

The March 1918 Genocide and the Formation of the Independence Idea in Azerbaijani Political Thought

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Abstract.

Relevance. The article examines the March 1918 genocide as one of the decisive turning points in the political self-awareness of the Azerbaijani people and the formation of the national independence ideology. The events that took place in Baku and other regions fundamentally changed the political landscape of the South Caucasus and confronted the Azerbaijani society with the necessity of reassessing its political future.

Purpose. The aim of the research is to determine how the March 1918 massacres influenced the transformation of political behaviour and ideological priorities of Azerbaijani national forces, especially the “Musavat” Party, and how these events accelerated the transition from the concept of autonomy within Russia to the idea of full state independence.

Results. It has been established that the genocide committed by the Bolshevik–Dashnak coalition not only caused large-scale human losses but also triggered a profound psychological and political shift within Azerbaijani society. The massacres revealed the incompatibility of Azerbaijani national interests with the Bolshevik governance model and demonstrated that security, self-governance, and cultural survival required an independent political structure. It has been determined that after March 1918, the Musavat Party revised its ideological program, gradually abandoning federalist expectations and adopting the political paradigm of a sovereign Azerbaijani state. The results also show that the tragedy strengthened national solidarity, shaped a unified political will, and prepared the ideological foundation for the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic.

Conclusions. The March 1918 genocide served as a catalyst for the crystallization of the independence idea in Azerbaijani political culture. The events contributed to the formation of national unity and a renewed ideological system based on sovereignty, self-determination, and resistance to external domination. The study highlights that the genocide played a central role in shaping the philosophical and political basis of modern Azerbaijani statehood and remains a key component of national memory.

Keywords: March genocide, Musavat Party, national ideology, independence, South Caucasus

Березневий геноцид 1918 року та формування ідеї незалежності в азербайджанській політичній думці

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Анотація.

Актуальність. У статті досліджується Березневий геноцид 1918 року як один із ключових чинників формування політичної самосвідомості азербайджанського народу та становлення ідеї державної незалежності. Події, що відбулися у Баку та інших регіонах, докорінно змінили політичну конфігурацію Південного Кавказу та поставили азербайджанське суспільство перед необхідністю переосмислення власного політичного майбутнього.

Мета. Метою дослідження є визначення того, як березневі події 1918 року вплинули на трансформацію політичної поведінки та ідеологічних пріоритетів азербайджанських національних сил, насамперед Партії «Мусават», та яким чином ці події прискорили перехід від концепції автономії в межах Росії до ідеї повної державної незалежності.

Результати. Установлено, що геноцид, здійснений більшовицько-дашнакським блоком, спричинив не лише значні людські втрати, а й глибокі психологічні та політичні зміни в азербайджанському суспільстві. Події виявили несумісність національних інтересів азербайджанців із більшовицькою моделлю правління та показали, що збереження ідентичності та безпеки можливе лише за умов власної державності. Визначено, що після 1918 року Партія «Мусават» переглянула свою ідеологічну програму, відмовившись від федералістських очікувань і перейшовши до парадигми суверенної азербайджанської держави. Дослідження також показало, що трагедія сприяла консолідації суспільства, формуванню єдиної політичної волі та створенню ідеологічного підґрунтя для проголошення Азербайджанської Демократичної Республіки.

Висновки. Березневий геноцид 1918 року став каталізатором становлення ідеї незалежності в азербайджанській політичній культурі. Події сприяли зміцненню національної єдності, формуванню цілісної ідеологічної системи, заснованої на принципах суверенітету та самовизначення. У дослідженні підкреслюється, що ця трагедія відіграла ключову роль у формуванні філософських і політичних засад сучасної азербайджанської державності та є важливим елементом національної пам'яті.

Ключові слова: Березневий геноцид, Партія «Мусават», національна ідеологія, незалежність, Південний Кавказ

Introduction.

