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An Average Azeri Village (1930): Remembering Rebellion in the Caucasus Mountains

Bruce Grant

From the end of 1929 to April of 1930, the political situation in [our region] was good. In April, a few kulaks and bandits raised a commotion and spread discontent. Currently, however, our political situation can be considered average.

—Political Report from northwest Azerbaijan, November 1930

What did it mean to be average in the Soviet Union of the early 1930s? This was the question confronting me as I sat in a provincial archive in Azerbaijan in the autumn of 2002, in the small city of Sheki, six hours’ drive northwest of the capital, Baku. Housed in a damp stone building, the archive had a single reading room that filled each day with men and women working through property registers from before, during, and after the Soviet period to lay claim to paper fragments that would alleviate their tax burdens or assert their property rights in the unstable setting of life in the post-Soviet republic. I had come to look for sources on the his-

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The epigraph is taken from “Nuxa Rayon ZDS (Zahmatkaslar Deputatlarn Soveti) İcraiyi Kommitesi Malumat üçün kand sovetlarin iclas protokollar (1930),” Azarbeycan Baş Arxiv İdarasi, Şak Filialı (Azerbaijan Central Archive Administration, Sheki Branch, hereafter ABAIJ SF), f. 13, s. 1, i. 29, s. 41. Azerbaijan archives follow the Russian system of fond, opis’, delo, list, and “ob.” by using the corresponding terms fond, siyahî, is, səhifə, and “sa.” For footnoted references to Azeri language sources and terms, I employ the Latin alphabet adopted by the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991. In the main body of the text, I romanize terms for typographical clarity, hence: Bash Şabalid rather than Baş Şabalid, Sheki rather than Şəki, and bereket rather than barakat.

1. The city of Sheki and its surrounding administrative districts were known as Nuxa under the Russian and Persian imperial administrations. Though the two names were used interchangeably throughout the period from the late nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth century, the city was officially renamed Sheki in 1968.

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tory of a mountain village where I had been doing ethnographic fieldwork, where the grandson of a Sufi-style saint had led a rebellion against Soviet power in 1930. The story of what became known locally as “the Sheki rebellion” (Şahi uşuyantı) unfolds today, as it might have then, as a complex whodunit. Was it a triumphant sign of timeless Azeri resistance to communist tyranny, or a government-led charade to expose anti-Soviet elements? Was the movement driven by a charismatic leader with magical powers, or by a politically inexperienced young molla who found himself in a trap? Inevitably partial and partisan, evidence from published, archival, and contemporary oral accounts suggests all of these things. These later multiple and lively retellings of the Sheki rebellion, dating from more than seventy years after it took place, demonstrate its enduring status as both event and metaphor for those who reconstitute it today.2

According to some reports, as many as 10,000 men and women—entire families of farmers and tradesmen, Muslim clerics and Communist Party members—took part in one night of street battles followed by three days of eerie calm in April 1930.3 Rebel leaders emptied a cabinet, a small militia, and even a trade office. After the Red Army arrived to retake the city, hundreds were arrested, sent into exile, or killed. Yet only months later in the rattled offices of the Sheki administration, the telling language of memorandum worked with its familiar clip: “From the end of 1929 to April of 1930,” an unnamed secretary of the political division reported, “the political situation in our region was good. In April, a few kulaks and bandits raised a commotion and spread discontent.” But what does one write about the state of political life when one’s own predecessor has been executed at gunpoint only months earlier? “Currently,” he wrote, “the political situation in our district could be considered average [orta hesab etmək mümkündür].”


3. Danilov and his colleagues cite figures from Moscow KGB archives that list 3,700 participants in the Sheki events, although Baku KGB files suggest higher numbers when they indicate that over 2,000 Communist Party and 576 Komsonol members alone joined in the counter-revolutionary movement. V. P. Danilov et al., eds., Tragediia sovetskoi de-revnii: Kollektivisatsiia i raskulachivanie. Dokumenty i materialy v 5 tomakh, 1927–1939, 5 vols. (Moscow, 1999–2003), 2:704; Mir Cafar Baghirov, “Doklad o povstancheskom dvizhenii v Nukha-Zakatal’skom Okrige (po dannym na 12 maia 1930 g.),” Milli Tahlükasılık Nazirliyin Arxivi, Azərbaycan Respublikası (Archive of the Ministry of National Security, Republic of Azerbaijan [formerly the Archive of the KGB, Azerbaijan SSR], hereafter MTNA), 1, 63. The file is catalogued as P177. The Baku security report indicated that 180 persons were killed, 150 were wounded, and 850 were detained (of whom 226 were arrested). Surveying anti-Soviet movements across Azerbaijan in the same period, historian David Reeves found that 2,686 persons were killed and 7,310 were detained in the same Sheki events. In his manuscript, “Islam, Banditry, and Popular Resistance to Soviet Power in Azerbaijan, Summer 1929,” presented to the workshop, “Russia/Eurasia in World Context: A Dialogue with Middle East Studies,” organized by the Social Science Research Council and Princeton University, April 2004, Reeves cites Azərbaycan Respublikası Siyası Partiyalar və İctimai Harakətlər Mərkəzi Dövlət Arxivi (Central State Archive of Political Parties and Social Movements of the Republic of Azerbaijan), f. 1, s. 74, i. 283, s. 75.
It is inviting to read this archival moment as Aesopian euphemism for what could only be described as chaos in the countryside, as a local party officer taking refuge in the language of “averageness” from the tumult all around. Indeed, within less than three years following October 1917, Muslims in the eastern Caucasus had witnessed the spectacular collapse of the Russian and Ottoman empires, vigorous interventions by the British and the Turks in the months that followed, a staunchly nationalist period of independence led by the Mūsāvat Party (1918–1920), and the establishment of Soviet government in April 1920. Given the pace at which events continued to unfold throughout the 1920s, amidst a tectonic remapping of political, economic, and social terrains—from the standardization of political rule and new communications technologies used by new political rulers to the banning of the veil, the introduction of the Latin alphabet at the expense of the Arabic one, and the collectivization of the countryside itself—it is not hard to imagine that anyone’s sense of the “average” would be loose at best.  

But instead of dismissing the nervous blandness of the Sheki pronouncement, what would happen if we took the report quite literally, on its own terms, to interrogate averageness itself? Where does the average come from? How it is made? And, most importantly, what do we make of it? The average, the everyday, the ordinary: these are the measures by which historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have long made patterns out of chaos, sameness out of difference, and memory out of history. But do these terms signify the same thing?  

Long after Hegel famously professed that there is no history without struggle (“Periods of happiness are empty pages in history”), scholars of Alltagsgeschichte have labored to produce chronicles of the normal and the ordinary, while equally numerous volumes have been dedicated to writing the very full pages of the everyday. Yet the concept of “average” has seemed to bear a more complicated set of associations, not least in anthro-


pology, where the focus on cultural difference long ago resulted in the abandonment of notions of "typical" or "average" cultural characteristics.

Early on in the nineteenth century, the Belgian scholar Adolphe Quetelet insisted that averages not only are integral to scholarship broadly conceived but are in fact only made knowable by the all-too-human labors of scholars themselves. "When men are thrust together in society and their various sizes come together in the most unlikely combinations, there is between them a mysterious link that allows us to consider each individual as a necessary part of a whole which has no physical existence and escapes us in the individual instance, and which can only be perceived through the eyes of science."7

Metaphysical, elusive, and factitious—how is it that Quetelet's early sense of the average so quickly became lost in the more formal scientific renderings of fact, even "typicality," by which averageness has since become known? The mystery of averageness may be laid bare, of course, when we take moments such as the Sheki pronouncement and map their provenance and their context. But perhaps Quetelet is offering us more. What would happen if we were to reclaim this early sense of the term, not through the typicality, but through the mystery that provides the glue for later acts of sense-making and persuasion? For, as we find in the chronicles of the Sheki rebellion, the very elements that are normally swept aside in historical recounting—the metaphysical, the elusive, and the factitious—are central to the event's endurance. Where human probity, religious faith, and political design meet, mysteries such as those surrounding Sheki's rebel leader Molla Mustafa emerge as tenacious responses to events that seem to resist logic: tragedies on the scale of Stalinism, the rise and fall of states, and the violence and the hopes that go with them.

