieh Pahlavi (The Progress of Iran during the Pahlavi Era), commissioned by Reza Shah in 1939, epitomized the new historiography. The book identified political independence and internal security as the two key achievements of the Pahlavi regime, which ended a period of utter chaos that purportedly characterized the Qajar era (Bayat, 2009, 114). The dramatic effect of this contrast brought to the fore the Pahlavis’ mission for Iran’s history. That mission was later showcased to the whole world in 1971 by his son Mohammad Reza Shah, who organized a grandiose gathering in Persepolis, the ancient capital, in celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. The symbolism of the event was unmistakable for the royal guests from around the world who watched the shah and his wife pay homage to the tomb of Cyrus the Great.

It was the emergence of these strong nationalist frameworks across the border that prompted the Soviet leadership to respond with equal fervor (Yilmaz 2013). As the centripetal forces of protectionism outweighed the centrifugal forces of empire, Soviet authorities intensified their efforts to promote an Azerbaijani nation unto its own,
distinct from both Turks and Persians. Changes in the titular name of the nation and its language, transition from Latin script to Cyrillic, and the promotion of ethno-nationalist scholarship aimed to reorient Azerbaijanis away from the nationalist centers of Ankara and Tehran and toward Moscow. By the end of 1939, Azerbaijanis of each domain had to use a different script: Latin in Turkey, Perso-Arabic in Iran, and Cyrillic in Soviet Azerbaijan. If the making of the Azerbaijani Triangle implied for the Azerbaijanis a shared diasporic horizon across empires, its unmaking through synchronized and interconnected closures divided that horizon into pieces. Parallel parochialisms left no space for local cosmopolitanism, and Azerbaijanis became part of different historical paths, separated from one another by diligently guarded borders.

4.1.2 Divided Horizons

Azerbaijanis on the Iranian side continued their millennial presence in Persian lands, now under Pahlavi monarchs instead of Qajars and without the cosmopolitan ties to their kinsmen in what were now the Soviet and Turkish realms. Soon after, the use of Azerbaijani Turkish was banned in schools, media, and the publishing industry, thanks to the Pahlavis’ newfound emphasis on Persian ethnicity and language as the basis of nation-building during the interwar era.12 The nationalist historiography developed in this period recognized the Azerbaijanis as linguistically Turkified Persians, ascribing to

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them the same Aryan origins as Persians. These new developments added up to a renewed invitation for the Azerbaijanis to remain integral to the Iranian realm, albeit as “Persians.” What made the invitation plausible in the first place was the Azerbaijanis’ deep entanglement with Persian history, palpable in their typical bilingualism in Turkish and Persian as well as their Shi’a creed shared with the Persians—an important difference from the Baluch or the Kurds in Iran, whose Sunni creed set them apart. Suited to their long history in the Persian lands, where they had been crowned as the shahs of the realm, they could now become ordinary “Persians” in Pahlavi Iran.

On the other side of the border, in the newly founded Turkish Republic, Azerbaijanis became Azeri Turks, just as one would be a Meskhetian Turk, Bosnian Turk, or a Bulgarian Turk. These many Turks constituted the demographic basis for the nation-building of the new republic, erected on the ruins of a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional empire. As the Ottoman territories shrank in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were also divided along ethnic and confessional lines. Various projects and processes during this period, from massacres to mass migrations and population exchanges, have produced a largely Turkified Anatolia, embracing millions of Muslim Turks with outside origins. Azerbaijanis, or Azeri Turks, became part of this Turkish Muslim majority.\(^{13}\) Although their Shi’a creed (some were Sunni) made them

\(^{13}\) Turkish cities of Kars and Iğdır can be considered as part of the Azerbaijani homeland. Iğdır’s population is predominantly Azerbaijani and Kars has a significant Azerbaijani population. Original Azerbaijani settlements in these two cities go back to the Safavid period, although their population further grew through
visible in a Sunni majority country, this denominational difference was compensated for, so to speak, by their ethnolinguistic ties to the Turkish realm. Their reception stood in stark contrast to the remaining Armenians and Greeks of Istanbul, whose religion made them legal minorities of the new republic.

In the former Tsarist territories, Azerbaijanis became a “nation,” albeit in “voluntary union” with other peoples of the USSR. The Soviet response to the question of how to sustain an old multi-ethnic empire in the age of nationalism found its succinct expression in Stalin’s dictum “socialist in content, national in form.” This Soviet policy of the interwar era, known as *korenizatsiya* (indigenization; literally, “putting down roots”), not only envisioned the participation of different nations in the socialist project, but required the production of those very nations through a host of Soviet ethnographers, historians, and archaeologists ready to prove the primordial roots of Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Azerbaijanis, and others within the Soviet-designated borders. In the case of the Azerbaijanis, a state was already in place prior to the Soviet rule. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918–20), erected in the ruins of the Tsarist empire, was far from representing a territorially bound people, however. Pan-Islamists and pan-Turkists were among its founders, and its parliament included, besides an Azerbaijani majority,

Azerbaijani migration from Iran and Russian Transcaucasia. The majority of Azerbaijanis in Istanbul have their origins in these two cities.
Armenians and Russians. Although this state-making enterprise received Soviet cachet under communist rule, the state now represented the Azerbaijani nation, claimed to be indigenous to the Caucasus and divorced from its Turkic and Persian pasts.

The mutual closures not only cut up the Azerbaijani Triangle; they generated excess populations that were killed, exiled, or exchanged. Turkey, for example, became the preferred place of exile for pan-Turkists hailing from the former territories of the Russian Empire, although the new republic disavowed any ethnic-based irredentist claims.¹⁴ Mammad Amin Resulzadeh, the former leader of the now defunct Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, was self-exiled in Turkey after he fled Bolshevik Russia via Finland. Just as Turkey became the recipient of pan-Turkists elsewhere, Turkey’s Communists, like the world-famous poet Nazım Hikmet, found refuge in the Soviet Union. In the same vein, Shi’a scholars of the Russian Caucasus resettled in Iran, among them the father of the late Fazil Lenkerani, a prominent Shi’a mujtahid of Qom. In sharing each other’s burden by swapping “internal enemies” during this period of closures, the Soviet, Iranian, and Turkish governments had in fact bound their realms to one another. Although these swaps were underwritten by agreements of non-intervention, exiles and earlier diasporic connections could resurface in times of opening and become potential bridges across borders.

¹⁴ Some of these political exiles arrived Turkey via Iran (Bezanis 1994, 78).
One such opening was delivered by the Second World War. In the summer of 1941, just as Nazi Germany began its occupation of the USSR, Soviet forces invaded Iran in a joint operation with the British. Azerbaijani ties of language and kinship between Baku and Tabriz gave Stalin much hope to remain in Iran even after the war’s end. In what eventually became an international crisis that foreshadowed the Cold War, Stalin mobilized Soviet Azerbaijanis from Baku to win the hearts and minds of those in Tabriz and other cities in Iranian Azerbaijan.

### 4.2 Stalin’s Dream

When the Second World War ended, Joseph Stalin was in his dacha near Moscow where he was presented with a small map of the extended borders of the USSR. Stalin pinned the map to the wall and said,

> Let’s see what we have here… Everything is all right to the north. Finland has offended us, so we moved the border from Leningrad. Baltic states—that’s age-old Russian land!—and they’re ours again. All Belorussians live together now, Ukrainians together, Moldavians together. It’s okay to the west.

Turning his attention to the eastern borders, he proclaimed, “What do we have there?…The Kuril Islands belong to us now, Sakhalin is completely ours—you see, good! And Port Arthur’s ours, and Dairen is ours.” Moving his pipe across China, he continued, “And the Chinese Eastern Railway is ours. China, Mongolia—everything is in order. But I don’t like our border right here!” pointing his pipe at the south of the Caucasus (Molotov and Chuev 2007, 8).

The terrain Stalin pointed at was familiar to him from his early years of
revolutionary activity in Transcaucasia, where he organized workers and robbed banks. It was also there that he rubbed shoulders with Azerbaijani activists like Mehmet Emin Resulzadeh, whom we followed in the previous chapter. Stalin’s acquaintance with the Azerbaijanis of Baku allowed him to observe in person the vibrancy of their diasporic space during the Constitutional opening. Although this Azerbaijani corridor across the Russo-Persian frontier was choked by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s, the potency of older diasporic connections was not lost on Stalin. During the Second World War, they became key to his dream of holding the beating heart of Iran.

The Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 gave Stalin a chance to secure a permanent Soviet presence there. Crucial in this enterprise was winning the hearts and minds of Iranian Azerbaijanis, who populated much of the lands occupied by Soviet troops. Following the invasion Soviet Azerbaijanis were mobilized in large numbers and in diverse capacities to be sent to various cities of Iranian Azerbaijan, where they were expected to showcase to their brethren an alternative future under Soviet regime. Communist Party functionaries, security service officers, militiamen, court officers, printers and publishers, geologists, educators, technicians, doctors, and artists were dispersed to various corners of Iranian Azerbaijan to engage in cultural diplomacy on behalf of the Soviet regime. Along with them went grain, sugar, kerosene, fabric, manufactured wares, and Soviet rubles. (Hasanli 2006, 3-9).

The Soviet mission in Iran was led by Aziz Aliyev, the third secretary of the
Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. Back in Baku, the efforts were coordinated by First Secretary Mir Jafar Baghirov, who mediated between Stalin in Moscow and the mission in Iran. In a report to Stalin in 1944, Baghirov updated Stalin on the situation:

Pursuant to your instructions on the strengthening of Soviet influence in South Azerbaijan, we have lately carried out some measures. In particular, 245 party, Soviet and military cadres of the republic have been sent to South Azerbaijan. Thirteen of them are employed as diplomats, ten as trade officials. 150 as military, and others in economic, transport, and educational areas. Another 375 people are to be employed in foreign trade, public health, and railways, and other Soviet bodies are expected to arrive in South Azerbaijan in a day or two. All of them Azerbaijanis (Hasanlı 2006, 34).

Efforts of these formal and informal diplomats were geared toward propagating among Iranian Azerbaijanis the advanced conditions of the Azerbaijanis under Soviet rule. Their achievements in the fields of literature, art, and economics were disseminated through a newspaper called For Motherland, issued by the Soviet Azerbaijanis in Tabriz. Four thousand copies were printed a day, with each issue passing through many hands. (Hasanlı 2006, 11). Representatives of the Tabriz intelligentsia were invited to Baku, where the talks would be attended by Soviet Azerbaijani writers and poets such as Suleyman Rustam, Suleyman Rahimov, and Mirza Ibrahimov (Hasanlı 2006, 14). It was essential, as Baghirov in Baku wrote to Aliyev in Tabriz, “to create the best impressions about our theater, actors, and the art of Soviet Azerbaijan among the population” (Hasanlı 2006, 13).

Baghirov was particularly fond of the Baku artists in Tabriz, who staged musicals.
and operas written by Soviet Azerbaijanis like Uzeyir Hacibeyov and Muslim Magomayev in several cities of Iranian Azerabijan (Hasanlı 2006, 13). Not only were these composers honorable persons of Soviet Azerbaijan, their operas, like Shah Ismail by Magomayev and Koroglu by Hacibeyov, spoke of historical and legendary figures that were nationalized under Soviet rule. Stories about these figures had circulated in the wider region for centuries. Shah Ismail’s own poems had a long afterlife among the Alevi in Anatolia, whereas the legends of Koroglu, a Robin Hood–like hero, had been recited by the aşık (bards), including Armenians, roaming over Iran, Anatolia, and the Caucasus. If these figures represented anything, it was the plural roots of Azerbaijanis within the Turko-Persian geography. Appropriated as the ethno-national heroes of the Azerbaijani nation under Soviet tutelage, they were now used as a strategically formulated cultural bridge to the Azerbaijanis on the other side of the border.

