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Ideological Resistance in Early Soviet Azerbaijan: A Textual Analysis of a Unique Archival Document

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Abstract: *The article analyses the anti-Soviet sentiments and movements in Soviet Azerbaijan in the late 1920s and early 1930s on the basis of Strictly Confidential documents received to the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Azerbaijan SSR. Particular attention is paid to the reflection of anti-Russian sentiments on the basis of an analysis of both the document and two interesting poems, which show the perception of Russians both among the anti-Bolshevik-minded segments of the population associated with parties operating underground and among young people. Textual analysis of this document shows that anti-Bolshevik sentiments often acquired a pronounced anti-Russian character. All these circumstances were manifested in the dissatisfaction of various strata of Azerbaijani society with the Soviet regime, which, along with anti-Russian sentiments, also acquired the character of pro-Turkish movements.*

Key words: Soviet Azerbaijan, Communist Party, Archival Document, Ideological Resistance, Political Repression, Soviet Cultural Policy, Anti-Russian Sentiments, Literary Symbolism

Introduction

Despite the relatively “bloodless” process of proclaiming Soviet power in Azerbaijan,¹ the period of the real establishment of Soviet power in the regions and in the administration was characterised by an intense struggle between the Bolsheviks and nationalist forces. This was due both to the general weakness of the socialist movement in Azerbaijan, the shortage of experienced Bolshevik cadres, and to the fact that many former Musavatists and Ittihadists continued to hold positions in local government. In the early 1920s, against the background of close Soviet-Turkish relations, the influence of Turkey and Turkish military and political figures, who were

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¹ On the Sovietisation of Azerbaijan see: RGASPI, f. 85, reg. 13, d. 1, l. 2; Kazemzadeh, 2008: 276-285; Guseynov, 1967; Swietochowski, 1985: 165-191; Pashaev, 1988: 11-14; Mahmudov, 1998: 741.

also previously in contact with the Musavat government, was very significant in the emerging Soviet political environment in Azerbaijan. Anti-Soviet sentiments and movements in Azerbaijan SSR in the late 1920s and early 1930s were complex, combining socio-economic, national-political, cultural and educational factors. Other external factors played a special role in the development of anti-Soviet sentiments, primarily Iran and Poland, which used the existing contradictions to weaken Soviet power in the region. The archival documents of the OGPU (United State Political Government) show that by 1928, the Musavat Party had established strong ties with Polish intelligence,² and espionage became an integral part of the party's activities in the USSR. Moreover, there was a direct link with the Turkish consulate in Baku, through which coordination was carried out between the illegal Musavat Central Committee in the Azerbaijan SSR and the foreign bureau in Turkey.³ As Aydin Balayev notes, Azerbaijanis sympathised with Turkey as Russia's historical rival in the region, which was the reason for Azerbaijani leaders' desire to distance themselves from Russia.⁴

It is important to note that anti-Soviet sentiments often took the form of anti-Russian demonstrations, which was due to both objective factors (the centre's economic policy) and the targeted propaganda of nationalist organisations. In his letter to Moscow in the early 1920s Ordzhonikidze wrote about the growing economic discontent: "The population literally groans and curses everything and everyone – the Soviet power, the Red Army and the Russians".⁵ These economic difficulties were skilfully exploited by anti-Soviet forces to strengthen anti-Russian sentiment. In the course of the anti-Soviet struggle, there was a significant transformation of Azerbaijani national identity, which significantly influenced the further development of the self-consciousness of the Turkic population of Azerbaijan. Anti-Soviet (and, in some cases, anti-Russian) movements affected not only political, but also religious, linguistic and other identification aspects, influencing the processes of collective identity formation.

Perception of Russia and Russians in Soviet Azerbaijan: "Bloodsuckers of the North"

Soviet propaganda of the concepts of "brotherhood of nations" and "common homeland", as well as their reflection in Soviet historiography and public discourse, created the perception that Azerbaijan's entry into the USSR, the establishment of Soviet power and subsequent peaceful coexistence within the Soviet Union contributed

² RGASPI, f. 80, reg. 1, fl. 1, p. 103.

³ Saharov & Hristoforov, 2013: 482-490.

⁴ Balaev, 1998: 37.