In this article I map the life of one Azeri village through the links that it has maintained to the Sheki rebellion of 1950, which also mark it as part of the larger Soviet Union at a time when Iosif Stalin was cementing his power and rolling a sweeping program of collectivization across the eleven time zones of the enormous new state. I draw on oral histories collected through ethnographic fieldwork in the natal village of one of the rebellion's organizers, Molla Mustafa Sheykhzade; on public archival offerings; on popular historical accounts emergent since perestroika; and on the Byzantine reasoning of former KGB intelligence documents. In the first section, "A Mountain Story," I set the most common terms of debate over the life of Molla Mustafa, whose very life path is understood much like Quetelet's making of averageness itself: metaphysically, elusively, factitiously. In the second section, "Remembering Molla Mustafa," I examine how contemporary residents of Molla Mustafa's village remember and reconstitute his story. In "Idioms of Rebellion," the third section, I move beyond the Cold War frames of Soviet time and space by considering how centuries of successive foreign rule in the Caucasus set the stage for waves

of rebellion against seemingly disinterested metropolitan rulers. In the fourth section, "Reading Molla Mustafa," I examine how widely varying published and archival sources compete for persuasive force among diverse audiences. By mixing oral and written narrative to render the story as fully as I have learned it, this approach looks to move beyond the impasse found in so much literature on the Caucasus, where politics have long been rendered exclusively as state life, history as state record, and ethnography as cabinet of curiosity. The long life of the Sheki rebellion shows how vitally politics, history, and cultural frame become intertwined, as happens when any powerful event becomes symbol.8

By introducing readers to this influential episode in rural Azerbaijani history, my goal is to explore how the "common property" represented in the storytelling of specific national pasts inflects and refashions our conventional understandings of early Soviet history.9 To speak of resistance to collectivization campaigns in the late 1920s, for example, conventionally summons the contextual logic of the Russian example: the legacies of the communal mir, the economics of the peasant household, and waves of autocratic rule. But not all Soviet citizens of the vast state made sense of the force and speed of events around them in the same ways. In this essay, I offer a portrait of an anti-Soviet rebellion in Azerbaijan that was as much performance as protest, in a location, the southern Caucasus, where "idioms of rebellion" have been a long-standing factor in local rule; where challenges to private property and public spheres were interpreted through archetypally moral and religious frames; and where Soviet leaders found themselves competing with Turks and Persians across the borders for the political imaginations of their new proletarian constituents.

A Mountain Story

On the night of 11 April 1930, Molla Mustafa Sheykhzade left his home in the northwest Azerbaijani village of Bash Shabalid and readied for an armed assault on the nearby city of Sheki, a silk-producing center once a famous crossroads of medieval trade routes. For at least a year and a half, Molla Mustafa, together with two other prominent leaders—Ismail Haqqi Efendi, a Turk, and Behram bey Nebibeyov, a highly decorated Azeri military officer in the tsarist army—had been laying the groundwork for the overthrow of the communist government and the establishment of an Islamic state on the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan.10

8. In mapping political symbolism, I reprise Katherine Verdery's use of the semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, who remarked that the most powerful symbols are the ones most available to multiple and competing audiences. Katherine Verdery, "Whither ‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’?" Daedalus 122, no. 2 (1993): 37–47.
9. I borrow the notion of "common property" from Fitzpatrick, Everyday Stalinism, 8.
The three men and their followers, armed and funded in part by pro-Turkish agents whom they understood to be from the underground guerilla movement, *İttihad ve Tərəqqi* (Union and progress), acted on the widespread discontent with Soviet rule in the Azeri countryside. Operating on the belief that as many as 7,000 Turkish troops were stationed in the forests of the Greater Caucasus mountains, and that Atatürk himself would take Baku weeks later in May, over 2,000 Azeris from in and around Sheki armed themselves for attack.

The rebellion had been intended for the tenth anniversary of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, 28 April 1930, but local events overtook the plotters when unrest in neighboring cities gave rise to fears of discovery. So it was that on the night of 11 April, as Molla Mustafa and his men readied for a morning assault, two policemen who had been tipped-off fired shots on Molla Mustafa’s headquarters. Molla Mustafa returned fire, killing both men, and eventually seized a third, Qasimov, head of the political affairs division of the Sheki District Executive Committee (*rəisi polkom*), whom he judged and executed. Sheykhzade’s compatriots, taking the gun volleys as a signal, began to gather at the village council office in neighboring Ashaghi Göynük and organized their march on Sheki. That night, learning of the death of his deputy officer, an anxious Riza Babayev, first secretary of the Sheki Communist Party office, telephoned Mir Cafar Baghirov, Azerbaijan’s powerful commissar for internal affairs (1921–1933) and later head of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan (1933–1953), to alert him that 500 armed men were advancing on the city. “Don’t bother with it,” was Baghirov’s famed response, repeated in almost every popular journalistic account and mountaintop retelling. “It’s just a provocation.” The Soviet commissar’s professed disinterest in the work of rebellion makes sense if one is to believe the mix of popular lore and government intelligence asserting that Baghirov, far from having been caught unaware, may have been the actual sponsor of the rebellion from the outset. These sources maintain that Baghirov, working closely with Lavrentii Beria, then head of intelligence in Georgia, was the one who put Molla Mustafa in contact with agents who posed as Azeri nationalist sympathizers, in or-

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11. It was unclear from archival sources whether the İttihad və Tərəqqi in question was the movement founded in Turkey in 1896, as described by Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Princeton, 1961), 194; or one of the wings founded in Moscow, in 1899, according to Danilov et al., *Tragediia sovetskoi derevni*, 3:90; or in 1920, according to Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World* (Chicago, 1979), 87, 218. İttihad və Tərəqqi’s goal of the creation of a pan-Turkic bourgeois state was, in any case, separate from the pan-Islamist İttihad (Union) political party in Baku (1917–1920). See Tadeusz Swietochowski and Brian C. Collins, *Historical Dictionary of Azerbaijan* (Lanham, Md., 1999), 70.

der to foment rebellion and root out anti-Soviet elements. Why else, some have asked, would Baghirov have waited so long to retake Sheki?

An equally provocative question concerns the fate of Molla Mustafa himself. Despite his youth—only twenty-four at the time of the uprising—he enjoyed enormous regional support as the grandson of a Sufi-style saint, Sheykh Ehmed. Molla Mustafa had been active in maintaining his grandfather’s shrine (or pir) in Bash Shabalid, a sacred site attracting pilgrims from as far as Turkey and Iran. In the wake of the rebellion, Molla Mustafa fled into the steep hills surrounding Sheki and Bash Shabalid together with his co-conspirators. Yet Molla Mustafa was the only one of the rebellion’s leaders to survive arrest and capture. After almost a full year of interrogation in Baku’s Bailovo prison, he was sentenced to a labor camp in the northern Russian Republic’s Solovetsk Islands and slated for execution. Eventually his surviving children in Sheki received notice that he had been killed by firing squad in 1937. However in 1956, following the death of Stalin, when Baghirov himself was tried in Baku for his famously repressive measures, a KGB agent told the court that Molla Mustafa had, in fact, never been killed. Intelligence sources in Sheki maintained that Molla Mustafa was alive and well, corresponding regularly with his relatives. What, then, became of Molla Mustafa after the rebellion?

These questions developed in three summer visits I made to Bash Shabalid since 1999, when I first visited the pir of Sheykh Ehmed, legendary in the region. At the time, my goal was to think of ways by which rural experience in the Caucasus might inform comparative understandings of conflicts across the region, particularly given the paucity of works outside the metropoles. The study of Sovietization in Azerbaijan has been favored with a number of excellent monographs. Yet by dint of restrictions on access, foremost for western scholars, or by restrictions on the kinds of questions that could be asked, foremost for Soviet scholars, there has been relatively little study of the Azeri countryside. During the communist period, the long-standing proscriptions against even talking of anti-Soviet rebellion further limited histories of political life in the countryside.

