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The historiography of the Russian Revolution in Western countries, for all its peculiar advantages of objective distance from the events, has produced a distorted view of the vast canvas of 1917-1918 by its almost exclusive concentration on the central cities, Petrograd and Moscow. Despite some interesting studies on the national regions during the revolution, important industrial centers have been overlooked, centers in which the revolution ran a course distinctly different from the pattern evident in Petrograd. This study endeavors to redress the balance somewhat by presenting a close look at the first year and a half of the revolution in the Caspian seaport and oil capital of the Russian empire, Baku. The very uniqueness of Baku, where class and national struggles were intertwined, offers a useful corrective to generalizations based on the better-known case of central Russia.

The revolution of 1917 was the culmination of a long process of social development and disintegration, the origin of which lay deep in Russia's past and in the peculiar characteristics of her society. A predominantly peasant country with an insignificantly small working class, Russia underwent the first so-called "socialist" revolution. This paradoxical occurrence, apparently inconsistent with orthodox Marxist prediction, was, in fact, explained by some of the Russian Marxists. From his earliest writings the "Father of Russian Marxism," Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov, had maintained that the Marxist timetable would apply to Russia in a somewhat unusual form. Marx had argued that, in the transition from feudal society through
capitalism to socialism, two great revolutions had to be endured: a bourgeois-democratic revolution which would abolish feudal relationships and permit the mature development of capitalist society; and a proletarian-socialist revolution which would liquidate capitalist exploitation and begin the transition to the classless society. Plekhanov carefully distinguished between these two revolutions, but contended that in backward, peasant Russia the miniscule urban proletariat would have to help the pusillanimous bourgeoisie carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution. During this first revolution the working class would be allied with the bourgeoisie and had to refrain from taking power. Only after a long interim period under a parliamentary republic, with the establishment of civil liberties and the slow development of an organized labor movement, could the second revolution be accomplished. This discipline and restraint of the working class were to characterize the Menshevik approach from the break with the Leninists in 1903 right through the revolution.

Lenin also maintained a distinction between the two revolutions; but in 1905 and again in 1917 he began to flirt with the notion of "continuous" or "permanent" revolution, a theory first expounded by the Social Democrats Helphand-Parvus and Leon Trotsky. According to Lenin the period between the two revolutions was of indeterminate length and could very probably be shortened, i.e., the proletariat might be able to take power in the course even

1 "Permanent revolution," according to Trotsky, was inevitable in Russia, given the fact that the bourgeoisie could not make its own revolution without the proletariat. Once the revolution was undertaken, workers' representatives would enter the government and be compelled by their constituents to introduce socialist legislation. Trotsky wrote: "Political supremacy of the proletariat is incompatible with its economic slavery. Whatever may be the banner under which the proletariat will find itself in possession of power, it will be compelled to enter the road of Socialism." (L. Trotsky, Results and Prospects [1906], trans. as Our Revolution by M. J. Olgin [New York, 1918], and republished in Robert V. Daniels [ed.], A Documentary History of Communism [New York, 1960], 1, p. 46.)
of a revolution which in its first stages was a bourgeois-
democratic revolution. This would be accomplished, not
with the aid of the liberal bourgeoisie, but in alliance with
the poor and middle peasantry. Such a revolution in Russia
he conceived as the opening shot in the international prolet-
tarian revolution. Believing that by herself Russia could
not achieve socialism, Lenin argued that the aid of the ad-
vanced industrial states of Western Europe was essential
for the final transition to socialism. Lenin was more radical
in his approach to the workers than Plekhanov, more re-
ceptive to the potential of the peasantry, and more im-
patient in his anticipation of the international revolution.

