

The Influence of Cultural and Educational Institutions on the Formation of Public Thought in Early 20th-Century Azerbaijan

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Accepted: 12.20.2025

Published: 12.23.2025

<https://doi.org/10.69760/portuni.0110019>

Abstract; This study explores the crucial role of cultural and educational institutions in the formation and evolution of public thought in Azerbaijan during the early decades of the twentieth century. It argues that, within the framework of the colonial policies of Tsarist Russia, the expansion of national education emerged as a vital means of safeguarding Azerbaijani national identity, language, and cultural heritage. The educational and intellectual efforts of leading figures such as Hasan bey Zardabi, Ali bey Huseynzade, Ahmad bey Agayev, Omar Faiq Nemanzade, and Muhammad Amin Rasulzade played a decisive role in raising public awareness and promoting ideas of national advancement.

The article further analyzes the impact of periodicals including Açıq Söz (Open Word), Füyuzat, and Dırılık, alongside educational societies such as Nicat, Səadət, and Nəşri-Maarif, as well as newly established modern schools, on the process of national awakening. It concludes that, in the early twentieth century, cultural and educational institutions functioned not only as centers of learning but also as key platforms for the articulation of national ideology and the development of public consciousness. This intellectual and educational movement ultimately created the ideological foundation for the proclamation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic.

Keywords: Azerbaijan; early twentieth century; enlightenment; cultural and educational institutions; public consciousness; national awakening

Introduction

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constituted a decisive phase in the socio-political and cultural development of Azerbaijan. This period was characterized by profound changes triggered by the industrial revolution, including transformations in economic relations, the formation of a national bourgeoisie, the growth of the labor movement, and the emergence of new trends in cultural and educational life. Within this context, the enlightenment of the population, the struggle against illiteracy, and the strengthening of national self-awareness became central objectives of Azerbaijani intellectual circles.

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For leading thinkers of the era, education was regarded as the primary means of attaining freedom, social progress, and the preservation of national identity. Consequently, schools, madrasahs, educational societies, press institutions, and charitable organizations not only contributed to raising the cultural level of society but also played a vital role in shaping and advancing public opinion.

Historical Preconditions for the Emergence of Cultural and Educational Institutions

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the colonial policies pursued by Tsarist Russia posed serious challenges to the development of national education in the Caucasus, particularly in Azerbaijan. The imperial administration introduced restrictive measures aimed at weakening the national identity of Turkic-speaking populations, subordinating educational institutions to a policy of Russification. A notable example of this approach was the so-called “educational reform project” prepared by Rodolev, Director of Public Education in the Caucasus.

Within this project, the Azerbaijani (Turkic) language was labeled as “Tatar,” while Russian was imposed as the principal language of instruction. Such policies were designed to erode the national and cultural foundations of the local population. Azerbaijani intellectuals, including Omar Faiq Nemanzade, Muhammad Amin Rasulzade, and Ali bey Huseynzade, openly criticized this initiative and actively opposed it through enlightenment-oriented journalism, defending the rights of the native language and national education.

In a series of articles published in *Açıq Söz*, particularly under the title “What Do We Expect?”, Omar Faiq warned that the proposed educational model would estrange children from their mother tongue and national identity, thereby undermining the moral foundations of society. He argued that although such schools offered Russian education, Arabic religious knowledge, and Persian literary culture, they failed to nurture a sense of national selfhood.

As a response, Azerbaijani intellectuals prioritized the restructuring of existing schools, the establishment of new educational institutions, teacher training, and the introduction of nationally oriented curricula.

Education and the Formation of National Consciousness and Public Thought

Education during this period was not limited to the acquisition of basic literacy skills; its broader aim was the cultivation of national consciousness, self-awareness, and cultural identity. Among the most consistent proponents of this view was M. A. Rasulzade, who considered education the moral foundation of national existence. He emphasized that while language alone does not fully define nationality, it constitutes its most decisive element.