⁵ Kvashonkin, 1997: 189.

to the formation of a positive image of Russia and Russians among the Azerbaijani population. However, this perception seems simplistic and does not fully reflect the historical reality. The opposite is confirmed not only by the anti-Soviet demonstrations in Azerbaijan in the 1920s and 1930s, but also by the sentiments that preceded them, the origins of which date back to the pre-revolutionary period. Moreover, even after the suppression of these unrests, critical attitudes towards Soviet power and Russia did not disappear, but continued to manifest themselves in various forms. Returning to the realities of the 1920s, it is necessary to pay attention to a number of objective and subjective circumstances and prerequisites, which caused discontent among various strata of Azerbaijani society. One of the key reasons for this discontent was the personnel policy of the central government. After the Sovietization of Azerbaijan, there was a need to expand the ranks of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. Despite certain successes in this direction, the problem of political unpreparedness of the new cadres, many of whom had little or no knowledge of the ideology of the Soviet state, was acutely felt. In 1921, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan decided to establish the Central Türkic Party-Soviet School in Baku. The leading party figures of the republic, including S. Agamalioglu, T. Huseynova, M. Izmailova, S.M. Efendieva, D. Bunyatsade, E. Khanbudakhova, A. Karaeva, P. Kasimova, R. Akhundova, M.D. Guseinova and B. Talybli.⁶

The personnel problem and the issue of local perception of the Soviet ideology were the main reasons for the implementation of the “korenizatsiya” (Rus. Коренизация; indigenization) policy.⁷ The policy of korenizatsiya carried out in the Azerbaijan SSR in the 1920s was conducted under the circumstances of weak local Bolshevik activism and a lack of intellectuals of Türkic origin. This circumstance predetermined the emergence of structural prerequisites for the formation of nationalist sentiments, the echoes of which can be traced in contemporary Azerbaijani society – in particular, in the form of dissatisfaction of Türkic-speaking youth with the ethno-demographic composition of the teaching corps and university students. Meanwhile, objectively speaking, it was during this period that the number of ethnic Türkic students in universities was constantly increasing. For example, in the academic year 1924/25 the number of ethnic Türkic students at the Faculty of Medicine was 24.5%, in 1925/26 – 31.7%, in 1926/27 – 40.7%, and at the Faculty of Pedagogy – 18.4% for the 1924/25 academic year, 11.5% for the 1925/26 academic year, 93.4% for the 1926/27 academic year, at the Faculty of Oriental Studies it was 94.6% for the 1924/25 academic year, 92% for the 1925/26 academic year and 63.4% for the 1926/27 academic year.⁸ The nationalization of the education system also took place in terms of content.

⁶ Niftaliev, 2016: 145.

⁷ Morrison, 2015: 160.

⁸ Amrahov, 2024: 41.

It concerns the language of instruction. Thus, the document *Practical Proposals on the Azerbaijan State University* of the Presidium of the Azerbaijan State University clearly states that without knowledge of the Türkic language among scientists it is impossible to achieve Türkization of higher education.⁹ The period of active implementation of the policy of korenizatsiya (1923-1933), which implied the nomination of representatives of titular nations to the party and administrative structures,¹⁰ revealed an acute shortage of qualified Türkic personnel in the republic. According to the All-Union census of 1926, the literacy rate among Azerbaijanis of the Azerbaijan SSR was 18.9%, and among Armenians living in the same republic – 58.3%.¹¹ As a consequence, the vacuum in professional and administrative structures was filled by representatives of other nationalities – mainly Russians, Armenians and Jews.

It is indicative that even popular publications related to the ethnic culture of Azerbaijan were created predominantly by non-Azerbaijani authors. For example, the publication *50 Dishes of Azerbaijani Cuisine* was prepared by a team that included representatives of Georgian, Armenian and Russian nationalities.¹²

In other words, thanks to the active efforts of the Soviet government, Azerbaijan was undergoing a process of Türkization and nationalization of the state, a manifestation of which can be seen in the formulation of national demands in anti-Soviet speeches as early as the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Another cause of discontent was the economic policy of the Soviet government, which from the very beginning created a favourable ground for the formation of anti-Soviet sentiments. The establishment of Soviet power did not mean the restoration of the previous economic realities that existed during the Russian Empire; on the contrary, the policy of war communism pursued in the 1920s caused serious discontent in almost all regions where it was applied. Azerbaijan was no exception. Dissatisfaction stemming from both personnel and economic policies was exacerbated by the foreign interference discussed above.

