Carpets as Signifiers of Historical Change: The Azerbaijani Carpet Industry from the Mid-nineteenth to Late Twentieth Century

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CARPETS AS SIGNIFIERS OF HISTORICAL CHANGE:

THE AZERBAIJANI CARPET INDUSTRY FROM THE MID-NINETEENTH TO LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By

Jill Boggs

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation with Honors from the South Carolina Honors College

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Thesis Summary

The political, social, and economic policies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union impacted the development of Azerbaijan’s carpet industry throughout the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Between 1860 and the late 1990s, Azerbaijan’s carpet industry underwent dramatic changes in its manufacturing and design processes; these shifts parallel more significant historical transformations in Azerbaijan as it developed a stronger sense of national identity and distinctive Azerbaijani culture. Two competing schools of thought exist in the field of Soviet history to interpret radical changes in the cultural development of its member states. The first school presents the USSR as a prison of nations that oppressed non-Russian ethnicities. In contrast, the second school characterizes the USSR as a nursery of new ethnic identities for its various minority populations. Changes to Azerbaijan’s carpet industry ultimately support concepts from both schools, contributing to current debates on the treatment of non-Russian ethnicities and their cultural practices under the Soviet Union.

Abstract

The Azerbaijani carpet industry, long recognized as an important piece of Azerbaijan’s cultural heritage, transformed dramatically between the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries in response to political, economic, and social changes that took place under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. During this period, the carpet industry began to use modern weaving techniques and materials, favored factory production over traditional hand-woven designs, and created pieces for exportation rather than personal or community use. These developments contribute to two historical schools that view the Soviet Union as either a prison of nations, stifling non-Russian cultures, or a nursery of ethnic identities, supporting these emerging groups. In addition to an array of articles and books on Azerbaijani history, art, and culture, selected Azerbaijani carpets provide visual evidence and context for readers who may be unfamiliar with the motifs and designs discussed here. Given the substantial number of sources not translated to English, there is potential for additional research on this topic in the future.
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Introduction

The development of Azerbaijan’s carpet industry overlays a series of political, economic, and social transformations that took place in Azerbaijan from the 1860s to the late 1990s. This period is the focus of this thesis as most changes to Azerbaijan’s carpet industry took place during this period, with little substantial change occurring before 1860 and minimal literature covering developments after the 1990s. During the mid-nineteenth century, the Russian Empire escalated its efforts to industrialize and Russify its holdings in Caucasia, starting modernization initiatives in Azerbaijan that led to the development of a distinctive national identity. After the empire dissolved in 1918, Azerbaijan briefly gained independence before its absorption into the Soviet Union in 1920. Under the Soviet regime, the government promoted economic policies and cultural and educational institutions for its non-Russian citizens, enabling the development of an independent cultural identity in Azerbaijan and laying the groundwork for Azerbaijan’s eventual declaration of autonomy after the Soviet Union’s collapse. The impact of these efforts is visible when examining Azerbaijani carpets, whose manufacturing and design styles changed in response to new Russian and Soviet government policies.

Sources

The sources cited include collections of photographs, academic articles, government publications, and books by various historians, art historians, and journalists. Primary sources include carpets found in Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs (Azadi et al., 2001) and Rugs & Carpets from the Caucasus (Kerimov et al., 1984). These books provided high-resolution color photographs of hundreds of Azerbaijani carpets with information on their materials and provenance, including carpets from various districts, periods, and design schools. Different carpets from multiple eras and regions are included to provide the best sense of how the designs and materials in Azerbaijani carpets developed, with differences in motifs noted and described to prove designs changed over time.

An additional piece, a 1999 pamphlet by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan, further provided information on Azerbaijan's modern history. However, as a government publication seeking to increase tourism to the country, it was interpreted with a degree of skepticism, as the publication would seek to represent Azerbaijan in the best possible light. Furthermore, the book On the Religious Frontier (Mostashari, 2017) provided another primary
source through various statistics relating to tsarist Azerbaijan's economy, political participation, and education, demonstrating how the demographics of Azerbaijani society quantifiably changed during the period surveyed.

Several art history books provided information on the history of the Azerbaijani carpet industry, the weaving process, and the development of different design schools in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs and Rugs & Carpets from the Caucasus again proved helpful here, as did the book Caucasian Carpets and Covers: the Weaving Culture (Wright and Wertime, 1995), which examined the history and development of weaving in Azerbaijan and its neighbors, and Stars of the Caucasus: Silk Embroideries from Azerbaijan (2017), a collection of essays studying the evolution of Azerbaijani and Persian textile art. The article "Carpets for Commerce" (Bier, 1990) explained how different carpets and their use in society changed over time. Another book, How to Read Islamic Carpets (Denny, 2014), provided a comprehensive overview of the carpet-weaving process and the craft's significance in the modern world. Two additional books, Kazak: Carpets of the Caucasus (Tschebull, 1971) and Folk Designs from the Caucasus for Weaving and Needlework (Kerimov, 1974), provided additional images and needlepoint designs of carpet motifs that were useful in analyzing the composition of different carpets. Latif Kerimov is one of the most influential writers cited; he was a prominent scholar of Azerbaijani carpets whose work formed much of the basis for the modern study of Caucasian textiles. This source group helped explain the fundamentals of the weaving process and the Azerbaijani carpet designs, aided by frequent inclusions of sketches and photographs of different looms, carpets, and patterns.

