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Zulfiyya Abdurahimova-Carberry

A.M. candidate in Russian, Eastern Europe and Central Asian Studies

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Harvard University

abdurahimova@g.harvard.edu

NOTE:

This paper is the outcome of preliminary research, for which I was not able to do field and/or archival work. Suggestions and comments to improve the project are most welcome.

For the time being, I am considering looking at the issues below during the field research:

- Soviet friendship/brotherhood of peoples trope being reconstituted for positive minorities (I doubt this is the case, but it is something I need to look into.);
- Soviet anti-religious policy mitigated the resources for religiously inflected anti-Semitism;
- It is also possible that the salience of Armenians as a problematic ethnicity makes Jews, who occupy a similar ethnic niche, less threatening
- State and academic categorization of Jews under Soviet rule and in the post-Soviet period
- More clarity on the different attitudes towards Mountain Jews and other Jewish groups

**Origins of Favoritism:
Minority Policy of the post-Soviet Azerbaijan towards Jews**

Introduction

Journalist: "What is your name?"

Soldier: "Albert"

Journalist: "What is your ethnicity?"

Soldier: "Jewish"

Journalist: "What makes a Jew defend Azerbaijan?"

Soldier: "I live in this land. I was born here and live here. Nothing else."

Journalist: "How long will you be fighting?"

Soldier: "Until the very end of the war." ¹

¹ Interview with Albert Agarunov by Mirshahin Agayev. The exact date of the interview is unclear.

Although there are countless interviews with soldiers fighting in the First Nagorno Karabakh War (1988-1994) (NKW I)² between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Albert Agarunov is certainly the best-known soldier of the period for two reasons. He was of Jewish descent and he died in defense of Shusha (May 8, 1992), the historically cultural center of Azerbaijan, especially for music. For about 28 years, Azerbaijanis mourned for the loss of Shusha and Agarunov annually on May 8. The TVs, public and private, would play Agarunov's interview repeatedly. It was rather Agarunov's Jewishness that contributed to the glorification of his heroism and celebration as "the Jewish son of Azerbaijan."³

My observation is that the popular love towards Agarunov, especially by the generation that grew up with the trauma of the defeat in NKW I, and warmth towards the Jewish minority, in general, are genuine. At the same time, this public sentiment is promoted through the official favorable attitude towards Jews. Although Azerbaijan has more than 15 ethnic groups making up 8.4 percent of the total population, the government has a quite special attitude towards the Jewish minority.⁴ This special official treatment manifests itself in different forms. The Azerbaijani government actively promotes Jewish identity. In 2003 an ancient building in Baku was renovated and transformed into a Synagogue for Ashkenazi (or as commonly called European) Jews and another ancient building and former Synagogue operated since 1945 was renovated for

² NKW I from here onward

³ He was awarded with the Order of the "Son of the Homeland" ("Vətən Övladı" Ordeni)

⁴ Talysh and Armenian minorities are special cases as they both initiated secession movement and thus they both are considered threat to the state, territorial integrity, and national unity. There were rumors that Lezgins collaborated with Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh war, so the government is not keen to promote Lezgins' cultural identity. [https://minorityrights.org/country/azerbaijan/#:~:text=Azerbaijan%20has%20a%20large%20number,Udins%20\(0.04%20per%20cent\)%20and](https://minorityrights.org/country/azerbaijan/#:~:text=Azerbaijan%20has%20a%20large%20number,Udins%20(0.04%20per%20cent)%20and)

the Mountain Jews in 2011 in Baku.⁵ The Jews have cultural clubs, youth organizations, women's organizations, newspapers, and agencies (Sokhnut, Vaad-I-Hetzola) promoting Jewish culture and identity, several schools teaching Yiddish and Hebrew where 1500 pupils study. This list of the privileges that the Jewish minority enjoys is long.