The archival documents of the State Archive of Social and Political history of Russian Federation contain valuable information about anti-Soviet movements and their ideological content. Of particular interest, in our opinion, is a copy of one of such documents – an appeal of a group of members of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan sent to the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party Nikolay Gikalo.¹³ The document was also confirmed by the next secretary of

⁹ Amrahov, 2024: 40.

¹⁰ See par. 8 of the resolution of the XII Congress of the RCP(b).

¹¹ *Vsesoyuznaya perepis' naseleniya 1926 goda*.

¹² Mesropyan, Skhirtladze & Churinov, 1940.

¹³ N. Gikalo was the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan from August 1929 to August 1930. His name is associated with the implementation of collectivisation policy in Azerbaijan, which

the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan Vladimir Polonsky. It was sent for information to the chairman of the Central Control Commission of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks Sergo Ordzhonikidze by the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party on 10 August 1930. This document, more than any other, vividly reflects anti-Soviet and anti-Russian sentiments, as well as the atmosphere that was characteristic of Soviet Azerbaijan in the late 1920s - early 1930s.¹⁴

Here it can be possible to make a parallel with Beria's words that the main axis for the construction of anti-Soviet sentiments was the colonial policy and domination of Russians, which was promoted by Musavatists in every possible way, then it will be easier to immediately understand the similarity of the concept and this document, although it was written by the members of Communist Party.¹⁵

In their appeal, the authors of the letter highlighted six key points expressing their dissatisfaction with the policy of the Soviet government in Azerbaijan. Having briefly reviewed their own expectations as representatives of the proletariat after the 1917 revolution, they emphasise that their hopes were not realised. Particular attention was paid to accusing the Soviet leadership of abandoning the political course of Nariman Narimanov, "an unforgettable leader and hero of the East, known for his great deeds".¹⁶ Moreover, the Soviet government is also accused of organising the assassination of Narimanov "under the pretext of a heart attack".¹⁷

further intensified anti-Soviet sentiments. During the civil war Gikalo was the commander of the Terek group of red rebel troops (Morozova, 2021: 771-796).

¹⁴ RGASPI, f. 85, reg. 25s, fl. 6, p. 6.

¹⁵ Mozohina, 2012: 287-292.

¹⁶ RGASPI, f. 85, reg. 25s, fl. 6, p. 2.

¹⁷ RGASPI, f. 85, reg. 25s, fl. 6, p. 2; The mention of Narimanov in the letter is not surprising, since relations between Narimanov and the Soviet center had been strained since 1922 because of Narimanov's nationalist political line. Narimanov's theory of Islamic socialism caused opposition in party circles. Narimanov believed that "during the Sovietisation of Azerbaijan, taking into account local peculiarities, it was necessary to create an independent exemplary Soviet republic so that the workers of the East would know that we [the Bolsheviks] have no conquering imperialist aims, and secondly, so that they would see and feel that it is possible to live and build their lives without khans, beks and others" (RGASPI, f. 85, reg. 2s, fl. 3, p. 6). However, disagreements between Narimanov and the Soviet center did not arise only on ideological grounds. Interesting information about internal party relations and foreign relations of Azerbaijan is contained in the letter of B. Shakhtakhtinsky sent to the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party, which presents episodes from the activities of Narimanov. For example, when the Turkish delegation returning from Moscow to Ankara stopped in Baku and Narimanov agreed to sign a separatist agreement at the Kars conference, although Moscow strictly prohibited any such manifestations. The most interesting is the following report: "Ahmed Agayev, a nationalist known throughout the Caucasus and in Russia, lives in Constantinople almost at the expense of Azerbaijan" (RGASPI, f. 85, reg. 2s, fl. 3, p. 49-52). Of particular interest is Narimanov's internal policy towards non-Muslims, both in the personnel system and in general. B. Shakhtakhtinsky confirms that Narimanov, while excluding the best non-Muslim workers from Azerbaijan from working in the Baku organisation, at the same time, despite the protests of his supporters, gathered notorious scoundrels around him, creating a gulf between Muslim and non-Muslim workers. See: RGASPI, f. 85, reg. 2s, fl. 3, p. 51; He also writes that "N. Narimanov

At the beginning of the document, in the first paragraph, the appealing side strictly complains about the resettlement of Russians in Baku and Mughan, allegedly every month 2,000 Russians are brought from Russia and settled in Azerbaijan.¹⁸ This was done in the opinion of the authors of the letter in order for “Russians to make up” the majority in Azerbaijan. The communist leadership is accused several times of “following the precepts of Peter the Great”, i.e. of imperialist and colonialist policy. As an argument of the Russians’ domination, the fact that the majority of students at Baku University are not Türks, but Russians, and that Russians have the opportunity to study here at the expense of Azerbaijan, is cited.