Another source group was a collection of books and articles that focused on Azerbaijan's history under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Historical events described in these sources were compared with changes to Azerbaijan's carpet industry to analyze how and why Azerbaijani carpets changed over time. Key sources included Russian Azerbaijan (Swietochowski, 2004) and On the Religious Frontier (Mostashari, 2017); both books provided detailed descriptions of Azerbaijan's history and economy under the Russian Empire. Audrey Aldstadt's books The Azerbaijani Turks (1992) and The Politics of Culture in Soviet Azerbaijan, 1920-1940 (2018) proved insightful as Aldstadt's work surveyed the history of Azerbaijan with an emphasis on the development of the country's national identity, efficiently explaining how the Azerbaijani culture changed during the Soviet era. Additionally, a collection of essays edited by
political scientist and historian Professor Ronald Suny (Rhinelander and Suny, 1983) assessed the development of nationalism in Azerbaijan and Caucasia. This collection connected the content discussed in Mostashari's book on tsarist Azerbaijan with Aldstadt's and Swietochowski's books on the history of early Soviet Azerbaijan.

Outside of the academic writings above, David Remnick's book *Lenin's Tomb* (1994) contributed to the research process by providing information that mixes the first-person account of his experience as a Western journalist in the Soviet Union with chapters describing the last years and months of the weakening union. As a journalist rather than a historian, art historian, or political scientist, Remnick's writing and research styles differ from most of the sources in this thesis as the book includes Remnick's feelings and experiences in addition to historical information. As a personal account, the events Remnick recounted may have been misremembered over time, resulting in a more careful reading here than in other sources.

**Historiography**

The first school views the Soviet Union as a prison of nations, with non-Russian ethnic identities suppressed by a state that stifled the development of minority cultural identities and practices. From this viewpoint, the Soviet government made Azerbaijan’s carpet industry abandon traditional designs and materials in favor of Soviet designs and manufacturing patterns, sacrificing an Azerbaijani identity and artistic style for greater homogeneity with the rest of the Soviet Union. Allowances for ethnic expression were permitted, providing they did not diverge from Soviet artistic principles. Some Azerbaijani families hid carpets to prevent their seizure by the Soviet government while traditional religious motifs vanished from designs. Similarly, outside of the carpet industry, other Azerbaijani cultural institutions could not freely promote their ethnic identity and were part of a larger pattern of Soviet cultural oppression. Concepts from this first school are found in sources by writers such as Audrey Aldstadt, whose books describe limitations placed on Azerbaijani organizations and art by the Soviet Union. Although a journalist rather than a historian, David Remnick provides anecdotal evidence that portrays the Soviet Union as a prison rather than a nursery, interviewing non-Russian citizens who describe mistreatment and hardship under the Soviet regime rather than any nurturing environment.

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The second school views the Soviet Union as a nurturing figure, serving as a nursery of ethnic identities, encouraging non-Russian populations to develop their own national identities after decades of oppression under the Russian Empire and rejecting Russian chauvinism. This school notes how Soviet support for ethnic minorities allowed for the preservation of cultural art forms, increased opportunities for education that had been nonexistent in Imperial Russia, and the growth of state-sponsored institutions that studied and promoted the ethnic identities of non-Russian groups. In Azerbaijan, the Soviet Union promoted the carpet industry, established carpet museums, and exported carpets for international sale at unprecedented levels. The result was Soviet elevation and promotion of carpets as a visual symbol of Azerbaijani culture, with Azerbaijanis using carpets to represent their national identity and distinguish themselves from the dominant Russian culture with the support of the Soviet government. Throughout the twentieth century, the Soviet government promoted an Azerbaijani national identity within the Soviet Union, demonstrating its role as a nursery for fledging national identities. Concepts from this school can be found in sources by writers including Siawosch Azadi, whose book *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs* describes in great detail the Soviet institutions created specifically for the promotion and growth of Azerbaijan’s carpet industry. Furthermore, an essay by Ronald Suny in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change* also supports this school, as it discusses the cultural diversity in Caucasia and Soviet efforts to develop the national identity of Caucasian ethnic groups.

Both schools of thought are useful in understanding developments in Azerbaijan’s culture and history. Azerbaijan’s carpet industry was reshaped under the Soviet Union, losing some of its traditional elements as Azerbaijan’s economy industrialized and its society modernized, with weavers subject to the whims of the Soviet government. In this sense, the Soviet regime continued the Russian Empire’s policy of suppressing minority ethnicities while seeking to profit from local industries. However, the Soviet Union instituted many more social, political, and economic reforms in Caucasia than the Russian Empire had, improving the lives of many Azerbaijanis and providing an outlet to preserve Azerbaijani culture and art including carpets. Examining the history of Azerbaijan’s carpets in the context of these two schools thus provides insight into Azerbaijan’s cultural development under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, with both groups providing contributing to the discussions in the following chapters of this thesis.

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I. Azerbaijan: A Historical Overview

Azerbaijan is a small, mountainous country located between three powerful neighbors: Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Its eastern coast, including its capital city and main port Baku, borders the Caspian Sea on a long stretch of coastline. Azerbaijan, including the disputed Nagorno-Karabagh province, is bordered by Georgia and Russia to the north, Armenia to the west, and Iran to the south; outside the rest of Azerbaijan is its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, an enclave surrounded by Turkey, Armenia, and Iran. Azerbaijan's territory covers approximately 33,400 square miles and varies dramatically in weather, temperature, and geography. The Greater Caucasus and Lesser Caucasus mountain ranges dominate the northern and western regions, while coastal regions along the country's southern and eastern ranges are low-lying basins. Azerbaijan is well-suited for agriculture, has abundant oil reserves, and an urban population that has increased drastically over the past two centuries. The country's proximity to both European and Asian trade routes increased its strategic value and importance on the global stage in recent years, a drastic shift compared to the general lack of interest it faced from other foreign powers in the mid-nineteenth century.