The early 20th century marked a period of dramatic political, social, and ethno-confessional transformations for the Caucasus region. The collapse of the Russian Empire following the February Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent October Revolution led to the destruction of former institutions of governance, created a power vacuum, and plunged the former empire into a state of protracted anarchy. Amidst a rapidly changing political climate, the peoples of the South Caucasus increasingly embraced ideas of national revival and self-determination. However, the growth of national movements was accompanied by the exacerbation of old ethnic contradictions and the emergence of new lines of conflict.

This period proved particularly contradictory for the Azerbaijani population. On the one hand, Azerbaijanis, deprived of broad political rights for decades within the imperial system, saw the events of 1917 as an opportunity to realize their own aspirations for autonomy and national-political self-assertion. On the other hand, the realization of these aspirations encountered serious obstacles, both internal and external – the lack of stable state institutions, competition for power in multi-ethnic Baku, infighting between parties and armed groups, as well as the strategic interests of Bolshevik Russia in the region (Balayev, 2008).

Results.

In the relatively liberal atmosphere following the February Revolution, Azerbaijani political organizations became more active. The Musavat Party played a particularly prominent role, becoming one of the most influential political groups in the region (Shaumian, 1978). Its program, adopted in late 1917, called for Azerbaijan to be granted autonomous status within a federal Russia (Program, 1917). At the time, this position seemed realistic, driven by hopes for the democratic transformation of the post-imperial space.

However, the Bolsheviks' rise to power in Baku and the activities of the Baku Soviet under Stepan Shaumyan radically altered the political context. The Bolshevik administration, relying on the armed forces of the Armenian Dashnaksutyun party, sought to establish complete control over the city, using the ethnic factor as a tool of political pressure. The idea of "class struggle" in Baku was deliberately replaced by ethnopolitical confrontation (Isgenderli, 2013). Control over the city, which possessed strategic oil potential, became a priority for the Bolsheviks, leading to a policy of systematic violence against the Azerbaijani population.

The culmination of this policy was the March events of 1918 – a planned massacre of the Azerbaijani civilian population carried out by Bolshevik-Dashnak forces. The scale and brutality of these events had a profound impact on the national consciousness and political elite of Azerbaijan. They shattered any illusions about the possibility of peaceful coexistence within a federal Russia and completely undermined confidence in the Bolshevik

declarations of "equality of peoples" (Archive of Political Documents, 2015).

The March tragedy was not only a humanitarian catastrophe that claimed thousands of lives, but also a turning point in the formation of national and political ideology. It was after these events that the idea of autonomy lost its relevance, and the concept of full state independence became a vital necessity. Political leaders such as M.E. Rasulzade, F. Khan Khoyski, M. Topchibashev, and others concluded that the people's security could only be ensured by creating their own sovereign state (Rasulzade, 1990).

Thus, the March 1918 genocide was not only a tragedy but also a historical turning point, defining the formation of Azerbaijani political thought and serving as the impetus for the declaration of independence of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. It is in this context that the March events should be viewed as a key element in the development of Azerbaijani national ideology and political identity.

Political causes of the March genocide and the change in the ideological position of the Musavat party.

By early 1918, the political situation in Baku was becoming increasingly volatile. The victory of the Musavat Party in the Baku Soviet elections, where it received widespread support from the city's Muslim population, caused deep concern among both Bolshevik circles and Armenian Dashnak organizations. The strengthening of the Azerbaijani national movement posed a threat to Bolshevik political dominance in the region, leading to an escalation of tensions and the preparation of violent pressure on the Muslim community.

By early 1918, Musavat had become the largest and most influential political force in the entire South Caucasus. The party openly advocated for territorial autonomy and political sovereignty for Azerbaijanis, which inevitably clashed with the Bolsheviks' plans to maintain the region under Soviet Russian control. This factor became one of the key motivations for the Bolsheviks, under the leadership of S. Shaumyan, to ally with the Armenian National Council and the Dashnaksutyun Party, beginning preparations for armed confrontation against Musavat (Isgenderli, 2013).

