

Review of: "The Evolution of Talysh Ethnic Identity: From Soviet Manipulation to Contemporary Reality"

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Overview

In this paper, the author investigates the history and ethnic identity of the Talysh people now living in Azerbaijan. Through a detailed review of historical, linguistic, cultural, and archival information pertinent to this subject, he provides a rich review of Talysh population history and the emergence of its ethnic identity over the past few centuries.

I learned a lot about the history of the Talysh people through this manuscript and saw clear parallels between their efforts to assert their identity in the face of political domination and those of other ethnic groups in Russia and the former Soviet Union, which I have previously studied.

However, I also see ways in which the author can strengthen this exploration of Talysh population history through textual changes, the rethinking of certain conceptual frameworks used in the paper, and the better integration of the different sections of the manuscript. In what follows, I make suggestions for these kinds of revisions while also raising questions about certain points of interpretation for the author's consideration.

Comments

(1) What is Talysh ethnic identity? What are its main features in contrast to those of other regional populations? Has it remained fixed through time or changed as the population adjusted to different political realities and control over time? The main story of this community seems to emerge in the context of Russian rule of Azerbaijan in the 19th and 20th centuries, as outlined on page 3 of the text, but clearly has deeper historical roots in the former Persian Empire, as outlined in the first section.

In this regard, it would be helpful for the author to provide more details about the earliest recognition of the Talysh in the historical record of Persia and its links to other Indo-Iranian speaking groups in the region. There is no real discussion of the Talysh Khanate until Section 10 of the paper, which clearly is important to the examination of Talysh identity in the 21st century, and some mention of it needs to come in the first section.

(2) The author refers to the Talysh in several different ways throughout the text and needs to be clearer about what he means when employing these terms. Among those used are “nation,” “ethnic group,” “people,” and “nationality.” It is important that the author be consistent in the use of these terms since each of them is defined differently depending on the literature(s) being referenced, e.g., political science, anthropology, linguistics, etc.

As an example, in political science and economics, “nation” usually means something like a “nation-state” with political boundaries and an organized government, rather than a group of people sharing a common ethnic and historical identity. “Nationality” follows from this definition, signifying people with a common political tradition, i.e., Americans, although sometimes there is overlap between the ethnic background of a population and its national status, e.g., Kazakhstan.

People sharing a common ethnic identity seemingly fits better with the Russian term “narod,” which usually means an ethnic group without political autonomy or often without a tradition of statehood. Here, one is reminded of the nationalities policy of the Soviet Union and the definition of distinct non-Russian ethnic groups living in the Asian (Siberian) part of the country, as well as those living in ethnic republics (e.g., Slezkine 1994). Even so, “narod” was sometimes used to refer more generally to a populace rather than a specific ethnic group, as well as to other concepts of population in Russia, reflecting its flexible definition.

The term “narodnost” (nationality) further entered the Russian lexicon in the 1830s through political discourse about nationalism and Russian ethnic heritage in the context of the changing demographics of the Russian Empire (Miller 2008). However, its usage also shifted through time during tsarist rule and later during the Soviet period.

Thus, as my remarks suggest, it is important to be as precise as possible in using terms such as these when discussing the ethnic heritage and population history of the Talysh, especially as they changed over time.

(3) The author mentions that ethnic boundaries are maintained through interaction with other groups and not isolation from them, but also indicates that the distinct language and culture of the Talysh reinforce their ethnic identity relative to that of Russians and Azeris. In this regard, it might be useful for the author to explore the social science and anthropological literature on the subject of ethnicity, identity, belonging, and imagined communities to see what more could be said about the emergence and persistence of cultural and linguistic differences between human groups.

Specific Comments and Suggested Edits

Page 5, Early Soviet Period section, fourth paragraph The author mentions that in the 1920s the Soviet Union had over 175 racial and ethnic groups. What is meant by “race” in this sentence? Today, it is recognized that biological races do not exist and are social constructs. Given this modern understanding of “race”, the sentence should be modified to reflect this fact while also describing the ethnic diversity of the USSR as accurately as possible.