The earliest settlers of what would eventually become Azerbaijan arrived between the tenth and seventh centuries B.C., likely related to similar groups including the Hurrians and Urartians that inhabited regions of present-day Iran. Later groups, including the Cimmerians and Medes, were also connected with the area leading up to the fifth century B.C. Succeeding regional empires incorporated parts of Azerbaijan into their territory, predominantly its southern stretches near Iran. These empires included the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 B.C.), Atropatene (323 B.C.E.-third century C.E.), the Parthian Empire (247 B.C.-224 C.E.), and the Sasanian Empire (224 B.C.-651 C.E.). Muslim incursions from the south caused the fall of the Sasanian Empire, and in approximately 730 C.E., Azerbaijan was conquered by invading Arabs, with the local population facing forcible conversion to Islam from Zoroastrianism, Christianity, or other religions. After the Ummayad and Abbasid caliphates overthrew the Iranian empires (661-750 C.E. and 750-1258 C.E., respectively), Azerbaijan remained under the cultural influence of Persia.

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with an added Islamic influence.\textsuperscript{7} The adoption of a new religion brought about new rules and restrictions as Islam forbade the depiction of people and animals that had long been motifs in Azerbaijani crafts, including carpets. However, these restrictions did not always carry over into newly converted populations, and designs containing animals continued to be utilized by successive generations of weavers.

Starting in the eleventh century, various Turkish groups migrated into the Caucasus, drawn by Silk Road trade routes and the lack of a strong centralized political system. The predominant powers were the Seljuks and the Eldanizes, Turkic groups who dominated local southern and northern political systems through the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{8} The Seljuk Empire incorporated parts of Azerbaijan during the eleventh century, as did the Mongol Ilkhanate after the sack of Baghdad in 1258 and the Timurid Empire between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. During the fifteenth century, Azerbaijan was briefly part of Karakoyunlu and Akkoyunlu, Turkic regional states, before its absorption by the Safavid Empire from the sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{9} Occupations by the Ottoman and Russian Empires briefly disrupted Persian rule; the lack of a strong central ruling state meant regional khanates could govern their populations with little outside interference until the late-eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{10} They were most powerful between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and included the Djar-Balakan, Guba, Sheki, Shirvan, Baku, Ganja, Karabakh, Talysh, Irvan, and Nakhchivan khanates. Northern khanates, including Guba and Sheki, had closer ties with the Russian Empire, while those to the south had stronger cultural and political ties to Persia.\textsuperscript{11} After the Turkic Afsharid dynasty overtook the Safavid Empire in 1736 and the Zand dynasty in 1750, a succession of weak rulers allowed greater political autonomy for the khanates. This period of independence stopped with the rise of the Qajar dynasty in 1789, with founder Mohammad Khan Qajar consciously strengthening Persian control over Iran and the Caucasus, limiting the khanates' power.\textsuperscript{12}

By the early nineteenth century, the khanates had continued to weaken as they quarreled with each other and involved Russia, Georgia, the Ottoman Empire, and the Persian Empire in their disputes. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the Russian Empire grew increasingly

\textsuperscript{7} Stars of the Caucasus, 26.
\textsuperscript{8} Stars of the Caucasus, 27-28.
\textsuperscript{9} Altstadt, The Azerbaijani Turks, 2.
\textsuperscript{10} Wright et al., Caucasian Carpets, 44.
\textsuperscript{11} Stars of the Caucasus, 26.
\textsuperscript{12} Stars of the Caucasus, 30-31.
invested in gaining territory in the Caucasus, annexing Georgia in 1801 and engaging in a series of wars with the Ottomans in the late-eighteenth century. Not fully aware of their precarious position, various khans continued to claim their rights to the land and their allegiance to Persia. Their rebellions met with near-universal failure and bloody suppression, as seen in the 1804 invasion of the khanate of Ganja, where Russian forces killed the khan and three thousand citizens, and the Russian Empire annexed the khanate. The incoming Russian officials under the command of General Paul Tsitianov, a Georgian prince, took an adversarial stance against the existing Muslim population, making little effort to cooperate with them and viewing them as inherently treacherous and uncivilized. After Tsitianov's assassination sparked the First Russo-Persian War (1804-1813), Russian incursions into Azerbaijan slowed as the empire engaged in proxy wars with Persia via rival khanates. The war ended in September 1813, with Russia gaining control over the khanates in northern Azerbaijan through the Treaty of Gulistan.

After 1813, there was a brief period of peace as the Russian Empire attempted to manage its newly acquired territories in Caucasia, generally failing to implement policies that met the local population's needs. The conflict between Persia and Russia flared up in the Second Russo-Persian War (1826-1828); after the 1828 signing of the Treaty of Turkmenchai, Russia gained complete military control over Caucasian Azerbaijan, replacing Persia as the dominant political force in the region. For decades, Azerbaijan would remain part of the Russian Empire, subject to various initiatives to bring it under Russian political control and assimilate Azerbaijan into an expanding Russian Empire. However, this proved a difficult task, and by the late-nineteenth century, the empire made little progress in modernizing Azerbaijan or integrating Azerbaijani into Russian society and culture. Azerbaijan remained rural, traditional, unindustrialized, and uninterested in developing closer ties to Russia. Instead, it was far closer to Turkey and Persia linguistically and culturally. This would soon change with the advancement of modern technology, the chaos of revolution, and political change spurred by regional and world wars.