Why does the Azerbaijani government not encourage the national development of other and much larger minorities like the Lezgins and Talysh, while demonstrating such starkly different attitudes towards the Jewish minority? Especially, as depicted in the table below, the Lezgins are the largest (2%) and the Talysh the second largest (1.3%) minority, whereas the Jews make up only 0.1 percent of the total population. I explain this puzzle with the path dependence approach. I argue that the roots of the modern Azerbaijani policy towards the Jews date back to the eighteenth-century positive experience of the Mountain Jews with Azerbaijani rulers and Azerbaijanis. This deepened in subsequent historical periods, especially during the governance of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920). This relationship with the Mountain Jews, and that in the early nineteenth century with the Ashkenazi Jews, in turn affected the general attitude towards the Jewish population in Azerbaijan under Soviet rule. In the post-Soviet period, this positive relationship combined with an instrumental advantage for relations with Israel fostered the positive perception of the Jewish minority by Azerbaijanis and their government.

⁵ <http://www.dqdk.gov.az/en/view/objects/26>

Ethnic groups	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989	1999	2009
<i>as % to total</i>								
Population, total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>including:</i>								
azerbaijanians	62.1	58.4	67.4	73.8	78.1	82.7	90.6	91.6
lezgis	1.6	3.5	2.6	2.7	2.6	2.4	2.2	2.0
armenians	12.2	12.1	11.9	9.4	7.9	5.6	1.5	1.3
russians	9.5	16.5	13.6	10.0	7.9	5.6	1.8	1.3
talyshs	3.3	2.7	0.0	...	...	0.3	1.0	1.3
avars	0.8	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6
turkisks	...	...	0.0	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.5	0.4
tatars	0.4	0.9	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.3
tats	...	...	0.2	0.15	0.14	0.14	0.13	0.3
ukrainians	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.3
sakhurs	0.7	...	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1
georgians	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1
jews	1.3	1.3	1.1	0.8	0.6	0.4	0.1	0.1
kurds	1.8	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1
kryzs	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	0.04
udins	0.1	...	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.05	0.04
khynalygs	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	0.02
other nationalities	5.0	2.9	0.7	0.55	0.66	0.46	0.12	0.10

¹⁾ Each interviewed person determined own nationality and native language himself (or herself). Information about nationality and

Ethnic composition of Azerbaijan 1926-2009

Source: The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan.
<https://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/?lang=en>

The paper is structured as follows. The first section reviews the existing studies of the question at hand. The second section is an overview of the history of the Jewish minority and their current situation in Azerbaijan. The analysis in the third section provides the foundation for the argument of the paper. The final section is a brief survey of the Soviet period policy towards

Jews in contrast to Mountain Jews generally in the Soviet Union, highlighting the Soviets' different attitude towards the Mountain Jews.

Existing explanations

The policy towards the Jewish minority in post-Soviet Azerbaijan is understudied. To my knowledge, such studies are currently limited to journalistic endeavors and think tank research, mainly approaching the question from the perspective of international relations, which attributes the Azerbaijani government's favoritism towards the Jews to the strategic alliance between Azerbaijan and Israel. Azerbaijan delivers 40% of Israel's oil import. Israel considers Azerbaijan as a "peripheral" ally as Azerbaijan borders Iran and Azerbaijan is the most trusted Moslem country from the Israeli perspective (Sozen 2017). The argument in this approach is that the Azerbaijani government plays nice toward the Jewish minority to benefit from Israeli support.

To be sure, the Azerbaijani government brands its policy towards the Jews in international relations as an example of multi-confessional and multiethnic coexistence. That said, the official and public stance towards the Jews has historically been favorable a long time before Azerbaijan became Israel's major oil exporter, a strategic ally, and an importer of high-tech Israeli weaponry. The Agarunov case is evidence of the modern history of Azerbaijan, demonstrating the special relationship in question through unprecedented public attention to his legacy and his posthumous award with the highest honor of "National Hero" by Aliyev Sr. in May 1998.⁶

