

THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF TURKISM IDEOLOGY IN AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract:

The formation of the Turkism ideology in Azerbaijan dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its emergence was closely linked to national awakening, enlightenment, and imperial pressures. Intellectuals such as Mirza Fatali Akhundov, Ali bey Huseynzade, and Ahmad bey Agayev emphasized the preservation of Turkic identity, language, and culture as a primary objective. The idea of “Turkification, Islamization, Modernization” became the conceptual framework of national development. The press, schools, and public organizations played a crucial role in disseminating Turkism. During the period of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, Turkism was further consolidated through the principles of statehood. In subsequent decades, this ideology exerted a strong influence on the formation of national self-consciousness and the pursuit of independence.

Keywords: Turkism, intellectuals, press, solidarity, national bourgeoisie, people

Introduction

There is a significant need for an objective study of socio-political currents such as Islamism and Turkism, which played a crucial role in the emergence and development of public movements in Azerbaijan. From the 1870s onwards, the development of capitalist relations in Azerbaijan led to profound changes in various spheres of social life, creating a favorable ground for the formation of national-democratic thought. In particular, the establishment and growth of the national press played a decisive role in this process. Newspapers and journals such as *Əkinçi*, *Ziya*, and *Kəşkül* contributed to the dissemination of enlightenment ideas, the strengthening of national self-awareness, and the awakening of public thought. Through these publications, new ideas spread among different strata of society, discussions of social problems expanded, and the consciousness of national identity was consolidated.

At the beginning of the 20th century, as a result of the general renaissance process among Turkic peoples, the ideology of Turkism was formed. This ideology was based on the unity and solidarity of Turkic peoples through a common language, culture, history, and moral values. In its initial stage, the intellectual circles operating within the Russian Empire served as the main centers of Turkist ideas. However, following the political changes of the 1905–1907 revolution, including the strengthening of reactionary forces, the geographical center of this ideological movement shifted to Ottoman Turkey. There, Turkism was developed in a more systematic manner and emerged as a political-ideological current.

During this period, Turkic peoples turned once again to their historical roots and national values, intensifying their struggle for freedom and independence. The rise of national consciousness, the expansion of the enlightenment movement, and the increase in political activity constituted the main features of this process.

From a historical perspective, it is important to note that Turkic peoples have occupied a significant place in world civilization. Since ancient times, they have spread across vast territories, established rich

traditions of statehood, and influenced the formation of various cultures. The history of Turkic peoples is deeply rooted not only in political events but also in language, culture, and social organization. These factors served as essential sources of ideas in the formation of Turkism ideology.

Thus, the socio-political and ideological processes that took place in Azerbaijan and the broader Turkic world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries gave a powerful impetus to the development of national-democratic thought and the emergence of Turkism ideology. These processes played a decisive role in shaping the political and cultural directions of the region in subsequent periods.

Main part

If we turn to history, we see that Turkic-origin peoples are among the most ancient nations of the world. Ali bey Huseynzade wrote: “The Turks appeared on the stage of history two thousand years before the Christian era. Since then, they have been subject to various racial and linguistic influences: in the east of the Asian continent through interaction with the Manchu, Mongols, and Chinese, and in the west through contact with Caucasian races such as Aryans and Semites, namely Indians, Iranians, Israelites, Circassians, Kurds, Arabs, and others. As a result, today they constitute a highly diverse community in terms of appearance, race, and language.” (Huseynzade, 2007).

Chinese historians mention the earliest Turkic rulers between 2000–1000 BCE. Consequently, the known history of the Turks encompasses a period of approximately four millennia. (Güngör, 1999: p.11).

Turkic peoples historically inhabited vast territories stretching from northeastern China to Eastern Europe. Regions such as Central Asia, the northwestern areas of the Sayan-Altai Mountains, along the Yenisei and Irtysh rivers, the Ural and Volga basins, Lake Balkhash, and the entire surrounding areas of the Caspian Sea have consistently been places of settlement for Turkic-origin communities. (Veliyev, 2015: p.192).

The analysis of historical sources demonstrates that Turkic peoples, over many centuries, spread across vast geographical areas and engaged in interactions with diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Their contacts with Mongol and Chinese populations in the East, as well as with various Caucasian and Near Eastern ethnic groups in the West, resulted in notable diversity in anthropological, linguistic, and cultural terms. This process of mutual influence contributed to the emergence of a rich and multifaceted structure, evident both in their physical characteristics and in their language and culture. Consequently, in the modern era, Turkic peoples, while sharing a common origin, constitute a broad ethnic community distinguished by diverse regional features.

Ancient Chinese chronicles provide significant information about the early history of Turkic peoples. These sources mention Turkic tribes and their rulers beginning from the second millennium BCE. Such evidence indicates that the Turks have been present on the historical stage since very ancient times and possess a developmental trajectory of at least four millennia. This long-term historical evolution facilitated the establishment of their rich traditions of statehood and forms of social organization.