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II. Carpets: History, Technologies, Design, & Symbolism

As one of the world's oldest forms of art, an understanding of carpets and their designs and motifs provides important context concerning their use and significance in Azerbaijani society. Changes in loom design, fiber, and dyes correlate with technological advancements and state-sponsored industrialization efforts in Azerbaijan. To understand the impacts of introducing new materials and designs, an explanation of traditional designs and practices is necessary.

Although multiple carpet-weaving styles exist globally, the fundamentals of the process and weaving styles used remain consistent between regions. In Azerbaijan, before the twentieth century, most carpets were woven by hand from either wool, cotton, or silk fibers dyed with natural materials, with wool being the most common fiber. Each spring, men were traditionally responsible for shearing herds of sheep, from which wool fibers were collected, boiled, and cleaned. Wool was beaten with a stick of pomegranate wood called Yun chubugu and had snarls removed with a comb called Yun doragy to create a pliable woolen mass. Several days later, women used a unique spinning wheel called a jakhra to spin wool into yarn, a complicated process carried out by experienced weavers. The completed material was then stored in a skein or twisted with other yarn strands to create a thicker strand for weaving. This method is notably more complex than a drop spindle technique, a common technique outside the Caucasus that relies on simple counterclockwise motions to spin wool into yarn.

After weavers prepared sufficient skeins of wool, they dyed the material in a process that took substantial time, effort, and supplies on the part of the weaver. If using virgin wool, yarn displayed a spectrum of greys and whites; these colors were either left untouched and woven into carpets or dyed for a more dramatic effect. Weavers derived colors from a wide range of both natural and artificial materials: cream and ochre dyes came from pomegranate, onion, and apple peels; light brown from the outer skin of walnuts, dark brown from walnut leaves and shells, pinks and reds from the madder plant or cochineal insect, orange from the dastica herb and madder, black from the herb "Mazy," and blues and greens with indigo from specialized workshops. Besides the ingredients that produced color, other components typically included fig leaves, nutshells,

18 Azadi, et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 38.
21 Denny, Islamic Carpets, 16.
22 Azadi et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 47.
madder, and herbs, including dastica and "Sary gan." Dyers would then add a mordant or fixing agent, such as alum, dried yogurt, or walnut shells mixed with iron filings to ensure yarn absorbed and held its color after the dyeing and weaving processes ended.

Villagers boiled the dyes in a large cauldron before adding yarn to the pot, a process repeated several times to deepen colors such as indigo. Even with a mordant, some natural dyes continued to fade over time. Although most colors kept their vibrance for years, black yarn corroded almost entirely within a century of being dyed, exposing the white threads that back most carpets. The yarn was then cooled, wound into balls via a kelafcha, a special wheel on a spinning wheel, before weavers stored it in preparation for weaving on a loom. This process called for an immense amount of time, labor, and materials before weaving could even begin; two or three times the usual amount of dye was necessary to color enough yarn for a carpet's field and border, the main areas of a carpet.

Having garnered the necessary materials to begin weaving, the weaver could set coarse woollen warp and weft threads. The warp is held tightly and runs vertically down the loom, while the weft runs through the warp horizontally in an over-under pattern. The number of warp and weft threads decreases with the projected density and number of knots in the future carpet; the number of threads would be marked out on the weaver's loom to illustrate the design's dimensions. Most weavers could only produce a small number of designs from memory rather than sketching new patterns out, as villagers outside large cities in Caucasia did not have ready access to writing materials until the twentieth century. If attempting to replicate a design she had seen in another village, a weaver would instead embroider the design's outline on a piece of canvas. Alongside the traditional weaving methods described in this passage, weavers also incorporated aspects of Azerbaijani culture and superstition into their carpets, distinguishing them from other neighboring Turkic groups in the Ottoman Empire and weavers in Armenia, Georgia, and Persia.

23 Azadi et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 47.
24 Denny, Islamic Carpets, 17.
25 Denny, Islamic Carpets, 17.
26 Azadi et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 47.
27 Azadi et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 47.
29 Azadi et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 48.
30 Kerimov et al., Rugs & Carpets, 14.
Depending on the district, weavers started new carpets on either Thursday or Saturday, drew circles around and fixed rue twigs to the top of looms to ward off evil, and prayed to Allah, Muhammad, and Suleiman to protect the loom from devils and evil spirits. When starting a carpet, tradition required the weaver's daughter to say "bismillah" (in the name of Allah) before a young bachelor leaned his right leg against the loom and the primary weaver responded with: "May your light leg be the source of your happiness." As recently as the 1990s, older weavers in Azerbaijan reportedly continued this ritual before weaving a new carpet.\(^{31}\) Even before the weaving process was officially underway, it tied multiple parts of village society together: female weavers and dyers, the young men visiting their looms, and village men raising and shearing the sheep that provided the necessary wool for yarn. During the weaving process, a weaver, her daughter, and her daughter-in-law worked together to create finished pieces, and newer weavers relied on templates from older carpets with traditional designs to weave their carpets.\(^{32}\) A prospective bride's dowry was incomplete without the inclusion of a carpet; having started to weave between the ages of seven and eight, a young woman would have completed a set of three or four carpets as part of her dowry, an inclusion called \textit{dast-khali-gebe}.\(^{33}\) Weaving was not a solitary practice or skill practiced out of necessity but served to unite a community under a shared goal.