However, further on in the second point the authors of the appeal sharply change the emphasis. Azerbaijanis begin to accuse their neighbours – Georgia and Armenia, which in comparison with Azerbaijan “unfairly” received more privileges and opportunities than Azerbaijan, why in Georgia the manganese industry is not nationalised, while in Azerbaijan everything is nationalised, why Georgia and Armenia have military units – divisions and cavalry regiments, while Azerbaijan is not allowed to have a division, why the sugar factory is not built in Azerbaijan, but in Armenia, and so on.¹⁹

In the same spirit, the third point of the appeal asks why, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Sovietisation, only 1,000 roubles out of 10,000 roubles allocated to Transcaucasia for the development of culture were allocated to Azerbaijan. The fourth point again, continuing the same logic, complained about the construction of a sugar factory in Armenia, not in Azerbaijan. The fifth point concerned the personnel policy, when party leaders of the state were appointed from the Soviet center rather than from the field. The document further testifies to the uprisings in the regions with Iran, from where anti-Soviet forces received additions to the ranks of their detachments, in particular, the text refers to 200 Shahsevan families.

At the end of the document, the authors of the appeal – “Türkic communists and Komsomol [Communist Youth Union] members”, as they defined themselves, although they draw attention to the fact that they are “not from among the khans, beks and Musavatists”, but they certainly promise to disturb the tranquillity of the country – by issuing an ultimatum to solve the issues raised by them, which of course the Soviet government would not listen or enforce in any case.

Of course, Russia’s traditional imperial-nationalist policy also played a significant role in the emergence of Russophobia and could not but give rise to reciprocal nationalism.²⁰

considered all Armenian communists as Dashnaks and by instilling this idea into his circle, created antagonism in the communist family” (RGASPI, f. 85, reg. 2s, fl. 3, p. 51-52).

¹⁸ RGASPI, f. 85, reg. 25s, fl. 6, p. 2-3.

¹⁹ RGASPI, f. 85, reg. 25s, fl. 6, p. 3.

²⁰ Kvashonkin, 1997: 163-194.

Another interesting nuance is that the authors of the document identify themselves as Türks and not as Azerbaijanis, since the term “Azerbaijani” was not adopted and used in the form of an ethnonym and “Türkcic communists” could not associate themselves with “Azerbaijanis”.²¹ In the document one can clearly feel hatred towards other nationalities – in particular Russians, Armenians, which indicates the ground of inter-ethnic tension.

In addition to the document, very interesting extracts, poems reflecting the true sentiments of anti-Russian-minded layers of Azerbaijani society are attached to the materials. The following analysis is devoted to the source analysis of the last part of the collection of poems dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Azerbaijan SSR. It highlights ideological, political, cultural and emotional aspects characteristic of the 1930s. The first paragraph “Northern bloodsuckers are organising celebrations, organising today the Great Bayram...” (in this case the word “Bayram” is used to mean the celebration of the Sovietization of the country) contains a sharp criticism of foreign policy and dominant influence. The expression “Northern bloodsuckers” directly refers to Russia and its attempts to establish control over Azerbaijan. Further on in the poem, the authors refer to the revolutionary events of 1917-1918 and emphasize the discrepancy between the proclaimed theory of comradeship and the actual actions of the Bolsheviks. It reflects criticism of the methods of the Soviet authorities in building socialism. The poem expresses disappointment in the Soviet promises of equality and justice. The author emphasizes the loss of trust in ideological slogans that do not correspond to real actions. The expression “We didn’t agree as the Russians did” reflects both regret and hopelessness of the situation, when after the revolution the Muslims of Azerbaijan already considered themselves deceived. In the second verse the reference to the Russians is no less harsh, here the Russians are already labelled as dishonourable people and beasts of the North: “Hands off, hands off! Wild beasts of the North, hands off the Azerbaijani region”. The final part of the document is a call for the liberation of Azerbaijan from Russian influence. The images of “beasts of the north” and “hands” serve as symbols of interference and control.