The idea of an Azerbaijani nation unto itself implied a shared past across borders. This shared past was conceived to be that of a nation, politically divided between Iran and USSR. This view was articulated by Soviet officials shuttling between Baku and Tabriz. Baghirov’s account of his own visit to Tabriz is one such example. At a meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Baku, he said:

While at Nakhcivan, I visited Tabriz for three to four hours. In some places of the city I met seven to eight boys and girls and wanted to talk with them. However, when my car stopped, they were about to run away. I addressed them in Azeri, saying “Come here.” Having heard their native tongue, they returned…The land of South Azerbaijan is our Motherland. Citizens living on the border of our Republic are those separated from their relatives (Hasanlı 2006, 4-5).
A shared past suggested the possibility of a shared future, coded in the very name “South Azerbaijan.” Sentiments and discourses geared toward a shared future informed the exchanges between Baku and Tabriz from 1941 until the retreat of Soviet forces from Iran in 1946 upon Stalin’s orders. Such sentiments, regardless of their performative nature, were key to the Soviet mission in Iran. That is why the Soviet leadership made a series of decisions in 1944 to prop up the presence of Soviet Azerbaijanis in the Soviet representative bodies in Iran, such as the authorized trade representatives, financial bodies, Soviet banks, consulates, and the embassy in Tehran.15 Alongside these diplomatic efforts, and perhaps more important, were social and economic investments that came in the form of an agro-technical station, a knitted-goods factory, a printing house with a machine for both Perso-Arabic and Cyrillic letters, and an “Azeri school” for the children of Soviet and Iranian Azerbaijanis in Tabriz (Hasanlı 2006, 31-33). All these investments were financed and staffed from Baku.

Stalin’s promise to the Iranian Azerbaijanis was a future showcased by the efforts and successes of Soviet Azerbaijanis, their “national prosperity” evident from the human and economic resources mobilized from Baku alone. Higher living standards

15 29. The order from Moscow sought “to replace the authorized trade representatives in Tabriz, Ardebil, and other towns of Iranian Azerbaijan by Azerbaijanis. The same goes for employees of financial bodies and Soviet banks in Tabriz … to employ Azerbaijanis in our diplomatic bodies to perform the duties of consuls and the secretaries of consulates, especially in Tabriz and Maku … to employ one or two Azerbaijanis in top positions in the apparatus of the Soviet Trade Representation and the embassy in Tehran … to arrange a tour of the Azerbaijan State Dramatic Theatre named after Azizbeyov as well as a concert group to perform in Tabriz and other towns of South Azerbaijan” (Hasanlı 2006, 29).
were meaningful as part of a bigger message: Soviet Azerbaijanis could write in their language, rule their own state, and partake in national pride in the age of nationalism.

Such was the message conveyed in the Soviet propaganda movie *On the Other Bank of the Arax*, prepared in 1944 by an Azerbaijani crew in Baku for screening in the cities of Iranian Azerbaijan.\(^{16}\) Early in the movie, against the backdrop of the historical *Arg-e Tabriz* (Arch of Tabriz), the voiceover addressed the Iranian Azerbaijanis: “If the historical truth was written on these old walls about the people’s fight and its heroes, we would read the following lines.”\(^{17}\) These lines, written in Azerbaijani Turkish and Cyrillic script, slowly ascend the walls of the historic arch:

The Azerbaijani people rose up many times to defend their homeland [oz vatan]. Names of their heroes like Javanshir, Babek, Shah Ismail Xatayi, Koroglu are inscribed to the pages of history in golden letters. As centuries wore on, these golden pages were adorned with the most esteemed names. Written on these golden pages are the names of the resistance leaders Setter Khan and his comrade–in–arms Baghir Khan.\(^{18}\)

The arc of time thus drawn on the Arch of Tabriz presented a single line of ancestry that stretched from the Christian prince of Caucasian Albania in the seventh century to the Tabrizi leaders of Iran’s Constitutional Revolution in the early twentieth century. Mentioned in the same breath were the neo-Mazdakian rebellious leader of

\(^{16}\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uq0FNJi3F4

\(^{17}\) “Eger tarih, halqin mubarizesi ve onun kahramanlari haqqinda bu kadim duvarlara hakikati yazmak isteseydi o zaman biz bu sozleri okuyardik.”

\(^{18}\) “Azerbaycan halki oz vatanini mudaфиya etmek ucun defelerle qiyam etmistir. Cavansir, Babek, Sah Ismail Hatayi, Koroglu kimi kahramanlarin adlari kizil harflere tarihin sayfalara yazilmistir. Asirlar odtukce, bu kizil sayfalarda Iran Azerbaycanindaki mubarize rehberleri Settar Hanin ve onun silahdasi Bagir Hanin adlari yazildi”
Persia from the ninth century and the founder of the Safavid Empire from the sixteenth. This deep past, taken to be that of the Azerbaijani nation, reminds the viewer of the reoccurrence of heroism in the ancient lands of Azerbaijan, both in the form of resistance against outside forces and the implied capacity to build one’s own state. The obvious anachronism of the narrative wanes when seen within the framework of a territorially conceived nation, whose make-up is understood to be primordially homogenous rather than historically plural. The appeal of such a narrative is further heightened when juxtaposed with other scenes in the movie, in which Iranian Azerbaijanis are seen at schools, factories, and fields working, producing, and modernizing: a nation invigorated under Soviet rule.

Stalin’s attention to Iranian Azerbaijan, mediated by the Soviet Azerbaijanis and couched in a nationalist language, carried a certain weight in Tabriz, where the ban on Azerbaijani Turkish and Tehran’s economic negligence had taken its toll. Soviet-sponsored Azerbaijani nationalism, coming as it did after more than a decade of Iranian nation-building based on Persian ethnicity and language, meant outright subversion for the Iranian leadership in Tehran. In response to the notion of “South Azerbaijan” advanced by the Soviet cadres in Baku and Tabriz, articles appeared in the Iranian press emphasizing the shared fate of Persians and Azerbaijanis. The Tehran newspaper Kushesh wrote:

We have obtained strange and mirthless news from Azerbaijan. They say that the resigned Shah made the people suffer. Now they express their discontent
through opposing central power and disobeying officials from the center … Now those dissatisfied in Azerbaijan are willing to disjoin. Dear Azerbaijanis! We, all the peoples of Iran, are unified, without any discrimination. It is through your own courage and heroism that Iran does exist today. It is you who repulsed enemies and shed your blood. It is you who brought fame to Iran, and we with good reason love Azerbaijan today. (Hasanlı 2006,12)

With the war’s end, which removed the excuse for a Soviet presence in Iran, the Soviet regime propped up its activities to put in place pro-Soviet cadres that would serve Moscow’s interests against those of the British and the Americans, even after the retreat of the Soviet forces from Iran. This, for the Soviet leadership, meant nothing short of a Soviet zone of influence within Iran, not unlike the Japanese-controlled Manchuria within China during the same period. After all, puppet states had become the lever of imperial expansion in the age of nation-states. In the summer of 1945, the Soviet-backed Democratic Party of Azerbaijan was established in Tabriz, its leader, Ja’far Pishevari (1893–1947), an old revolutionary with connections on both sides of the border.

The Soviet preference for Pishevari was hardly a coincidence. His kinship ties to the Soviet realm and his earlier cross-border communist activism were noted by a report written by Baghirov:

Pishevari was born in Iranian Azerbaijan. For a long time he worked in important party offices in Soviet Azerbaijan and was sent to Iran by Comintern in 1927. Having been imprisoned by the government of Reza Shah, he was kept in prison for 10 years and was released after the intervention of Soviet troops in Iran in 1941 … Two of his brothers live in the Soviet Union. One of them is a captain of medical service in the Red Army (Hasanlı 2006, 70).

Born in Iran’s Ardabil province, Pishevari moved to Baku at an early age when

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his parents left Iran in 1905 in search of employment opportunities in Baku’s oil industry. Exposed to the revolutionary ideas brewing in the city during his education and later as a school teacher, Pishevari began to engage in leftist activism. Through his contacts with Baku Bolsheviks and his active role in the Baku-based Adalat (Justice) Party of Iran, he immersed himself in communist circles in the Russian Caucasus and in Iran. Together with other Iranian Azerbaijanis like Haydar Khan-e Amo-oghli, who was among the leaders of Iran’s Constitutionalist movement, Pishevari founded the Communist Party of Persia. His communist activism continued during the Pahlavi period, which led to his arrest in 1930. He remained in prison until the shah was deposed by Anglo-Soviet forces in 1941. Out of jail, Pishevari turned to journalism. He was editing newspaper in Tehran when the Soviets contacted him for the leadership of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan.

Through Pishevari and his contacts on both sides of the border, the Soviet leadership put to use old diasporic ties of kinship and communism in the service of Azerbaijani nationalism à la Soviet in order to maintain an imperial presence in Iran. Such presence was critical to combat from within Iran the British influence over the new Pahlavi king in Tehran, and Pishevari’s public opposition against the British would do just that. When Pishevari’s Soviet-backed party unilaterally declared the Azerbaijan Democratic Government by way of organizing a separate congress in Tabriz, the Anglo-Soviet rivalry over Iran intensified, and created in the process an international crisis that
soon brought the Americans in on the British side. In what was an early episode of the Cold War, Azerbaijanis from both sides of the border became Stalin’s entryway to Iran.

As the historical paths overlapped in the context of a world war that unraveled national borders, the Soviet leadership extended a bridge to the Iranian Azerbaijanis, offering them a chance to switch from one historical path to another, much like a train changing tracks at a level junction to another direction, and ultimately to a different destination. That was the dream Stalin offered to Iranian Azerbaijanis to realize his own dream of extending Soviet influence further down south toward the Persian lands soaked in oil. However, just as Stalin used Azerbaijanis to meddle in Tehran’s backyard, Hitler collaborated with Azerbaijani exiles from Transcaucasia to bring down Moscow. To his dream we now turn.

4.3 Hitler’s Dream

In the late summer of 1942, a year after Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, which brought the Nazi forces to the vast Russian steppes, his generals presented him with a large cake adorned with a map of the Caspian with “Baku” spelled out in chocolate cream. Having enjoyed the Baku slice, he reportedly said, “Unless we get Baku oil, the war is lost.” Originally, Hitler had conceived Baku’s oil to be the prize of a swift defeat of the Soviet Union. Having failed to seize Moscow, however, he had to revise his strategy. Baku’s oil was now essential to replenish Hitler’s war machine, which was running low on gasoline. And capturing Baku would cut off the Soviets’ access to their
main source of oil.\textsuperscript{20} As Baku became for Hitler both the means and the prize of his imperial ambitions over the USSR, the irony of it all was not lost on Stalin: Baku’s oil industry, which once forged the “Man of Steel,” (that is what Stalin means) had now become his Achilles’ heel.

Although Hitler failed to achieve his dream, the advances of his army across the Eurasian steppes into the Caucasus aroused the dormant dreams of others, like Mammad Amin Resulzadeh, whose transimperial itineraries we followed in the previous chapter. Moscow is where we left him. He was brought there by Stalin who had rescued him from the hands of the Baku Bolsheviks for old times’ sake. After two years of willy-nilly residence in Moscow, and making a living by teaching Russian and Persian at an institute, he fled Bolshevik Russia in the summer of 1922. Having escaped from St. Petersburg to Helsinki with the help of the Tatar theologian Musa Bigiev, he found himself in Europe, where pockets of exile communities from the former Russian empire existed in all the major capitals. Making contact with these exiles, he first traveled to Berlin and then to Paris before he finally settled in Istanbul—a decade after he had first come there as an Iranian exile. Now an exile from Bolshevik Russia, he made Istanbul his home base for his anti-Soviet activism. Not only did he keep correspondence with other exiles in Europe, he also published two periodicals, \textit{Yeni Kafkaz} (New Caucasus) and \textit{Odlu Yurt} (Land of Fire), to arouse Turkish public opinion.

\textsuperscript{20}In 1940, only a year before Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, “22.2 million tons of oil were extracted in Baku which comprised nearly 72\% of all the oil extracted in the entire USSR” (Agayev et al. 1995).
for Azerbaijan’s independence from Soviet rule. In the mutually agreed divisions across the Azerabijani Triangle, however, Resulzadeh’s activism for the emancipation of Azerbaijan from the Soviet Union fell on deaf ears.

This was not the Ottoman capital he had known a decade earlier, when pan-Turkist ideas had some political weight. The leaders of the new republic, who wanted to maintain friendly relations with their Soviet counterparts, were wary of such activism within their borders. Accommodating Resulzadeh for close to a decade despite Soviet pressure, Turkish leadership finally asked him to leave the country to avoid further embarrassment in Turkish-Soviet relations. Having settled in the Polish capital of Warsaw, he continued his activism, shuttling among European capitals, particularly between Paris and Berlin, where he attended conferences, gave talks, published journals and books, and even formed secret committees together with other exiles from the Caucasus and Central Asia. In Berlin, for instance, he attended conferences in the Humboldt Club and published a book in German called Das Problem Aserbeidschan (The Azerbaijan Problem) in 1938. He was all too familiar with the circles in Berlin when he was contacted by the Nazis in 1942.