Azerbaijani intellectuals firmly believed that national progress could only be achieved through the creation of national schools, instruction in the mother tongue, and the dissemination of modern, secular knowledge. In this regard, newspapers and journals such as *Açıq Söz*, *Dirilik*, *Füyuzat*, and *Yeni Füyuzat* played an essential role in enlightening society and fostering public thought.

Through these publications, progressive ideas—such as liberty, equality before the law, education reform, women's enlightenment, and national unity—were actively promoted. Educational and cultural issues thus moved beyond intellectual debate and became matters of broad public concern.

Prominent figures including Hasan bey Zardabi, Ali bey Huseynzade, and Ahmad bey Agayev viewed education as the key to achieving social justice, progress, and freedom. Zardabi, in particular, maintained that ignorance was the primary cause of poverty and dependence, and that only education could liberate society from these conditions.

Education, Culture, and the National Liberation Movement

By the early twentieth century, the Azerbaijani enlightenment movement had acquired a distinctly political dimension. Cultural and educational institutions—schools, educational societies, charitable organizations, and the press—evolved into centers of socio-political awakening.

During this period, organizations such as *Nicat*, *Səadət*, *Nəşri-Maarif*, and *Cəmiyyəti-Xeyriyyə* were established. Their activities included founding schools, publishing textbooks, training teachers, and promoting women's education. New educational and cultural centers emerged in cities such as Baku, Ganja, Shusha, and Nakhchivan, transforming the enlightenment movement into a nationwide phenomenon.

These institutions functioned not only as centers of learning but also as spaces where national ideology was formed and refined. Many intellectuals educated within these circles later became leading political and ideological figures of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic.

As Rasulzade emphasized in his writings on schools and madrasahs, education was expected not merely to instill loyalty to the state, but also to ensure the comprehensive cultural development of the nation. This approach marked a critical stage in the formation of Azerbaijani national ideology.

The Enlightenment Mission of the Press and the Intellectual Elite

Along with educational institutions, the press of the period played a pivotal role in shaping and guiding public consciousness. Newspapers and journals such as *Açıq Söz*, *İryad*, *Füyuzat*, *Həyat*, and *Yeni Füyuzat* functioned as influential platforms for national awakening and intellectual debate. Through these publications, ideas related to education, cultural preservation, and national identity reached a broad audience.

Azerbaijani intellectuals—including Ömər Faiq Nemanzade, Məhəmməd Əmin Rəsulzadə, Əli bəy Hüseynzadə, and Əhməd bəy Ağayev—used the press to criticize ignorance, illiteracy, and religious dogmatism, consistently promoting science, education, and rational thought as the only viable path to social progress. Particular emphasis was placed on women's education and their role in society. In this respect, the establishment of the girls' school by Hacı Zeynalabdin Tağıyev represented a milestone in

the history of Azerbaijani education. Owing to such initiatives, Azerbaijani women had already begun to participate actively in cultural and social life by the early twentieth century.

Culture, as understood by contemporary thinkers, was a multifaceted concept in which education occupied a central position. Although education constituted an integral component of culture, it was often discussed separately due to the exceptional importance attributed to it during the years 1914–1917. During this period, Azerbaijani intellectuals were overwhelmingly preoccupied with enlightening, instructing, and educating the population. Educational issues dominated public discourse, and there existed a notable degree of unity among intellectuals regarding their urgency and significance.

This heightened concern was largely a response to the attempts by Tsarist authorities to radically restructure Muslim education in the Caucasus. Under the guise of expanding schooling, a deeply reactionary project was proposed that restricted the educational rights of Turkic peoples and violated their national interests. Particularly revealing was the deliberate designation of the Azerbaijani or Turkish language as “Tatar,” a clear manifestation of imperial policy aimed at undermining national consciousness and moral foundations.

M. A. Rəsulzadə addressed this issue with remarkable clarity, emphasizing that although language alone does not constitute nationality in its entirety, it represents its most decisive element. He argued that policies designed to assimilate a nation invariably begin with the suppression of its language, seeking to erase it from collective memory (*Dirilik*, 1914, No. 6).