There was plenty not to talk about. In the year 1930 alone, at least 508 incidents of anti-Soviet disturbances were recorded in the Caucasus region, part of a larger 13,754 disturbances across the former Soviet Union. Yet it was not until 1989 that accounts of rebellion in Sheki and

15. Lynne Viola, Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance (New York, 1996), 105. For comparable events in Georgia, see Ronald Grigor Suny, The Making of the Georgian Nation (Bloomington, 1988), chap. 11. For mappings of considerable resistance and revolt in the early Soviet periods, see Danilov et al., Tragediia sovetskoi derevni; Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Vil-
elsewhere were first published.\textsuperscript{16} The more often I heard the same or similar stories of “mystical mountain life” repeated, however, the more I was struck that deeper means of political sense-making were being lost in the consignment of rural knowledge to ethnographic curios. The memories of Molla Mustafa and the Sheki rebellion offer extraordinary events from everyday life in tumultuous times, but they also suggest how particular southern Caucasus codes of power and authority inflected the reception of early Soviet rule.

Remembering Molla Mustafa

To reach Bash Shabalid from Sheki in 1999 or 2002, passengers could take jeeps, trucks, or a halting bus to make the long climb into the hills. Caution on the precipitous, winding roads and much grinding of gears resulted in this twenty-kilometer trip taking just over an hour. Past the neighboring villages of Ashaghi Shabalid and Bash Göynük, several hundred square meters of natural floodplain lie atop the hills. The plain is spread with foot-thick, white-grey boulders, so uniform in size that they appear almost to have been quarried for a tall, stone building and then left behind. This volatile riverbed, rising and shifting by season, separates Bash Shabalid from its neighbors and from the visitors who come to the pilgrimage site (ziyaratga) of Sheyk Ebmed, or as he is known in the region, Sheyk Baba.\textsuperscript{17} At first sight, this mountain location can resemble the verdant slopes of a Swiss canton. In the summer, moisture from mountain runoff makes the soil seem to explode with growth along every path. The richness of the land is one reason why it has been cultivated for so


\textsuperscript{16} In a 3 April 1924 interview with the Tbilisi newspaper, \textit{Zaria Vostoka}, Baghirov reported that while fifty-eight rebel groups had been active in the Azerbaijan SSR in May 1922, only five groups remained in March 1924, and a further seventeen men had surrendered just days before his arrival in Georgia. “At this time the entire republic has been cleaned of criminal groupings, as well as SR, Mūsavat, and monarchist organizations.” Baghirov in Nazirli, \textit{Topografi}, 161. Audrey Altstadt and Tadeusz Świetochowski qualify Baghirov’s assertion by writing that wide-scale armed resistance to Soviet power in Azerbaijan continued “to at least” 1924. See Altstadt, \textit{The Azerbaijani Turks}, 111; Świetochowski, \textit{Russian Azerbaijan}, 190; and \textit{Russia and Azerbaijan}, 102–3. The most encyclopedic source on anti-Soviet rebellions in Azerbaijan is Jörg Baberowski, \textit{Der Feind ist überall: Stalinismus im Kaukasus} (Munich, 2003). Azeri historian Ziya Bunyadov sketches accounts of armed rebellion of 1950 in nearby Naxchivan in \textit{Qurmuż Terror} (Baku, 1993), 21–32.

\textsuperscript{17} In the eastern Caucasus, şeyx is a term loosely used to designate the leader of a religious community, a well-known preacher, or venerated local saint. In Arab societies it can carry a more formal political significance. Though Sheyk Ebmed is widely held to be a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, I did not hear him referred to by the alternate titles of šarif (lit., the honorable one, a term more common among Sunni Muslims predominant in northwest Azerbaijan) or šayyid (lit., master, the term more common among Shi’i Muslims across eastern Azerbaijan). Martin van Bruinessen’s work, \textit{Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan} (London, 1992) provides a helpful discussion of the blurring of these terms in a different setting. With similar flexibility, the term molla can designate someone particularly knowledgeable in Islam, or someone from a famously pious family, as in the case of Molla Mustafa, rather than someone who carries the limited clerical responsibilities of the Muslim faith.
long. Farmers' ploughs routinely churn up clay pots, human bones, underground terra cotta water canals, and carved rock sculptures—unattended by archaeologists who have hundreds of such sites in easier-to-reach locations—as a constant reminder of the long record of human occupation of the hillside.

In the summer of 2002, when villagers were called to the local schoolhouse to cast ballots in a referendum that would change electoral laws to allow the president's son to become the next in line to rule the country, Bash Shabalid registered some 120 houses, with an estimated formal population of over 600. The actual population was closer to 450, given the out-migration of fathers, husbands, sons, and daughters seeking work elsewhere amidst the economic instabilities of life in the new republic. Few young women traveled further than Sheki, but almost every family had an uncle or son who had moved to Russia, placing them among the estimated more than one million Azeri men who have left their republic in search of economic opportunities since the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

When the various collective farms north of Sheki folded a decade earlier, assets were handed to liquidation committees, who parcelled out land, equipment, and animals in arrangements that were most often advantageous only to committee members themselves. Since then almost all residents have worked as small-scale farmers and horticulturalists, raising fruits, vegetables, and animals to feed themselves, and living off the cash profits from the sale of honey, hazelnuts, walnuts, cherries, and, when they defy the authorities, the ubiquitous tut arağ, a local vodka from the fruit of mulberries. Men who had horses also worked year-round to cull mature trees from the forests, draw them back to their yards, and fire them in covered pits to make charcoal, a back-breaking job that could earn them as much as the equivalent of four dollars a tree. Strained living in trying times: in this respect Bash Shabalid had everything in common with other rural communities across the contemporary Caucasus. For those from the outside who traveled there, however, Bash Shabalid was particularly regarded for its religious signposts, including the mausoleum of Sheykh Ehmed, the grandfather of Molla Mustafa. It is also remembered as a center of rebellion.

In this section I offer short extracts from interviews conducted in the summer and fall of 2002, suggesting the various configurations of how and why the 1930s rebellion is remembered and reconstituted in the town that gave the movement its leader. To be sure, these were the kinds of stories

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18. The village has at least three other pirs—sites where visitors tie small ribbons of cloth to branches of bushes or trees, leave money, or simply come to invoke aid. The other sites include Diş piri, for dental problems, Öskürük piri, for coughs, and Yel Baba, an open space of forest. For a fuller discussion of the role of pirs in contemporary Azeri society, see I. P. Meshchaninov, “Piry Azerbaidzhana,” Izvestia gosudarstvennoy akademii istorii material'noy kul'tury 9, no. 4 (1931): 1–17; and Mark Saroyan, Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union (Berkeley, 1997), chap. 5.

19. I spent ten months in Azerbaijan over the course of three visits in 1999, 2001, and 2002, including three months in Bash Shabalid proper. The interviews in this section were done in Azeri with translations into Russian when older male residents, many of whom had learned Russian when they served in the Soviet army, were present to extend help.
that people chose to share with an anthropologist guest who appeared to require explanation for even the most obvious day-to-day workings of village life. Yet they are stories that also communicate consistent themes: the moral lives of mountain bandits, the religious frames of mountain life, magical traversal of space, and nationalist triumph over communist adversity.

Born in 1932, Hacibala (Qada) Shūkūrov was the oldest male in the extended household where I stayed as a guest during my visits. I lived in a room in his family’s hundred-year-old stone house, above the winter kitchen used by him and his wife, Mekka, alongside another pair of rooms that housed one of their daughters and her family. Living in his home, I had regular opportunities to ask Hacibala Qada about the history of Bash Shabalid, its current strife, and the fate of the kolkhoz system. But for narrative value, nothing compared to the life of Molla Mustafa, a topic that seemed to require no prompting. From Hacibala Qada’s stories I started to understand the degree to which Molla Mustafa had inherited some of the mythic dimensions of his grandfather, Sheykh Ehmed. Sheykh Ehmed’s pir complex was high on the hillside and consisted of a number of elements: a stone house built over his grave and those of his closest family members; the graves of his descendants in the courtyard surrounding the mausoleum; a small stream for ritual cleansing; a long dead but very much active “nail tree” (mismar ağacı), to which residents would pound nails as a revenge of last resort upon anyone who had wronged them; and, in telling quantities, dozens of trees and bushes covered entirely in small cloth ties as symbols of the fixing of intimate hopes and moral intentions.

Before the advent of the pir, Hacibala Qada’s great-uncle had been one of Sheykh Baba’s assistants, serving tea to pilgrims. A generation later, Hacibala’s father had been head of Bash Shabalid’s first village council office in the spring of 1930 and was in the uncomfortable position of recognizing the authority. Hacibala insisted, of both the rebellion and its repression. Hacibala further insisted that the very act of rebellion, defined in relation to Russians or even Persians, underscored what it meant to be a “people of the hills.” Rebellions, as I also learned, made a place for the miraculous in the shadows of violence.