The Bolsheviks watched with alarm as Musavat's authority rapidly grew. The party's massive popular support created an entirely new political configuration, one in which their influence in Baku could be significantly curtailed. Even Musavat's most radical opponents were forced to acknowledge its strength. It's no coincidence that S. Shaumyan wrote bluntly that the party, which barely existed at the start of the 1917 revolution, had become "the most powerful political organization in Transcaucasia" within a year (Shaumian, 1978, p. 291).

It was precisely the fear of the Musavatists' further strengthening that prompted the Bolsheviks to launch a preemptive strike, without waiting for a final shift in the political balance. The choice of location for the military

operation was also no coincidence: Baku, as the region's largest industrial and strategic center, was seen as a key foothold, control over which determined the fate of the entire South Caucasus.

As M. E. Rasulzade noted, it was Baku that became the "stronghold of the Turkic national idea" at the beginning of the 20th century, which explained the Bolsheviks' increased interest in establishing strict control there (Rasulzade, 1990). The growth of the national liberation movement, as well as the strengthening of Musavat, caused acute concern among Dashnak circles, who dreamed of realizing the concept of a "Greater Armenia." In their view, the political rise of the Musavatists threatened the very foundations of their territorial claims.

To implement plans to eliminate Azerbaijani political forces, approximately 5,000 Armenian armed forces were assembled in Baku in early March 1918. As a result, the "Red Guard," which, according to various sources, numbered 10,000–12,000 fighters, consisted of approximately 70% Armenian armed units (Azerbaijan State Archive, 2001). At the same time, Russian-Molokan auxiliary units were being created in the Caspian Flotilla and in several districts (Shemakha, Mugan), indicating large-scale preparations for a military operation.

Another participant in those events, the Bolshevik N. Esriyants, claimed in his memoirs that in February 1918 they received a direct order from Shaumyan and Kaparidze to prepare a plan to seize the Musavat headquarters (Azerbaijan Republic Political Documents Archive, n.d.). This further confirms that the events of March were not a spontaneous clash, but rather a pre-planned operation aimed at the physical elimination of the political leaders of the Azerbaijani national movement.

The events of March 1918 left an indelible mark on the collective memory of the Azerbaijani people. The organized and widespread nature of the violence allows them to be classified as an act of genocide, aimed not only at the destruction of the Muslim community but also at undermining the political base of the national movement. The Baku Soviet, led by S. Shaumyan, deliberately used armed Armenian units as the primary force in the fight against Musavat. On March 30, 1918, a large-scale operation began, officially presented by the Bolsheviks as a "civil war," thereby concealing the ethnic and political nature of the events (Balayev, 2008).

For many decades, Soviet historiography deliberately and systematically distorted the picture of the March events, presenting them not as an organized act of violence against the Azerbaijani population, but as an alleged "internal conflict" provoked by the Musavat Party. However, this interpretation does not stand up to scrutiny. As M. E. Rasulzade rightly noted, during that period, Musavat did not have even a minimal armed contingent in Baku, making claims of an "armed uprising of Musavatists" completely groundless (Rasulzade, 1990).

In fact, numerous armed groups operated under the guise of the "Bolshevik-Dashnak Union," using political

rivalry as a pretext to attack not so much Musavat as the unarmed Azerbaijani population. The scale of the tragedy is confirmed by the fact that more than 12,000 peaceful Muslim Turks were killed in Baku and its environs alone (Balayev, 2008). This figure testifies to the deliberate nature of the ethnic violence and the deliberate destruction of the social and national foundations of a future independent Azerbaijan.

Particularly brutal reprisals occurred in areas with dense Azerbaijani populations: Icheri Sheher, the Shamakhi road, and Chemberekend. The punitive actions began on the evening of March 30 and continued for almost a week. The killings were accompanied by the burning of neighborhoods, looting, and the expulsion of the population. All of this fit into the overall strategy of the Bolshevik leadership, which sought to eliminate Musavat as the main political opponent and break the will of Azerbaijani society to resist (Smith, 2015).