The origins and intent of the controversial educational project become evident through a close examination of the contemporary press, particularly Ömər Faiq’s series of articles titled ‘Nə umuyoruz?’ (“What Do We Expect?”). These writings reveal that Rodolev, the Caucasus Director of Public Education, sought to gather opinions on education by consulting individuals separately rather than engaging the intellectual community collectively. Ömər Faiq strongly opposed this approach, warning that such methods were harmful to national interests and advocating instead for collective discussion and decision-making (*Açıq Söz*, 1916, No. 108).

From the outset, Azerbaijani intellectuals characterized Rodolev’s project as overtly reactionary and discriminatory, particularly toward Muslims and Turkic populations. The proposed three-tier school system replaced traditional educational structures and imposed Russian as the dominant language of instruction. Although the local language was formally included, it was allocated minimal instructional time and rendered effectively optional, thereby marginalizing it within the curriculum.

Even more striking was the linguistic inconsistency of the project: religious instruction was to be conducted in Arabic, explanations given in Russian or “Tatar,” and most academic subjects taught exclusively in Russian. Ömər Faiq criticized this arrangement as pedagogically unsound and ideologically motivated, questioning how such a system could possibly serve the educational needs of the population (*Açıq Söz*, 1916, No. 108).

The third level of education focused on teacher training but imposed an excessively burdensome and impractical curriculum, including advanced theological disciplines such as *kalam* and *fiqh*. While these subjects held theological significance, they were of little relevance to the practical responsibilities of primary-school teachers. Ömər Faiq convincingly argued that such curricular overload would discourage learning and render the educational system ineffective.

In essence, under the pretext of educational expansion, Tsarist authorities sought to implement a policy that transformed schools from centers of enlightenment into instruments of cultural suppression. By overburdening students and marginalizing their native language, the project aimed to alienate young learners from their national and religious identity.

Despite official rhetoric emphasizing equality and justice among the empire's peoples, Azerbaijani intellectuals exposed the discrepancy between proclaimed ideals and actual practice. Through detailed comparisons, Ömər Faiq and Rəsulzadə demonstrated the preferential treatment afforded to non-Muslim populations—particularly Armenians—whose educational institutions enjoyed far greater autonomy and support. These inequalities, extensively documented in the press, underscored the systemic discrimination faced by Muslims within the imperial framework.

Rəsulzadə's writings on school and madrasa reform articulated a broader vision of education as the cornerstone of national revival. He believed that national schools should cultivate cultural awareness, historical consciousness, and a deep sense of belonging. Although constrained by political realities, he sought to utilize whatever concessions the regime permitted in order to advance the cause of national education.

In this way, education became both a means of cultural survival and a strategic instrument in the broader struggle for national self-determination.

Education, National Unity, and State Loyalty in Rəsulzadə's Thought

Rəsulzadə ultimately answered his own question regarding the mission of education by emphasizing its dual function. From his perspective, schools were expected to cultivate loyalty and attachment to the state while simultaneously acting as cultural institutions that supported the aspirations of the nation to which their students belonged (*Açıq Söz*, 1916, No. 134). Thus, the primary responsibility of schools lay in balancing state interests with national development.

However, Rəsulzadə subtly shifted this balance by assigning priority to national identity. He insisted that schools educating Muslim children must also promote the national goals articulated by the enlightened segment of the Muslim community. In this sense, schools were not merely instruments of state discipline but collaborators of the progressive Azerbaijani intelligentsia. Graduates of these institutions were expected to emerge as conscious patriots—individuals devoted to serving their people and advancing national culture.

Rəsulzadə viewed the Muslims of Russia, with minor exceptions, as belonging to a broader Turkic-Tatar cultural community. He believed that cultural progress among Muslims was impossible without a clear awareness of unity. This unity, in his view, represented the strongest cultural force available to oppressed peoples. Any initiative fostering closer ties among the Muslims of Russia deserved support, whereas policies that encouraged sectarian division were interpreted as deliberate tools of imperial domination.