All Marxists agreed in 1917 that the February Revolu-
tion was “bourgeois-democratic,” despite the fact that the
revolution in Petrograd had been made by workers and
soldiers. Two contenders for power sprang up to fill the
vacuum: the Provisional Government, made up of bour-
geois, professionals, and liberal intellectuals, and the Soviet
of Workers’ Deputies. Evident from the beginning was the
fact that real power rested with the soviet, which alone
could order people into the streets and command the local
soldiers. But the soviet leadership, largely Menshevik and
Socialist Revolutionary, reluctant to take formal state
power into its own hands, recognized the Provisional Gov-
ernment. The workers had made the revolution, but their
leadership considered it a “bourgeois” revolution and gave
its conditional support to the “bourgeois” government.
Thus, the “dual power” or dvoevlastie was created, in part
as a result of fears that a workers’ government could not
unify Russia in its crisis and in part because of the notion
that in a bourgeois-democratic revolution state power
should remain in the hands of the bourgeoisie.²

The implicit conflict between the Menshevik view and
the Leninist approach did not come out into the open until

²I. G. Tseretelli, Vospominanitii o fevral’skoi revoliutsii, 1 (Paris
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Lenin's return to Russia in April. The Bolshevik leader's attention was turned first to his own party in an attempt to win it over to his more radical position, appealing to the Bolsheviks to break decisively with the Provisional Government and adopt the slogan "All Power to the Soviets." The implications of this slogan were clear: immediate transition to the socialist revolution. Not only did Lenin's April Theses shock the Bolshevik moderates, it traumatized the conciliatory leadership of the soviet. Within a surprisingly short time, however, Lenin had won over his own party as well as a significant number of the city's workers. By May the conference of factory committees was passing Bolshevik resolutions.

The weakness of the Provisional Government and its absolute dependence on the support of the soviet was made abundantly clear in the "April Crisis," during which soviet discontent with Miliukov's annexationist foreign policy led to the foreign minister's resignation. In the aftermath of the crisis the government itself began to break up. Early in May a coalition government, made up of members of the old governing group and a number of socialist ministers from the soviet, was formed. The coalition was a stopgap government, designed to lead the country through the war until a Constituent Assembly could be convened and a constitution adopted. But, unlike the dvoevlastie, the coalition tried to link the leadership of the workers with the representatives of the upper classes, and the divergence of interests of these groups led to a complete impasse in the government. The failure of the coalition government to respond to the deepening social crisis in the country and its inability to bring the war to an end worked to the advantage of the one party which promised immediate social reforms and an end to the war—the Bolsheviks.

Shortages of food combined with the failure of the "Kerensky Offensive" to increase the volatility of the workers and soldiers. Outside the cities the peasants undertook
their own kind of land reform by seizing the land themselves, killing the landlords, and burning their manor houses. By September the Bolsheviks had majorities in both the Moscow and the Petrograd soviet. The coalition government had thus been *de facto* repudiated by the soviet electorate. The October Revolution, while in form a conspiratorial *coup d'état*, came about after a steady draining away of Kerensky's support. Just as in February 1917 no troops could be found to defend the tsarist order, so in October few but the famous Women's Battalion of Death were prepared to stand up for the coalition government.

The Bolsheviks came to power in Petrograd, Moscow, and a number of other cities in October and November 1917, but by overthrowing the Provisional Government they in effect declared war on the rest of Russia, which was unwilling to recognize a soviet monopoly of power. On the eve of the Civil War a deceptive calm lay over Russia, while elections to the Constituent Assembly were held. Those elections reflected the widespread opposition to the Bolsheviks and the peasants' support for the Socialist Revolutionaries. When two months later the soviet government dispersed the Assembly after a one-day session, the lines were finally drawn for the fratricidal struggle. On one side were those who accepted the October Revolution and soviet power; on the other was a diverse group unified by their rejection of October but only in part committed to February.

A thousand miles to the south, in Transcaucasia, the revolution resembled the pattern in Petrograd, at least for the first year. A "dual power" was created in both Tiflis and Baku, but in both cities real power was held by the soviet. There too the moderate socialists dominated the local soviets and refused to seize power in their own name. Only after a long and gradual radicalization of the workers were the Bolsheviks in Baku in a position to make a bid for power. In Tiflis the Georgian Mensheviks, considerably
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more radical than their Russian brethren, formed an independent Georgian government.

Similarities disappeared, however, soon after October. In Baku the local Bolsheviks decided not to seize power by force but to work toward a “peaceful transition” to soviet power. Thus Baku’s “October” was delayed. Not until March 1918 did the soviet win the political monopoly in the city which it had sought since the fall of 1917. The consequences of this delay are discussed in this study.