With German tanks sunk deep in the Eurasian steppes, the German diplomat Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg invited to Berlin Soviet exiles from the Caucasus living in Europe and Turkey. Gathered in the legendary Hotel Adlon in May 1942, the participants comprising Georgians, north Caucasians, and Azerbaijanis negotiated their
options for collaboration against the Soviets.\textsuperscript{21} It was a precious opportunity for the exiles, whose anti-Soviet activism had fallen on deaf ears during the interwar years. Hitler’s plans of bringing Stalin to his knees opened up new prospects for those who considered piggybacking on German efforts to get back at Moscow. Germans, on the other hand, wanted to capitalize on their activism in their own agitprop among the defected Soviet soldiers or those captured by the Nazis. Many of these POWs were deployed in the special eastern legions of the SS Army, and the activists in exile were expected to be in close contact with the legionnaires of their own people. More important, these activists were considered as the future cadres of a Nazi-administrated Caucasus.\textsuperscript{22} And it was precisely on that point that Resulzadeh had a disagreement with the Germans. His aspirations for an independent Azerbaijan free of Nazi boots did not sit well with the German leadership, for whom Baku’s oil fields were too important to be left in the hand of Azerbaijanis.

Just as Germans sought the collaboration of exiles from the Soviet Union, they also lobbied the Turkish government to break its neutrality on the side of Germany and against the Soviet Union. German Ambassador Franz von Papen led the lobby in Ankara, where he could draw the interest of some generals in the Turkish army. Two of

\textsuperscript{21} The Azerbaijani participants included Resulzadeh, Halil Hasmemmetli, and Fuat Emircan (Yagublu 2015, 100).
\textsuperscript{22} Although Resulzadeh cut off his relations with the Germans and left the country, Germans continued to collaborate with other Azerbaijanis such as Fuat Emircan, Abbas Atmalibeyov, and Abdurrahman Fetalibeyli-Dudenginski, who kept in close contact with the Azerbaijani legionnaires deployed in the SS army (Yagublu 2015, 100).
these generals later visited Berlin and met with Germans as well as Soviet exiles including Resulzadeh. These generals were not alone in their pro-German sentiment; a growing number of Turkish intellectuals and officials were espousing pro-Nazi and pan-Turkist sentiments, and that kept alive the German hopes to create a fissure between Ankara and Moscow alive.

Although the Turkish leadership proved resilient in their neutral stance throughout the war, the German influence emboldened the exiles in Turkey to be more vocal about the plight of their brethren outside of Turkey. The term “outside Turks,” also referred to as “captive Turks,” was popularized by the emigrants among these so-called outside Turks, especially those with a pan-Turkist bent. The number of monographs written by these emigrants drew a renewed interest in the fate of Turks in Iran and the Soviet Union alike. For example, A. Caferoglu’s Azerbaycan, published in 1940, not only provided an overview of Azerbaijani history and culture but also pleaded for the independence of Soviet-governed Azerbaijan. In 1942, Mehmet Sadik Aran published his Iran Türkleri (The Turks of Iran), which spoke of the persecution of Turks in Iran to arouse public opinion in Turkey on their behalf (Landau 1995, 86). Articles on the outside Turks began to appear in newspapers too. One of them, published in Sabah, read:

We have no right to remain indifferent to the fact that Turks enjoy no equal legal rights with Persians in the field of education, and that their language and culture are crushed down. When the Parliament had just been formed in Iran, it was permitted to speak in Turkish. (quoted in Hasanlı 2006, 12)
These lines, reflecting the renewed Turkish interest in Azerbaijanis as the Turks of Iran, incited an anti-Turkish campaign in the Iranian press. Many articles were produced to remind the Turks and the Persians alike that the Turkic-speaking Iranians were “the essence of Iran.” Some of them were written to prove that the Persian language had been native to Azerbaijanis, whereas Turkish had been forcibly thrust upon them in the sixteenth century, that is, during the Safavid rule of Shah Ismail and his descendants (Hasanlı 2006, 12). These claims shared the premise of Iran’s nationalist historiography on the Azerbaijanis, which understood them as linguistically Turkified Persians.

Both the Turkish article and the reactions to it in Iran were communicated by Aliev, the head of the Soviet mission in Tabriz, to his comrade in Soviet Baku. Having dismissed the Turks’ patronage and Persian claims to a shared history, even ethnicity, Baghirov insisted on the ethno-national unity of the Azerbaijanis, separate from both and in need of neither’s patronage:

Now South Azerbaijan have a new boss—Ottoman Turks. They have possibly been instructed to allege that residents of South Azerbaijan are their kinsfolk. Where are they up to now? Who disturbed them? Things went so far that Tehran and Ankara got into an argument. They say it is imperative to lead the country. As if the five million-strong Azerbaijani people have so far been homeless. These say “ours,” those insist “ours,” and they start sharing the nation. Tehran lost its head so much that they “forgot” some historical facts. However, our goals are clear, our path is distinct. We, the citizens of Soviet Azerbaijan, may confidently say that we have already accomplished one goal: Azerbaijanis are a nation with an ancient statehood and millennia-long history. (quoted in Hasanlı 2006, 12-13)

A round of responses from Turkey, Iran, and Soviet Azerbaijan was nothing short
of an international dialogue on where Azerbaijanis belonged. Each response attached them to a single domain by way of reducing their many pasts into a single origin. Seen together, however, these responses laid bare Azerbaijanis’ many roots that could not be shared across national borders. That which could not be shared was the surplus of a diasporic history. When the doors were shut, the surplus had to be integrated, pacified, or, if possible, dispensed with. When prospects for opening emerged, however, the surplus became a bridge to the other side. Hitler understood this as well as Stalin.

4.4 Surplus of History

If the imperial dilemmas of the long nineteenth century gradually narrowed political horizons, the ultimate solutions found in the project of nationalism broke apart Azerbaijanis’ interconnected historical geography. The many roots they accumulated along their diasporic routes became excessive within each domain that prioritized a separate single root. With their roots and routes lost to view, Azerbaijanis’ local cosmopolitan ties became the surplus of history. During the interwar years, the surplus was deliberately forgotten or at least pacified within each domain. It resurfaced, however, during the brief opening delivered by the Second World War, for what was excessive within proved useful for projecting state influence beyond borders.

If the dreams of Hitler and Stalin revealed the potency of old cosmopolitan ties in bridging realms beyond borders, their ultimate failure revealed the fragility of such ties, now dependent on state patronage and couched in nationalist terms. When Hitler’s
grandiose scheme of enclosing the Middle East went down the drain, along with it went the dreams of those Soviet exiles and Pan-Turkists. Similarly, when the Soviet forces had to retreat from Iran under increasing Anglo-American pressure, Pishevari’s government in Tabriz collapsed instantly, shattering the dreams of Azerbaijani nationalists on the Iranian side. Many of these Iranian Azerbaijanis crossed the border into the Soviet Union and eventually became Soviet citizens, and those who remained on the Iranian side were subjected to persecution. Azerbaijanis’ cross border ties had become an excess once again. The Second World War, rather than ending the age of nationalist closures, laid bare its paradoxes.

The persons who crossed the border or established a connection with the other side during the war posed a problem for the regimes once the doors were shut down. In some cases the problem was dealt with by dispensing with those very persons. When 195 Soviet Azerbaijani soldiers who had defected to Turkey were handed over to the Soviet authorities in 1945, they were executed on the spot by a Soviet firing squad. Pishevari, who crossed to the Soviet side following the Soviet retreat from Iran, shared a similar fate. He died in a suspicious car accident in 1947, which many believe to be an act of Soviet secret police. His diasporic ties and nationalist outlook, which were useful on the other side of the border, apparently proved excessive within Soviet borders. That excess is evident today in his disputed legacy. Though many in Iran remember him as a Soviet stooge, he is hailed as a socialist revolutionary by the Iranian left and championed
as a hero by Azerbaijani nationalists in Iran and post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The views on the short-lived state he led are similarly divided. Some consider it as a Soviet puppet state, much like the Japanese-backed Manchuria in China, whereas others see in it the harbinger of a national destiny.

Similarly excessive were the repatriated Azerbaijani legionnaires, who had been exposed to anti-Soviet nationalism on the German front. Moscow’s solution was to exile them to Siberia. I stumbled upon the memoirs of one such legionnaire during my fieldwork in the town of Balaken in northern Azerbaijan. Originally written in 1998, the memoirs of Cafer Hanif Oglu Caferov were published in 2004 by his neighbor Akif Memmedli, a local historian with pan-Turkist leanings and a fervent critic of the Soviet regime. *The Legionnaire’s Book of Honor*, as Memmedli entitled it, didn’t just expose the Soviet cruelty that fell upon the Azerbaijani legionnaires upon their repatriation. Equally important, for Mammadli, was Caferov’s account of a brief encounter between him and Mammad Amin Resulzadeh, who appeared among the Germans during a visit to the Azerbaijani POWs. This short episode in the narrative is interjected by Mammadli’s long editorial note that praises Resulzadeh’s efforts for an independent Azerbaijan.

Another document I came across in the same town shed light on the fate of the Iranian Azerbaijanis, who fled to Soviet Azerbaijan after the fall of Pishevari’s government in Tabriz. Among the private collection of letters preserved by the children of one of those Iranian exiles, a leaflet from 1971 stood out for its mixed script of Perso-
Arabic and Cyrillic alongside the portrait of an Asian man (see Figure 22). The leaflet was a donation card prepared by the Azerbaijani branch of the association of Iranian exiles living in the Soviet Union. The printed Perso-Arabic text denounces American imperialism in a fashion typical of Soviet propaganda posters and requests donations for the “heroic fighters of Vietnam” fighting the Americans. And the handwritten Cyrillic fills the blanks to indicate the amount of donation and other details. The presence of the Perso-Arabic script was the residue of a past that had remained on the other side of the border. But the Cold War rhetoric conveyed in that script pointed to a new division that came to be known as the Iron Curtain. Those Iranian Azerbaijanis who crossed the border to the Soviet side, though separated from their brethren across the Iron Curtain, had apparently acquired new brothers in faraway places like Vietnam.

Figure 22: Perso-Arabic and Cyrillic scripts juxtaposed on a donation card for supporting the Vietnamese communists.
The opening delivered by the Second World War had left its legacy in each domain. In Iran the Tudeh Party, which was founded in 1941 through contacts between pro-Soviet socialists and the occupying Soviet army, became the main political platform of the Iranian left, shaping its trajectory from the oil nationalization of the 1950s to the revolution of 1979. Although the party greatly benefited from Soviet prestige during the Cold War, its critics abused this Soviet connection, accusing Tudeh of serving Soviet interests rather than those of Iran.

World War II left a legacy on the Soviet side as well, where Azerbaijani nationalism pumped by the Soviets within Iran had an afterlife in the post-Stalinist years. During what later came to be known as Khrushchev’s Thaw, Soviet Azerbaijani cadres—some of whom had served in Iran like Mirza Ibrahimov, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet in Azerbaijan (1954–58)—pushed hard for increasing cultural autonomy from Moscow. Thanks to the Soviet-sponsored Azerbaijani nationalism during the war, Azerbaijanis in Baku had significant cultural capital which they used when negotiating with Moscow on issues of cultural autonomy. As a result of these efforts, for instance, Azerbaijani became the state language of the republic in 1956.

In Turkey the term Outside Turks, popularized during the war, had an afterlife in the nationalist movement of the 1970s. The movement was led by a former senior lieutenant of the Turkish Army, Alpaslan Türkeş, who was among the supporters of the German–Pan-Turkist alliance and was court-martialed for what came to be known as the
Racism Turanism Trials. Because the pan-Turkist wave was revived in tandem with a strong anti-Soviet sentiment during the war, the nationalist movement Türkeş led in the 1970s espoused a staunch anti-Soviet stance, epitomized in its slogan “Communists, go to Moscow,” directed against the Turkish left in its violent ideological rivalry. Years later, this Turkist anti-Soviet discourse underpinned the Turkish outreach to the Turkic-speaking populations across a crumbling Soviet Union.