The settlement area of Turkic peoples was remarkably vast. They inhabited territories stretching from northeastern China through Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Near East, extending as far as Eastern Europe. This wide geographical spread not only strengthened their interactions with diverse cultures but also shaped the multifaceted and dynamic character of the historical development of the Turkic world.

Thus, the ethnogenesis and historical evolution of Turkic peoples can be evaluated as a complex, multilayered process enriched by mutual influences. This process enabled them, in the modern era, to create a broad civilizational space that combines common roots with diverse regional characteristics.

The Turanian world contributed significantly to global culture, offering eminent scholars and cultural figures such as Muhammad al-Khwarizmi, al-Farabi, al-Biruni, Ibn Sina, Nizami Ganjavi, Nasir al-Din Tusi, Fuzuli, and Nasimi, as well as conquerors and leaders like Attila, Mete, Babak, Amir Timur, Mehmed the Conqueror, and Shah Ismail. It also bestowed high moral and spiritual values upon world civilization. However, this world was eventually fragmented and subjected to domination and colonization by large empires. In the early 19th century, Azerbaijan was divided between Iran and Russia; in the 1880s, the Central

Asian emirates fell under Russian control; and the multi-million Uyghur population became marginalized within China.

The tendencies toward fragmentation in the historical development of Turkic peoples were linked to a number of economic, political, and ideological factors. A comprehensive analysis of this process reveals several key causes. First, the historically entrenched feudal disunity hindered the consolidation of political unity among Turkic peoples. Rivalries and divisions among khanates and state entities weakened the defense of common national interests. Another important factor was the economic instability of many Turkic states, which, despite being founded on military strength, lacked sustainable economic foundations. This weakness prevented long-term political stability and reduced resilience against external influences. At the same time, the insufficient organization of collective resistance against large and aggressive empires further accelerated the fragmentation of Turkic peoples.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the process of national self-awareness and spiritual revival among Turkic peoples began to intensify. This phenomenon was particularly evident among Turkic-speaking communities living within the Russian Empire. The presence of numerous Turkic peoples in the region at that time contributed to the emergence of the initial center of Turkism ideology precisely in this geographical space.

The national press played a decisive role in the dissemination of Turkist ideas. The newspaper *Əkinçi*, published by Hasan bey Zardabi, and *Tercüman*, issued in Crimea by Ismail bey Gasprinski, had a profound impact on spreading enlightenment ideas and fostering national consciousness among Turkic peoples. These publications promoted concepts of common language, culture, and identity, thereby strengthening tendencies toward integration within the Turkic world.

In addition, *Şərqi-Rus* published by Mahammadaga Shahtakhtinski, *Həyat* led by Alimardan bey Topchubashov, *İrşad* by Ahmad bey Agayev, and *Füyuzat* edited by Ali bey Huseynzade became important platforms for the development of national ideas. In particular, the *Füyuzat* school advanced the synthesis of Turkism, Islamism, and modernity, thereby defining a clear ideological direction.

Ziya Gökalp regarded Ali bey Huseynzade as his spiritual guide and intellectual father in his personal development and ideological formation. At the same time, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk highly valued Gökalp's influence, stating: "If Ali Rıza Efendi is the father of my flesh and bones, then Ziya Gökalp is the father of my ideas. (Güngör, 1999).

Ziya Gökalp played a pivotal role in the development and dissemination of the idea of Turkism among Turkic peoples. He divided the concept of Turkism into three levels of significance and objectives: Turkism, Oghuzism (Turkmenism), and Turanism. According to him, the establishment of a national Turkish state—the republic—represented the realization of the first level, namely the idea of Turkism. Oghuzism and Turanism, however, were conceived as broader and more distant goals.

In Gökalp's view, the groups with the greatest potential for unity in terms of national affinity and closeness were the Oghuz Turks. This group included the Turkic-speaking peoples of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkmenistan. Nevertheless, Gökalp emphasized that the political unification of these peoples would require time; at present, integration was possible only at the level of culture and national consciousness. This approach reflects the linkage of the Turkism idea to practical realities and provides a rationale for the gradual development of national unity.

Methods

This study employs a historical-analytical approach to examine the emergence and development of Turkism ideology in Azerbaijan and the broader Turkic world. The principles of Turkism were examined in relation to other socio-political currents such as Islamism and Enlightenment thought.

A multidisciplinary perspective was adopted, combining historical, cultural, and political analysis to highlight the complex and multilayered nature of Turkic ethnogenesis and ideological development. Special attention was given to the interaction between cultural identity and political realities, demonstrating how Turkism evolved as both an intellectual movement and a practical response to historical challenges.