The moderate Bolshevism of Baku had deep roots in the history of the local labor movement and Social Democracy in the city. Faced with a politically unconscious working class that was divided by nationality, skills, and wage-levels, the Baku Bolsheviks adapted their appeals to the particular interests of the oil workers. Thus Bolshevism in Baku, especially after 1905, developed a sensitivity toward workers’ economic desires. Bolsheviks dominated trade unions, workers’ clubs, and the legal labor movement. The underground party continued to exist, but often played a subordinate role to the legal institutions. The Bolshevik leaders did not simply respond to any spontaneously generated impulse of the workers but rather worked to shape those impulses and provide the economic struggle of workers with organization, appropriate rhetoric, and some political overtones.

A local history study such as this one can in some detail describe the growth of Bolshevik receptivity to workers’ demands in both the pre-1917 and the revolutionary periods. This work attempts to demonstrate the dialectical relationship between the workers and the Bolsheviks in which the party taught and from which the party learned. The chapters that follow describe the origins, evolution, and eventual disintegration of the Bolshevik hegemony over the workers of Baku.

Any researcher dealing with the revolution in Baku must address himself to the perplexities which punctuate the
events themselves. Questions arise how the Bolsheviks achieved paramountcy in the Baku soviet without a majority. Why did dvoevelastie continue after October 1917? What were the reasons for the revolution’s “delay” in Baku? Particularly fascinating are the problems of the nationalist struggle within the city and its relationship to the class struggle. Was the insurrection in March 1918 the result of class or national antagonism? On this very point Soviet and non-Soviet historians are divided. Finally, why did the Baku Commune fail? Were the Bolsheviks at fault or were the objective circumstances beyond the capacity of any party to control?

Historical writing on the revolution in Baku has always been abundant but has never enjoyed freedom from partisanship (or, in Soviet terminology, partiinost’). Whether the writer wanted to prove his party comrades innocent of the tragic murder of the Twenty-six Commissars,3 to demonstrate the correctness of Shaumian’s general line,4 or to defend Great Britain from the accusations of the Soviet government,5 those who have taken up their pens to describe the confusion of those years in Baku have usually served a mistress less worthy than Clio. Needless to say, the cause of objectivity has not been served by the political shifts within the Soviet Union which have resulted in artificial reevaluations of various aspects of revolutionary history. As with most Soviet historiography, so with the material on Baku, the most productive period was between the Civil War and the consolidation of Stalin’s dictatorship in the early 1930s. During that period the study of history

3 V. A. Chaikin, K istorii rossiiskoi revoliutsii, vypusk 1; Kazn’ 26 bakinskikh komissarov (Moscow, 1922); an account of the execution by a Right S.R.
4 Artashes Karinian, Shaumian i natsionalisticheskie techeniia na Kavkaze (Baku, 1928); by the Bolshevik commissar of justice in the Baku Commune.
5 C. H. Ellis, The British “Intervention” in Transcaspia, 1918–1919 (Berkeley, 1963); by a member of the British force in Transcaspia at the time of the execution of the Baku Commissars.
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was “Bolshevizied,” but not yet “Stalinized.” The former process implied merely that the point of view of the Bolshevik party during the revolution was identified as the only correct position and that those of the rival parties were seen as ranging from “mistaken” to “anti-Soviet” and “counterrevolutionary.” The works on Baku written in the twenties read as if they had been dictated by the participants in the events themselves, as if the old Bolsheviks were rationalizing their own actions in the recent past. Facts are not distorted, but they are interpreted in agreement with an a priori understanding of the “laws” of history.

Particularly important in the 1920s was the work of the kolletiv of scholars who eventually formed the Shaumian Institute of Party History in Baku. Collections of documents, memoirs, and secondary accounts by the leading Marxist historians in Transcaucasia were published by the Institute. Such writers as A. Dubner, Ia. A. Ratgauzer, S. A. Sef, and A. Raevskii provided Soviet readers with the first thoroughly analytical accounts of the revolution in one of the major cities of their country. Because the archive of the Baku soviet had been destroyed during the

7 A. Dubner, Bakinskii proletariat v gody revoliutsii (1917–1920 gg.) (Baku, 1931).
Ia. A. Ratgauzer, Bor’ba bakinskogo proletariata za kollektivnyi dogovor 1917 g. (Baku, 1927).
———, Revoliutsiia i grazhdanskaia voina v Baku, I: 1917–1918 gg. (Baku, 1927).
S. E. Sef, Revoliutsiia 1917 g. v Zakavkaz’e (dokumenty, materialy) (Tiflis, 1927).
———, Kak bolshevikи prishli k vlastii v 1917–1918 gg. v bakinskom raione (Baku, 1927).
A. M. Raevskii, Partiia “Musavat” i ee kontrrevoliutsionnaia rabota (Baku, 1928).