As we saw in Chapter 1, that post-Soviet Turkish outreach overlapped with Iran’s Shi’a Crescent in Transcaucasia, where Iranian Azerbaijanis became Tehran’s entryway into the former Soviet space. If on the Cold War’s eve Soviet Azerbaijanis conveyed to their brethren on the Iranian side the promise of a shared future under socialist nationalism, this time on the Cold War’s wake, it was the Iranian Azerbaijanis who reached out to the Azerbaijani nation on the Soviet side, offering them a shared future under the banner of Shi’a Islam. With the post-Cold War opening the old frontier was getting crowded once again. The next chapter takes us to the eve of that opening.
5. Leaving the Cocoon

December 25, 1991. When the Soviet hammer-and-sickle flag lowered for the last time over the Kremlin, Iranian leadership found a treasure in their backyard. The dissolution of the Soviet Union gave the Islamic jurists in power another chance to create a zone of influence. It was a golden opportunity, coming, as it did in the wake of a tumultuous decade that dissipated their dream of “exporting the revolution.” Already in 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini had sent Gorbachev a letter inviting him to “examine Islam more closely” as an alternative to both Eastern communism and Western capitalism (A Call to Divine Unity 2008). When Khomeini’s historic epistle was handed to Gorbachev by the Iranian leader’s personal envoy, Khomeini’s other epistles had already been circulating in the southern towns of Azerbaijan S.S.R and the outskirts of its capital, Baku, where they had traveled secretly in the pockets of sea captains and truck drivers on duty carrying out trade across the Soviet–Iran border.

Among the recipients of these epistles was a merchant from the border town of Astara, named Mirza. Reaching beyond the Soviet border into Iran, Mirza did not rely only on sea captains and truck drivers; he had been catching radio signals from the Iranian cities of Ardabil and Tabriz ever since he got his first portable radio. Mirza would overcome the inquiring ears and the noise by climbing up the green hills that rise just a few miles from his village in Astara and stretch across northern Iran along the Caspian shore. Behind the range lay the historic lands of Azerbaijan in Iran, whence a
radio voice in January 1979 would speak of the shah’s departure from the country and
the imminent return of Ayatollah Khomeini. With the cleric’s return, Iran went through a
major political transformation, the reverberations of which shook the entire Middle East.
Meanwhile, Mirza, still on the hills of Astara, continued to tune in to Iranian news. The
signals he caught on the Soviet side sketched out the lives of his kinsmen in Iran, now
ushered into a new future under an Islamic regime. It was calmer on his side of
history—until it was no more.¹ When the Soviet regime eventually collapsed in 1991,
Mirza was the first to host the Shi’a clerics coming from Iran. That first encounter across
the former Iron Curtain was to proliferate into countless others extended across the
former Russo-Persian frontier.

January 2, 1992. Just as Mirza was receiving the Iranian mullahs in his house,
Ahmed, a Soviet imam from the Azerbaijani town of Shaki, was about to arrive at the
Istanbul airport. There he was to be received by a Turkish Muslim notable, who had
previously visited Ahmed in Shaki. This was Ahmed’s second time in Turkey. He had
traveled there in 1985 on an official mission to represent the Soviet Muslims in an
international trade fair in Izmir. Among the visitors of the Soviet pavilion were high-
level Turkish bureaucrats such as the mufti of Izmir and the head of religious affairs. The
contacts he made there later found him back in Azerbaijan S.S.R, where Ahmed kept

¹ I borrow the expression from the title of Alexei Yurchak’s (2005) book Everything Was Forever, Until It Was
No More: The Last Soviet Generation (In-Formation).
receiving visitors from Turkey, imams sent by the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs or resourceful individuals who came on their own initiative. One of these individuals was now waiting for him at the airport, and next to him was a Turkish imam who had spent a month with Ahmed during Ramadan in 1990.

Their meeting in Istanbul brought Ahmed in touch with Osman Topbaş, the son of a Sufi sheikh who led a Muslim community of affluent businessmen. The community had flourished during the 1980s, when Turgut Özal liberalized the Turkish economy and encouraged the public visibility of hitherto marginalized Muslim communities. As a beneficiary of this opening, the Topbaş family organized their philanthropic activities under a foundation named after a seventeenth-century Ottoman-Sufi saint, Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi, with its headquarters next to Hüdayi’s shrine in Üsküdar. That is where Ahmed met with the sheikh and their exchange initiated a process that resulted in a number of schools and charities established in Azerbaijan by the Istanbul-based foundation, prefiguring a growing Turkish presence in Transcaucasia. In the meantime, the meeting between the Soviet imam and the Turkish sheikh has become a story of “the original encounter,” one that circulates among the teachers and graduates of those schools.

The short twentieth century came to a close with unexpected regime changes, namely, the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in
1992. If the former promised a future based not on closure around ethno-national lines but an opening through Muslim (Shi’a) internationalism, the latter pulled the “Azerbaijani nation” out of its Soviet cocoon and ushered it into many possible futures. In between these two events, and in relation to them, Turkey opened up as well. Sunni Muslim networks there, invigorated by the Islamic revolution in Iran in the 1980s, flexed their muscles across the former Soviet space in the 1990s, particularly in Transcaucasia, where they competed with Iranian mullahs over a mixed population of Sunni and Shi’a Azerbaijanis. These interrelated developments swung the doors wide open to Azerbaijanis moving between places where they shared a past with others. This chapter focuses on the prehistory of that post–Cold War connectivity by following the stories and itineraries of Mirza, the fatwa smuggler, and Ahmed, the Soviet imam.\(^2\) We start with Mirza, whom we left on the hills of Astara.

\(^2\) These are pseudonyms.
Figure 23: Citizens of the Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran, lined up and gazing at each other across the Aras River. Once a porous border between Tsarist Russia and Qajar Iran, the river became part of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.

5.1 The Fatwa Smuggler

Mirza’s name came up in different places during my fieldwork: a village in the outskirts of Baku, an Iranian cleric’s office in Qom, and a Hussainiya in Moscow. Although he was not a Shi’a scholar, Mirza had been a key figure in the making of many; his name still circulates along with the Azerbaijani students going back and forth between Iran and post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Following those students across the border had finally brought me to his village in September 2013.
At the time of my arrival, Mirza was at a wedding in Nardaran, a village north of Baku that was proudly dubbed by pious Azerbaijanis the fortress of Shi’ism in Soviet Azerbaijan. Waiting for his return, I spent two weeks in his village, staying and conversing with the circle of people who knew Mirza well and had stories to tell. These stories, aired around dinner tables and in teahouses, had elements of local history, pivoted on some personal feat or tragedy, and submerged in the larger theme of religious life under the Soviet regime. Such narratives gained further weight when told in the historic mosque of the village, which houses a cemetery in its yard. The mosque and the graves around it provide a sacred ground where personal tragedies or heroic actions resemble those of the twelve imams, who, Shi’ites believe, were God’s supreme intermediaries after Muhammad and, as recipients of divine grace, led exemplary lives to be emulated. In the presence of God and in the midst of ancestors, Mirza’s fellow villagers felt at ease to shift between their personal stories and well-known episodes from the lives of Shi’a imams, particularly Imam Hussain, the third Shi’ite imam, whose martyrdom drives the passion of Shi’ites. The cries and prayers for Imam Hussein inside the mosque echo those offered to the ancestors outside; together, they create a powerful current that enfolds the faithful who swing in and out of the mosque–cemetery compound.

Across the compound is Mirza’s house, where he received me upon his return from Baku. It was also where he had welcomed the Iranian Azerbaijanis who crossed the
border into the Soviet Union two decades ago. A two-story structure built of stone and brick, the house is surrounded by a large garden, typical of the rural architecture across the country. Upon entering it I noticed a number of beehives neatly set up in front of the seating area. Mirza was busy, together with his two young sons, smoking the hives to calm the swarm of honeybees around him. Beekeeping, an old Caucasian occupation, occupied Mirza that day. As he noticed my presence, he removed his protective veil, which hid a welcoming smile on his tanned, white-bearded face. Soon we sat down across the beehives and spoke of Soviet times as we repeatedly dipped into the delicious honeycombs he had brought out from the house.

Figure 24: Mirza with his bees. Photo by author.

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3 Absent in the city of Baku, gardens are an inextricable aspect of rural life in Azerbaijan, and indeed in much of Transcaucasia. In those gardens, besides the section reserved for vegetation, one typically finds a seating area where the family receive guests, have meals, and socialize with neighbors over tea and miyəbbə, sweet and sour jam pickles made of seasonal fruits.
The 1980s were the liveliest in Mirza’s memory, not least because he had been the center of attention both in the village and the province. For some he was a local religious leader, for others a man of wisdom and connections. “The community here insisted that I lead the prayers in the mosque,” he recalled; apparently, many of his pious fellows refused to stand behind a Soviet-appointed axund, the Persian title for Shi’a clerics in Azerbaijan. The loosened belts of Soviet governance during glasnost had emboldened some mosque communities to nominate their own axunds. Mirza was one of them. “But I couldn’t accept it,” he said, reminding me about Khomeini’s fatwa against taking up such appointments under a tyrannical regime.4 “It would not be permissible to pray

4 Tha said fatwa probably refers to the following statement in Khomeini’s first political book/pamphlet Kasif al-Asrar (1943), or The Unveiling of Secrets: “We say a dictatorial government is an oppressive one, and those who work for it are tyrants and oppressors” (239). The English translation is from The Position of Women from the Viewpoint of Imam Khomeini (2001, 203).
behind axunds who are appointed by an oppressive government. You see, we were under communist rule, and having read the fatwa, I simply could not do it.”

Perhaps unsure if I fully grasped the stakes in his conviction, he brought up the Tobacco Régie, asking me if I had heard about it. As I nodded yes, our conversation was steered to more than a hundred years back, when the concessions on tobacco trade granted by the Qajar Shah to the British in 1890 received a backlash from local merchants supported by Shi’a clerics. Mirza was quick to remind me of the role of a fatwa in effecting the famous tobacco protests. Issued in 1891 by the highest cleric of Najaf, Mirza Hasan Shirazi, the fatwa against the use of tobacco had indeed played a key role in the protests by giving a moral boost to the merchants’ movement. Mirza then proceeded to tell me the story he had heard in Iran during one of his visits to Qom in the 1990s. The story went like this:

One of the shah’s officers was a tobacco collector. He had in his house some three hundred types of tobacco, some very rare samples among them, collected from all over the world. One day, on his way home, the collector noticed smoke coming out of his yard. Rushing home, he saw his wife throwing his entire tobacco collection, in its expensive boxes, into a bonfire. Back in the house, he scolded his wife but she stood her ground and responded, “You haven’t heard of the fatwa?”

“What fatwa?” the man asked, without a clue. She then told her husband about Hasan Shirazi’s fatwa declaring the use of tobacco to be tantamount to war against Imam
al-Mahdi, the last imam that the Twelver Shi’ites believe to have been occulted until he will reappear at the end of times. Having heard about the fatwa, the collector ran up to his room to bring the rest of his tobacco collection out to the yard, where he threw it onto the fire, uttering salawat (prayers) for Imam Mahdi.

“You see, the riches and the pleasures of the world all wane in the face of a fatwa,” said Mirza, trusting in the lesson of his story. It was more than enough to clarify the persuasion he had some two decades ago for not accepting the nomination to become an axund. Today, those in the village use a range of media, including social media, to consult the jurists in Iran. In the 1980s, however, it was the sea captains and truck drivers that gave Mirza access to fatwas. They were coming in the storage rooms of ships or the pockets of truck drivers carrying out trade with Iran. “We were basically smuggling them,” he said, remembering how “for a piece of paper I used to pay these drivers a fortune.” During the Iran–Iraq war, military aid in ground equipment, in addition to Soviet goods, reached Iran through the border town of Astara, where Mirza received the fatwas and other epistles brought by truck drivers who did not mind having an extra business on the side.

Mirza’s connections with these drivers were forged in the 1980s, when he himself was traversing the Soviet territory from his hometown on the Iranian border, transporting vegetables and fruits to the industrial towns of Russia, all the way to St. Petersburg. He was a self-styled merchant operating in the shadow of the Soviet
economy—Sovietologists called it “the shadow economy.”