*Page 7, Second paragraph on page:*The author mentions that, in areas dominated by “Turkish”, some Talysh identified themselves as being “Turkish”. What exactly does this mean? Areas of the Azerbaijani SSR? To an English speaker,

“Turkish” refers to the modern country of Turkey and the Turkic-speaking people who live in Anatolia. I don’t think that this is what the author intends to suggest. Using the word “Turkic” may be more appropriate here since it refers to the languages spoken by Azeris, which are Turkic in origin and bear some resemblance to Turkish spoken in Turkey as well as the Turkmen, Gaguaz, and Qashqai languages spoken elsewhere, all of which derive from Oghuz Turkic. It is also the case, however, that Azeri was referred to as “Turkish” in the years following the establishment of the Azerbaijani SSR in official documents, although this designation was changed in the 1930s to Azerbaijani (Goyushov 2018). The basic point being made here is that the way that the word “Turkish” is used in this paragraph must be carefully defined so that its meaning – politically and historically – is clear to the reader.

Page 13, First paragraph: Here, the author discusses Talysh languages and the possible Turkification of them during the past century or so. In this regard, it would be useful to better understand the extent to which Turkic (Azeri) culture and language have influenced those of Talysh populations given the concerns about the integrity of Talysh ethnic identity and the debates about the authenticity of ethnic heritage that are raised in this section. Quite a bit has been written about these issues in different areas of the world, and the author might consult them to learn how populations in similar positions to the Talysh have negotiated these challenges to their sense of identity and territorial claims.

(4) *Page 13, Fifth and sixth paragraphs:* In these paragraphs, the author refers to the Talysh Khanate and the way this historical political entity anchors the Talysh sense of statehood or national identity. Here again, we get into definitions that describe different kinds of political formations that existed at different periods of time. In this context, “khanate” is not the same thing as a “state” in the modern sense of this word, which essentially is a “nation” (see discussion above), although a khanate clearly represents a significant political entity in relation to other socio-political formations in the broader region.

While a complete account of the Talysh Khanate is apparently not available in Russian, Persian, Turkic, or Azerbaijani sources, it is clear that this khanate emerged in an area encompassing part of modern-day Azerbaijan and northwestern Iran in the middle of the 18th century and existed through the beginning of the 19th century, when it was dissolved and absorbed into the Russian Empire following the Russo-Persian War of 1826-28. To make this point clearer, I suggest that the author add details about this history in Section 1 of the paper before beginning Section 2, since this discussion foreshadows the discussion of the legitimacy of Talysh claims of “statehood” in Section 10.

(5) *Section 10: Current Talysh Reality.* The preceding sections of the paper present the history of the Talysh people through mostly a historical and political lens and describe the struggles to maintain an ethnic identity during Russian control of Azerbaijan. Section 10 shifts the focus to the contemporary moment and current efforts by the Talysh to assert their identity in modern-day Azerbaijan. It also includes information gathered through interviews with Talysh individuals through digital technologies to present their perspectives on various aspects of their ethnic identity.

The inclusion of the interview data shifts the tone of the paper from that expressed in the first nine sections, which is strongly historical, to a somewhat more ethnographic account of the understanding of their history, culture, and language by (mostly) contemporary Talysh individuals. The juxtaposition of these two parts of the paper requires some finesse to make the transition between them, but as presently written, this transition is a bit rough. One can see how the first

historical sections set the stage for Section 10, but this latter section is not as succinct in its discussion of Talysh ethnic identity in Azerbaijan as the former ones. Thus, Section 10 should be consolidated through judicious editing to tighten its focus, especially since certain topics such as religious practices, social perception of identity, and certain aspects of the Talysh language are introduced or discussed at any length for the first time in this section.

(6) Overall, the text needs revision to streamline the explication of the content of the paper and improve its readability. There are numerous redundancies in the text that should be eliminated. The author should also add citations in specific places in the text to support the points being made there. I have provided an annotated version of the manuscript for the author's perusal; hopefully, all of these comments and edits are legible.

Literature Cited

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