Having subjected the presented documents to source analysis and considered them in the context of public political sentiments of different strata of Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1920s-1930s, we can unequivocally conclude that while being anti-Soviet, they contained explicitly anti-Russian elements, viewing this as a manifestation of imperialism. This is evidenced both by the mentioning of Peter the Great in the documents and the disproportionate attitude of the Soviet government

²¹ The term “Azerbaijani” as a name for the population of Soviet Azerbaijan was first mentioned in the 1937 Constitution of Soviet Azerbaijan (Konstitucija ASS, 1961: 3). However, for the first time it was clearly indicated as an ethnonym of the titular population of Soviet Azerbaijan in the *All-Union Census of the USSR in 1939*. (Polyakov, 1992: 71).

towards neighbouring Armenians and Georgians compared to Azerbaijan, which is again a reflection of the perception of tsarist reality. The use of negative adjectives such as “beasts”, “bloodsuckers” was a way of expressing negativity towards the Russian. All these sentiments, which were also linked to external influences, touched on subtle issues of identity, which in the 1920s and 1930s were in a latent stage of passive formation.

Conclusions

Dissatisfaction with Soviet power in Azerbaijan in the late 1920s was a complex phenomenon encompassing various aspects of society. This discontent concerned not only personnel and economic policy, but also other spheres, where expressions of resistance were often directed not only against the Soviet power itself, but also against neighbouring peoples – Armenians, Georgians and especially Russians. This was due to the tendency to perceive the Soviet authorities as the embodiment of Russian influence. An analysis of the document addressed to the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, N. Gikalo, provides an interesting insight into the ideological framework through which resistance to Soviet power was articulated. Anti-Soviet resistance in Azerbaijan often took on an anti-Russian character, reflecting the complex intertwining of anti-colonial sentiments with the emerging national consciousness. Interestingly, the newly forming identity was based on the tendency to contrast with others rather than on one's own national achievements. The metaphorical language used in the poetry – describing Russians as “bloodsuckers of the North” and “wild beasts” – is more than just a rhetorical device; it reveals deep-seated anxieties about cultural and political subjugation that go beyond purely economic or administrative claims. The analysis of the document reveals how the policy of korenizatsiya led to contradictory results. Although statistics show an increase in the representation of Türks of Azerbaijan in educational institutions during this period, the perception of Russian dominance persisted. This paradox illustrates the gap between quantitative indicators of national equality and subjective feelings of national dignity. Finally, the analysis shows how external influences – particularly from Turkey, Iran and Poland – contributed to the formation of resistance movements in Soviet Azerbaijan. This complicates the understanding of a purely internal explanation of anti-Soviet sentiment and points to the factor of competing geopolitical influences.

К 10-летию А.С.С.Р. (стихотворение)

Северные кровопийцы устраивают торжества,
Организуют сегодня Великий Байрам.
Азербайджанская молодёжь проливает кровавую слезу,
Не выдержит эту беду народ никак.
В 17–18 годах нас обольстили ложными словами,
Теория о товариществе,
Так не предполагали, как сделали русские.
Где те очи, которые одинаково смотрели на весь народ?
Слова, сказанные до революции,
Не поверим больше этим словам,
Мы так не условились, как поступили русские.

To the 10th anniversary of the Azerbaijan SSR. (poem)

The northern bloodsuckers hold celebrations,
Today they organize a grand Bayram.
Azerbaijani youth sheds bloody tears,
The people can no longer bear this grief.
In 1917–18, we were seduced by false words,
The theory of comradeship—
It was not meant to be as the Russians made it.
Where are the eyes that once looked equally upon all people?
The words spoken before the revolution—
We will no longer believe in those words.
This was not the agreement we made; the Russians broke it.

Кровопийцам Севера:

Руки прочь, долой!
Дикие звери Севера,
Прочь руки с Азербайджанского края.
Эй бесчестные люди мира,
Прочь руки с азербайджанского края.
Эй смотрев не на Азербайджан свысока,
Вместо независимости и пустословия
Прекрасившие в другой цвет николаевскую власть.
Руки прочь с Азербайджана!

To the Bloodsuckers of the North²²

Hands off, away!

Savage beasts of the North,

Take your hands off the Azerbaijani region.

Hey, dishonorable people of the world,

Take your hands off the Azerbaijani region.