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0ASIfqDW1M>

Some scholars offer insights to partially understand Azerbaijan's minority policy in the post-Soviet period. Goff (2020) suggests that, although not explicitly, unlike some minorities like Armenians and Talysh, the Jews never pursued territorial autonomy despite having distinct territorial arrangements designated to them. Thus, this attitude of the Jews reduces the Azerbaijani government's anxiety regarding any possible secession movement. Although the territorial claim argument is plausible, it does not, however, explain why the Azerbaijani government is indifferent towards other minorities, who never had territorial claims, or the Avars, who, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, have remained a much larger minority than the Jews. It should be pointed out though, that despite the absence of overt minority suppression, "the Lezghins' campaign for national-cultural autonomy is vehemently rejected by the Azerbaijani authorities" as there was suspicion that Lezgins fought on the side of Karabakh Armenians" (De Waal 2003, 122).

Wilson (2020) offers another, but similar insight to that of Goff. Analyzing the attitude of the authorities towards different religious congregations in Azerbaijan, Wilson (2020) found that the authorities are more accepting of the indigenous or conventional faiths in Azerbaijan being Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, German Lutheran Church, Judaism but not tolerant towards missionary Evangelical religious groups. She argues that the authorities reflect the public perception, and the public is quite tolerant towards religions that have historically been part of the culture. (Wilson 2020, 178) Although Wilson found that Azerbaijanis are even more favorable toward Judaism than the other faiths that have historically been present in the country (Wilson 2020, 183), she doesn't provide any explanation why Azerbaijanis, while being broadly quite tolerant toward different religions in the country, are more favorable towards Judaism.

Two other perspectives provide insights for an analytical framework of this paper. First, Wilson argues that “[the] non-discriminatory treatment of traditional minorities could be rationalized as a continuation of pre-Soviet practices of religious tolerance in Azerbaijan.”(Wilson 2020, 193–94) Second, as she showed in the context of public attitudes towards different religions in Azerbaijan, similarly Martin (1998) suggests that during ethnic cleansing under Soviet rule, the central policy or the attitude of the authorities often reflected, to an extent, the popular sentiment when an ethnic group was targeted.(Martin 1998, 823) My analysis builds on these two insights.

To explain the origins of the Azerbaijani government’s favoritism, I will review the interaction of Azerbaijani rulers with the Jewish minority in different historical periods. I also aim to identify whether it was the public sentiment that led to the favoritism of the Jews in Azerbaijan, or whether this favorable public perception was created through attitudes from above such as attitudes by rulers in the first place. To be sure to fully answer the governing question is beyond this paper, especially given that I have not conducted field and/archival research. However, this paper attempts to draw preliminary conclusions that should be tested through research based on in-depth interviews in the field, oral history, and archival research.

The Jewish minority of Azerbaijan

“I was asked what I wish for American Jews. I’d say my wish for them is that they experience the same as we do in Azerbaijan.”⁷

“I am proud of being a citizen of a Moslem country that protects the Jews and their Jewishness.”⁸

“We came to this country to contribute to the prosperity of this country.”⁹

There are different Jewish groups in Azerbaijan. According to the Armenian and Georgian records, the first Jewish settlers came to Transcaucasus at the beginning of the 6th century B.C.E.(Halle 1946, 355) Mountain Jews being the largest and oldest Jewish group are characterized as “[less] well off, less Russified, and remote from the international Jewish circuit, they belonged to distinctive Jewish *eydes* (ethnic sub-groups) with histories, customs, and languages of their own.”(Perlin 2015, 26) Chlenov goes even further comparing Mountain Jews to their European brothers and claims that they are quite a different kind of Jew “nothing like the Ukrainian or Lithuanian Jews that everyone is used to seeing, with their Yiddish, familiar names, and their small-town ways.”(Chlenov 2009, 30–31) The Mountain Jews speak Juhuri: a dialect of the Tat language, which is related to Persian (Borjian and Kaufman 2016, 59) and also spoken by Moslem and Christian Tats in Azerbaijan. As the subsequent sections will show, the language

⁷ Milikh Yevdayev, Community Leader of Mountain Jews

⁸ Yevda Abramov, Jewish Member of the Parliament of the Republic of Azerbaijan

⁹ Chief Rabbi, Shneur Segal, Community Leader of Ashkenazi Jews

was one of the factors for Mountain Jews to be considered as not an authentic Jew but rather mountaineer or Caucasian people.

