

## Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition

By Tadeusz Swietochowski, Columbia University Press, 1995.

The last centuries of human history bear witness to the generation of havoc and carnage brought about by the disintegration of world empires and super-powers that ruled vast areas inhabited by people of different ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds. One such event took place in the early period of this century: the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Its downfall left a power vacuum in many areas of the Balkans, North Africa and the Middle East. Out of the ashes of its ruin, new and independent states emerged.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union totally disintegrated and suddenly disappeared from the international scene in a relatively short time. As mentioned, history has recorded the gradual decline and final fall of great empires. The collapse of the Soviet Union differs from other older empires. We will draw a comparison between its disintegration and the fall of the older Ottoman Empire.

There are abundant scholarly and literary analyses indicating that the Ottoman Empire underwent a process of gradual dismantling from its initial decline to its final collapse. The Soviet Union, however, underwent an abrupt end to its reign and, entered ultimate oblivion without experiencing a prolonged loss of vitality. This abrupt fall and quick end may be attributed to various factors, from the failure of economic policies to the yearning for freedom, including the revival of ethnic, religious, and national identities. These are the points emphasized by Swietochowski's timely book on Russia and Azerbaijan.

The current wave of world events exerts itself not only upon the political elite but also within academic quarters and on publishing trends. As the 1979 Iranian revolution drew greater attention to Islam and was followed by the establishment of new departments of Islamic studies and the publication of hundreds of books on the subject, the collapse of the Soviet Union generated a significant amount of interest and, accordingly, academicians and publishing houses responded to the growing search to know more about the region. Swietochowski's book should be considered a significant contribution to these efforts.

It is a widely held observation that the disintegration of the Soviet Union dramatically changed and traumatized the geopolitical and geocultural landscape of the area. Swietochowski's book concentrates specifically on Azerbaijan by examining closely the last two centuries of this unknown land's history. As the title *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition* suggests, the author deals with a people whose land is divided between north and south. He uses archival sources, official documents, and numerous books and articles written in various languages to inform readers about a land and a people about which little was known before the Soviet Union's downfall. Swietochowski's work

informs us that Azerbaijan was for centuries of continuous concern to Turkey, Iran, and the Russian empire. The influx of Oghuz Turkic tribes to the region in the eleventh century resulted in a significant proportion inhabitants being Turkic-speaking, which, in turn, caused the gradual replacement of Persian by Azeri Turkish. The history of Azerbaijan is one of mixtures and complexities: coming under Turkish Muslim rule in the mid-seventh century, succumbing to the Mongol invasions during the thirteenth century, and becoming a power base for the Shi'ah Safavids with the coming of Shah Ismail to power at the end of the fifteenth century (thereby changing the religious map of the region). With the Treaty of Gulistan (1812) the Russians began to play a lasting role in Azerbaijan. They exploited the Sunni-Shi'ah tension among Azeris through the use of Shi'ah volunteers (p. 10) against Turkey in 1828-29 and against Shamil's anti-Russian *jihad* in Daghestan.

Russian imperialism proved to be very effective in oil-rich Azerbaijan (p. 10), which received almost no Russian investment until the mid-nineteenth century. Russians extracted huge amounts of oil in Baku; in 1898, Baku's oil production surpassed that of the United States. However, after 1905 this region ceased to be a major factor in the oil market as a result of irreversible damage caused by oil production and the exhaustion of resources.

The review asserts that Azerbaijani identity is marked by the values to which people of this land surrender (p. 60), as Rasulzade, a leading Azeri intellectual, is quoted to have said explicitly:

With regard to language we are Turks, Turkism is our nationality. With regard to religion we are Muslims. Every religion creates among its followers a particular civilization, and this civilization generates some form of internationalism. As Muslims and Turks we are part of the International of Islam.

Swietochowski argues (p. 108) that Russia devised a policy designed to dismantle the bedrock of Azeri identity by promoting "the millat over the umma identity, of the secular, rather than the Islamic foundations of communal life, and of fragmentation rather than of the Muslim unity." Islam suffered from the ensuing all-out offensive and repression. The Soviet policy against Islam created an atmosphere of terror under which Muslims were ceased observing the five pillars of Islam and the teaching of its rites to the younger generation in any form. The brutal and pervasive campaign to deconstruct Islamic identity and to replace it with a secular and atheist identity resulted, as observed by the author, in abandoning "the visible manifestations of Islamic identity such as the observance of the five pillars of Islam . . ." (p. 116).

Swietochowski also discusses the history of Azerbaijan under the control of Iran in the south. According to him, Azeri Turks fell victim to the Persianization campaign of Mosaddaq, who carried out a nationalization policy after 1951. As part of an accelerated assimilation policy, Azeri Turkish was banned at the schools for it "could corrupt a proper Persian accent." Swietochowski notes that

Azeri was thus reduced to the status of a spoken idiom with a stigma of social inferiority attached to those who use it. To insist that Azerbaijan had its own national language was politically dangerous, and a writer arrested by the secret police was forced to deny in front of television cameras that such a language existed. (p. 170)

Assimilation policies were accelerated further during the 1960s, and Tehran's Persianization effort at the grassroots level intensified. The author draws comparisons between the Russian-controlled north and the Iranian-controlled south

of Azerbaijan (p. 173). He argues that "the suppression of Azeri identity in Iran had certain parallels albeit different in scope and character, in the Soviet Union. Ominous signals appeared in 1950 with the condemnation of Shamil's role in history in a scholarly publication whose title termed him 'Henchman of Sultan's Turkey and British Colonizers.'" Despite all these efforts, although loyal to Iran, during the twentieth century the Azeris managed to retain their own peripheral ethnic identity, as expressed by their successful boycott of Iran's constitutional referendum on December 2, 1979.

The startling collapse of the Soviet Union enabled the expression of Azeri identity on its own independent soil. Moreover, the old Azeri-Armenian conflict, which remained under the rug during Soviet rule, surfaced again in 1988. Moscow once more resorted to force to put down sentiments of independence and the revival of Azeri religious and cultural identity in the early 1990s, a campaign that claimed the lives of many civilian Azerbaijanis. This tragic military intervention, which took place in Baku, was approved by the United States State Department. In addition, the Western media showed a biased reaction and made no references to the hundreds killed by the Russian army's onslaught. Swietochowski's articulate analysis of the last two hundred years of troubled Azerbaijan ends with an insightful touch on recent developments and their far-reaching implications for domestic and international politics. A scanning of twentieth-century Azerbaijan reveals President Haidar Aliyev's stamp on the design and shape of domestic politics. Aliyev's first appearance in power goes back to 1969. He was a member of the Politburo until forced to resign in 1987 by Gorbachev. Aliyev returned to power in 1993 when Abulfaz Echiyay was toppled by a military coup.

Swietochowski's valuable and informative book addresses significant themes in the history of Azerbaijan and furnishes the reader with an insight about a country that lies at the crossroads of Turkish-Russian-Iranian geopolitical and geocultural triangles.

Talip Kucukcan  
Center for Research in Ethnic Relations  
University of Warwick  
Coventry, England