5.1.1 In the Shadow of the Soviet Economy

Although Mirza was from a border town, his horizons were not jammed at that border; he was a well-connected man. His connections did not lie with the functionaries of the Communist Party, known as the apparatchik, but with a host of other groups that engaged in quasi-legal and illegal economic activities. Among them were farmers in the countryside who would underreport to kolkhoz (collective farm) leaders in order to sell the “surplus” to make extra money in the dire economic conditions of the late 1970s. Mirza established ties with these farmers upon returning from his military service in Kaliningrad. Partnering with his friend who had a small pickup truck—a luxury asset in the Soviet Union—he began to drive to various villages to buy animal stock, nuts, and grains from the farmers and bring them to the market sellers in the city. This illegal economic activity was not an everyday affair; rather, it peaked during Nowruz, an ancient Persian tradition that marks the beginning of spring. Preparations for the celebrations invigorated the informal economic networks between the cities and the rural provinces known as rayons.

Markets for agricultural goods extended from the bazaars of Astara to major Russian cities in the north, where the sale of fruits and vegetables from southern regions was permitted during the Brezhnev era. As part of what James Millar (1985) called the

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[^5]: It was also called “the second economy.”
“little deal,” the Soviet state tolerated and even encouraged illegal market activities to reinvigorate the stagnating economy.⁶ A growing number of people in the southern republics, including Mirza and his family, participated in this internal trade as farmers, intermediaries, and sellers. Together with his father, Mirza transported fresh fruits and vegetables from the villages of Astara to places as far as Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg). As a produce middleman, he established contacts with many other long-distance traders, legal and illegal.

This long-distance trade in fresh produce ran parallel to another one in flowers. On the one end of this curious economic enterprise were the villages of Shuvelan, Mardakan, and Nardaran located next to one another in the Absheron Peninsula, some thirty miles north of Baku. Flowers grown there were collected seasonally and loaded in trucks and trains heading north. On the other end lay the major cities of Russia, where the culture of flower-giving found new life with a set of celebratory days established by the Soviets, such as the anniversary of the October Revolution and International Women’s Day in March. The high demand for flowers and the pressure to keep them fresh over long distances kept the prices in Moscow quite high, up to six times the prices in Baku (Sahadeo 2011, 526). The lure of high profits resulted in an extensive network of Azerbaijani traders who bought the flowers from the farmers on credit, arranged for

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⁶ Jeff Sahadeo (2011) notes that “even before the Brezhnevite Little Deal, Moscow’s city council allowed the sale of selected consumer goods, fruits, and vegetables, from southern regions with longer growing seasons in order to improve the city’s mood and status as a privileged consumer destination, in addition to the wellbeing of its residents” (526).
their transportation and storage, and bribed the police in Moscow to turn a blind eye to the selling of these flowers on the streets or around metro and bus stations (Sahadeo 2011, 527). Mirza’s acquaintance with this network was going to have unintended consequences, for the villages where flowers were grown harbored a network of Shi’a mullahs. Operating in the shadow of the Soviet public, a few of these mullahs were emboldened by the Islamic revolution in Iran and in turn emboldened Mirza to be observant of the developments on the other side of the border.

5.1.2 In the Shadow of the Soviet Public

Unlike what one might expect, Soviet Azerbaijan was full of mullahs, though only a handful of them had a proper Islamic education. In the 1930s the Soviet state had drained the blood vessels of learned religiosity by banning and burning Islamic literature and crushing local networks of Muslim scholars who had been connected to Islamic centers in Istanbul, Najaf, and Cairo. Many of these scholars perished in jail, and a number of them were exiled to Siberia; others found refuge in Iran and Turkey. Those who survived the Siberian winter were allowed to return after the Second World War, though they were not permitted to settle in their hometowns. Educated in the Shi’a madrasahs of Iran or Najaf, these mullahs still commanded a certain prestige among the

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7 The change of alphabet from Perso-Arabic to Latin (1927/8), and then to Cyrillic (1937-1940), constituted a double break on the transmission of Islamic knowledge. Maybe the impact of these imposed changes would have been mitigated had local networks of scholars not been crushed. The resultant atmosphere of fear was such that some people felt the need to ceremoniously burn their own books (Kemper et al. 2009, 9-10). For more on the Soviet assault on Islam, see Khalid (2007, 50-83).
pious circles. Mirza remembered these old mullahs well, naming them one by one, their hometowns, where they received religious education, and where they eventually settled after returning from exile.

Small groups of interested students soon formed around these mullahs. Hiding from the authorities and without access to texts or schools, intergenerational transmission did not go much beyond the basic tenets of Islam and learning how to read the Qur’an. That, however, was more than enough for the new generation, who provided an essential service that came to define mullahs’ work in Azerbaijan S.S.R.: officiating burial ceremonies. In the absence of Islamic institutions and scholars, public religion in Soviet Azerbaijan was reduced to funerary rites and rituals around mazars (tombs), as was the case with the other Muslim-majority Soviet republics in Central Asia (Ro’i 2000, 524). Mullahs registered solely for the purpose of officiating funerals, which constituted their main source of income (Ro’i 2000, 217). Their fee would often constitute the biggest portion of funeral expenses, and the promise of such income resulted in growing numbers of unregistered mullahs, which far outnumbered the registered ones (Ro’i 2000, 604).

The services of this unregistered clergy were also sought during shrine visiting, a practice that coexisted with the routine of the kholkot. The Soviets did not destroy every

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8 Funeral prayers were the most observed of all religious rites among Azerbaijanis, Sunnis and Shi’ites alike, during Soviet times (Ro’i 2000, 515).
mosque and shrine but preserved some of them as cultural monuments and entrusted them to kholkaz leaders, who constituted the lowest ranks of the Soviet bureaucracy. Some of these leaders later facilitated access to religious spaces entrusted to them as cultural monuments. Doing so would earn them the respect of pious locals who demanded physical infrastructure for religious congregation. Shrines, or pirs as they are called in Azerbaijan, were thus an inconspicuous part of the Soviet landscape in Azerbaijan, and self-styled mullahs were to be found in almost all of them. In 1970, in just forty-seven rayons and three towns (out of eighty rayons and eight towns), 496 unregistered clergy were counted (Ro’i 2000, 340). These mullahs were in competition with one another and often moved from shrine to shrine. Soviet authorities referred to them as “itinerant mullahs,” whereas Mirza called them karin mollasi (materialistic mullahs, literally “mullahs of stomach”). Years later, when Shi’a clerics from Iran came to post-Soviet Azerbaijan, they had to win over these mullahs, who were anxious about losing their livelihood to the newcomers. To prove that they were not competitors, Iranian mullahs had to make sure that enough money went into the pockets of these Soviet mullahs.

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9 (Roi, Islam int he Soviet Union, p. 340) In 1970, another report forty six groups or secret associations, “the predominant majority of which gathered for prayer just on the main festivals, during the fast and, in the case of the Shi’ites, in the month of Muharram (Ro’i 2000, 313).

10 On “itinerant mullahs, see Ro’i (2000, 326-328).

11 This was pointed out to me by the Iranian mullahs who crossed the border into the Soviet Union.
Not all mullahs were in competition for mundane rewards, however. Some had a deeper connection with the religious tradition, circumscribed as that tradition had become under decades of Soviet rule. These mullahs often had a circle of students whom they taught behind closed doors. In fact, it was from one of those mullahs that Mirza had learned how to read the Qur’an when he was a child. A number of these mullahs were clustered in the villages around Baku, the same villages where flower traders regularly stopped. One of them, Nardaran, was particularly known as a fortress of Shi’ism, thanks to its tightly knit local community of pious Shi’ites led by learned mullahs. Mirza’s connection to Nardaran through flower traders brought him into contact with these mullahs, who showed a keen interest in the developments in post-revolutionary Iran. Mirza was quick to add that a few of these mullahs were even called on to participate in the official meetings held in Baku between the Iranian and Soviet officials.

In the meantime, winds of change had begun to blow over the Kremlin with Gorbachev’s rise to Soviet leadership. Having introduced a series of reforms aimed at economic restructuring (perestroika) and political transparency (glasnost), Gorbachev cracked the door to public debates on social, economic, and political problems accumulated over decades. Emboldened by this opening and his conversations with the learned mullahs of Nardaran, Mirza began to look for ways to bring in literature from Iran. At the top of his list were Khomeini’s fatwas, which he began to smuggle in by
drawing on his connections to the truck drivers crisscrossing the Soviet–Iran border and also a few sea captains sailing between Baku and the Iranian port of Anzali. Such a risky enterprise was hardly a stretch from his quasi-legal and illegal engagements on the Soviet side. His entrepreneurial spirit had been cultivated in the midst of underreporting farmers, bribing traders, and itinerant mullahs, whose overlapping networks loomed large in the shadow of the Soviet state.

Because of those networks that remained in the shadow, Soviet response to the Iranian revolution was marked by a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, the revolution removed from their backyard what was in their eyes an American puppet. On the other hand, it wasn’t the leftists but the Islamists who ended up seizing political power after the shah’s departure. Now stuck with an Islamist regime right in their backyard, Soviet authorities had to tread carefully. Although they carried out a friendly diplomacy with the ruling jurists of Iran, they were wary of any Iranian influence among the Muslims of the southern borderlands. The problem was not only that the Iranian revolution invigorated Islamist movements across the Middle East, but also Soviet tanks and troops were entrenched in Afghan soil, fighting against the mujahedeen. Islam was looming large the Soviet relations with the Middle East.

5.2 Soviet Bridges to the Middle East

A comprehensive Soviet diplomacy to the Middle East first emerged in the 1950s, when the wave of decolonization and the rise of the “nonaligned movement” prompted
increasing Soviet—East exchanges. This post—World War II historic momentum was consequential for Muslims of the Caucasus and Central Asia, who were instrumentalized in the process as agents of “cultural diplomacy” to the East (Kirasirova 2011). “The Eastern peoples” of the Soviet Union would enjoy this new agency—as well as test its limits—in various avenues like the Asian and African Film Festival in Tashkent and the Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Organization’s (AAPSO) conferences. These and similar platforms would anchor far-flung communication among politicians, bureaucrats, artists, and scholars across the regions within and beyond the Iron Curtain. Equally important was the role of scientists, interpreters, and technicians in brokering relations between the Soviets and the Arab world, in particular. The growing geopolitical interest in the Middle East and the rise of Arab socialism during the 1950s prompted East-to-East cooperation in which technological transfers, development programs, and educational aid were as important as military cooperation, economic relations, and anti-Western political alliances (Katsakioris 2010). These various channels collectively defined the scope of Soviet outreach to the Middle East from the 1950s through the 1970s.

Although people of the Caucasus and Central Asia assumed critical roles in this enterprise, they did not act as Muslims per se; their Muslim background was a cultural ____________

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12 New governmental and non-governmental bodies, such as the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Contacts (SSOD) and the Soviet Committee for Solidarity with Asia and Africa (SKSSAA), were established in the 1950s to orchestrate Soviet efforts toward channeling the new international dynamism into a socialist ecumene. On the concept of socialist ecumene, see Bayly (2007).
asset that Soviet authorities drew on in their diplomacy to Muslim Afro-Asia (Kirasirova 2011, 126). Oriental studies departments played a key role in preparing the Soviet Muslim cadres who could serve as informal diplomats to the Middle East. The graduates of Baku University’s Department of Oriental Studies would take up positions in the Soviet projects in the Arab world. One of these graduates was the future president of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Əbülfəz Elçibəy.

Upon receiving his degree in Arabic philology, Elçibəy was sent to Egypt to work as a translator at the construction site of the famous Aswan Dam in the city of Luxor (Al-Uqsur). When Khrushchev visited the near-complete dam in 1964, Elçibəy was among the group who received the Soviet leader, together with Egypt’s President Gamal Abdel-Nasser. Khrushchev had brought two other Azerbaijanis with him: One was Enver Alikhanov, the chairman of the Council of Ministers of Azerbaijan S.S.R., and the other was the famous Soviet-Azerbaijani singer Raşid Behbudov, who acted as a Soviet cultural diplomat through his concerts around the globe. It was a precious occasion for Khrushchev to showcase to Egypt and other Arab nations what Soviet patronage of national development would look like. It was also a show of force for the pan-Arabist Nasser, who had invited other Arab leaders of the nonaligned movement to the opening, including Iraqi President Abdul Salam Arif and Algerian President Ahmad Ben Bella. As national infrastructure projects like the Aswan Dam brought the Soviets deep into Arab turf, such rapprochement was anxiously followed across the Atlantic. In the midst of it
all was a Soviet “Easterner” Elçibəy, who witnessed world politics in the making and later deemed the experience “invaluable.” Upon his return to Baku Elçibəy taught in the Department of the History of the Asian and African Countries at Baku University and among his students were a number of Arabs who had come there on a Soviet scholarship. Soviet diplomacy to the Middle East was sustained by a web of Arab students, Soviet singers, artists, interpreters, and technical experts moving across the Iron Curtain.