Azerbaijani sources indicate that Mountain Jews came to Azerbaijan 2000 years ago (Zulfugarli 2016, 1) through Persia whereas Ashkenazi Jews came at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Many more emigrated to Baku in the late nineteenth century with the oil boom. In the 1930s, in Kuba¹⁰, or as it was famously called the “second Jerusalem”, there were twelve synagogues some of which were transformed into schools, clubs, or something else since the establishment of the Soviet Union (Halle 1946, 357). When Fannina Halle, the Austrian sociologist, visited Baku in 1933, she discovered a city becoming a hub of a growing number of Mountain Jewish youth, many of them intellectuals - physicians, teachers, agronomists, orientalist, mining engineers, and other skilled so-called “responsible workers”(Halle 1946, 356). Halle is so far the only source also describing the Mountain Jews as urban and intellectual. In the literature on the Jewish minority in the Soviet Union, we usually see Ashkenazi Jews described more as part of the Soviet intelligentsia, not the Mountain Jews. The latter group was rather seen as an agricultural group, thus outside of the attention of the Soviet authorities during the heyday of Soviet anti-Semitism.

Today, a small shtetl called Red Village or Krasnaya Sloboda, the only all-Jewish settlement in the world outside of Israel has a 4,000 population whose mayor told a group of American researchers that the town has only three Azerbaijani families.(Clifton et al.,16) According to 2016 statistics, currently, there are 15,000 Mountain Jews, 7,000 Ashkenazi Jews,

¹⁰ Referred today as Guba or Quba

700 Georgian Jews¹¹, and two small groups of Sabbatians and Geres being just only a couple of hundred people, make up the Jewish population of Azerbaijan.¹² It should be noted that the statistics of the Jews during the Soviet Union were not accurate. When Halle visited Azerbaijan in 1936, she claimed that there were 15,000 Mountain Jews, to which she refers in the Soviet description of the time “Jewish-Tat-population of Baku” (Halle 1946, 360). Thus, one could assume that the number was much higher, but since the authorities often registered the Mountain Jews as Tats, the number of Mountain Jews appears to be low.

Two explanations are possible here. One is that the Mountain Jews easily accepted being registered as Tat because it possibly could have helped them escape persecution. For instance, during the Russian Empire, Mountain Jews had to convince the authorities not to apply the restrictive anti-Jewish laws to them as they claimed that “they are nothing like Jews,” but have a settled way of life”, which Ashkenazi Jews did not like (Chlenov 2009, 34). While Chlenov does not explain what the Mountain Jews meant by the “settled way of life”, I assume that it meant being agricultural, thus non-urban and non-intellectual. Another explanation would be that generally the Soviet nationalities policy favored language over religion for identification, so they could either be encouraged to identify as Tat or inclined to self-identify as Tat to normalize the community. In short, while there is no direct evidence, language appears to have been a factor as to why they were saved from the chronic anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.

¹¹ I did not find any explanation who exactly the Georgian Jews are. From the sources I consulted my sense was that they were those Jews who emigrated from Georgia to Azerbaijan during the 70s and 80s.

¹² “The Juhuro are a Jewish community from the Caucasus who immigrated in large numbers to the United States and Israel in the 1980s and 90s.”(Borjian and Kaufman 2016, 60)

Jews in Pre-Soviet Azerbaijan: the origins of the special relationship

Three historical periods in pre-Soviet Azerbaijan contributed to the special kind of relationship between the Azerbaijani rulers and the Jewish minority. The first period is the establishment of the Red Village in 1742. Today's Red Village or Krasnaya Sloboda is established for the Mountain Jews fleeing Dagestan from persecution in the early-mid eighteenth century. In 1742, a group of Mountain Jews from Dagestan came to the Moslem emir of the Guba region Fatali Khan asking whether he would allow them to settle in his Khanate Guba to escape the persecution in Dagestan. Fatali Khan agreed, allocated land for them across the river, and promised them protection.(Gancman 2016) The location he chose was close to his palace, and he told the Jews to light signal fires in case of any threat so that he could send help.