It should not be forgotten that by early 1918, Musavat had truly become the most influential political force in the South Caucasus, a fact that even Bolshevik leaders repeatedly acknowledged. This is precisely why the Bolsheviks' defeat in the Baku elections provoked a sharp reaction in Armenian Dashnak circles and the leadership of the Baku Soviet. They sought not only to change the balance of power but also to physically eliminate the national liberation movement. To this end, approximately five-thousand-armed Armenian militants were concentrated in Baku, and the resulting "Red Guard" consisted of 70 percent Armenian paramilitary personnel (Isgandarli, 2013).

Further evidence of the deliberate nature of the punitive actions is provided by Stepan Shaumyan's own confession. In his official report of April 13, 1918, he explicitly stated that the armed clashes in Baku were no accident. On the contrary, by using the military support of the Dashnaksutyun party, the Bolsheviks had planned in advance to "neutralize the Muslim counterrevolution" – which, in fact, meant the Musavat Party and the Azerbaijani national movement (Shaumyan, 1978). Moreover, Shaumyan openly acknowledged that a Bolshevik defeat would have transformed Baku into a political center for Azerbaijanis – which, in his words, would have been a "strategic defeat for Russia."

It's important to emphasize that the tragedy wasn't limited to the capital. By early April, punitive campaigns had spread to Shemakha, Quba, Khachmaz, and other regions. Disguised as "Soviet troops," predominantly Armenian armed units under the command of T. Amiryanyan and G. Hamazasp were dispatched there. Events in the Shemakha district were particularly devastating, with settlements subjected to mass arson, and residents subjected to executions and torture. The "Bloody March Calendar" of that time preserves numerous testimonies to the brutality, scale, and methodical nature of these actions (De Waal, 2010).

Clearly, the goal of these events was not only to

maintain power in Baku, but also to crush the moral fortitude of Azerbaijani society, destroy its demographic structure, and deprive the people of the ability to organize resistance. However, the result was precisely the opposite. The mass killings and destruction produced a powerful national consolidation effect. People realized that the threat to their existence stemmed not from local conflicts, but from systemic violence aimed at destroying national identity. Therefore, the March events became not only a tragedy but also a turning point in psychological and political history.

The profound shock of the genocide strengthened the sense of unity and solidarity. National leaders such as M. E. Rasolzade gained even greater authority, as their calls for self-organization, the creation of national institutions, and preparation for independence were no longer perceived as ideological slogans, but as a vital necessity. As a result, the March tragedy became one of the key factors accelerating the formation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and the final affirmation of independence as the only path to development for the Azerbaijani people (Isgenderli, 2011).

The ideological influence of the March 1918 genocide and the transformation of the political line of the Musavat Party.

The events of March 1918 had a profound and lasting impact on the evolution of political thought in Azerbaijan, particularly on the ideological line of the Musavat Party. Prior to the tragic events of March, the party's core programmatic thrust remained the concept of "autonomy for Azerbaijan within Russia," representing the most realistic political option amid the ongoing disintegration of the Russian Empire. The Azerbaijani political elite, focused on reforms and the gradual transformation of the imperial system, did not yet accept the possibility of the rapid establishment of a fully independent state. Many circles remained convinced that the international situation and the lack of a national army made the idea of full independence premature.

However, after the March genocide, the political thinking of Azerbaijani society underwent radical changes. The massacre of Muslim civilians, the destruction of Azerbaijani neighborhoods, and the open hostility of Bolshevik-Dashnak armed groups demonstrated that Azerbaijanis could count on neither security nor political guarantees within any form of Russian statehood. Thus, the tragedy of March marked the turning point at which the idea of independence transformed from a theoretical program into a vital necessity.