Figure 26: Opening of the Aswan Dam in Egypt in 1964. Pan-Arabist Gamal Abdel Nasser (center) next to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (right). The event was a show of force, attended by other Arab leaders such as Iraqi President Abdul Salam Arif (left).
Figure 27: Əbülfəz Elçibəy, the first democratically elected president of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, in a Bedouin outfit. An interpreter employed by the Soviet Union in the Aswan Dam project in Egypt, he translated between Russian and Arabic, neither of them his mother tongue.

The Muslim background of Soviet Easterners’ Muslim background came to the foreground in the early 1980s, by which time the political climate in the Middle East had shifted significantly. The time of Arab socialism was no more. The Middle East was now a bastion of flourishing Muslim networks and movements, energized by Iran’s Islamic Revolution of 1979. If Egypt’s Nasser had epitomized the ethos of the 1950s and 1960s, Iran’s Khomeini heralded the changing spirit of the time. His historic return to Iran on a chartered Air France flight sent shockwaves across the Middle East and beyond, emboldening dormant Muslim networks to emulate the Iranian Islamists and reclaim their countries’ future. This larger political trend was variously manifested in the Grand Mosque’s seizure in Mecca, the creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the rise of Islamic
movements in Turkey.\footnote{On the Meccan rebellion, see Commins (2006) and Hegghammer and Lacroix (2011); on the rise of Hezbollah, see Norton (2007); on the Islamic movement in Turkey, see White (2002) and Yavuz (2003).}

In dealing with these new actors and their claims, several Middle Eastern states had to refashion themselves. The Saudi royal family tried to divert the wave by adopting a deliberately conservative outlook at home while stepping up their sponsorship of Muslim networks abroad. These internal and external moves converged in the Afghan front, where the restless Saudi jihadis joined the Afghan mujahedeen, both supported by the Saudis (and the United States) in their fight against the Soviet forces (Commins 2006, 152-154). In Turkey, President Turgut Özal tried to absorb the wave of change by toning down the staunch secularism of the Turkish state and by giving Muslim businessmen and intellectuals a stake in a liberalizing Turkey. Later, in the 1990s, he benefited from these Muslim networks in making inroads into a crumbling Soviet Union. Just as in the Saudi case, the internal and external moves were to converge in Central Asia, where Muslim activists underpinned the first wave of Turkish regionalism.\footnote{The regional rivalry among states to outdo one another in the eyes of an international Muslim public only entrenched the relevance of Islam to international politics throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.}

Muslim networks were becoming indispensable aspects of international politics during the 1980s, and Soviet authorities were not slow to read this changing climate. Indeed, they found themselves right in the middle of it following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. A growing transnational Muslim public that had become increasingly self-confident was now strongly critical of the Soviet Union. The “Afghan
question” began to pop up in diplomatic meetings as early as 1980 and put the Soviet diplomats in a tight spot vis-à-vis their peers from Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran, who also raised their concerns about the treatment of Muslims in the Soviet Union (Nunan 2011, 138).

In response to this backlash, Soviet authorities had every reason to relay to non-Soviet Muslims a carefully crafted image of the Soviet Union as a country of religious freedom. Bureaucrats and mullahs staffed several exhibitions abroad, put on by the Council of Religious Affairs (CRA), where they conversed with visitors and “corrected” misconceptions about Muslim life in the Soviet Union (Nunan 2011, 139-140). Such exhibitions were complemented by conferences between the Soviet and Afghan ulama, for instance, or high-level visits by Soviet Shi’a clerics from Azerbaijan to the Islamic Republic of Iran. All these created avenues in which “Muslims on both sides of the Soviet border could imagine what Muslim life could be under different political orders” (Nunan 2011, 134). In light of this growing mutual interest, the Soviet leadership had to prove that their political system and modernist spirit, represented by the Muslim cities of Ufa, Tashkent, and Baku, were superior to the models propagated by the clerics in Qom or the Muslim businessmen of Anatolia (Nunan 2011, 138).

In this Soviet diplomacy to Muslim countries, spiritual directorates in Ufa, Tashkent, and Baku played an important role. The Soviet-appointed heads of these directorates, known as the muftis, made visits to various Asian and African countries
and received foreign delegations from them. These receptions would often result in further exchanges. Following a visit to Baku of several Iranian officials in June 1980, for instance, the Soviet CRA put together an exhibit titled “Muslims of the Soviet Union” for the Tehran International Trade Fair in 1980 (Nunan 2011, 144).

In 1985 the head of religious affairs in Turkey, Tayyar Altıkulaç, received an invitation from the CRA in Moscow to visit the USSR’s southern republics. The invitation, issued through Moscow, actually came from the muftis of SADUM and DUMZ, the Spiritual Directorates in Tashkent and Baku. Altıkulaç himself had previously hosted Ziyauddin Babakhanov, then the mufti of Tashkent, in Ankara and Istanbul in 1978. Now it was his turn to see what was on the other side. Together with his delegation, he visited Tashkent and Samarkand in Uzbekistan, Derbent and Makhachkala in Dagestan, Baku and Shaki in Azerbaijan, and finally Moscow. On these visits the delegation met with prime ministers, ministers, mayors, and local representatives of the Communist Party, who were eager to prove to their visitors that

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15 As appointed representatives of the Soviet Muslims, the Muftis were at the forefront of religious contacts across the Iron Curtain, and made frequent visits to other countries. Such visits were moments of opportunity for both sides. While the foreign delegations could connect—albeit shortly—with Soviet Muslim elites, Soviet bureaucrats were able to demonstrate Soviet Muslims’ “advanced” conditions to their guests. This mutual interest made both parties handle these encounters with a certain discretion and pragmatism.


17 The Turkish delegation comprised Altıkulaç as the President of the Turkish Department of Religious Affairs, two vice-presidents of the same department, and the mufti of Izmir.
Soviet Muslims enjoyed religious freedom. Although the delegates were given a tour of the mosques in each town, they were not allowed to lead any sermons in the mosques. Instead, they had to make do with reciting the Qur’an in some of them to a largely emasculated audience (Altıkulaç 2011, 809). Altıkulaç remembers how the Soviet officials accompanying them during these visits kept telling us that there was religious freedom in the country and that open mosques testify to the fact. But those who went to mosque were either old or disabled. Yes, the mosques were open but there was almost no youth in these mosques; and religious education was absolutely forbidden (Altıkulaç 2011, 809).

Even as open mosques proved a false dawn, Altıkulaç still saw a silver lining. Not in the wishy-washy statements of the Soviet officials perhaps, but certainly in their names: Hacı Murat, Hayrullah, Mahmut, Osman, Yusuf Han, Abdulgani, Musa Selamoğlu (Azerbaijan’s deputy prime minister), Nadir (the head of the Communist Party in Zaqatala), Zeyneb Hanlarova (artist), Tevfik Bey (Quba’s municipal mayor), Muhammed Taki Mecidoğlu (prime minister of Dagestan), Tahir, and Ahmet were the

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18 In proving the existence of religious freedom in the country, Soviet officials did more than just craft an idealized picture of the Soviet Union for the consumption of their Muslim guests. They also spoke to an internal debate that ran deep in Russian-empire making: What is the extent of cultural autonomy to be granted to the Muslims of the empire in return for their allegiance to the empire? Scholars have argued that it was the ability of the Russian empire to win broad support among its Muslim subjects that contributed to its relative longevity and stability (Crews, 2006). The rule of Catherine the Great during the eighteenth century was critical in marking a shift from forceful assimilation to co-optation of Muslims in the Russian Empire. Her policies enshrined a certain cultural autonomy such that, during the constitutional opening, Muslim intellectuals and clergy evoked Catherine II as a symbol of religious tolerance, idealizing her as the “Grandma-Empress” for involving Muslims in the making of the Russian Empire. (Naganawa 2007, 83-84). Also see Campbell (2005).
names of the politicians and bureaucrats that received Altıkulaç and his delegation (Altıkulaç 2011, 809). These were Muslim names refracted through different Turkic languages, reflecting the prominent role of Central Asian and Caucasian Muslims in foreign diplomacy. The gratifying aspect of this, for Altıkulaç, was that, while making a name for themselves, these individuals had not had to sacrifice their Muslim names. Among them was Soviet Imam Ahmed, whom Altıkulaç visited in Shaki. This was not their first meeting; the two had met before at the International Trade Fair in Izmir, where Ahmed was on a mission to represent the Soviet Muslims to a non-Soviet Muslim audience in Turkey. To his story we now turn.

5.3 When Imams Represented the U.S.S.R

I met Ahmed in Shaki, where he received the Turkish imams and notables in the late 1980s. Shaki’s caravansaries and castles, decayed as they were by Soviet disinterest, whispers a larger-than-life history. The first colonies to settle in Shaki were silkworms. The cocoons they spun on mulberry trees were in turn spun off by locals, who turned Shaki into a major center of silk production on par with Gilan of Iran and Bursa of Anatolia. Venetian and Genoese merchants carried Shaki’s well-known silk garments and rugs from the Caspian basin as far as the shores of Marseilles. Although Shaki repeatedly changed hands between Turkic rulers of Iran and Anatolia, and later the Russians, its importance as a trading city did not diminish until the turn of the twentieth century. The Bolsheviks, not the biggest fans of trade, spun Shaki’s silk off its wider
geography and tucked it into a factory that still operates today.¹ The noise of the looms is deafening to those inside, but the mulberry trees outside are quieter, offering a seasonal testimony to a tasteful history.

Ahmed and I were enjoying the shade of a mulberry tree a couple of blocks from that silk factory when he told me his story of becoming a Soviet imam. He pinned 1974 as the beginning of it all. That is when his interest in Islam was first kindled upon reading a book titled *Islam: A Historical Account* by a Soviet orientologist named Anri Masse (1964). The book had made its way to Azerbaijan S.S.R. as Soviet-promoted anti-Islamic literature and was still passing through many hands at the time of the Soviet collapse.¹⁹ The book’s allegations against the prophet of Islam, with references to the Qur’an, had apparently piqued Ahmed’s curiosity at the time, prompting him to inquire about his own religion, of which he knew very little. He knocked on doors of *aksakals* (knowledgeable elders) and mullahs, consulting them on matters of faith and tradition, inviting some to his house to push them to debate—all to little avail. The scholarly knowledge Ahmed sought had mostly been lost to earlier generations. As we have mentioned earlier, because of the Soviet repression in the 1930s, the religiosity transmitted to the next generation was at once detextualized and provincialized.²⁰

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¹ Examples of anti-Islamic literature can be found in abundance in the Akhundov National Library of Baku.

²⁰ Adeeb Khalid (2007) argues that the Soviet assault on Islam radically changed the meaning of being a Muslim. “Being Muslim came to mean adherence to certain local cultural norms and traditions rather than adherence to strictures that were directly validated by the learned tradition” (83).
What Ahmed did not find in the learned men of Shaki, he found in reading the Qur’an. “I found a mullah to teach me how to read the Qur’an. I paid him 25 rubles for each class,” said Ahmed, who ended up studying with him for six years, albeit hiding it from his closest kin. “Even my wife did not know about it. Though I was performing namaz (prayers) and reading the Qur’an, they didn’t know that I was regularly studying with a teacher. You see, I was scared that somebody would slip, and the word would get out.” Ahmed learned the Qur’an but lost his mother in the meantime. His loss turned his new skill into a godsend, a blessing he could in turn offer to her departed soul. Reciting from the Qur’an by her tomb became his new routine. When others overheard, they invited him to read God’s words for the souls of their own dearest. Bit by bit, Ahmed became a sought-after person for funeral prayers and Qur’an recitations.

In the summer of 1980, when word of his growing popularity reached Soviet officials, he was summoned to the Spiritual Directorate in Baku, one of the four directorates that oversaw Muslim affairs in the Soviet Union. The directorate had long been occupied with the question of how to curtail the influence of unregistered clergy. Just a decade earlier, twenty-seven unregistered mullahs in Shaki were forced to renounce all religious activity, although the mullahs went about their business anyway (Ro’i 2000, 3-4). Another strategy was to register popular illegal mullahs and appoint
them as imams to divert believers from illegal prayer meetings.21 And that is exactly what happened in the case of Ahmed. Soon after his name echoed through the halls of the Spiritual Directorate in Baku, he was appointed as the assistant imam (imam naibi) at the only operating mosque in Shaki.22 Only a year after his appointment, when the 84-year-old imam he assisted passed away, Ahmed took his place as the new imam of Shaki.