Today the central street in the settlement is named after Fatali Khan in his honor. The Mountain Jews of Guba consider the region a haven ever since.¹³ I argue that this period marks the first positive interaction of the Jewish minority with an Azerbaijani ruler decisive for the former's survival, and I argue that this experience is the foundation of the Jewish minority's loyalty to the Azerbaijani rulers, authorities, and Azerbaijanis.

The second period encompasses the anti-Tsarist rebellion in Azerbaijan and the active participation of the Jews on the side of Azerbaijanis in Guba. During the rebellion against Tsarist Russia, the Jews were actively involved and fought alongside the Azerbaijanis in Guba in July-August 1826, March-September 1837, and May-October 1877.(Zulfugarli 2016, 764) This period

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yci6bcH4PqQ>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAg_gT73UPE

can be characterized as the first period where the Jews demonstrated their loyalty to their Azerbaijani ruler and Azerbaijanis.

The third period encompasses 1918-1920, during which the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) provided the Jewish minority with protection by offering them, among others, an official representation. First, the Jews fought again with Azerbaijanis against the Red Terror of Baku Soviet troops in March and April 1918. An archival document demonstrates the list of the Mountain Jews killed by the Bolsheviks in this fight in Guba.(Zulfugarli 2016, 764) When ADR was founded on May 28, 1918, the post of Minister of Health was offered to an Ashkenazi Jew Yevsei Gindes. The ADR recognized the Jewish National Committee as the formal representative of the Jewish minority to signal them official protection by the Azerbaijani government. During ADR Baku's highly educated and sophisticated Jewish population, both Mountain Jews and Ashkenazi Jews, founded Jewish newspapers, cultural clubs, student unions, theatre, university, and schools. When the Baku State Economic University was formed, eight out of ten founders of the medical faculty were Jews.

To sum, the pre-Soviet rulers (Khan and the government of ADR) were open and supportive towards Jewish minorities. The Jewish minority, in turn, showed their loyalty in two crucial historical periods: the eighteenth-century rebellions against the Russian empire and the Red Terror in different parts of Azerbaijan in the Spring of 1918. I argue that the source of today's mutual confidence between the Azerbaijanis and the Jewish minority of the country originates from this historical experience. Of two things, one can be sure: the Azerbaijani government utilizes this special relationship to demonstrate Azerbaijan's multiethnic and multi-confessional coexistence to the world; and the Israeli-Azerbaijani relationship is built on strong

trust because of the Azerbaijani government's favorable attitude towards the Jews. However, the Azerbaijani government inherited this special relationship and discovered that it is quite beneficial, thus it is utilizing it for strategic interests. This relationship is also enormously boosted through the lobby by the Jewish Azerbaijanis who left the country before and during the dissolution of the Soviet Union and because of the NKW I. In a meeting between Aliyev Jr. and the Israeli PM Netanyahu, Aliyev Jr. said that every country has a diaspora in another country that consists of its nationals. Israel is the only country where the Azerbaijani diaspora consists of Israelis (meaning Jews who left Azerbaijan)¹⁴.

Did the purge of cosmopolitans reach the Mountains?