With the warp and weft threads set and weaving about to begin, weavers traditionally relied on wooden vertical looms, limiting the size of a single carpet to the frame of a loom that could fit inside the weaver's home. The exception to this was in Shusha City, where larger looms allowed for larger projects or commissions.\(^{34}\) In Azerbaijan, most carpets were either flat \textit{kilims} or knotted pile carpets. In a pile carpet, yarn is woven between the warp and weft and knotted to form points of color; the planned design's complexity determines the density of knots in a carpet.\(^{35}\) Elaborate designs with greater detail typically require greater knot density and thinner yarn; silk threads are the most delicate and provide the greatest room for detail than thicker wool and cotton strands. Weavers typically required about one hundred days to finish a design, working from the top to bottom or bottom to top of a loom. Upon completing a carpet, weavers cut it down from the loom, clean it, and present it to their husband, who would then step on it. A finished carpet meant a day

\(^{31}\) Azadi et al., \textit{Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs}, 48.
\(^{32}\) Azadi et al., \textit{Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs}, 49.
\(^{35}\) Azadi et al., \textit{Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs}, 47-49.
of celebration for the weaver's family before the process would begin anew with a different design. There was relatively little upkeep involved, as carpets would be cleaned once or twice each year by being washed with special clay in either the Kura River or the Caspian Sea.\(^{36}\)

It is difficult to determine precisely when rugs and carpets first appeared in the Caucasus. However, evidence suggests a weaving history spanning two thousand years; the earliest surviving specimens originating are dated from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries and credited to weavers in Armenia.\(^{37}\) Early weavers created most pieces for private use in the home rather than a royal court or trade center, so written records on the early development of Azerbaijani carpets are virtually nonexistent.\(^{38}\) There are four early periods of carpet development: the first with the weaving of undyed simple flat carpets, the second with the skilled weaving of dyed and patterned flat carpets including *kilims*, the third with the inclusion of additional decorative stones, woven designs, and metals to increasingly complex weaving patterns, and the fourth with the development of pile carpets and a technique called *kullaby ilme*, which dates to at least the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. and allows for thicker carpets with more ornamental decoration. High-quality weaving existed by the first century C.E., and a seventh-century C.E. report by a Chinese traveler mentioned Azerbaijan as one of the best weaving centers in the world. Around this time, an Arab invasion converted Azerbaijan to Islam, after which Persian and Azerbaijani weaving designs influenced each other. Later incursions by the Mongols, Seljuks, and Safavids introduced calligraphy into carpet designs, foreign motifs including dragons and clouds, and new materials including silk and metallic threads.\(^{39}\) Azerbaijani weaving improved technically and aesthetically for a millennium, only declining in the fifteenth century as trade dried up due to conflict between the Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires. These conflicts devastated the region's economy and fragmented its political system. Azerbaijan's remote location made it difficult for outside kingdoms to establish a foothold and essentially left the region under the control of various independent khanates.\(^{40}\)

Although there remains uncertainty over the timeframe in which weaving developed, carpets have carried significant importance and cultural relevance in Azerbaijani society for

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\(^{36}\) Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 49.
\(^{39}\) Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 39-42.
\(^{40}\) Kerimov et al., *Rugs & Carpets*, 11.
centuries. Persian, Turkish, and Chinese influences were far more present in Azerbaijani carpets before the twentieth century than any Russian aspects despite Azerbaijan's integration into the Russian Empire in the early nineteenth century. Azerbaijan's historical relationships with Persia, Turkey, and China explain this disparity, namely its long-lasting political ties to Persia, shared Turkic identity with Turkey, trade with China. These were more influential than Azerbaijan's relatively recent interactions with Russia, which emphasized the Russian Empire's desire for political domination over intercultural exchange. Designs varied between regions but commonly reflected pre-Islamic and Islamic religious motifs, fragments of Arabic script, animals and plants native to Azerbaijan, and creatures from local and foreign mythologies.

With over one hundred fifteen pile carpet patterns on record, most Azerbaijani carpet designs followed a general pattern incorporating regional variations. Carpets tend to fall into two primary design aesthetics: the bold, spacious, and rectilinear or the delicate, intricate, and curvilinear. Pile carpets frequently depict flora and fauna, including deer, ducks, peacocks, cypress trees, flowers; other designs incorporate artificial elements such as vases, arches, and prayer lamps. Additional symbols included the goel, a large medallion translated as "lake," swastikas, stars, trees of life, geometric shapes such as squares and crosses, honeycomb designs, horn-shaped figures, and flames. Figures often are abstracted and geometric to make it easier to weave and replicate the same shape across multiple carpets. Stylized figures of animals such as frogs, tortoises, bats, and birds show geometric shapes and hooks extending from their outlines, making identification difficult for the casual viewer.