Ahmed had no religious education but he was hardly an exception in that. In the early 1980s, only twenty of the officially registered Muslim clerics had graduated from higher institutions of Islamic learning, such as the Mir-i Arab Madrasa in Bukhara and the Islamic Institute in Tashkent.23 For a rewarding career, establishing trust with the Spiritual Directorate mattered more than having a proper Islamic education. The directorates enjoyed not only relative autonomy from Moscow but also a near-monopoly in managing the religious life and activities of the Muslims in the territories under their jurisdiction. The Spiritual Directorate in Baku, which was responsible for Transcaucasia,

21 An alternative scenario is also possible: Ahmed’s Qur’an recitations may have impressed a pious and influential member of the community, who then may have nominated Selim to the position of Shaki’s imam. Such nominations were uncommon; in places like Azerbaijan, where mullahs were not on the state’s payroll and depended on donations from their respective communities, it was only natural for local imams to be nominated by influential locals (Kemper et al.2009, 4).

22 In the year Ahmed became an imam, only about twenty mosques were legally functioning, with two hundred and thirty five employee—only about half of them officially registered—altogether (Göyüşov and Ösgarov, 2009, 188).

23 Göyüşov and Ösgarov (2009) note that “by 1990, only 16 persons in the Spiritual Directorate and the Baku mosques had received any religious education” (188).
appointed (and dismissed) clergy, issued fatwas interpreting Islamic theology in line with Soviet interests, published religious literature and calendars; and undertook the hajj organization. Hajj, in particular, was a delicate matter that entailed meticulous vetting of the pilgrims, for it was perceived by Soviet leaders to be a diplomatic mission rather than a religious ritual. When the Spiritual Directorate in Baku offered Ahmed a chance to perform the hajj in 1982, he could not anticipate the consequences of that mission.

5.3.1 The Hajj

Many in the town visited Ahmed upon hearing about his hajj pilgrimage. Some brought money, and others supported him in kind, following an unwritten law they knew only too well: One needed intermediaries to escape Moscow’s reach. When alive, these intermediaries would cross borders to bring news and gifts from the outside world—American jeans or Beatles records, for example. When dead, they would cross into heaven, their tombs connecting the living to the afterlife. Ahmed was about to kill two birds with one stone by crossing borders to make contact with the holy dead. He was going to see—even better, touch—the Kaaba in Mecca and visit the Prophet’s tomb in Medina. No doubt he would recite the Qur’an there as well. People in Shaki had every reason to win Ahmed’s heart so that he would remember to include their names in his
prayers. Visitors soon frequented his house, eager to exchange Soviet rubles for divine blessing.  

Although Ahmed and his neighbors saw this as a grand ritual, Soviet authorities tackled it as a matter of diplomacy. Ahmed had to visit Baku and Moscow several times during the months leading up to his pilgrimage. Each time, he went through meticulous interrogation to prove his loyalty and reliability as a Soviet citizen. As far as the Soviet authorities were concerned, Ahmed was going on an informal foreign mission to represent the Soviet Union in Saudi Arabia, a country with which the Soviets had no diplomatic relations and to which a Muslim audience came from all over the world. Endless interrogations and admonitions by the officials did not dishearten Ahmed; he played by the rules and soon enough was set to leave the country along with fourteen other pilgrims, all coming from various parts of the Soviet Union.

From its reinstatement in the mid-1940s to the end of the Soviet regime, the hajj pilgrimage remained a delicate matter for Moscow. It was inextricably linked to the question of improving the Soviets’ image among Muslims abroad, and thus selecting prospective pilgrims required extensive vetting. As for the pilgrims, this meant privilege

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24 Such hustle and bustle prior to the hajj season, though restricted to certain towns, was not unusual in the Soviet Union. Similar episodes would play out in different Soviet towns every year, depending on where the pilgrims were selected that particular year. People would bring money and gifts of other kinds to the prospective pilgrim and frequent his house upon his return, arousing concerns for the authorities in the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC). For all these reasons, preparations for the hajj often preoccupied the relevant CARC departments for three months (Ro’i 2000, 174).

25 For more on the hajj as Soviet foreign policy tool, see Ro’i (2000, 171-175 and 584-58).
on the one hand and a mission fraught with risk on the other. Each year, only about fifteen to twenty Soviet citizens in a country with millions of Muslims were allowed to perform the hajj. Ultimately, the authorities “were interested in the pilgrims comprising an isolated and carefully supervised group” (Ro’i 2000, 173). Numerically insignificant as it was, the hajj organization still functioned as a vector of mobility from Russian Eurasia to the Arabian Peninsula. Its subversive potential did not escape the Soviet authorities, who paid utmost attention to keeping numbers small and participants under watch.

Soviet officials did not have to look too far back in time to understand the potency of Muslim pilgrimage in spreading ideas, transforming individuals, and swaying public opinion on international matters. In the competitive imperial context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russian, British, and Dutch officials had all tried their hand at controlling the hajj pilgrimage to curb the threats posed by heightened Muslim mobility, namely cholera and pan-Islamism. Germs and ideas, both subversive in their own way, had circulated along pilgrimage routes (Low 2008). Because of the heightened hajj traffic along the north—south axis, tsarist officials were highly attentive to the intensified movement of Muslims from their empire to the land of the Ottomans. Ensuring the loyalty of Muslim subjects required the officials to walk a thin line between supervision and patronage (Brower 1996).
The importance of the hajj as a modality of backdoor diplomacy continued even after the Bolshevik Revolution. The Bolsheviks, who were concerned with undermining British dominance in Arabia, considered the hajj an international medium for their message of anti-imperialism well into the 1930s. The hajj remained a delicate matter of international diplomacy during the Cold War. It was a double-edged sword for Soviet officials, who could use pilgrims as political instruments for cultural diplomacy, because the same pilgrims could also slip through their fingers and become a source of embarrassment if not carefully scrutinized. Bolshevik Party elites mitigated this potential dilemma by keeping pilgrim numbers low from the mid-1940s, when the hajj was allowed, until the regime’s collapse in 1991.

In the summer of 1983, Ahmed joined the group of pilgrims in Moscow before they all boarded an Amman-bound Soviet plane. Because Soviet planes could not land on Saudi soil, the pilgrims had to transfer to another plane before they finally reached Jeddah. There, Ahmed met people from all walks of life though constantly looking over his shoulder for Soviet agents. His concern was not unfounded. Upon his return to Moscow, an official congratulated him for not having disappointed the Soviet authorities.26 His clean record in classified documents registered him as a reliable figure for various Soviet authorities, including the governor of the Shaki Oblast, the chair of the

26 Moscow often placed KGB agents among its cultural diplomats. In 1983, the same year Ahmed went on a pilgrimage, “two actual KGB agents in the Muslim clerical establishment participated in the Soviet Muslim delegation to the 8th session of the World Peace Conference and, having returned via Saudi Arabia and Egypt, ‘presented information of operational value’” (Nunan 2011, 575-6).
Spiritual Directorate in Baku, and those in the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) in Moscow. “I must have left quite a good impression on them during and after the hajj, so that, just in a year’s time, I was considered for another mission,” Ahmed told me, spotting at once the parallel between this and his next adventure to the Turkish city of Izmir, where he represented the Muslims of the USSR in a major trade fair.

5.3.2 The Fair

The Soviet Union, like many other countries, regularly participated in the Izmir International Fair to advertise its products, showcase its industrial capabilities, and strike major deals with firms in Turkey and beyond. Despite being driven by business, the fair bore dimensions of international relations and cultural exchange. Its bustling, entertaining atmosphere attracted a much wider and more diverse audience than a mere business crowd, and thus provided a favorable international setting for countries to engage in informal cultural diplomacy. Though the Soviet Union had participated in the fair for decades, Soviet authorities decided for the first time in 1982 to set up a separate pavilion called “Islam in the Soviet Union,” similar to the ones that were set up in Kabul (1979), Baghdad (1982), and Tehran (1982). In these projects, bureaucrats and mullahs would pair up to represent the Soviet Union with books, posters, pictures, pamphlets, and copies of the Qur’an (Nunan 2011, 140).
In 1985 it was Ahmed’s turn to represent the Soviet Muslims while his peers representing Soviet companies sealed business deals with Turkish firms. As a representative of the Soviet Muslim clergy, he was to communicate to a Turkish audience an “objective” account of Muslim conditions in the Soviet Union. But Ahmed knew “almost nothing” about Turkey at the time except for what he had learned from secretly listening to Turkish radio broadcasts. This time, Ahmed was not crossing the Soviet-Turkish border secretly on radio waves but officially on a Soviet plane bound for Istanbul via Moscow. When he arrived Izmir, he saw that 5,000 copies of the Qur’an had arrived before he did. “Not one of them I could keep to myself; they would simply not allow me,” he complained, deploring Soviet hypocrisy. Although his disappointment did not amount to more than a nervous sigh during our conversation, it pointed to a brewing tension he felt at the time. On the one hand, the Soviet instrumentalization of Eastern peoples and the growing salience of political Islam in the Middle East created opportunities for Muslims like Ahmed to travel abroad and, in some cases, even build a political career within the USSR. On the other hand, such mobility (externally horizontal, internally vertical) implied increasing familiarity with Muslim lives under alternative

In May of 1985, the Governor of Shaki Oblast notified Ahmad of his nomination to the task. He was one of ten candidates being considered to represent the Soviet Muslims in the Izmir fair. Having frequented the Governor’s office and the Directorate in Baku, Ahmad stood out from among the others and was eventually appointed for the “mission.”
socio-political orders and threw into relief the contradictions between Soviet self-representation abroad and Soviet Muslims’ conditions at home.\textsuperscript{28}

Although Soviet bureaucrats could not spare a copy of the Qur’an for Ahmed, they did provide him with a fully furnished, three-bedroom apartment in Izmir. From this apartment in the neighborhood of Alsancak, Ahmed went to the fair every day for an entire month in the late summer of 1985. During his 12 PM to 6 PM shift, he met people from all walks of life and answered questions of various kinds. Some asked out of genuine curiosity, but others were “truly misguided,” remembered Ahmed. Although some of his interlocutors were likely deliberate, reflecting the performative anti-communism prevalent at the time, it mattered little to Ahmed, for his answers had to be unequivocally pro-Soviet. After all, he was there to correct misconceptions about the lives of Soviet Muslims, and Soviet agents were around to make sure that was what he actually did.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{28} On the discrepancy of Soviet approach to Islam in the domestic and foreign settings, see Ro’i (1984).

\textsuperscript{29} Ahmad’s oft-monitored encounters were not limited to the fair’s passersby. More significant perhaps were his excursions within and beyond the city of Izmir. For his prayers, he tried to go to different mosques, acquainting people of various Izmir mosque communities. He still keeps the photos he took with young Turkish imams he befriended. Even Christian missionaries came his way at the House of Virgin Mary, some fifty miles south of Izmir. The New Testament he had received from them was to be confiscated by Soviet officials upon his return to Moscow, prompting another of his nervous sighs.
Figure 28: The Izmir International Fair is the oldest trade fair in Turkey. It was a festive event for the national audience and an understated venue for international cultural diplomacy.

Figure 29: An advertisement in the Turkish newspaper Milliyet, inviting readers to visit the Soviet Pavilion in the Izmir International Fair.

Although Ahmed’s return to Moscow was an anticlimactic end to his impressive days in Turkey, the role he had played as an informal cultural diplomat generated for him some recognition abroad. While in Turkey, he was asked to give an interview for Sabah, a major Turkish newspaper of the time. He was also introduced to high-level bureaucrats such as Haydar Hatipoğlu, then the mufti of Izmir, and Tayyar Altıkulaç.
then the head of religious affairs, who visited the fair. As we saw earlier, Altıkulaç later visited Ahmed in his hometown in Shaki, where he continued to host visitors from Turkey until the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991.  

One of those visitors was a Turkish imam named Asım. In 1990 the Turkish Department of Religious Affairs took advantage of Moscow’s loosened grip on Azerbaijan and sent twelve imams there. These imams, under the Baku Spiritual Directorate’s auspices, were allocated to different towns, where they would spend the month of Ramadan with the locals and return to Turkey after Eid. When notified by the directorate about the visiting Turkish imams, Ahmed went to Baku to pick one of them up and bring him to Shaki.