Soviet central anti-Semitism policy

Systematic and open anti-Semitism started immediately after WWII. On Stalin's order already during the war the chief of Soviet propaganda, Alexander Scherbakov initiated a secret campaign to cleanse the party and the state from the Jews who were classified as "cosmopolitans" (Naimark 2010, 32). The foundation of the ethnic cleansing was Soviet xenophobia, which was ideological rather than ethnic, and was based on an "exaggerated Soviet fear of foreign influence" (Martin 1998, 829). This fear was also accelerated with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and with its strong American leaning orientation. (Smith 2013, 143) The evidence of the Holocaust and Jewish heroism in the war was suppressed and the Jews were accused of avoiding going to fight on the front. Personal and institutional anti-Semitism "spread like fire". (Zubok 2009, 7) However, the Soviet policy towards the Jews was at times paradoxical. Although Stalin was

¹⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vooY6E5R_0Y

paranoid about the Jews being diaspora nationality, the evidence suggests he either allowed or sent the Jews to Eastern Europe to serve in communist authorities.¹⁵

The campaign against “cosmopolitanism” was the official cover for anti-Semitic policies. Stalin’s suspicion of Jews started to grow with the onset of the Cold War. He suspected not only the Soviet Jewish elite, including intelligentsia and Politburo members but also those in the Politburo who married Jewish women. In 1946 Zhdanov “passed Stalin’s order down through the ranks” to expedite the dismissals of “cosmopolitan” cadres, meaning the ethnic Jews, from the Soviet bureaucracy. When one of the officials had trouble understanding who exactly the cosmopolitan enemies are in his agency, Zhdanov told the official “get rid of the synagogue there.”(Zubok 2009, 56)

The Soviets dissolved the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee arresting a number of its leading members, closed several cultural centers such as theatres and other institutions. They also crafted a conspiracy theory that an international Jewish specter is planning to overthrow the Soviet state. The doctor’s plot was a conspiracy that the Soviets staged to prosecute influential Jews. As a result of this conspiracy, they arrested the Jewish Kremlin doctors in early 1953 accusing them of having caused the deaths of former Politburo members Zhdanov and Shcherbakov, and of planning to kill Stalin and other Politburo members. Sources indicate that Stalin was planning to deport all of the Soviet Union’s Jews to Siberia and that he was preparing

¹⁵ Zubok claims that when building Communism in Eastern Europe Stalin didn’t rely only on secret police and Soviet military authorities, but also “those Communist expatriates of Eastern European origin, many of them Jews, who had returned to their home countries from Moscow in the rearguard of the Soviet army.”(Zubok 2009, 23)

to persecute Kremlin doctors, both were prevented by his death on March 5 in 1953.(Smith 2013, 144; Naimark 2010, 33)

The post-Stalin period

Khrushchev and Brezhnev's era saw a different type and level of anti-Semitism. The Soviet Jews started to demand the right to live in Israel and were actively organizing protests. Out of 321 protests between 1965 and 1978 54.2% were by Jews and 22% by Crimean Tatars for the right to live in Israel and Crimea respectively, about 41.7% of the protests being inside the RSFSR.(Smith 2013, 235)

The Khrushchev era ended overt anti-Semitic campaigns, “but the regime never tried to redress the wrongs committed during the “anticosmopolitan” campaigns. No attempt was made to rehabilitate people of Jewish descent and Jewish cultural figures purged in 1948–52; nor did the regime reopen those institutions of Jewish education and culture that had been closed at that time.” The Soviet Union continued its institutional anti-Semitism in more subtle ways. People of “Jewish nationality” were permanently marked on secret bureaucratic forms as untrustworthy and not fit to serve in key state organizations and at the top of the party and state hierarchy (the military-industrial complex, nuclear energy, and Academy of Science were notable exceptions).(Zubok 2009, 186)

Soviet Jews were highly educated and sophisticated, which set them apart from many of the other nationalities and ethnic groups. Although urban Jews were to a greater degree assimilated, they still felt alienated from the system and felt the discrimination of the regime, especially in their career prospects relative to their parent's generation.(Zubok 2009, 187) In

Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, and other major cities, the Jewish intelligentsia lived in fear when anti-Semitism became a crucial component of Russian nationalism in the context of rising Russification under Krushchev. (Zubok 2009, 196)