The real bastard after the rebellion was Novruzov; he was the lead investigator who ordered all the killings in the cleanup. He kept demanding from my father, “Will you shoot Mustafa? Just tell us, yes or no?” . . . My father didn’t know what to do. Everyone had fled into the hills after Baghirov’s troops had arrived; there were hundreds, maybe thousands of people living in the hills. No one slept at night for all the comings and goings of people trying to get back to their houses to feed themselves or steal something to eat.

At one point they had a lead on Molla Mustafa and eight other rebels and had tracked him all the way west to the river Shin. My father was trying to help them get away, but he told Molla Mustafa they had been surrounded—the Red Army had them on all sides. “You can’t get out, you can’t leave,” he said. “You’re surrounded.” But my father said that Molla Mustafa stood up and started to pray to Sheykh Baba. “Sheykh Baba, please help us,” he said, raising his arms to the skies. Within an hour, there was a downpour, a real storm, the sky turned
black, and huge winds. The Russians couldn’t hold out and gave up the chase. Molla Mustafa got away. That was the kind of person he was: bullets couldn’t touch him.20

I asked Hacibala Qada what it meant for his father’s generation to stand between revolt and reprisals. It was a small step from miracles to violence.

You don’t want to know what that part was like—bodies being dumped down wells, wives being sent with their husbands into exile. But it’s not like people never tried to fight back. At one point, during the revolt itself, half of Bash Göynük had decided that the only way to deal with the Russians and their Azeri supporters was to gather them all in a cattle barn and burn them alive. That’s what things had come to. I don’t know what they were thinking. Eventually, a fight broke out in the barn; people ran screaming in the streets. When Novruzov found out—you know, he lived in the next village over in Ashaghi Göynük—there were shootings for days.

Hacibala contributed to the chorus of stories about Molla Mustafa’s clandestine visits back to Bash Shabalid, before his arrest and then again years later, stories that always involved an encounter on the side of the road, in the dark of night, with policemen who almost guessed but never quite figured out the identity of the man who resembled Molla Mustafa. I asked what it was like for Molla Mustafa’s family all those years. The fecklessness of the police and the ability of Sheykh Baba to posthumously intervene in the life of his family years after his own death were recurring themes. These transubstantiations might well also be considered Sufi themes, as they involve fantastic close calls, mystical powers, and impossible visitations. But Hacibala said he was not familiar with Sufism, and continued without pause to explain how Sheykh Ehmed protected Molla Mustafa and his house. His recounting made vivid use of the nail as the vengeance hardware of supernatural choice.

Not long after the revolt in the early 1930s, police came to reclaim Molla Mustafa’s house, the one up on the hill. But they came to my father’s house first, to drink vodka. Hours later my father told them, “You’re drunk, you can’t go to a shrine like this.” But the commissioner didn’t care; he was really out of it. He said to his men, “Let’s go.” To get to the house, up the path along the river, they had to go over a fence that had been covered with open nails so that the cows wouldn’t get near it. All the men made it over the fence safely, but when the commissioner climbed over, he slipped. A nail caught his eye and pulled across the entire top of his face. He was drippin in blood, badly injured. “That’s it,” he said. “We’re not giving them a hard time.”

The question of whether the nail featured in Hacibala’s story because of the sanctity of Sheykh Ehmed’s house itself, or because of the nail’s status as the village’s most popular symbol of righting wrongs was left to the listener to resolve.

Abdul Lezar Gurmemmedov, aged 73, was Hacibala’s frequent visitor. The men had grown up together, when Hacibala’s father was head of the council office and Abdul Lezar’s father was chairman of the “28th of April”

20. The following three extracts are from an interview with Hacibala (Qada) Şükürov, 28 July 2002.
kolkhoz. "My father himself was illiterate," Abdul Lezar explained. "But those were the times. He used to sign collective farm documents with his finger, like this, na! Yes, you know, he didn't do a bad job, and eventually more literate people came to help out." Continuing in the vein of parallels between Sheykh Ehmed and Molla Mustafa, whose names governed a vibrant body of parables and moral guide rules, Abdul Lezar insisted that to understand Molla Mustafa was to know his grandfather before him.

*Just because people talk about Molla Mustafa, don't think that people have forgotten about Sheykh Ehmed. . . . Originally there were three brothers; the idea is that*

21. The Soviet republic of Azerbaijan was promulgated on 28 April 1920.
22. This and the following extract are from an interview with Abdul Lezar Gurmummadov, 27 August 2002.
they came from Saudi Arabia. “Arabs,” everyone used to say. They came to study us, maybe, or preach to us. Each of them had their own following, and when they died, they each had their own pir.

There was one time when Sheykh Ehmed was arrested—“Nikolay,” I mean.23 He was on the street one day in Sheki and passed a man who was whipping his horse because it wouldn’t move. Sheykh Ehmed walked up to him and said, “The horse may move now” [At getsin], and the horse moved on! Some Russian policemen saw this and arrested him for mischief. Typical! They locked him in a cell, no window, nothing, and left him there. But when the police went outside, suddenly they saw him again, on his knees, praying in the middle of the street for all to see. That’s the kind of person he was. The police had no idea how he got out. Even back then they realized that he was a sacred figure. So they said, “Let him go. Leave him to himself.”

In Bash Shabalid, Sheykh Ehmed would often come to people in dreams, as in the time when he told Abdul Lezar to stop drinking, or when he would explain to hunters where to look for wild boar in the hills.24

Like Abdul Lezar, Zemfira Hesenova gave a particularly vivid account of the intersection between the sacred and the political in the life of Molla Mustafa. Born in 1937, she had worked in the grain mill of the kolkhoz all her life. She never attended school because of the absence of men in World War II and the poverty that followed it. But her family prospered. Her husband, Huseyn, worked as a driver, and in 1991 her son was able to purchase the village store after the demise of the collective farm. When I visited them for a late dinner in the autumn, Huseyn, 72, was writing a letter to authorities in Baku to complain about his meager pension and “disorder in the country.” Zemfira kept telling her husband not to write the letter, but it was clear that Huseyn enjoyed his reputation as letter writer. In our conversations, the couple spoke at length of the concept of barakat, an Azeri version of the Arabic, baraka, which has been translated widely as plenty, power, blessing, or divine favor. Powerful men like Sheykh Ehmed and Molla Mustafa had bereket, Zemfira explained. It seemed not out of place that there was a glittering mosaic of Stalin, another powerful leader from another time of extraordinary events, above the couch where she spoke.

In the 1930s it was the most tense. That’s when the cruelty was at its height. You know, they would tell us that Allah didn’t exist any more. But it’s not like this was the first time any of that had been going on. Russians never wanted anyone to be better than them. That’s why they were so suspicious of Sheykh Baba [Ehmed]. . . . Whenever a molla would go out in the street, someone would accuse him of something. But no one was afraid of the mollas; it was the Russians they were afraid of. They were the ones who blocked the path to the mollas. My grandmother told me that when the Russians used to come from house to house, they would break all the dishes, break people’s legs. Of course people were terrified. I’m talking about tsarist

23. “Nikolay vaxtı” (lit., the time of Nikolay), or more simply “Nikolay,” was standard shorthand for talking about the tsarist period.
24. Abdul Lezar used the Russian word kaban (wild boar) after I did not understand the Azeri donuz (wild hog). Abdul Lezar did not explain how a religious figure such as Sheykh Ehmed could counsel hunters to look for animals that are forbidden (haram) in Islam, though the practice among Muslims in the eastern Caucasus of hunting them was not uncommon in hungry times in any case.
Russia, of course. So by the time of Soviet power, it was just the Russians one more time. What was the difference?25

Zemfira was a regular visitor to the pir of Sheyk Baba.

If I have a sacrifice to make, of course, I go. But sometimes, like the last time when my son came from Moscow, or if someone asks me to do it for them, I will go along. When I go, I enter the mausoleum and take a pillow and sit right beside Sheyk Ehmed’s grave. You start by walking around [the outside of] the building three times, and then you go in. But it has to be an honest person who opens that door, it can’t just be some panderer [oğras] or it will make matters worse. You remove your shoes and you walk in with your back to the wall, so that your back is never facing his grave. When you go back outside, after praying, you take water from the river and drink it, then you leave money in the basket, wherever, along the fence, even if you’ve already made a sacrifice. What can you say, it’s like a cash-box, you know, like in Russian, a kassa.

