



*Ziia Buniatov and the Invention of an Azerbaijani Past*  
S.G. Crombach

# **Ziia Buniatov and the Invention of an Azerbaijani Past**

## **Summary**

My dissertation is devoted to the Soviet post-World War II discourse on Azerbaijani history, which I study through the life and works of Ziia Musaevich Buniatov, Hero of the Soviet Union, historian and orientalist, born in Baku in 1923, and assassinated in 1997. I explore Buniatov's publications and his role in the development of an Azerbaijani national identity. By analyzing his historical writings from the late 1950s to the *Perestroika* period, and into the 1990s, when Azerbaijani nationalism culminated in the escalation of the territorial conflict with Armenia over Nagorny Karabakh, I attempted to establish in how far Buniatov provided the basis for this escalation.

Next to studying his publications, I also explored Buniatov's biography, his political role in society, his relations with the Azerbaijani Party boss (and later president) Geidar Aliev, and with the Popular Front in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The construction of what I call the "Buniatov myth" is of crucial importance with regard to both his personal image and the perception of his work as a scholar.

The first chapter focuses on the biography and personality of Ziia Buniatov and how he became one of the founding fathers of Azerbaijani historiography. Buniatov's personality is full of paradoxes, which is mainly the result of the construction of an image as "living legend", done by himself, his wife Tagira and several others. Many oral testimonies of my interview partners challenge the carefully constructed heroic status of the scholar and the first chapter is therefore also an attempt to deconstruct the mythological image of Buniatov, in order to understand the function of this myth for national identity in Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

In the second chapter I analyzed the major works that Buniatov wrote between 1958 (when his first article was published) and 1987, when the political situation rapidly changed due to Gorbachev's *Perestroika*. Right from the beginning of his career Buniatov challenged what was regarded, in his eyes, as a foreign and

imposed historical canon of Azerbaijan, mainly constructed by Russians or Armenians. Buniatov saw it as his own responsibility to create a new and better perspective of the past. Generally the Azerbaijani people had been considered to be newcomers in the region, and former nomads that lacked a glorious history of a strong state and a great national culture, unlike the Georgian or Armenian neighbors. These were Buniatov's main challenges and he addressed them systematically from the late 1950s to the late 1980s.

Characteristic of Buniatov's method was the fact that, although he always had a nationalist mission, he carefully operated within the Soviet framework. Although his works had been strongly politicized from the beginning, he always had the image of a "pure", honest and objective scholar. And precisely this image made his work so influential in Azerbaijan. The political message of his work led to a continuing and open confrontation with Armenian scholars. In Armenia he was regarded as an Armenophobic pseudo-scholar, while in Azerbaijan he had a heroic image and his status as a scholar was beyond dispute. This also made him the perfect candidate for setting up a new school of historians that expanded his work.

The third chapter investigates Buniatov's role in the political turbulence of Azerbaijan from the start of *Perestroika* to his violent death in 1997. In this period his writings are strongly connected to the political events, and they express the changed political atmosphere of the time. The Soviet system eroded quickly and the new protest movement of the Popular Front attacked Buniatov as a member of the old elite. Buniatov was caught in a very complex political environment, which threatened to marginalize him as a scholarly authority. The Popular Front rapidly gained popular support and undermined the legitimacy of the Communist Party. The conflict with Armenia escalated and according to the dominant view in Azerbaijan, Moscow supported Armenia. All these factors made Buniatov employ an even more aggressive style of writing.

When Geidar Aliev returned to power in 1993, Buniatov got a new role: he went into politics as the moral and scholarly conscience of the Yeni Azerbaijan Party. Azerbaijan was independent since 1991 and the new situation required a new discourse on the past. Buniatov, who once had been one of the main architects of the Soviet Azerbaijani canon, now easily adapted to the new political challenges. Islam and nationalism were the main pillars of this new national identity. Buniatov also

added another new element to the post-Soviet Azerbaijani identity: the Azerbaijani nation as a victim of the treacherous historical enemy Armenia.