

The Topic of Azerbaijan and the Karabakh War in the Literature of Ahiska Turks

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Abstract

The article analyzes the content, literary features, and historical context of the theme of Azerbaijan and Karabakh in the literature of Ahiska Turks. It reviews the Ahiska Turks' participation in cultural, economic, and public spheres in Azerbaijan after their immigration to the country starting from 1958 (the Ahiska Turks were exiled from their homelands in 1944). Information is given about the literary works of the Ahiska Turks and their writers living in Azerbaijan, including the activities of the Union of Ahiska Turkish Writers Living in Azerbaijan. Commentary is given on the topic of Azerbaijan in the works of Ahiska Turkish writers, including literary depictions and expressions of the occupation of Karabakh and the Khojaly genocide. Examples are given of praise in the works of Ahiska Turkish poets directed toward martyrs and victims who fought heroically to free Azerbaijani lands from occupation or who lived and died for the "One nationality-- one state" ideal. The article analyzes and summarizes the works of Ahiska Turks on the themes of Azerbaijan and Karabakh, laying a foundation for further research on this topic.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Karabakh, Civil war, Ahiska, Ahiska Turks, Ahiska literature, deportation, exile, Turkic poet, Turkic literature.

Introduction

Relevance and significance of the topic. Several hot topics in modern humanities are multiculturalism, preservation of minorities' ethnic and cultural values, and cross-cultural relations. From this perspective, the culture, folklore, and literary analysis of nations deported from their homelands in the 1940s by the Soviet regime take on special significance. One of those nations was the Ahiska (Meskhetian) Turks, who were exiled to Central Asia from their homelands in the regions of Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni, Aspindza, Akhalkalaki, and Bogdanovka in Southwestern Georgia on November 14-15, 1944. During that time 115,000 Ahiska Turks were stripped of all their national and civil rights, exiled from their homelands, and were made to live

under a special regime for 12 years. Although they were rehabilitated in 1956 along with other nations who were similarly exiled, they were not given permission to return to their native lands in Georgia, and to this day, the Ahiska Turks have not been able to return to their homelands. A portion of the Ahiska Turks who were living in Central Asia emigrated to Azerbaijan in 1958. They lived among the Azerbaijani Turks, who were very similar to them in heritage, language, culture, and religion, and they were able to preserve their national values, cultures, and way of life. To this day, Ahiska Turks living in the Azerbaijan Republic actively participate in the country's economic, social and cultural life, and they develop their ethnic culture and native literature. Azerbaijan's history, environment, culture, and modern processes in the country are also very present in the anonymous folklore of the Ahiska Turks. The subject of Azerbaijan in the literature of Ahiska Turks from the period of their exile is a significant one because of the necessity to research the general exile-period literature, cross-cultural interactions, and multiculturalism among the former Soviet peoples.

Historical survey. The Ahiska Turks, who lived in the Childir-Ahiska region of the Southwest Caucasus from ancient times, preserved their own Turkish identity, ethnic culture, language, and Islamic beliefs throughout history, and at the same time, maintained cultural relations with other nations in the area. The Turks of the Ahiska region, named as early as in the Book of Dede Korkut, maintained close relations with their neighboring Caucasus nations, especially the Georgians and Azerbaijani Turks. In this region, there was an intermingling of traditions and mutual enrichment among various cultures of Anatolia and the Caucasus. The connections of intercultural contact between Ahiska Turks and Azerbaijanis were especially deep; the Ahiska area was really a borderland connecting Anatolia to the Caucasus, Ottomans to Azerbaijani Turks, and Turks to Georgians. Cultural relations between Azerbaijan and Ahiska Turks continued during the reign of many dynasties in the South Caucasus through the Middle Ages and after the Ahiskas became part of the Ottoman Empire. As the Russian Empire advanced toward the South Caucasus in the early 19th century, Ahiska Turks grieved the occupation of historic Azerbaijani cultural centers as if they had lost their own homelands. This cultural unity is also reflected by Ahiska Turkish folklore and literature. The poet Cherkezoghlu from the Altungala-Kobliyan region of Ahiska expressed his opinion on the occupation of Azerbaijani areas by Russia and the approach of the Tsarist forces to Tiflis and Ahiska:

Red blood stained Old Man Ganja and Shirvan,

The home of the ulama, Sheki, also burned,

It came from Tiflis to Azgur and stopped,

Are these not a plea to us, “wake up”? (Hacılı, 2014, p. 13)

After the Russian Empire occupied Ahiska and the Northern Caucasus, a new complex era began in the historical fate of the Caucasus Turks, and similar processes took place in these regions. After a large portion of the Ahiska pashalik became part of Russia in 1828 due to the Ottoman-Russian wars, the Empire implemented a reactionary policy against the Ahiska Turks. Many Turks were forced to migrate to the Ottoman Empire, and the Ahiska regions were Armenianized en masse. Acts of repression, terrorism and forced assimilation policies were carried out against local Turks in Ahiska and Azerbaijan. To this end, starting in 1828, the Tsarist government began to exploit the Armenians it had settled in the Caucasus to create Armenian terrorist groups and bolster the terrorism against Turks, Muslim peoples of the Caucasus, and even against Georgian Christians. This reign of terror continued through the end of the 19th century and beyond into the 1910s and 20s.

During this period, the terrorism brought by armed Armenian bands against the peaceful Turkish Muslim population and likewise against Georgians drove even Russians like V. Velichko, N. I. Shavrov, S. N. Begichev, I. O. Simonin, and N. N. Muravyov as well as Russian-speaking Georgian intellectuals like I. Chavchavadze, A. Sereteli, A. Chavchavadze, G. Orbeliani, N. Baratashvili, and M. Javakhashvili to speak out against the Armenian terrorism, to note the characteristics of the Turkic Muslim population (such as noble, brave and friendly) and to demand an end to the massacres. Finally, Azerbaijani and Georgian intellectuals protested against the Armenian terrorism on Turks, and a Georgian-Muslim Union was created against the Armenians during a congress of villagers held in Tiflis in the summer of 1917 (Gurko-Kryazhin, 1990, p. 13).

After the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia and the Soviet regime took hold in Georgia, Turkey and Russia made an agreement in March 1921 to give the Ahiska and Akhilkelek zones to Soviet Georgia. After that, the repression against the Turkic peoples in the Caucasus strengthened as it had in all of the Soviet Union, and attempts were made to replace Turkic ethnic values with Communist ideas and Turkic national identity with the Soviet/Bolshevik identity. As a result, “the Ahiska people’s history during the Soviet period began with many tragedies. In the environment of complete violation of human rights, a new society was forming and bringing with it an intolerable life in opposition to human nature” (Piriyeva, 2005, p. 12).

National revival

Despite all these repressions from the Tsarist government and the Soviet regime, Ahiska Turks tried to preserve their national heritage through the Russian and Soviet Empires, and they developed their education, culture, and press. After the South Caucasus, including Ahiska and Borchali, was consolidated into Russia in 1828, local Turks' moral opposition to their slavery strengthened, and a national awakening began. Ideals of Turkism and Turkic unity grew stronger, especially in the early 20th century: "In the 20s and 30s of the 20th century, cultural and economic progress of the Ahiska locality picked up speed. In the Ahiska and Akhilkelek zones, new educational institutions were formed, and national personnel was trained... Many teachers, professionals, and administrators came here from Azerbaijan. With their help, technical schools, teacher training schools and political courses were opened... press organs were opened which played a progressive role in the Turkic public life, such as those of the period of independence from 1918-1921: "Gələcək" (Future), "Al Bayraq" (Red Flag), "Vətən" (Homeland), "Yeni dünya" (New World); as well as those of the Soviet period: "Kommunist" (Communist) (1921), "Yeni fikir" (New Thought) (1922-1927), "Yeni kənd" (New Village) (1927-1938), "İşıqlı yol" (Lighted Path) (1924), "Dan ulduzu" (Morning Star) (1926-1931), "Şərq kolxozçusu" (Eastern Kolkhoz Worker) (1931), "Qızıl şafəq" (Golden Dawn) (1926-1930), "Yeni güvvə" (New Strength) (1930-1939); in Adigeni, "Adıgün kolxozçusu" (Adigeni Kolkhoz Worker) (1931) and "Qızıl rəncbər" (Golden Rancher) (1933); in Ahiska, "Kommunist" (Communist) (1930); in Aspindza, "Bağban" (Gardener) (1933) and "Sosializm kəndi" (Village of Socialism) (1940) (Hacı, 2009, pp. 50-51).