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Turkish occupation of the city, these researchers relied primarily on the stenographic reports of soviet sessions given in the local press. The completeness and apparent accuracy of these accounts make Baku newspapers the single most valuable primary source for investigations of the revolutionary events. Scholarly works of the 1920s are admittedly “Bolshevik” in tone, but they are invaluable to scholars as sources of information. Based on solid research and candid in dealing with controversial issues, their failure usually lies in the authors’ readiness to impute the most diabolical motives to leaders of other political parties and to identify Bolshevik policies, as a rule, with an objectively correct course. These writers consistently argue the primacy of the class struggle within Baku over the nationalist conflict, often objecting strenuously to certain mistakes committed by the Bolshevik leadership. Debates raged in the 1920s, and the historiographical conflicts have been preserved in published symposia. They appear all the more lively when compared with the dearth of controversy which followed the establishment of the “Cult of Personality.”

Stalinized history on the revolution in Baku grew out of the famous speech of Lavrenti Beria given in Tiflis on July 21–22, 1935. Stalin’s lieutenant in Transcaucasia attempted to demonstrate to his audience, indeed to a generation of readers, that both the prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary history of Georgia and its neighbors had been dominated by the single figure of Iosif Dzhugashvili. Events which had occurred in Stalin’s absence were attributed to him. Articles by other revolutionaries were said to have been written by him. He had been omniscient and ubiquitous. During his frequent stays in prison he managed,

8 S. E. Sef, Kak bol’sheviki prishli k vlasti. . . .
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in Beria’s account, to carry on the business of the party from his cell. Stalin had, in fact, spent part of his revolutionary youth in Baku, and the party chief of Azerbaijan, M. D. Bagirov, in a speech which rivaled Beria’s in imagination, celebrated Stalin’s sixtieth birthday (1939) with a lengthy account of the General Secretary’s years in that city.\(^{10}\) These two works determined the nature of all writing on party history in Transcaucasia until the death of Stalin (1953) and the Twentieth Party Congress (1956). The other major studies of this period, by Burdzhalov, Tokarzhevskii, and Ibragimov, share this fawning dedication to Stalin and a rigid uncompromising view of the “enemies” of the Bolsheviks.\(^{11}\) Those scholars who found it impossible to elevate Stalin to the position of prime mover in Transcaucasian politics either remained silent or spent years in the aimless pursuit of nonexistent material.

Since the Twentieth Party Congress Soviet historiography on Baku has returned to the position of the 1920s, i.e., to a Bolshevik approach without Stalinist distortions. But the best-known works of the recent past have not yet rid themselves of the formulistic and oppressively dull style developed in the Stalin years. The role of the opposition parties has not yet been adequately investigated, and certain unrehabilitated figures have been neglected in the retelling of the revolution. In 1957, on the fortieth anniversary of the revolution, collections of documents were issued, but the processes of selection require that they be

\(^{10}\) M. D. Bagirov, *Iz istorii bol’shevistskoi organizatsii Baku i Azerbaidzhana* (Moscow, 1946).

\(^{11}\) E. Burdzhalov, *Dvadtsat’ shest’ bakinskikh komissarov* (Moscow, 1938).


The work of Z. I. Ibragimov is largely in the Azeri language; for a complete list see the bibliography in I. A. Guseinov et al. (eds.), *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana*, III, pp. 504–505.
used with utmost care: many interesting documents were left out or abridged—and only a close reading of the Baku press provides a true picture. The most interesting work in recent years has appeared in articles in Istoriia SSSR and other journals, rather than in book-length studies. First-hand experience in the USSR indicates that historical thinking is somewhat ahead of publications and that Soviet historians impatiently await the total eradication of the unscientific habits of an older generation.

12 Z. I. Ibragimov and M. S. Iskenderov (eds.), Bol'sheviki v bor'be za pobedu sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii v Azerbaidzhane. Dokumenty i materialy, 1917–1918 gg. Hereafter this work will be cited as “Dok.”