Leading political figures – M. E. Rasolzade, F. Khoyski, and M. Topchubashev – began to reconsider the party's previous ideological line, concluding that national security and the people's political future were impossible without the creation of an independent state (Rasolzade, 1990). Previous formulations associated with federalism gradually disappeared from the party's printed organs, giving way to concepts such as "istiklal," "national state,"

and "the right to self-determination of the Azerbaijani people." Already in statements from the spring of 1918, the March genocide was presented as "the price paid in blood for freedom," reflecting a new ideological tone and the formation of a political consensus within national forces.

At the same time, the cultural and spiritual component of national ideology was also strengthening. Musavat Party ideologists began actively drawing on historical sources, national literature, and religious motifs, forming a coherent system of political thought centered on the idea of national and state identity. The goal of this ideological transformation was not only the political unification of society but also the formation of a model of national self-awareness capable of withstanding external threats and internal divisions.

During this period, issues related to the creation of a national army, the determination of a state language, and the protection of territorial integrity acquired the status of key political priorities. At local congresses and regional assemblies held in the spring of 1918, these issues were discussed as necessary conditions for preserving the nation's existence.

The March tragedy became a powerful ideological catalyst. Even those members of the intelligentsia who had previously considered preserving the federal model possible began to openly support the idea of full independence after witnessing the scale of violence. The genocide served as a point of no return, after which continued life within Russia began to be perceived as a threat to the very existence of the nation. This helped to form a solid foundation for national unity – one of the key factors in the swift declaration of independence.

The March genocide left deep psychological and social scars on the fabric of Azerbaijani society. Families perished, communities were destroyed, and with them, centuries-old cultural ties. Societies experiencing such traumatic events often experience a prolonged crisis of trust, but in Azerbaijan, the tragedy played the opposite role: it led to unprecedented national consolidation.

People from various social strata – from the intelligentsia to the peasantry, from urban merchants to the clergy – felt for the first time that they belonged to a single national whole. The idea that the struggle was not for privileges or political representation, but for the preservation of the nation itself, took root in society. This idea became central to the formation of Azerbaijan's future political culture.

The population's faith in national leaders also received a significant boost. The political foresight of M. E. Rasolzade and his associates was perceived as an indicator of the maturity of the national movement. In the regions most affected by the genocide – Shamakhi, Quba, Lankaran, and Karabakh – support for national political forces increased. People who had directly experienced the horrors of violence no longer saw the possibility of living under the rule of alien political structures.

This was also facilitated by numerous volunteer initiatives: fundraising for refugees, organizing food aid, and the participation of women, clergy, teachers, and merchants in charity campaigns. These examples demonstrate the high level of social solidarity that became the foundation for subsequent political development.

Thus, the March 1918 genocide did not become a factor of disunity, but, on the contrary, a powerful impetus for strengthening the national spirit and uniting Azerbaijani society as a whole. Under the impact of these tragic events, a new political and moral reality was formed, in which it became clear that the fundamental pillar of national existence was not the patronage of external forces, but solely the independence of the state itself. This is why the idea of political sovereignty gradually became one of the fundamental pillars of Azerbaijani political culture.

Despite the depth of the humanitarian catastrophe, the March events also had far-reaching diplomatic consequences. The collapse of the Transcaucasian Sejm, the formation of the Azerbaijan National Council, and the subsequent proclamation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic were direct consequences of the political upheaval unleashed by the March events. For the first time, the Azerbaijani people demonstrated internationally their inability to exist within the crumbling imperial system, which became an argument in favor of establishing an independent state (Smith, 2019).

The place of the March genocide in national ideology and its historical consequences.

Following the tragedy, three key directions in rethinking their own history began to emerge in the public consciousness of Azerbaijanis:

1. Restoring historical memory. People began to look back on the past in a new way, reassessing the significance of national heroes, events, and traditions. The memory of resistance and survival became a crucial element of collective identity (Williams, 2018).

2. Formation of national solidarity. Representatives of various social groups recognized the need for unity in the face of external threats. During this period, a sense of belonging to a single ethno-political community grew stronger, most clearly manifested in the activities of volunteer groups, charitable committees, and community organizations (Institute of Social Studies, 2015).