Theater groups made up of local amateurs played a special role in the cultural life of Ahiska Turks. Finally, in 1934, the Adigeni Traveling Kolkhoz-Sovkhoz Theater opened with the help of the Tiflis Azerbaijan Drama Theater under the leadership of the great Ibrahim Isfahanli (Hacıyev, 1984, pp. 138-141). As a well-known researcher on Turkish theaters' history and activities in Tiflis and Adigeni, Prof. Abbas Hacıyev showed, "Adigeni Turkish Theater was not disconnected from the Tiflis and Borchali literary and cultural societies, and its activity was connected to these. People of Borchali, the Tiflis Azerbaijani Theater, and intellectuals living in Tiflis helped the Adigeni Turkish Theater in every way. This concern and support also bore fruit; the theater developed quickly, and a stable group of artists came together" (Hacıyev, 2008, p. 20).

Exile and migration to Azerbaijan

Naturally, this type of cultural, economic, and demographic growth of the Turks began to worry the Soviet regime, and in 1944, the Ahiska Turks were exiled from their homelands en masse along with many other Turkic and mountain peoples. Thousands of people perished along the way and in their resettlement because of poor conditions and unfamiliar climates. The Ahiska Turks, who lived under a warden regime for 12 years, were completely stripped of their national rights. In 1956, even though the Soviet state rehabilitated them, they were not allowed to return to their native lands, and they have not been given this right even today. At present, Ahiska Turks have settled in over ten countries.

Beginning in 1958, many Ahiska Turks migrated to Azerbaijan, and there are currently about 50 thousand of them living in Azerbaijan. After the events in Fargana of 1989, almost 40 thousand Ahiska Turks came to Azerbaijan. These Ahiska Turks, who settled in Azerbaijan's Mil-Mughan, Guba-Khachmaz, Gazakh, Shamakhi, and other regions, mostly worked in agriculture, but they gradually moved to other regions sectors like civil service, science, and education. They have also begun to be represented in government and elected bodies.

Ahiska Turks, whose dialect is very close to Azerbaijani Turkish, have gained the opportunity in this country to earn high school and higher education; preserve their traditional ways of life and ethnic values, traditions, and rituals; and develop their culture and literature. At the same time, from the time they came to Azerbaijan, Ahiska Turks have organized around their own "homeland" society and have continued the struggle to return to their native lands.

In their own right, Ahiska Turks have made contributions to Azerbaijan's economic development and have actively participated in the country's public, cultural, and political life. Ahiska Turks also fought heroically to preserve Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and free the lands of Turkic peoples from Armenian occupation during the First and Second Karabakh Wars. In the 1990s, 81 Ahiska Turks were killed in battle, and the state awarded many Ahiskas. Iskandar Aznavur, who went to the front lines voluntarily, was named as an Azerbaijani National Hero (İşık & Mövlud, 2018). During the Khojaly genocide, dozens of Ahiska Turks were slaughtered and tortured by Armenians (Hacılı, 2009, p. 81).