Asım stayed in Shaki for 33 days, each night at someone else’s house. From the day I was born until today, I have never had a Ramadan like that one. It was out of this world. Every morning, I would wake up to a day with him. Fasting people around me, beautiful ezan [call to prayer] in our ears, and learning something new every day...Every day before we left the house, Asım would read the Quran juz (part) of that day. Then we would go to the mosque. He would teach the kids there. Then we would gather for muqabala [reciprocal recitation of the Qur’an]. And so on and so forth.

A year after Asım left Shaki, Ahmed received another Turkish visitor, Nevzat Yalçıntaş. As we saw in Chapter 1, Yalçıntaş was a key figure in Turkish outreach to the Muslims of the former Soviet republics. After their meeting in 1991, Yalçıntaş invited Ahmed to visit him in Istanbul. “I had hosted him in Shaki,” Ahmed said plainly. “Now

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30 These visitors included teachers, imams, philanthropists, and even the former Turkish president Abdullah Gül, who came to Shaki in 2007 to visit the Islamic madrasah opened in 1995 by the Istanbul-based Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Foundation.
he was going to host me in Istanbul.” It was as simple as that for him; he was picking up
the thread once again to weave it in the other way, back to Istanbul. When he arrived at
the Istanbul airport on the January 3, it was Yalçıntaş and imam Asım who were waiting
for him at the gates.

Similar invitations and contacts proliferated in the wake of the Soviet collapse,
giving rise to a Turkish-Azerbaijani network across the former Russo-Ottoman frontier.
Simultaneously, an Iranian-Azerbaijani network emerged out of contacts between
Iranian clerics and Soviet Azerbaijanis across the former Russo-Persian frontier. Just as
Transcaucasia was opened to Iran and Turkey, Russia reemerged as the third corner,
where millions of Azerbaijanis, crushed under post-Soviet economic collapse, moved in
search of work—the opening was as much a moment of crisis as it was a moment of
optimism. As more and more people crawled out of their cocoons, their mobility and
exchanges spawned a transnational web across the political domains of Iran, Turkey,
Russia, and post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

The many routes of this expansive map overlaps in Transcaucasia, in the city of
Baku, where a typical Azerbaijani family would have its members going in and out of all
three domains. And it is in Baku where Molla Nasreddin, the satirical magazine that had
become the cultural expression of the Azerbaijani Triangle during the Constitutional
opening, came back to life.
5.4 The Wise Fool’s Afterlife

Just a few years after the Soviet breakup, the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences in Baku took on a project of massive proportions: reissuing *Molla Nasraddin* in its entirety. The first of eight imposing volumes, each running roughly 700 pages, was released in 1996. By that time the Republic of Azerbaijan had changed its official script for the third time in the twentieth century, first from Perso-Arabic to Latin, then to Cyrillic, and now back to Latin—the three scripts that typically appeared side by side on *Molla Nasraddin’s* cover.

The 1990s was a time of opening in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, and *Molla Nasraddin’s* distinctive eclecticism spoke well to that moment, when former Soviet citizens were discovering their shared ties not only with Turks and Persians but also with Russians prior to the Soviet period. To put it differently, *Molla Nasraddin’s* resurrection unfolded in tandem with the Azerbaijani’s homecoming to their historical geography, the Azerbaijani Triangle. By the time the eighth and final volume was published in 2010, many Azerbaijanis had visited, returned from, or settled in different corners of their old diasporic space from Tehran to St. Petersburg and Istanbul. As the old imperial capitals realigned on the same circular horizon of the Azerbaijani diaspora, the variegated cultural landscape between them found its shared expression in the pages of *Molla Nasraddin*, where Russian satire blends with Persian classics in Turkish, and Western themes are presented by a figure of medieval Anatolia.
The eclecticism of *Molla Nasraddin* is excessive when seen from post-Soviet Baku alone. The product of a wide geography, the journal’s appeal is unmistakable for those with a perspective of matching width, such as Slavs and Tatars, the art collective that defines itself as “a faction of polemics and intimacies devoted to an area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia.” Members of the collective had come across *Molla Nasraddin* at a secondhand bookstore in Baku and, as they put it, “it was bibliophilia at first sight” (Slavs and Tatars 2011, 5). Carrying and studying the republished volumes between Brussels, Moscow, Paris, New York, Berlin, and Warsaw, the collective finally published its own edition of *Molla Nasraddin*. Their edition brought together thematically organized selections from the journal under an ingenious title that encapsulates our approach to historicity in this study: *Slavs and Tatars Present Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would’ve could’ve should’ve*.

The journal’s afterlife was hardly over. Having released the book in 2011, *Slavs and Tatars* began to tour the world with lecture performances titled “Molla Nasreddin: Embrace Your Antithesis.” Piggybacking on *Slavs and Tatars*, the medieval wise fool continued to make appearances in exhibition halls, galleries, and universities in Los Angeles, Houston, New York, London, Paris, Stuttgart, Vienna, Minsk, Thessaloniki, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Istanbul.Originally assembled a century ago in the diasporic space of the Azerbaijanis, *Molla Nasraddin* was thus reassembled once again and put

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31 https://www.slavsandtatars.com/about
back into circulation, further expanding its lengthy itinerary.

It was at one of these presentations in Istanbul during the summer of 2011, I first heard of the *Molla Nasraddin* journal. The figure of Nasraddin was deeply familiar to me as Nasraddin Hodja, the wise fool of countless stories in Turkish folklore. But his appearance on the cover of an old Azerbaijani magazine—as well as the spelling of his name in Perso-Arabic and Cyrillic side by side—was certainly new. Years after that first encounter, when I had already forgotten about him, *Nasraddin* came my way once again. This time our encounter was not at another Istanbul art gallery, but at a secondhand book seller on the Nikolskaya Street in Moscow. After a long bargain, I secured from the bookseller three imposing volumes of *Molla Nasraddin* journal collection published by the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences. Having carried them to Ankara, my hometown, I again forgot about Nasraddin. I was reminded of him again by a presentation by the anthropologist Bruce Grant. The wise fool found a way of coming back every time I forgot about him, popping up in different places, and in different forms: on the pages of edited volumes, as images on the screen, or in the talks of artists and academics. As the surplus of many pasts, *Molla Nasraddin* was not only eclectic, it was also resilient.
Conclusion

The preceding pages have offered a model for analyzing phenomena on a transregional scale. What follows recaps the essential elements of that model through a series of questions and answers.

Internal and external: Studies of transnationalism have been crossing borders for three decades, what is new about this one? This study goes beyond borders, not by discarding them, but by relating them to circuits which move in and out of their domains. Moreover, the flows we have analyzed are not just new or global, but can be old, historical, in specific directions, and at varying distances. Social sciences have long been concerned with the internal constitution of society. And the burgeoning emphasis on global flows has yet to express how these flows articulate with internal structural conceptions of a society, leaving the inquiry at the stage of a simple proposition: societies are permeated by global flows. This model analyzes how the internal constitutions of societies are shaped by those greater flows; alongside the internal motivations for external movements that flow in the other direction. When multiple domains are brought into the analysis, as we have done in this study, the internal-external frame can illuminate how different political domains are formed and transformed in relation to one another.

States and networks: Where can we locate the social basis of this mutual transformation? It is not to be found in one place but many, spread out through
networks of religion, education, trade, labor, etc. This transnational web is made up of several interlinked clusters. What is shared at each link may vary from language to spiritual lineage, religious creed to political ideology but they all harbor social and cultural intimacies through which ideas, visions, concepts, and debates move from one place to another. Across borders, states act through and with this transnational web beyond the constraints of the formal interstate system. While diasporic ties of intimacy give states access to societies beyond their domains, states may in turn sponsor such ties, giving diasporic individuals mandate to act as cultural diplomats. These regional dynamics, however, remain opaque to the social sciences for lack of proper analytical frames between competing fixations on the local and the global. This study offers such a frame by first researching the network broadly conceived, through historiographical and ethnographic methods, and then folding that external, network-centric analysis back to engage a number of states internally. Such a view enables us to harness data, concepts, and insights from the past to inform contemporary crises, such as that of Syria today, in which regional powers entangle in ways that befuddle conventional state-centric and international relations analyses.

Centers and frontiers: If the social basis of state-network interactions is spread across multiple political domains, how can we analyze this expansive socio-political order? This study shifts the focus from old imperial centers to their shared frontier as the primary locus of transregional analysis. In frontiers the centripetal force of the political
center lessens, which allows the frontier people to be part of circulations that bring them in and out of different political domains. States too interact in frontiers through a connective tissue woven by diasporic societies whose routes, past and present, crisscross that frontier. A frontier thus serves as a portal that opens from one domain to the other. Whatever seems stable and taken for granted in political capitals appears in a state of flux in the frontier, where otherwise unrelated currents come together and test each other. Placing frontiers at the center of analysis then allows us to see political domains not as given contexts, but as projects in the making which are recalibrated vis-à-vis one another in the frontier. A frontier like Transcaucasia, though peripheral to each domain individually, lies at the center of them all. This analytical inversion of center and periphery throws light on multiple domains at once and reveals their interconnections, which are hardly visible from within a single political domain.

Openings and Closings: What does the view from the frontier reveal? It reveals a pattern of openings and closings in transregional mobilities. Times of opening, instigated by events such as revolutions, regime changes, or reformist movements, are moments of crisis and opportunity when conversations on future possibilities and shared pasts proliferate. Diasporic societies can articulate these internal conversations across borders, fostering transnational dialogues on issues of common concern. Such potent dialogues in turn feed back into debates within each domain, giving rise to uncannily similar political movements and even outcomes in key historical moments. In
this study we have analyzed several such moments including the synchronic constitutional revolutions of the early twentieth century and the state-sponsored regionalist projects of the post-Cold War present. In between these two openings were times of closing, when convergent parochialisms divided diasporic horizons and disenfranchised the old frontiers. Scholars often work within the temporal boundaries of such openings and closings, and thus reflect little on how those historical moments come about in the first place.

**Pasts and Places:** When there is an opening, where do people find the resources to imagine and build cultural orders beyond borders? The historically minded may find them in shared pasts. Others might stumble upon them elsewhere, in places where they have traveled. Either way, pieces of the puzzle are not to be found in one place. A shared past lost on one side of the border could very well be alive on the other side. Cross-border mobility brings to surface what we have called the surplus of history, an intermixed residue of transimperial exchanges that lie outside any single political domain. In that surplus, one may find unrealized futures that were nevertheless possible. When pasts and places are cast as repositories for possibilities, recollection of history acquires a particular force that orients human action and facilitates cross-border connection. In that connective space, older conversations could be resumed, stories swapped, rusty ties polished. Crossing borders then implies an interpretive opening, in which shared figures of the past can become the reference points—or stumbling blocks.
for that matter—for imagining alternative futures.

Biographies and Itineraries: How can scholars capture that interplay among past, present, and future? An attention to deep history, especially when conceived spatially, can offer valuable insight. For one, it connects the past to the present, not through a linear succession of pasts, each one undoing the other that comes before it, but through a set of alternative routes that were not taken, but could have been taken, and if not foreclosed, perhaps can be taken in the future. In other words, pasts can serve as repositories of possibilities that could be reactivated in the present. If pasts offer the present actors with alternative routes for the future, implications of following those routes are brought to home in certain places. Scholars can move between these pasts and places by taking their clues from the biographical trajectories of itinerant individuals. By digging into biographical accounts and following lines of travel within them, scholars can follow individuals along overlapping threads of shared experiences and narratives that cut across temporal and political boundaries. Such movement can create, just as it does for diasporic Azerbaijani, the effect of a time travel, into the past, and back to the future.
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Biography

Serkan Yolacan was born in Ankara, Turkey in 1984. He received his BA degree in Cultural Studies from Sabancı University in 2007. He received his MA degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology from Central European University in 2008 and a second MA degree in Cultural Anthropology from Duke University in 2013. He published short articles and reports with the King Faisal Research Center in Riyadh and the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a recipient of full fellowship for Master’s at Central European University and research associateship at the Middle East Institute at National University of Singapore. He also received outstanding academic achievement award from Central European University and research grants from National Science Foundation, Duke Graduate School, and Duke Sanford School of Public Policy.