Results and Discussion

Among the supporters of Turkism ideology, a widely shared view was that being a Turkic nationalist also meant embracing Islam, since religion, like language, was considered one of the most essential markers of a nation. Ahmad Agayev emphasized that Islam for the Turk was not merely a religious belief, but also a bearer of national and ethnic values. Therefore, it was regarded as necessary for anyone joining the Turkist movement to accept Islam. Ziya Gökalp, in turn, wrote: “The aim of Turkism is the Turkism of a modern Islam.” (Göyalp, 1996:p.53).

In the early 20th century, special attention was devoted in the press to the dissemination of ideas of Turkism and Turanism. During this period, the notion of uniting all Turkic peoples within a single Turan state was actively discussed. Muhammad Amin Rasulzade referred to the initial stage of the Turkist movement as the era of “Romantic Pan-Turkism.”

The idea of Greater Turan was particularly promoted under the leadership of Turkey. Addressing the issue of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk stated in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey in December 1921: “Because the Turks are Muslims, they will always be concerned with the fate of their religious brothers. However, they must not entertain the idea of uniting all Turkic peoples under Turkey’s leadership within a single empire. In the past, such illusions have only generated hatred and resentment. Our goal is to live independently.” (Aliyev, 2000).

In 1918, ideas of Turanism and unification under Turkey’s leadership were widely disseminated in Azerbaijan, particularly in Ganja, where opposition groups supported these views. However, the leadership of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic defended the policy of national independence and succeeded in achieving it. Muhammad Amin Rasulzade emphasized that Islam and religious identity do not define nationality; rather, nationality is built upon the unity of language and culture. Therefore, although the idea of “Turkic unity” was advanced, some intellectuals continued to identify themselves as “Muslims” or as members of “Muslim nations.” Within Tsarist Russia, Azerbaijani Turks were often referred to as “Tatars.” Rasulzade, however, for the first time replaced this term with “Turk” in the newspaper *Açıq Söz*. Thus, the era of religious communalism (*ümmətçilik*) came to an end, giving way to the period of national consciousness and Turkic nationalism.

Turkist ideologists also sought to define the geographical boundaries of the Turkic world, paying particular attention to territorial factors. Ahmad Agayev, in his article “The Turkic World” published in the journal *Türk Yurdu*, noted: “The Turks, spreading from the Altai Mountains, have expanded in all directions—from north to south, east to west. They have settled in diverse regions, ranging from China to Finland, Poland, Hungary, and even North Africa.” [1].

He argued that the territory of the Turkic world was equal in size to the combined area of Europe and America, and that approximately 70 million Turks lived there; in the modern era, this number has exceeded 250 million. Yusuf Akçura emphasized that the spirit of the Turks resided in the Caucasus, Siberia, and Eastern Turkestan—the steppes of Turan—and divided the Turkic world into three main regions: the independent Ottoman Empire; territories under the domination of Tsarist Russia and China; and northeastern Iran. The geographical domain of the Turkic peoples extended from the Mediterranean to the Great Wall of China, and from the shores of the Arctic Ocean to the Kunlun Mountains, covering approximately 10.5 million square kilometers, which is equal to one-fifth of the Eurasian continent.

Compared to the early 20th century, the number of Turks has decreased more than threefold. Demographic indicators, however, show that the population of both Muslims and Turkic peoples has been rapidly increasing. According to statistics from the late 20th century, the average annual growth rate was 2.7% among Azerbaijanis, 3% among Uzbeks, 3% among Turkmens, and 2.9% among Kyrgyz; in comparison, the rate was 1% in England, 0.9% in Japan, 0.3% in Switzerland, and 0.1% in the Baltic states and Germany. More than 80% of Turkic peoples are Muslims, while 20% adhere to other religions such as shamanism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism. According to United Nations statistics, the Turkic language ranks fifth among world

languages. Turkic-speaking states and autonomous entities possess vast territories, rich natural resources, and significant economic, military, and political potential. This potential enhances their influence in global politics, and several developed countries experience energy dependence on Turkic states.

Conclusion

From the late 20th century onwards, economic, political, and cultural rapprochements began to take place among Turkic-speaking states and autonomous entities. In this process, the role of National Leader Heydar Aliyev was invaluable. Through his initiative, the TRACECA project and the restoration of the Great Silk Road laid the foundation for cooperation among the Turkic republics. The first summit of Turkic-speaking heads of state, held in Istanbul in 1993, made a significant contribution to the development of this rapprochement in both economic and cultural spheres.

In an era of global interconnectedness, alongside Turkism, the policy of Azerbaijani identity (Azerbaijanism) also held an important place in Azerbaijan. Heydar Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan is a Turkic-speaking nation and that the Azerbaijani language is the language of a Turkic-origin people. Today, the number of Azerbaijanis worldwide exceeds 50 million, all of whom are connected to Azerbaijan and contribute to the country's development. At the same time, other ethnic minorities living in Azerbaijan consider themselves full members of this homeland and lead free and independent lives.

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