Ahiska Turkish literature in Azerbaijan

Currently, the country where the literature of Ahiska Turks has developed and spread most is Azerbaijan. Ahiska Turkish writers and poets such as Usta Murtez, Jabir Khalid, Nurredin Sasiyev, Hamdi Yitgun Gomorolu, Gulahmad Shahin, Sabirjan Jalil, Tazagul Jovdatkizi, Muzeyfa Khoja Adigunlu, Shamsi Shimshekoghlu Aytayev, Ilim Shahzadeyev, Adem Ahiskali, and others lived and worked or are still living in Azerbaijan. Ahiska writers created the Ahiska Turkish Writers' Union in the Azerbaijani county of Saatli in 2001. This union successfully operates nationwide, carrying out discussions of new works by Ahiska Turkish writers and organizing book presentations and celebrations of significant events. Ahiska Turkish writers living in Azerbaijan, including Jabir Khalid, Shahismayil Adigunlu, Hamdi Eyvazov, Nureddin Sasiyev, Shamsi Shimshekoghlu, Tazagul Jovdatkizi, Sabirjan Jalilov, and Adem Ahiskali, are also members of the Azerbaijan Writers' Union.

An artistic embodiment of the theme of Azerbaijan in Ahiska Turkish literature

Azerbaijan's past, present, and Karabakh events are among the major themes in written works by Ahiska Turks living in Azerbaijan and other countries. Ahiska Turkish poets and writers living in Azerbaijan who have tasted the bitterness of exile and longing for home while also loving Azerbaijan as their own have produced valuable epic and lyrical works dedicated to Azerbaijan around themes of the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani lands, Armenian terrorism, and the Karabakh theme. Among these writers, the theme of Azerbaijan takes an especially prominent place in the works of Jabir Khalid, who writes of it with love as if it were his native land. In the poet's nationalistic poem "Söylə kimsən?" (Tell Who You Are), Jabir Khalid demands the reader to take civil responsibility, have national pride, keep ties to the past and love the homeland: "You are the child of this great land, / You are the one name, the roaring fire of two hearts, / Know yourself well, know yourself well... / You are the grandchild of Babek and Koroghlu, / You take the place of martyrs' lives, / You are the fire, the water, the air of your home! (Xalid, 2020, p. 69) The poet's love for Azerbaijan takes on a philosophical meaning which is manifested in his poem "Yaşıl, mavi, qırmızı" (Green, Blue, Red) in the symbolic meaning of the colors on the Azerbaijani flag:

The colors of my flag are

Green, blue, red.

The rhythm of my pulse is

Green, blue, red.

The light of truth is burning

It calls to mind my Turkishness

It says, don't sleep, it wakes me up

Green, blue, red.

It is my conviction, my goal

It is my wish and my work

It is my resume

Green, blue, red. (Xalid, 2020, p. 298)

Theme of Karabakh in Ahiska Turkish poetry

Works in many genres, including lyric verses, poems, epic poems, and prose, have been produced in the Ahiska Turkish literature on the theme of Karabakh. These works describe the occupation of Karabakh, the vandalism and crimes against humanity committed by Armenians, and refugees' longing for home. They also praise the heroism of commanders and soldiers fighting in the battles. Tazagul Jovdatkizi is an Ahiska poet who has written many works on this theme that express the occupation of Karabakh, Armenian terrorism, and the genocide of Kjoahly with a tender and profoundly emotional tone coming from folklore and the nation's mourning. These motifs are expressed in a tragic tone in Tazagul Jovdatkizi's string of connected bayatis, "Xocali" (Khojaly):

Weep for the people leaving

Weep, my dear Khojaly, weep

For the innocent victims

Weep, my dear Khojaly, weep

They fired a storm of bullets

No one asked how you were doing

Your wound was mercilessly deep

Weep, my dear Kholaly, weep...

(Cövdətgızı, 2002, p. 99).

Azerbaijan and the Karabakh war theme also takes a prominent place in the works of talented Ahiska poet Hamdi Yitgun, who currently lives in Azerbaijan and is the chairman of the Ahiska Turkish Writers' Union. Hamdi Yitgun praises themes such as the love of Azerbaijan, unity, and familiarity among people living with the concept of "one nation," the Karabakh war and martyrdom in his poems including "Azəri qardaşım" (My Azeri Brother), "Şəhid analarına" (To the Mothers of Victims), "Şəhid anaları" (The Mothers of Victims), "Azərbaycanım" (My Azerbaijan), and "Azərbaycan" (Azerbaijan). The poet expresses the two people groups' unified roots, histories, and destinies as follows:

God created us as one

My brother who looks like your brother

Our groans are also relatives

Oh my Azeri brother.