I returned to the rebellion and asked Zemfira if she thought someone as young as Molla Mustafa could command enough respect to lead a revolt. Zemfira continued her dismissive collapse of all Soviets into “Russians” and spoke in refrain with others who saw the lives of Sheyk Ehmed and Molla Mustafa as intertwined. In accounting for his efficacy as a leader, she made reference to his special gifts, allowing that he was a young man who could “disappear into thin air”—given his particular abundance of bereket, the loose configuration of divine favor and magical power—only to return again.26

You tell me, how could Russians know who a sheyk is, what a pir is? They don’t understand. They never understood. In the 1930s, all they knew was to look for the people we respected. But they had no idea what they were doing. People tried to shoot Molla Mustafa, but they didn’t understand who he was, what family he was from. That’s why the bullets could never hit him. He could disappear into thin air one moment, only to come back the next somewhere else.

What became of Molla Mustafa after his arrest and capture?

He had been exiled quite far away; he was in prison in the north, Murmansk or Solovetsk, for a while. But then he would come back, under cover of night at times. He would visit the pilgrimage site, make sure everything was fine, and then leave before it got light.

Of all the conversations I had in Bash Shabalid about Molla Mustafa, the most formal may have been with his grandson, Molla Mahir. He knew the most, in an official sense, but had also grown accustomed to just such conversations. Molla Mahir ran the family’s pir and was kept busy receiving pilgrims arriving from elsewhere who came to perform sacrifices and

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25. The following four extracts are from an interview with Zemfira Hasanova, 3 October 2002.
26. For one elaboration on baraka, see Clifford Geertz, Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia (Chicago, 1971), 44. For more extended discussions see Anne Marie Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam (Chapel Hill, 1975); and Michael A. Sells, ed., Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’an, Mi’raj, Poetic and Theological Writings (New York, 1996).
dine in his courtyard after visiting the mausoleum. He had a troubled 
look, with grim features and a nervous gait. Some credited this to the fact 
that when he reconstructed the tall stone fence around Sheykhh Baba’s 
original property, where he lived with his wife, his children, and their 
families, he closed off the original doorway into the courtyard, an energy 
channel for Sheykhh Ehmeh’s spirit. Sheykh Ehmeh, they said, visited 
Molla Mahir in his dreams to castigate him. Belief in nightly interventions 
underscored the assumption across the village that the spirits of the saintly 
were shadow rulers in all spheres of daily life.

Molla Mahir received me on a late autumn afternoon on the second 
floor balcony of his family’s spartan but elegant house, at a table spread 
with white linen and flowers. I asked him first about Sheykh Ehmeh.

Sheykh Baba came from Arabia, we’re not quite sure where. His tombstone here 
says “Bedevia Arabia Huseyna,” which means, “the Bedouin Arab, Huseyn.”27 
He was from the clan of Mehmemed, the Prophet. He arrived with his entire clan 
[taifa], with his brothers, their wives, their children. Each of them settled in their 
own village, specially, to spread the word of Islam. As a Muslim, for the times he 
was very well educated. Late in life he had been sent a gift from Allah, the gift of 
prophecy. This meant that he had the ability to foresee events that eventually took 
place, with him in particular and sometimes with others.

Many people didn’t believe him. But there was also another side to his powers. 
Once someone called him “a Black Sheykh,” but he didn’t know what he was getting 
into. The man’s mouth became entirely paralyzed. He didn’t realize that 
Sheykh Baba was... [I didn’t understand Molla Mahir, and Abdul Lezar 
intervened in Russian, raising a brow and pronouncing the word “Un- 
touchable” (neprikosnovenny)]. The man went to the local mosque in Sheki, to 
the mürid.28 The mürid told him, “The path of Sheykh Baba is greater even than 
the work of our entire mosque.”29

Molla Mahir’s account of his grandfather’s fate after the rebellion re-
visited the key events: his arrest in Georgia in 1932, his being sentenced to 
death, and his death sentence being commuted to ten years in prison in the 
Solovetsk Islands in the Russian north.

Roughly until 1937 the family received letters from him, but then after that, we 
stopped hearing. His mother was exiled, as well as his sister. You can imagine, his 
sister had a six-month-old child in her arms. Cousins, everyone, at least almost

27. The period when the territory of Azerbaijan was conquered by Arabs in the late 
seventh century is not well studied in Russian- or Azeri-language literatures. Many argue 
that the Arabs rapidly assimilated into local society, in the same way that later Turks did. 
The names of the smaller central Azeri cities of Ismaili and Kürdamir (which includes 
Ərabxana district) recall these distant arrivals. Many refer to Sheykh Baba’s tombstone to 
conclude that he came from Saudi Arabia, but Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey are invoked 
just as often. Sheykh Ehmeh died in 1898.

28. Mürid means religious adherent, or follower, although it also once signaled the 
Islamist Murid movements across the Caucasus and Central Asia in the nineteenth cen-
tury, most popularly captured in the rebel figure Shamil. See Moshe Gammer, “Shamil 
and the Murid Movement, 1830–1859: An Attempt at a Comprehensive Bibliography,” Central 

29. The following three extracts are from an interview with Molla Mahir, 4 October 
2002.
everyone. His father's brother was sent away too. But one concession is that they didn't all go to Siberia, most went to Tashkent. As I said, the letters stopped in 1937. Eventually, the family received a letter saying that he had been killed in prison, but we don't believe it. We know that he was still alive; he hadn't been killed. He used to come visit Bash Shabalid still. He would come and go, but he was insistent that no one know the details, where or when.

I asked Molla Mahir what it was like to be part of such an unusual family.

Well, we've had a lot of problems. Somewhere in the 1930s, or maybe the 1940s, they stopped the harassment, after World War II. But we always knew that we had to be careful, everything was always open to question. Especially with education, getting our children into schools.

This house, for example, was empty from 1930 to 1955. Even after it was confiscated, no one dared come live here. So in spite of all the problems in the village, it was empty. In 1955, my grandfather's sister, Khadice, returned from Tashkent, from exile, and she started to fix up the house again. She lived here for ten years before she died. After that, we moved in so that the house wouldn't be without an owner. It had already been empty for so long. For a long while it had been used as a storehouse. We thought we could try and restore things. In 1930, for example, the family had hidden all the dishes down the wells, but so many years had passed, we could never get them out.

When I asked whether Sheykh Ehmed or Molla Mustafa should be considered as Sufi-style saints, almost every person in Bash Shabalid said they had never heard of Sufism. It is not uncommon across Central Asia or the Middle East for Muslims to disavow use of the term Sufi—a label that refers to a diverse system of practices often looked down upon by governments and urban intelligentsia alike for unorthodox practices perceived as unmodern. But it seemed another matter to have the idea lapse entirely in an area only fifty kilometers from Dagestan, where Sufi practices are the more widely recognized norms. Molla Mahir was the one exception, blinking at me somewhat uncomfortably and then closing the subject by saying, "We've heard of things like that, but no one here uses that word." Only later in Baku archives would I find Molla Mustafa's deposition describing his flight to Georgia after the revolt as a meeting with "Sufis who follow my father and grandfather." Though it is relatively little studied in Azerbaijan, Sufism, particularly the Naqshbandi strain, has a distinctive modern history in the eastern Caucasus. On the territory of Azerbaijan, the center of Sufi practice was considered to be Shirvan, the area of contemporary Baku. In the 1810s, the area's most famous practitioner, Sheykh Ismail al-Shirwani, drew pilgrims to the central city of Kürdamir before migrating north to Dagestan decades later in the mid-

30. Molla Mustafa's infant son died of illness shortly after his family's arrival in Tashkent. I was told that local mollas established a shrine to his son and that his family left the grave there because it, too, received visitors.
nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{32} While acknowledging that Sufism was never popular among the urban elites—neither among late nineteenth century Islamic modernizers nor among the early Soviet rulers who followed them—the complete absence of recognition of Sufism in the current Azeri countryside seemed itself significant in a place where pirs and their followers are ordinary sights indeed.