You, who looked down on Azerbaijan,

Instead of independence - empty words,

You repainted the rule of Nikolay in different colours .²³

Hands off Azerbaijan!

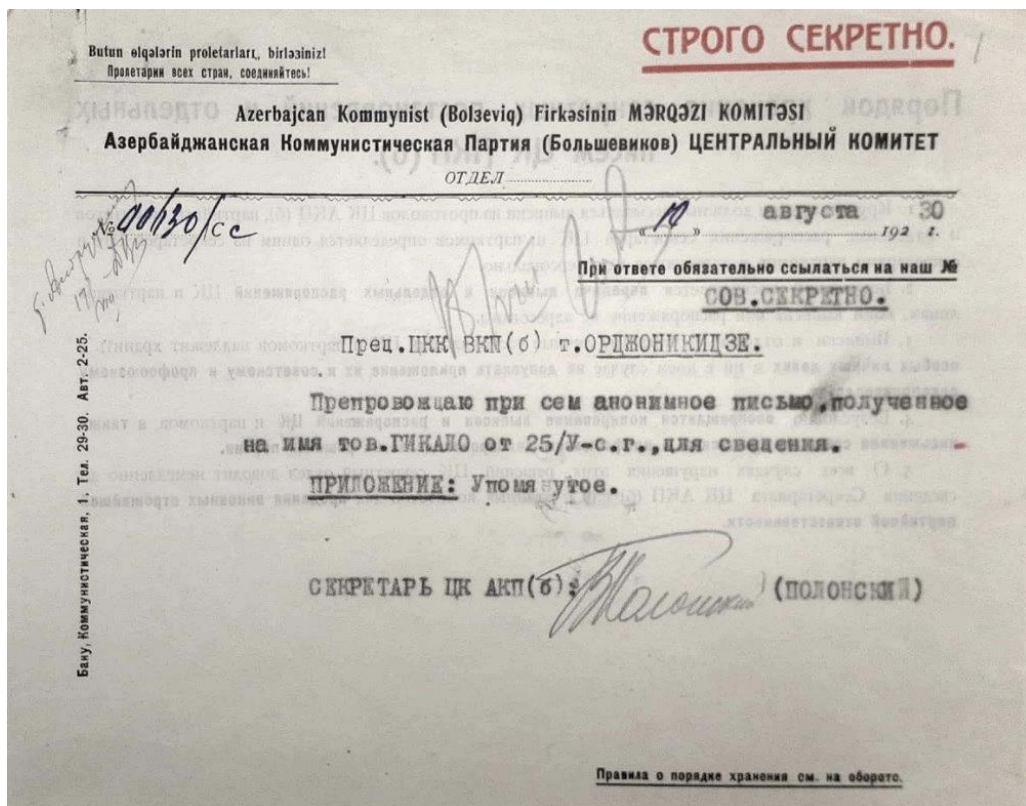


Fig. 1. The First Page of the Document (RGASPI, F. 85, reg. 2s, fl. 6, p. 1).

²² “Bloodsuckers of the North” is a metaphorical reference to Russians viewed by the poem’s authors as imperial oppressors.

²³ The reference to “the reign of Nicholas” refers to Russia’s Tsar Nikolay II, symbolising the continuation of imperial domination under a different guise.

К 10-ти ЛЕТИЮ А.С.С.Р.

(стихотворение)

Северные кровопийцы устраивают торжества
Организуя средня Большой Байрам
Азербайджанская молодежь проливает кровавую слезу
Не выдержит эту кабалу притвора никак,
В 17-18 годах не обольстили лживыми словами,
Говоря о товариществе
Так не предполагали, как сделали русские.
Где те очи, которые одинаково смотрели на весь народ,
Слова сказанные до революции,
Не поверим больше этим словам.
Мы так не условились, как поступили русские.

-х-х-х-х-х-х-х-х-х

х -х-х-х-х-

КРОВОПИЙЦАМ СЕВЕРА.

Руки прочь. Долой!
Дикие зверя Севера,
Прочь руки с Азербайджанского края.
Эй бесчестные люди мира,
Прочь руки с Азербайджанского края.
Эй смотрев не на Азербайджан свысока,
Вместо независимости пустословия
Перекрасившие в другой цвет николаевскую власть,
Руки прочь с Азербайджана.

Fig. 2. The Last Page of the Document (RGASPI, F. 85, reg. 2s, fl. 6, p. 5).

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