3. Creating political will for independence. The idea of sovereignty, previously perceived as a distant prospect, acquired the status of a practical necessity. It was the events of March that accelerated the transition from the concept of autonomy within Russia to the idea of complete independence, which the National Council officially enshrined in May 1918.

The March genocide became not only a tragic chapter in history but also a turning point in the formation of Azerbaijani ideology. It united the political and philosophical understanding of freedom with the threat of physical annihilation, thereby transforming the idea

of independence into a vital imperative. As a result of the tragedy, the very structure of the national movement changed: Musavat finally committed to the creation of an independent state, abandoning any illusions about the possibility of democratic development in Russia (Rasulzade, 1990).

At the same time, the threat of physical liquidation of Azerbaijanis by the Bolshevik-Dashnak alliance pushed other parties to support the Musavat line. An unprecedented consensus emerged among the main political groups regarding the goals of future statehood. This convergence of positions became one of the most important prerequisites for not only the political but also the military organization of the national movement.

It should be emphasized that the March events changed not only the goals but also the methods of struggle. It became clear that the previous form of predominantly peaceful political resistance had exhausted itself. Achieving the stated objectives required a combination of political and military methods, as well as the creation of national armed forces capable of protecting the population from systematic violence.

The political crisis that paralyzed the Transcaucasian Sejm only accelerated the development of Azerbaijani statehood. The Sejm's inability to protect the Azerbaijani people discredited it in the eyes of society and ultimately destroyed faith in the feasibility of a federal model. Even the declaration of independence of the Transcaucasian Democratic Republic on April 22, 1918, failed to change the situation, as the crisis of confidence proved insurmountable (Hasanli, 2015; Swietochowski, (1995)).

Under these circumstances, the proclamation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was the logical culmination of a complex series of ideological transformations. Its leaders – M. E. Rasulzade, F. Khoyski, and M. Topchubashev – heeded the lessons of the March tragedy and sought to build a state based on the principles of civil equality, interethnic peace, and tolerance. These principles were reflected in the constitutional drafts of the ADR.

The March genocide also became a crucial element of national memory in the following decades. After regaining independence in 1991, the state officially recognized the tragedy of 1918 as a key event in the history of national identity. The establishment of March 31 as "Azerbaijani Genocide Day" enshrined this historical experience in the political culture of the modern Republic of Azerbaijan (Azerbaijan State Archive, 2001).

Conclusions.

The analysis conducted allows us to state with a high degree of certainty that the events of March 1918 were not only a tragedy of national proportions but also a crucial turning point in the political and ideological development of Azerbaijani society. The massacres committed by Bolshevik-Dashnak forces shattered any illusions about the possibility of maintaining autonomy within Russia and definitively demonstrated that the

national security and political survival of the Azerbaijani people could only be ensured within the framework of their own independent state.

It was precisely as a result of the March genocide that ideas of "federal autonomy" gave way to the concept of political sovereignty, which was reflected in the evolution of the Musavat Party's ideological platform and in the activities of the national movement's leaders. The virtual elimination of previous political guidelines, a strengthened sense of collective belonging, the awakening of historical memory, and the desire for self-determination led to the formation of a new political will based on the principles of national unity, self-defense, and statehood.

The events of March became a catalyst for processes that soon resulted in the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic – the first secular democratic

state in the Muslim East. Thus, the tragedy of 1918 simultaneously served as a prerequisite for national revival and the foundation for political modernization.

The ideological legacy of the March genocide continues to play a key role in contemporary Azerbaijani state-building. Recognizing March 31 as Genocide Remembrance Day is not only a tribute to the past but also a reminder of the need to preserve national independence, political vigilance, and historical responsibility to future generations.

In this context, the March tragedy remains a fundamental element of national identity, shaping a strong understanding that freedom, independence, and statehood are the indispensable values of the Azerbaijani people, for which they have repeatedly made the highest sacrifices.

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