In this mix of history, memory, and practice, one could be tempted to invoke structuralist distinctions such as those used by historian Pierre Nora, who writes of \textit{lieux de mémoire}—“sites of memory” such as archives, anniversaries, and authenticating documents; sources that step in when memory (or history itself) falters in its job of properly representing the past—and \textit{milieux de mémoire}, “settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience.”\textsuperscript{33} Yet this distinction relies on a problematic opposition that runs through anthropological study of the Caucasus already quite fully: the opposition between fraught jumbles of archival evidence on the one hand, and the imagined quiet pace of the everyday on the other (Nora describes \textit{milieux of memory as places of “ethnological slumber.”})\textsuperscript{34} We are better off, I would contend, to see both mountain stories and their archival doubles as comparable arenas where the multiple logics of Soviet rule were creatively forged. The circumstances demonstrate how seemingly fantastic tales of mountain might were no less fitting a way than any other to explain the heroism and tragedies of early Stalinism.

Whether Sheykh Ehmed or Molla Mustafà ever passed through prison walls—literally, having “escaped through divine favor”—may seem an exotic question for non-mystics (or for that matter, non-Christians, non-Hindus, and non-Muslims whose beliefs forestall the possibility of substantiation). But for visitors to the pir of Sheykh Ehmed, and for those who live by its ideals, the preternaturally long lives of Sheykh Ehmed and his grandson offer other means of accounting. These hold that while

\textsuperscript{32} Anna Zelkina, \textit{In Quest for God and Freedom: Sufi Responses to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus} (New York, 2000), 48, 100–105. See also Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, \textit{Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union} (Berkeley, 1985), 9–10. Among the few studies of Sufi practice in northwest Azerbaijan are I. I. Datunashvili, “Materialy k kharakteristike sovremennogo sostojaniiia religioznosti v Belokanskom, Zakatal’kom i Kakhskom raionakh (Azerbaidzhanskiaa SSR),” in \textit{Konkretnye issledovaniia sovremennych religioznikh veroanii} (Moscow, 1967); and M. S. Neimatova, \textit{Azərbaycanın əpitgrafik abidələri (XVII–XVIII axtor)} (Baku, 1968). While interested in the framing language by which contemporary residents of Bash Shabalid discussed the rebellion, I found no evidence to suggest that Sufi structures of belief themselves determined resistance to Soviet rule, not least when the seizure of property, political mayhem, and the closing of mosques offered more than enough incentive on their own. For a careful review of the many and problematic essentializations of “political Sufism” in imperial Russia and the former Soviet Union, see Alexander Knysh, “Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm: The Issue of Motivations of Sufi Resistance Movements in Western and Russian Scholarship,” \textit{Die Welt des Islams} 42, no. 2 (2002): 139–73.


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 1.
good favor and moral authority come from God, the divine power of bereket can be mediated through nail trees, cloth ties, holy masters, moral outlaws, and even political leaders, whose share of favor can rise and fall over time.

Idioms of Rebellion

Are peoples of the Caucasus as naturally prone to conflict as histories would seem to have it? “Araby’s flower of martial manhood,” Aeschylus wrote of the inhabitants of Mount Caucasus as early as the fifth century BCE, “Who upon Caucasian highlands, / Guard their mountain-craddled stronghold, / Host invincible, armed with keen spears, in the press of battle.”35 Making efforts to repel foreign invasions, such as the one led by Alexander the Great a century after Aeschylus, is one way to gain a reputation for bellicosity, though it is belied by the fact that many peoples across the Caucasus seldom held out against all the other invaders who followed: Roman, Arab, Turk, Mongol, Persian, Ottoman, and Russian. After so many centuries of armies and their scribes coming and going, the question of who owns the violence of the Caucasus appears somewhat moot, not least given the degree to which pride in military prowess has been internalized by mountaineers themselves. In this section I reflect on the long-standing history of rebellion in northwest Azerbaijan, so that the events in Sheki are not seen in temporal isolation.

Here and there in Sheki in 2002, a city of some 60,000 persons largely unemployed but for the few who work in government services, tobacco processing, or the small tourist sector, one encountered candy and craft shops by the name, Gələrən, Gərən (literally, “If you come, then you’ll see,” but more colloquially, “Come and get what’s coming to you”). This seemed an oddly idiomatic way of appealing to customers. But, as I would discover, these shops advertised more than candy and woodcrafts. They alluded to a long campaign to repel foreign overlords from well before the age of tsarist empire.

For a long period beginning as early as the ninth century, Sheki was one of the Caucasus’s leading silk-producing centers. Located on the southern slopes of the Greater Caucasus Range, it is one of the oldest cities in contemporary Azeri territory, at a crossroads between routes to Tbilisi (in Georgia, to the west) and Derbent (in Dagestan, to the north). Historically it has seen a steady trade among communities frequently defined by religion: pre-Islamic animists, early Christians, and Sunni Muslims.36 The area is famed, to this day, for a twelfth-century church (variously claimed as a proto-Azeri Albanian site or as Georgian Orthodox) built over a sacrificial structure dating to 3000 years BCE.37

36. “Albanian” is one of the many geographic terms used to designate the eastern Caucasus in the pre-Islamic period. The essays in Ronald Grigor Suny, ed., Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (Ann Arbor, 1983), are among the best in mapping these shifting identifications.
In the early eighteenth century, shortly before the decline of Persian leader Nadir Shah’s rule over the Caucasus, the Sheki region was divided into eight administrative mahallas, each led by a naib, or mahalla boy. Beys of the mahallas became famous for their collective defiance, a situation abetted by the relative inability of late Persian and early Russian rulers to control the mountainous rural regions. As one well-polished war story recounts, well before the arrival of the Russians, Sheki’s collective resistance to taxation in particular crystallized in the humiliating defeat of Nadir Shah. The beys refused tax payment, and local leaders named their hillside resistance citadel, Galarsan, Gürərsan. They routed the Shah’s armies and sent them back to Tebriz.

In 1805 Selim, Khan of Sheki, followed his counterparts from across the Caucasus by entering into tributary relations with the Russian crown in return for protection from Persian incursions. But the path to fealty was hardly a sure one. Khan Selim concluded the reverse agreement with the Persians less than a year later, leading an exasperated Tsitsianov, the first Russian viceroy in the Caucasus, repeatedly to threaten military countermeasures. (Writing in 1859, a Russian officer would look back on the early years of Russian struggles with the khanate and remark that leaders in Sheki were “prone to trade up for higher powers.”) The Russians quickly unseated Selim. Later, in 1819, following the death of the last Russian-appointed khan, they did away with the office altogether.

Russian officials found their hold on the small city and its surrounding territories unstable from the outset. In August 1837, for example, Sheki was besieged for two days by neighboring Lezgin forces crossing over from the north in Dagestan, requiring the Russians to call in backup forces with the help of the Georgian Prince Chavchavadze and the pro-Russian sultan of nearby Ilisu. Attacks on the Russian garrisons by “Lezgins”—the title accorded to the fiercest of mountain rebels, regardless of whether they were from Lezgin areas of Dagestan or not—continued well beyond the 1850s, when the traveling French writer Alexandre Dumas seemed to marvel at the intensity of the assaults.

Georgian connection, relying on much later nineteenth-century census figures that marked the Sheki aszad as 99.9 percent Tatar (Muslim). The clearest statement of this position is Gulpchokhra Mamedova, “Church in the Village of Kish Is the ‘Mother of Albanian Churches,’” History of the Caucasus (Baku) 1 (2001): 29–32. For demographics, see N. A. Trointsskii, ed., Perevaia vseobshchaia perepiis’ naseleniia rossiskoi imperii, 1897 g. Tom LXXIII: Elizaveti pol’skaiia guberniia (St. Petersburg, 1904).

A. Sh. Mil’man, Pol’iticeskii stroi Azerbaidzhana v XIX—nachale XX vekov: administrativnyi apparat i sud; formy i metody kolonial’nogo upravleniia (Baku, 1966), 44–45.


Smitten, “Kratki istoričeskii ocherk prisoedinenykh k Persii, musul’manskih chastei sostavliaushtchikh teper’ o Derbentskii i Shemahkinskii gubernii,” Azərbaycan Republikası Dövlət Tari̇x Arxivı (State Historical Archive of the Azerbaijan Republic [formerly GAI ASSR]), hereafter, ARDTA), f. 998, s. 1, i. 13, s. 8.