Many of these designs have explicit or implicit religious connotations. Arched shapes represent the mihrab, an Islamic architectural element helping adherents pray towards Mecca; trees of life and prayer lamps also have Islamic significance, and birds with five legs represent the five Shi’ite imams or prophets. Less obvious designs include a mokhur, clay from a Muslim holy site, and pitchers for washing oneself before praying. Other symbols trace their roots back further, such as the seven-legged bird that signifies the seven planets known to the pre-Islamic astrological cult Sabeism. Furthermore, peacock and flame designs originate from pre-Islamic fire cults, the

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41 Wright et al., Caucasian Carpets, 38.
42 Wright et al., Caucasian Carpets, 40-41.
43 Azadi et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 68-72
45 Kârimov, Folk Designs, 4-12.
46 Kârimov, Folk Designs, 13-16.
swastika is an early symbol representing the four elements, and goels trace their origins to early celestial imagery.\textsuperscript{47} Even images such as the arch and prayer lamp adopted by Islam were originally representations of Venus, the moon, the sun, or other planets. Other designs included Arabic inscriptions to Allah and lines from the Quran, although often woven by illiterate villagers unaware of their religious significance and merely replicating patterns from earlier rugs or imported pieces.\textsuperscript{48} In these cases, the script was often illegible and corrupted as the general shape of words had been preserved, not the meaning of the words themselves. In short, the majority of Azerbaijani weavers continued a long tradition of, either knowingly or unknowingly, incorporating religious and natural imagery into their carpets. Regional styles followed these general principles and will be briefly summarized below.

Most carpets typically had fields—central areas surrounded by a border—with a background dyed either dark or light blue, red, cream, white, and occasionally green, brown, or black. A carpet with a dark ground used light colors in the overlaying designs and vice versa; despite regional variations, most weavers followed this pattern in Azerbaijan's six primary weaving districts.\textsuperscript{49} The Kuba region was relatively diverse and was known for producing the best carpets in Azerbaijan, using darker color palettes with up to a dozen different colors displayed on a dark blue background with dense ornamentation. The coastal Shirvan region included the capital city of Baku and bordered the Caspian Sea and Kuba, with pieces displaying less uniformity than other regions and a greater variety of colors and materials, typically on a light background with less decoration than carpets from Kuba.\textsuperscript{50}

The district of Ganja was a populous region closer to Armenia, typically producing thick pile carpets with distinctive goel shapes and dark- or brown-tinged palettes. The fourth district, Kazak, was a rural region that bordered the Aral and Caspian seas; its carpets typically had red backgrounds with large goels and elaborate decorations, frequently including fire and bird motifs. The Karabakh district had a large Armenian population and close ties to Persia due to its location in southwest Azerbaijan, giving its carpets greater diversity of design, trending towards blue, white, or cream hues, especially in its warp and weft threads. Finally, the Nakhichevan district

\textsuperscript{47} Azadi et al., Azerbaijan-Caucasian Rugs, 52.
\textsuperscript{48} Azadi et al., Azerbaijan-Caucasian Rugs, 53-55.
\textsuperscript{49} Kerimov et al., Rugs & Carpets, 16-18.
\textsuperscript{50} Azadi et al., Azerbaijan-Caucasian Rugs, 86-95
bordered Armenia and Persia, further isolating it from the rest of Azerbaijan; its largely nomadic population did not demonstrate substantial similarities in their carpet patterns.\(^{51}\)

With few exceptions, these districts produced most of Azerbaijan's carpets, nearly all woven by hand in a weaver's home before the country industrialized. All carpets were members of two main categories: densely knotted pile rugs or flatweave carpets. There are eight main types of flatweave carpets commonly found in Azerbaijan, with multiple subtypes: the *palas, jejim, shadda, kilim, gedigre, soumak, zili, and verni*.\(^{52}\) Flatweave carpets were less elaborate in design, relatively easy to manufacture, and were not as popular as pile carpets with collectors or markets in urban centers outside Azerbaijan. Consequently, pile carpets provide more specimens with greater detail and diversity of designs for analysis.

Although the designs, materials, and history of traditional Azerbaijani carpets are far more detailed than described here, this chapter should provide sufficient information for the reader to understand the relevant terminology and processes in Azerbaijani carpet-weaving. Above all, it is important to note that carpets have been a cultural institution in Azerbaijan for millennia, holding deep religious and community value long before Azerbaijan's integration into the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. As crafts created by hand in an unindustrialized country, carpets served as vehicles to display foreign influences, religious convictions, and community bonds well before the country modernized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On a smaller scale, they demonstrate the popularity of textile arts in rural communities and the strong communal ties that existed between villagers and across generations.

**III. From Tsars to Soviets: Industrialization and Economic Development**

By 1860, Azerbaijan had been a part of the Russian Empire for over thirty years, removed from Persian and Ottoman influence as regional resistance to Russian rule diminished. However, bureaucratic inefficiency and apathy resulted in a lack of improvement in most Azerbaijanis' lifestyles, who remained largely rural, uneducated, and isolated from the rest of the Russian Empire. Although nearly sixty years had passed since the initial Russian advance into Azerbaijan, the local population retained a strong distaste for local Russian officials, remembering the bloody conquest of Ganja and other khanates. Meanwhile, Russian officials in Azerbaijan viewed the

\(^{51}\) Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 86-95

\(^{52}\) Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 57-61.
region as a rural backwater with an uncivilized population practicing an alien religion, best ruled through force rather than compromise. Officials did little to modernize regional economies; an 1836 report noted that the government could increase weaving production in Caucasia by organizing weavers in factories, a reform not implemented until Azerbaijan's integration into the Soviet Union.  