In Brezhnev came to power, after some negotiations with Kissinger, Brezhnev agreed to raise the immigration quota for the Jews from the Soviet Union to Israel and the US. (Zubok 2009, 231) To escape the personal and institutional anti-Semitism, Soviet Jews emigrated to different countries (Gold, 1992). The United States received over 400,000 immigrants from the Soviet Union since the early 1970s majority of them being the Jews. (L. Gordon, Immigration and Naturalization Service, personal communication, 1999). In the years 1969-1972, Jewish emigration increased from 2,673 to 29,821 annually. Brezhnev had to allocate a substantial amount of political capital to allow this emigration for two main reasons. On the one hand, it was an ideological blow to the Soviets as it looked like the Soviet citizens are betraying or abandoning the “motherland”. On the other hand, there was strong anti-Semitism among many apparatchiks who made it hard for the Jews to leave the Soviet Union. (Zubok 2009, 234)

In August 1972, Soviet authorities invented the “Jews for cash” scheme. The official decree issued by the Soviet authorities demanded compensation from the Jews for their education that the Soviet Union spent. The American Jewish community used this scheme to raise awareness against Soviet and American anti-Semitism. “The exit tax” for the Soviet Jews triggered an outraged media campaign in the American media and led to the emergence of strong Jewish-liberal-conservative opposition to the American-Soviet rapprochement in the U.S. Congress. The hardliners in the Soviet apparatus claimed that rapprochement with the West was indeed a bad idea. (Zubok 2009, 234)

With one exception, the reviewed studies focusing on Soviet period state-led anti-Semitism do not indicate a systematic anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan during all these years, referring instead to other republics, mainly Russia, Lithuania and Ukraine. Chlenov shows that in the 1950s and 1960s, the Mountain Jews in Dagestan started a campaign similar to that under the Russian empire: “We are not Jews at all. We are Tats, part of the unique Iranian Aryan people. Let us not be confused with Jews.” They even changed their passports where they were identified as Tats.(Chlenov 2009, 36) To prove it vis-à-vis authorities they received a paper from the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union in Moscow attesting that “so-called Mountain Jews” has nothing to do with Jews”. Chlenov suggests that this was the way of surviving in “regime of state anti-Semitism”.(Chlenov 2009, 37) This is certainly strong evidence of state-led persecution. However, it tells us very little about the situation in Azerbaijan as Chlenov does not give us a further explanation on to what extent the purges of Mountain Jews in Dagestan spilled over to the Mountain Jews in the other parts of the Soviet Union, including Azerbaijan. He does provide us with a hint though, mentioning in passing two Azerbaijani towns:

Twenty-five years passed... Almost all of the old strongholds of Mountain Jews were deserted. Makhachkala was almost deserted. The population of Jewish Derbent dropped sharply. About 1,500 people were left in the once populous Kolonka neighborhood in Nal’chik. Vartashen (Oguz) was deserted. They say that only Kuba is holding out, and how long can it continue to do so?(Chlenov 2009, 37)

The two towns Chlenov is referring to, Oguz and Kuba, are traditional homes of the Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan. It stays a puzzle why and how the Mountain Jews in Kuba survived but the those in Oguz did not. However, it looks like these indigenous Jews were targeted selectively, victimized in some countries, and to an extent left alone in others like Azerbaijan.

To sum up, the review of historical sources on Jews in Azerbaijan during the Soviet period does not directly provide a piece of evidence that there was state-led anti-Semitism. In an interview, the community leader of Mountain Jews claimed that they “did not experience serious challenges during the Soviet Union,”¹⁶ on which he did not further elaborate. It should be highlighted that as a general rule, the Soviet nationalities policy was uniform, and it should not have been different than in the other republics. That the Oguz Jews were persecuted, and the Mountain Jews identified themselves as Tats seem to be an indication of systemic persecution of the Jews. However, I assume that because of the positive attitude of the public towards the Jews, there could have been a deviation to some degree in Azerbaijan,¹⁷ though this is an assumption that needs to be reviewed after careful archival research.

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¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yci6bcH4PqQ>

¹⁷ For instance, when already the systemic anti-Semitism was on the rise, in 1945, the Mountain Jews of Baku even received an ancient building to use for “cultural purposes”(Zulfugarli 2016).

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