Alexandre Dumas, Adventures in Caucasus (1859; Westport, 1962), 163–70. Dumas added, whether for accuracy or for dramatic effect, “Nowhere else, even in Algeria, even
Chronicles of Russian conquest of the Caucasus show that for all the empire's assimilationist policies, perhaps best encapsulated in Count Sergei Uvarov's triptych of "Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality" from the 1830s, overseas in the southern Caucasus made few if any efforts to convert their Muslim constituents. In Sheki, at least, this was certainly true of the patchwork impositions of imperial administration.

Conceding that they had limited resources to invest in infrastructure—particularly for the badly needed systems of irrigation and terracing to protect against seasonal mountain floods—some Russian leaders advocated diverting attention from their own weaknesses by promoting instability. In May 1839, General Golovin wrote to Count Sergei Grigor'evich Stroganov, recommending that that Sunni and Shi'i communities be played off one another to Russian advantage. Despite Golovin's brio in advocating that the internal lines of fealty be crossed, the day-to-day correspondences of the offices of the changing nineteenth-century Russian viceroys highlight the frustrating and repetitive struggles of these administrators simply to identify, let alone communicate with, their rural counterparts. Exhaustive reports in 1839, 1859, and 1869 strained to sort through the roles and responsibilities of the yüzbaşi, minbaşi, bəy, ağə, axund, əfəndi, kadi, vəkil, məlik, and sultan (among many others) to determine who could best become a Russian-style village elder or starosta, who could be keeper of the local mosque, and so on. Not least among the problems was the confusion generated by a combination of administrators' unfamiliarity with local practices and a tendency among local actors to literal self-entitlement (the samozvantsy, or impostor problem, as the Russians called it). Many legitimate mollahs, in turn—including the few not in active opposition to Russian administration—were dismissed on grounds of illiteracy.

While clashes between Muslim clerics and the Russian administration were ongoing, what may have prevented more concerted disruptions was the balance between the viceroys' near total control of the largest urban centers of Baku, Erevan, and Tbilisi, and their comparative neglect of supervision in rural communities. In the early twentieth century, the dis-
juncture between local and imperial leaders was still apparent, particularly in efforts by the administration to oblige rural Muslim clerics to communicate in Russian. Whether they were writing in Azeri or Persian, the vast majority of clerics submitted their reports in Arabic script, many of which were left untranslated by the officials who received them.46 What this signals in the context of the later Sheki rebellion is that long-standing rural concerns were not only not being addressed by Russian authorities in Tbilisi and Baku, they rarely registered unless they were communicated by rebellion.

Reading Molla Mustafa

What do early Soviet archival sources tell us about events around Sheki and the men and women who precipitated them? In August 1924, residents of the nearby village of Bash Göynük—irate over dizzying new levels of taxation—burned down their council office, an act that was repeated in Bash Shabalid and Ashaghi Göynük more than once in the six years that followed.47 By 1926, still having no physical structure from which to organize government affairs in Bash Shabalid, officials complained that while there were many literate and able-bodied candidates, not a single literate resident was willing to serve as chairman or secretary of the village council.48 In general, government officers recruited outsiders for Soviet administration in Sheki and the surrounding hillside villages, primarily from among Russian stalwarts and the many Armenian refugees escaping tensions elsewhere in the republic. This approach had its limits: as in decades before, few if any of the Russian or Armenian administrators could read Azeri correspondence generated in Arabic or Latin script. Lezgins, meanwhile, continued their attacks on Russian, and now also Armenian, officials living in Sheki throughout the 1920s.49 As across the Soviet Union at this time, these fledgling organizational efforts were overwhelmed by the poverty that followed so many years of chaotic struggle.

The report filed in May 1930 in the aftermath of the Sheki rebellion by Baghirov, then commissar of internal affairs, is the most telling. This report may be read as a cowed admission of failure from a repentant leader (who nonetheless went on to rule the republic as first secretary of the Communist Party from 1933 to 1953) or as triumphant gloating over the harvests of a complex sting operation. In the report’s opening, Baghirov leaned heavily on economic context to account for the rebellion. “Never in the history of [Sheki] have the factories stood idle for want of raw ma-

46. Mostashari, “Colonial Dilemmas,” 247. Partly due to illiteracy, clerics across the eastern Caucasus used finger-ring stamps in lieu of (Arabic-script) signatures, a practice that further frustrated their Russian correspondents. ARDTA, f. 289, s. 1, i. 40, s. 11–12.
47. ABAI SF, f. 102, s. 1, i. 2, s. 47a.
48. ABAI SF, f. 102, s. 1, i. 5, s. 32.
49. ABAI SF, f. 102, s. 1, i. 2, s. 46; Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Arxiv (formerly Tsentral’nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Oktiabr’skoi Revoliutsii Azerbaidzhanskoj Respub- liki, or TsGAOR AzSSR; hereafter ARDA), f. 379, s. 1, i. 7595, s. 52.
terials,” Baghirov wrote.50 In a city of only 27,000, over 2,000 people depended on the silk factories for jobs. Other families, in turn, labored in the city’s tobacco factory and lumber mill, or privately sold walnuts and hazelnuts to make up the bulk of their income. In the hunger of the late 1920s, however, farmers had been cutting down their mulberry orchards that produced the silk worms, as well as their nut trees, to make room for subsistence food crops. By April 1930, Sheki’s silk and tobacco factories had stood idle for over three months; little food was in the stores, and salaries were not being paid on time.

“Local communists and Komsomols considered themselves the new tsars,” Baghirov contended.

In several instances, taxes were levied on the same household several times, allegedly under the reasoning that they had yet to pay the original load. . . . As a result, because of the huge payments, many were left to starve. . . . In other instances, taxes were not levied at all. There were those able to pay up to 100 rubles who were charged only 3, and there were those charged 40 rubles who could pay only 2.51

The district agronomist, Mekhtiev, illegally threatened villagers with cancellation of their emergency food vouchers if they refused to join the collective farm. But, as Baghirov conceded, there was no longer any food in the stores to be redeemed.52 “If this is the future,” Haci Ismail, a farmer from the village of Belekan told an intelligence officer, “we might as well die fighting.”

Baghirov’s report becomes more complicated when he identifies the role of “our man”—indicating a secret intelligence officer—in the planning of the rebellion from its early stages. The language of the report becomes elliptical and moves by inference, jarringly so given Baghirov’s privileged status in the security hierarchy. If Baghirov was not going to deliver facts, who could?

According to Molla Mustafa’s deposition to the state security police, he had made the familiar trip from Sheki to trade wool in Tbilisi, 200 kilometers to the west, in June 1929. Sheykhzade, who was already known for his work in the underground “Xalqchilar” (formally the Xalq Azadliq Partiyasi, or the People’s Freedom Party), which had its base of operations in Tbilisi, recounts having been approached by two men who identified themselves as members of the underground Ittihad ve Tereqqi party, which was working for the creation of a pan-Turkic state. Ismail Haqqi Efendi, Sheykhzade’s Turkish comrade in Xalqchilar, had already spoken to him about the idea of armed uprising. Now, two men from Ittihad ve Tereqqi were assuring him of substantial Turkish army backup.

Baghirov asserts that only three months later, by September 1929, one of his government’s Sheki-based officers became involved as a double

51. Ibid., 22.
52. Ibid., 31, 28. By 2 April 1930, 17.2 percent of district households had joined the collective farm system.
agent, at the level of the rebellion’s deputy organizer. “Our man,” as Baghirov refers to him, met on at least two occasions with Mustafa Elicanbeyov, a confidant of Molla Mustafa, who assured him that the revolt could number as many as 500 men and could spread as far as Qarabagh if left unchecked. Baghirov’s claim that his agents were working from inside the ranks of the rebels for as long as eight months in advance has proven, for at least three Azeri historians, how exhaustively the Soviet secret police had managed to work themselves into Azeri society in such a short time, to the extent that even the rebels were, in some perverse way, made to work for the government. Why else, they suggest, other than to better identify anti-Soviet elements, would Baghirov have waited three days to send in an army to clean up?

When I asked people in Bash Shabalid if Molla Mustafa’s movement could have been fed, ultimately, by Soviet officials themselves, most scoffed at the idea that Molla Mustafa could be anyone but a local hero who fought for religious or nationalist freedoms. Only Molla Mahir conceded that his grandfather might have been netted in a trap. But, once trapped, where did Molla Mustafa go? How is it that when hundreds of ordinary farmers were captured and executed in the weeks after the rebellion, the revolt’s actual leader could avoid execution and disappear?