The Russian Empire's involvement in Azerbaijani politics and society was generally secondary to its main motive: leveraging Azerbaijan's oil deposits and fledgling trade networks for economic profit. Outside of regional hubs and ports, much of Azerbaijan's population were nomadic herders or rural subsistence farmers under the control of regional lords after Azerbaijan's integration into the Russian Empire. Weaving in villages was not meant for export, but for use in the weaver's home, by local nobility, or for trade in regional hubs within the Caucasus. The 1850s brought significant difficulties for Azerbaijani peasants, who lost their right to resettle between villages in 1853 and had to pay rent to local nobility in hard currency rather than goods. These new policies caused increased economic difficulties to an already impoverished population who had paid rent in produce and tradeable goods in the past. In 1870, the Russian Empire introduced nominal land reform policies to accommodate the needs of Azerbaijani peasants, but the empire accomplished little reform until compulsory reform policies were implemented in 1912, over forty years later. Unsurprisingly, peasants had trouble paying land dues and saw virtually no improvement in their standard of living during this period, while the government made little effort to develop good relationships with Azerbaijan's small middle class. 

In 1861, serfdom was abolished in the Russian Empire, releasing peasants from their land obligations and permitting them to attempt a broader range of economic activities. The Russian government and private businesses tried to support newly emancipated serfs by reviving traditional craft industries. The resulting kustar movement was implemented between 1885 and 1887 and allowed farmers to supplement their incomes by selling crafts, including weaving. This movement was implemented throughout Azerbaijan and aimed to revive local craft industries while maintaining artistic quality and affordable materials for weavers. Azerbaijani textiles reached an

53 Wright et al., Caucasian Carpets, 24.  
54 Stars of the Caucasus, 30-31.  
57 Wright et al., Caucasian Carpets, 19.
increasingly large domestic market under the tsar amid growing international interest. As early as 1873, the Russian Empire sponsored an exhibition of Caucasian textiles in Vienna, displaying the diversity of its empire and solidifying its political dominance over the region.\textsuperscript{58} This marked a change for many Azerbaijani weavers, who created work for use in the home, inclusion in one's dowry, or trade within one's village or neighboring communities. Rugs were still dyed and woven by hand, as artificial dyes and iron looms were not accessible to most of the population. With the government's support in producing and selling textiles, some weavers introduced European and Asian elements into carpet designs by the end of the nineteenth century, as seen in plate one (Plate 1). Wallpaper and soap wrappers from Moscow-based companies were incorporated into carpets, reflecting increased interaction with the rest of the Russian Empire.\textsuperscript{59}

During the mid-and late-nineteenth century, the Russian Empire introduced early industrialization initiatives. However, these efforts were meant to link Azerbaijan to trade and oil networks and did not improve the lot of most of Azerbaijan's population. The Russian Empire built roads and linked Azerbaijan to a number of regional seaports, increasing its access to the outside world as the first Caucasian rugs arrived at international markets, as illustrated by the inclusion of

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Plate1.png}
\caption{Plate 1, ‘Plate 223, Gulmekhmer, Shusha district, Karabakh,’ beginning of the twentieth century. Cotton and wool, 565 by 203 cm. Location not listed.}
\end{figure}

An interesting example of European influence in Azerbaijani weaving, this carpet shows the so-called velvet flower pattern, which was based on patterns from Russian velvets imported to Azerbaijan to provide new designs to weavers, inspired by Oriental carpets that were popular in the Russian Empire and the rest of Europe. A foreign design in the field and is surrounded by a border in a southern Azerbaijani style, combining design elements from three cultures in a single piece. When compared with pieces shown later in this paper, the divergence in style between this carpet and others is immediately evident.

\textsuperscript{58} Stars of the Caucasus, 149.
\textsuperscript{59} Wright et al., Caucasian Carpets, 43.
Caucasian textiles in the previously mentioned 1873 exhibition in Vienna. Economic policies towards Azerbaijanis remained unfavorable and unresponsive to reform; at the turn of the century, Muslim and Azerbaijani merchants faced passport restrictions to enter Persia for trading purposes, rights that Russian merchants had held for over fifty years. The Russian state could benefit from Azerbaijan's natural resources and advantageous location along Persian trade routes, but its policies were generally rooted in a desire to benefit itself, treating Azerbaijan as an economic colony.

Although the empire's economic policies did little to benefit the average Azerbaijani citizen, there were some important milestones as the Russian Empire introduced early industrialization measures to the Caucasus. The 1880s marked the introduction of the first synthetic dyes used in Azerbaijani carpets, although most dyes other than blues were still made at home using various traditional recipes. As foreign buyers purchased increasing numbers of Azerbaijani carpets, an influx of cheap machine-woven pieces arrived, inspiring new designs meant to appeal to prospective buyers in Europe and the Ottoman Empire. For example, low-quality machine-woven rugs depicting the Aya Sofya, a popular motif at the time, arrived from Turkey, flooding local markets and hurting small weavers whose pieces took longer to complete and were more labor-intensive. These introductions made little lasting impact on the Azerbaijani weaving industry, which remained decentralized and dependent on traditional technologies and patterns in most of the country. Without a centralized economy or widespread industrialization, the Russian Empire could not modernize Azerbaijan's carpet industry and generally relied on exporting pieces created via traditional methods in weaver's homes or small workshops.