Rejecting the imperial narrative that portrayed Muslim unity as a political threat, Rəsulzadə argued that efforts to overcome sectarian divisions—such as those between Sunnis and Shi‘is—were cultural rather than political in nature. The fear of so-called *ittihad-i Islam* (Islamic unity), he maintained, was largely a misconception cultivated by imperial authorities (*Açıq Söz*, 1916, No. 134).

While opposing Tsarist policies aimed at fragmenting Turkic peoples through education, Rəsulzadə nevertheless regarded himself as a citizen of Russia and respected the state’s overarching interests. He argued that if Russia genuinely sought to become a homeland for all its peoples, it should not fear cultural rapprochement among Turkic communities. On the contrary, such unity would strengthen the state. Conversely, the continuation of a “divide and rule” strategy would inevitably weaken both the empire and its subjects.

The relative softening of Tsarist domestic policy during this period can be explained by the gradual erosion of autocratic power. Military defeat, economic strain, and mass uprisings forced the regime to make limited concessions. Yet these concessions were largely tactical, intended to delay the collapse of the system rather than to grant genuine equality.

Rəsulzadə remained deeply critical of the educational policies implemented in the Caucasus, emphasizing that they systematically violated the national and cultural rights of Turkic peoples. He described national schools and the cultural rapprochement of Turkic communities as the “cornerstones” of national aspirations. The removal of these foundations, he warned, would inevitably lead to the collapse of popular hopes.

Tsarist authorities attempted to legitimize their restrictive policies toward Muslim schools by accusing them of promoting anti-Russian sentiment. Rəsulzadə dismissed such claims as fabrications, exposing the contradiction between official rhetoric and actual practice (*Açıq Söz*, 1916, No. 135). At the same time, he acknowledged that responsibility also lay partly with Muslim society itself, which had often neglected mosque schools and madrasas instead of reforming them. Despite their shortcomings, these institutions belonged to the nation and educated its children; abandoning them, he argued, was a grave mistake (*Açıq Söz*, 1916, No. 143).

Conclusion

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represent one of the most complex and transformative periods in Azerbaijani history. During this era, the Azerbaijani people lost their political independence, were divided between empires, and subjected to colonial domination. Alongside socio-

economic exploitation, national oppression intensified. At the same time, the elimination of feudal fragmentation created favorable conditions for the development of education, culture, and economic life.

Against this background, nineteenth-century Azerbaijani intellectuals—most notably M. F. Akhundov and H. b. Zardabi—articulated a more decisive critique of despotism, clerical fanaticism, and colonial governance than their predecessors. Influenced by progressive European and Russian thought, they called for public participation in governance and the democratization of political life. Although some of their views bore utopian elements, they played a crucial role in shaping modern Azerbaijani social thought.

In the early twentieth century, Azerbaijani intellectual life became marked by ideological diversity, ranging from enlightenment and revolutionary democracy to Turkism and Bolshevism. Despite tactical differences, nearly all leading thinkers shared a commitment to national progress, cultural development, and independence.

Among the most influential representatives of Turkist ideology were Ali bey Huseynzade, Ahmad bey Agayev, and Mammad Amin Rasulzade. By synthesizing Turkism with the principles of Islamization and modernization, they transformed it into a comprehensive ideological framework that mobilized oppressed Turkic peoples. The establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic—the first parliamentary republic in the Muslim East—and the emergence of modern Turkey were tangible outcomes of this intellectual and political struggle.

Rəsulzadə went further than many of his contemporaries by critically analyzing the causes of the republic's downfall. Beyond external aggression, he highlighted internal weaknesses, political errors, and betrayal as enduring lessons. With remarkable foresight, he characterized Soviet rule as a form of "Red Imperialism," arguing that it differed little in essence from European colonialism. His early recognition of the authoritarian nature of Stalinism underscores the lasting relevance of his thought.

Many of the ideas developed by these intellectuals retain their significance today. Their socio-political views and legal-political teachings constitute some of the most valuable chapters in the history of Azerbaijani intellectual tradition and continue to offer important insights for contemporary society.

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