While his co-organizers Efendi and Nebibeyov were killed in gun battles in the hills of Sheki in the months following the revolt, it was almost two years before intelligence officers traced Molla Mustafa to a mountain village in eastern Georgia. Having made unsuccessful attempts to cross into Turkey, he had, ironically, found quiet employment tending cattle on a collective farm. Against the testimony of dozens of arrested supporters who described him as a virulent and charismatic opponent of Soviet power, Molla Mustafa insisted to his captors that he, too, had put his faith in Soviet power but was spurned by officials who rejected the support of religious clerics. Frustrated that interrogations were at first yielding so little, officials claimed that a different strategy—one that permitted Molla Mustafa to take his breakfast and lunchtime meals in the security ministry canteen—eventually enticed him to begin to give out the names of almost all Xalqchilar members.

The intelligence triumph reported in such claims may or may not have been earned in this instance. But, following the interrogation phase, the case of Molla Mustafa Sheykhzade appears decidedly irregular. On 15 September 1933, Molla Mustafa was condemned to execution, a sentence commuted only four months later in January 1934 when he was resentenced to ten years of corrective labor at the eighth Solovetsk Division, one of the USSR’s most notorious prison camps (active from 1923–1939) just south of the Arctic Circle.

56. Ibid., s. 82.
Whatever good fortune had earlier spared his life seemed to have evaporated by his third year of internment in the Solovetsk Islands. In 1937, guards reported his renewed anti-Soviet agitations inside prison walls. Molla Mustafa’s intelligence file closes with three short documents returned to Baku from Solovetsk. On 25 November 1937, one typed form contains only the name, “Molla Mustafa Sheykhzade,” at left, and “Rasstreliat’” (Shoot), at right. On 8 December 1937, a second form with Sheykhzade’s name reads, simply, “Vypolnen” (Implemented). A month later, however, on 10 January 1938, a further notice states that the case of Molla Mustafa has been “transferred to Category One.”

Sitting in the reading room of the security archive, I turned to the minder whose job it was to sit beside me each day and monitor my use of the files. “What does Category One mean?” I asked. “That’s the last stage before execution,” he responded. So how can someone be executed and then slated for execution again a month later? “They probably just hadn’t done the forms in the right order,” he answered. “Trust me, they shot him.” I looked up in surprise at the response, not because of the simplicity of the answer—indeed, what kind of paperwork is the right paperwork when executions are taking place?—but because it was one of the first times in months that I had heard someone dispute Molla Mustafa’s seeming immortality. In Bash Shabalid I was accustomed to hearing how Molla Mustafa’s liberation from certain death was paralleled in the life of his grandfather, Sheykh Baba, tormented by tsarist jailors who incarcerated him behind prison walls one moment, only to find him praying to God in the middle of the street the next. Accordingly, I never pressed Molla Mustafa’s family for the dates of his clandestine visits, the stories of which, by design, seemed to hinge on their strict unknowability. Nor did all security officials who followed Molla Mustafa’s case report the same confidence in Soviet records as my archive companion. One KGB officer, when Baghirov himself was on trial after Stalin’s death, demanded to know how such a violent public figure as Molla Mustafa could have survived execution and still have been sending letters home to Sheki in the mid-1950s.

This divergence of opinion over the written evidence, rather than vitiating Molla Mustafa’s power as a public symbol, strengthened it. For those who chose to believe he had been shot, Sheykhzade emerged as a martyr for the Azeri nationalist cause, a man whose symbolic stock rose considerably after the fall of the former Soviet Union. For those, by contrast, who saw Molla Mustafa as an almost timeless example of immortal mountain valor, the documentary evidence read differently. One of the three brief memoranda on Molla Mustafa’s execution at Solovetsk presented the question for which most in Bash Shabalid needed no answer. Typists had drawn up the first order, dated 25 November 1937, on a long rectangular sheet; at right, there was a four-inch pull tab with the one word printed on it: “Rasstreliat’” (Shoot). Hyphens surrounded the one-word decree to create a boxed effect, and the left edge of the tab had been

57. Ibid., ss. 91–95.
58. Manafli, Şəki üşüyən, 34.
perforated for tearing. If Molla Mustafa had been shot, why was the tab still there?

Archaeologies of the Average

In the autumn of 2002, not long after I left Sheki and its stone hilltops, I returned to Baku and received permission to work in the former KGB archives of the Ministry of National Security, where I read Baghirov’s reports and Molla Mustafa’s depositions. The weather in Baku was still warm, and I sat in the sunlit, empty modern reading room in the visitors’ annex of the ministry. The atmosphere of quiet corporate affluence belied what was a physically draining kind of reading. The human and the inhuman seamlessly met in transcripts of interrogations that showcased the evasions, breakdowns, fabrications, and confessions of those under mordant stress, with a frighteningly regular set of patterns common to any routine institutional practice. Striking here, too, was an archaeology of interrogation that said as much about the generalized penuries that spurred revolt as it did about those who put it down. Each of the handwritten transcripts was penned on a telling smattering of available scrap papers—veterinary forms for the inoculation of animals, voting registers, and occasionally, discarded evidence from other investigations. For one prison interview with Molla Mustafa, dated July 1932, the transcriber reached for the discarded handbill of a satirical cartoon from the popular journal, Molla Nasreddin (see figure 2). In reading about one Molla’s struggles, I had found another’s.

The character of Molla Nasreddin was based on the real-life philosopher, Nasreddin Hoca, believed to have lived in Asia Minor between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries.59 The modern journal was inaugurated in 1906 by the Tbilisi-based Muslim satirist, Celil Memmedquluzade. Enjoying a readership from Greece to China, the journal ran for fourteen years before being shut down by Soviet authorities in 1920. In the early Soviet period, the editor made several attempts to revive the journal. But in April 1932, having returned to his family in Baku, Memmedquluzade was arrested and sentenced to execution. The handbill used as scrap paper in Molla Mustafa’s interrogation featured a 1906 image of Molla Nasreddin being clubbed by a cluster of Russian tsarist police and fellow Muslim clerics. The cartoon, entitled “Why Are You Beating Me?” was stamped with the date April 1932, the very month of Memmedquluzade’s arrest. It was, I ventured, evidence from a parallel investigation of Memmedquluzade going on at the same time in the same prison. But this was not the only pattern that seemed to present itself. The text beneath the

image of Molla Nesreddin from a quarter century before Molla Mustafa’s interrogation read:

Ay Mollas, why are you beating me? Maybe you are afraid of me? Maybe you fear that I will go into the crowd and will whisper a few things in their ears that will make them aware of certain important
matters? Maybe you fear that they will take the pages from this journal to light their samovars, or that children will entertain themselves with the pictures, and that finally, in the end, they will open their eyes and understand? . . .

If you are going to beat me, know this. Ay Mollas, the days will go by, water will flow, and time will begin anew. In the end . . . the penniless orphans, our brothers the poor and the naked, will one day understand who are their friends and who are their enemies. When this happens, they will take these sticks from your very hands, and will begin . . . But of this, and what comes next, I say no more.60

In its own chilling way, the handbill tracked an earlier changing of the guard underway in a region of the Caucasus long accustomed to such upheavals. But as I sat looking at this strange piece of evidence, struck by the picture of Molla Nesreddin on one side of the page as Molla Mustafa made his case to his captors on the other, I could not help but think of the almost cyclical calls to arms in an area that is perhaps best known for its rebellions, and the idea of what constituted an average piece of scrap paper in a time that was anything but ordinary.

In this ethnohistorical discussion of armed mutinies and magical mobility, notions of the fantastic are not confined to zones of the purely divine but find places in average spaces of historical papers, political events, and the continually changing cultural configurations of one early Soviet republic. This view of anti-Soviet rebellion recognizes it as not episodic or exceptional, but rather as deeply patterned in the political routines of varied Caucasian experiences. Finally, this approach argues that mystical forces of authority are best seen not as indices of “ethnological slumber” but as all-too-wakeful commentaries on mortal social orders—or, as Geertz once described baraka, as a means of construing human experience itself. To argue for “reclaiming averageness” in this context is to suggest that it may be time to recast an understanding of averageness away from the flattening logic of typicality toward accounts that necessarily presume rural lives that are always in flux, steeped in the greater politics around them, where the ordinary and the extraordinary are equally embraced as structuring elements of everyday life.