

***The Politics of Culture in Soviet Azerbaijan, 1920–40.*** By Audrey L. Altstadt.  
 London: Routledge, 2016. xxii, 234 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Tables. Maps.  
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The picture painted by scholars (including this reviewer) since the early 1990s about Soviet nationalities policies is, typically, that as a way of overcoming the economic and cultural backwardness of non-Russians (while also winning the support of at least some of them), the Bolsheviks embarked on a series of nation-building policies under the overall heading of *korenizatsiia*. This involved nurturing local cadres, developing (standardizing if necessary) languages and alphabets, and promoting flourishing national cultures in all their forms (written, visual, and aural). In *The Politics of Culture in Soviet Azerbaijan, 1920–40*, Audrey L. Altstadt poses a rather obvious but rarely asked question: what happens when these policies are implemented in the context of a non-Russian nationality which was not backward, and which already had its own strong cultural traditions and a large body of active intellectuals before the arrival of Soviet power? Azerbaijan was just such a case: and the answer, the book shows, was the destruction of a thriving and modern national culture and its replacement by one tailored to the Soviet system. Despite Azerbaijan being listed by the Bolsheviks as a “backward” nationality, Altstadt amply demonstrates in Chapter 1, “The Azerbaijani Enlightenment,” that in terms of culture this was far from the case, while the wealth of Baku makes any claim of economic backwardness highly dubious.

Chapter 2 lays out the Bolshevik approach to nationality and to the general sovietization of culture. The following chapters document the clash between the two traditions outlined in the first two chapters: the established cultural and intellectual life of Azerbaijan and “Bolshevik cultural construction” (133). Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 describe the changes of the 1920s and 1930s in alphabet and language policies, schools, higher education, literature, and other high arts, respectively. Each chapter is structured chronologically, providing a clear sense of the different periods of this clash. One of the strengths of this approach is that developments in Azerbaijan are clearly tied in with the major developments of the Soviet Union—the New Economic Policy, the great transformation of 1928 to 1932, collectivization, and the great purges. The account rests not only on the author’s decades of research on and familiarity with Azerbaijan, but also a thorough reading of the evolution of Soviet policies towards culture and intellectuals.

Altstadt’s interpretation of Soviet cultural and language policies as Russification (41–43) might be argued with, especially as she documents the efforts of Lenin and (at least in the beginning) Stalin to distance themselves from such a notion, as reflected in the resolutions of the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1923 (45). While arguing that Russification was an inevitable result of proletarian dictatorship, “a theme with russifying implications since most proletariats were Russian” (41), Altstadt is at pains to distinguish the different periods of this process. Thus, the contrast between the Latinization of the Turkic alphabets in the 1920s and the introduction of Cyrillic could not be clearer. The former had for long been advocated by certain Azerbaijani intellectuals, who saw Latinization as a form of modernization. It was initially proposed as a non-Party initiative (69), and the reform was accompanied by an open and critical debate between supporters and opponents, for example at the First Turcological Congress in 1926 (72–77). Cyrillic, by contrast, for what was now considered the Azerbaijani rather than Turkic language, was introduced in 1940 on the back of denunciations of the former proponents of Latinization and in an atmosphere of terror and intimidation that allowed for no debate.

Altstadt portrays these developments as a struggle between the established intellectuals of Azerbaijan and the ideologically-driven Bolsheviks. But this was not

a one-sided struggle. Some Azerbaijanis, notably Nariman Narimanov, were able to mediate between the tendencies, while as long as open discussion was allowed, change could be delayed or moderated. It took the elimination of almost all of the older generation of intellectuals in the Terror of 1937 (201) to finally squash the pre-revolutionary cultural traditions. Even so, the result was an “adaptation of the pre-Soviet national culture to the pressure of the party-state” (210). As the final chapter argues, the memory of the denounced culture lived on sufficiently to undergo revival during the Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev (and Aliyev in between) rehabilitations, and to inspire the independence movement of the 1980s. As well as advancing a vivid and informed picture of cultural life in Soviet Azerbaijan, Altstadt has provided plenty of food for thought about what Soviet nation-building meant.

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***The Making of the Greek Genocide: Contested Memories of the Ottoman Greek Catastrophe.*** By Eric Sjöberg. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017. viii, 255 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. \$110.00, hard bound.  
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The Greek population of Anatolia was persecuted systematically by the Ottoman Young Turk and the Kemalist governments between 1913–1924, resulting in the loss of their very existence in their historic homelands. The most prominent events during this process include the ethnic cleansing in Asia Minor during 1913–14; the 1921–22 systematic massacres of the Pontiac Greeks; the burning of Izmir in 1922; and the 1924 forced population exchanges. The author demonstrates successfully how these different episodes of violence were reconstructed as one “genocide” starting in the 1990s, meaning that this book is not about what happened during 1913–24; it is about how and why this history was reconstructed and what conditions this reconstruction was a product of.

The author explains that the process began slowly, with the demand by a small local community (the Pontiac Greeks) that their suffering be labeled a genocide. This request was met by criticism on the premise that it was dangerous to Greek national unity: not only the Pontiac Greeks, but the Greeks of Asia Minor had also suffered a genocide. Thus, two separate genocides came to the forefront. Later, the narrative of these two genocides was merged into one under the framework of a unified national memory. This “genocide” and “memory” construction gains meaning when considered under the context of contemporary political needs or as a part of the identity politics involved, especially within diaspora communities.

The general setup and structure of the book is successful. The reader can ascertain from the beginning what each chapter’s contents and primary theses are. We are thus presented with a book that is easy to follow and understand. The Chapter 1 provides a brief historical background of the period leading up to the 1924 forced population exchanges. It offers useful information for those who are not well-versed in the topic. Chapter 2 discusses the process of how the Greek Genocide concept emerged. Until the 1990s, the Anatolian Greeks’ experience in 1912–24 did not play an important role in Greek political life. The refugees were also not much interested in the violence of their own history. The author provides various explanations for this: generational response to trauma and the 1946–49 Greek Civil War are two of these reasons. The turning point in the reconstruction of memory was the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and the memoirs published in the 1980s and 1990s.