Two souls in one Caucasus

Akhiskha, Azerbaijan

Both are victims

Oh my Azeri brother (Yitgün, 2018, p. 48).

In Hamdi Yitgun's poetry, one feels both deep sadness and pride for those who gave their lives in Azerbaijan's just war, for the courage of Azerbaijani and Ahiska Turkish heroes, and for their unity against the enemy:

Today I am very sad,

I have many martyrs.

I am also somewhat proud,

See how many warriors I have (Yitgün, 2018, p. 50).

At the same time, the poet expresses his confidence that the memory of soldiers who looked death in the eye and gave up their lives for the homeland will never be forgotten, and that they will “conquer death”:

May God let you rest in peace

My martyred brothers.

May flowers grow from your graves

My martyred brothers.

You came down to the battlefield

You came knowing death awaited

You conquered death

My martyred brothers.

You were united, you became one

You were a shield to the homeland

Sons of brave men, you became men

My martyred brothers (Yitgün, 2018, p. 49)

Many poets, including masters Nureddin Sasiyev and Muzeyfa Adigunlu, wrote about the life and battles of Iskandar Aznavur, the casualty of Karabakh, and Azerbaijani National Hero. Muzeyfa Adigunlu’s “Topçu İskəndər” (Soccer Player Iskandar), Nuraddin Sasiyev’s “Qrad İskəndər” (Hail Iskandar) and Sasiyev’s poem dedicated to the hero not only discuss National Hero Aznavur but also form general impressions of the casualties of Karabakh (Hacılı, 2009, pp. 550-551).

As was previously noted, Ahiska Turks demonstrated extraordinary heroism in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War beginning last year on September 27th. Hundreds of Turks gave their lives as they loved Azerbaijan as much as their own homeland; the state awarded them for their sacrifices and won the people's love. At the same time, this 44-day war caught the attention of Ahiska poets; works by the poets circulated on social media networks to inspire young people, congratulate victors and forever preserve the memory of those who were lost. A poem written on this theme by Azerbaijan Writers’ Union and Ahiska Turkish Writers’ Union member, master poet Shamsi Aytayev, is exemplary for its content and artistry. The poem, entitled

“Ağlatdın bizi, Xudayar!” (You Made us Weep, Khudayar!) was written to commemorate a martyr named Khudayar, and it was inspired by a poem read by the martyr entitled “Vətən” (Homeland):

My pen doesn't write; my hands shake
The traces of sadness burn through my heart
My grief pushes the limits of my tolerance
You made us weep so badly, Khudayar!
Your nation and your army are proud of you.
Your own motherland flashed before your eyes.
You built a temple to the homeland in your heart.
You made us weep so badly, Khudayar!
You were a nightingale who perched on a branch.
You shone like a star in the sky and burned out.
In the fog, you turned into a legend.
You made us weep so badly, Khudayar!
May the enemy not triumph in your attack.
You were a soldier for your home by your own will.
With your sweet smile, your soft voice.
You made us weep so badly, Khudayar!
Your life wrote your violent destiny.
One beauty with painted eyebrows waits for you.
Shamsi also writes his words with tears in his eyes.
You made us weep so badly, Khudayar!
Aghdam is your fatherland, your own home.
Karabakh is free and the victory is yours.

Oh my child, martyred, listen to your spirit.

You made us weep so badly, Khudayar! (Aytayev)

Conclusion

Thus, Ahıska Turkish writers living in Azerbaijan have actively participated in the country's economic, cultural and political spheres; under the ideal of "One nation – two states," they have counted their own losses and demonstrated heroism in battle during the long-lasting Karabakh war and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Many Ahıskas have fallen in battle, and the state has given many more awards for their heroism. This theme is raised with great artistry in the literature of many Ahıska Turkish writers and poets, who create valuable works in keeping with the Turkic peoples' creative traditions. With their original language, style, and genre characteristics, these works are a prime subject for more detailed research in literature studies.

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