The Russian Empire's support for the kustar movement continued into the twentieth century, peaking between 1900 and 1913 as the empire subsidized schools and workshops to train weavers and provided venues to exhibit and display Caucasian textiles. A state-appointed Caucasian Kustar Committee began directing these efforts in 1899; the committee aimed to improve worker conditions and quantities of production, sought to limit European influences in carpets, and attempted to introduce modern machinery to the weaving process. The government

60 Kerimov et al., Rugs & Carpets, 21.
62 Wright et al., Caucasian Carpets, 35.
63 Azadi et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 37.
64 Wright et al., Caucasian Carpets, 46-47.
established factories to spin yarn and create dyes in Georgia, where most Caucasian weaving displays were based. However, the movement was largely ineffective at updating weaving technology or moving away from wooden looms and wool as the primary materials for weaving.\textsuperscript{65} The rural nature of Azerbaijan's home weaving industry, its distance from the rest of the empire, and the government's financial difficulties meant that the Russian Empire made few lasting institutional changes to the weaving industry. The \textit{kustar} movement served to expand Azerbaijan's cottage weaving industry rather than drastically change its means of production and distribution.\textsuperscript{66}

The last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a significant increase in foreign interest in Azerbaijani carpets; with an increase in trade, most weaving families owned two looms rather than one, allowing them to weave up to four rugs at once for exportation and sale outside of Azerbaijan. In 1913 alone, traders exported nearly six hundred tons of rugs from Baku, with the highest quality pieces sold outside the region.\textsuperscript{67} Azerbaijan continued to maintain its historical ties with Turkey and Persia. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Azerbaijani weavers continued to copy carpet designs depicting the Aya Sofya in Istanbul, a standard image in Turkey that would have carried little personal significance to the rural Azerbaijani weaver.\textsuperscript{68} Meanwhile, minor political reforms were implemented after 1905, introducing a more politically liberal period of Russian leadership in response to heightened ethnic tensions and economic difficulties that had devastated Azerbaijan's merchant class.\textsuperscript{69}

In the years leading up to World War I, ethnic clashes and economic difficulties wreaked havoc on Azerbaijan's economy. Between 1901 and 1905, the Baku oil crisis devastated local economies, resulting in a series of strikes and protests in Baku and the surrounding regions. Ethnic tensions continued to build up between ethnic Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Russians, resulting in the Tatar-Armenian War that caused millions of rubles in damages and brought the local economy to a halt for two months.\textsuperscript{70} The outbreak of World War I did little to ameliorate economic distress in Caucasia; in February 1916, riots broke out in bazaars over the high cost of essential products

\textsuperscript{65} Wright et al., \textit{Caucasian Carpets}, 49.
\textsuperscript{67} Azadi et al., \textit{Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs}, 45-46.
\textsuperscript{68} Azadi et al., \textit{Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs}, 55.
\textsuperscript{69} Mostashari, \textit{On the Religious Frontier}, 105.
\textsuperscript{70} Mostashari, \textit{On the Religious Frontier}, 101.
and supplies, a problem that did not improve as the war continued to escalate.\textsuperscript{71} Azerbaijan's economy would not stabilize and modernize until its inclusion within the Soviet Union.

Azerbaijani textiles had reached a broader market outside the Caucasus, but economic difficulties combined with political instability and two major wars meant the Russian Empire could not introduce lasting reform to the Azerbaijani carpet industry. It is worth noting that the empire's efforts, even if motivated by a desire for economic gain, marked improvements in the Russian Empire's relationship with its non-Russian populations. The \textit{kustar} movement supported peasants who otherwise relied upon subsistence farming and herding to support themselves and demonstrated an interest in Azerbaijani culture not present in the first decades of Russian rule. Rather than criticizing native traditions and attempting to replace them with Russian culture, the Russian government was interested in preserving and exporting Azerbaijani culture. Strictly in the context of Azerbaijani textiles, there is little evidence of the Russian chauvinism that the Soviet government later sought to undo.

As with the Russian Empire, the Soviet government faced difficulties implementing substantial political and social reforms in Azerbaijan due to its relative geographic isolation and generally rural, socially conservative population with little love or strong historical ties to the government in Moscow. However, weavers quickly took advantage of the economic opportunities that new political leadership provided and wove carpets featuring Lenin's and Stalin's faces for export outside of Caucasia.\textsuperscript{72} These carpets marked a continuation of a historical trend of depicting famous political or cultural figures in carpets, adopted to appeal to prospective buyers throughout the Soviet Union rather than strictly local Azerbaijani communities. Carpets adapted to fit new market demands, incorporating new elements into pre-existing patterns and designs. Azerbaijan remained politically stable and industrialized rapidly as its carpet industry increasingly relied upon synthetic dyes and moved towards production in factories and workshops rather than in the home.

Under the Soviet Union, collectivization and industrialization initiatives transformed Azerbaijan’s economy within several decades, revolutionizing the weaving industry by the mid-twentieth century. After the 1920s, synthetic dyes were popularized in Azerbaijan, being used in the weaving process to a far greater extent than before and displacing traditional homemade dyes. Although synthetic dyes reduced the weavers’ workloads, they were more prone to fading and

\textsuperscript{71} Mostashari, \textit{On the Religious Frontier}, 111.
\textsuperscript{72} Wright et al., \textit{Caucasian Carpets}, 40.
were less vibrant over time than natural dyes, which remain superior in terms of long-term color retention and the value they add to a carpet. The differences between natural and synthetic dyes can be seen in plates two through four, with the first two carpets using natural dyes and the last piece using synthetics (Plates 2, 3, and 4). When comparing nineteenth and early twentieth century carpets to their early modern counterparts and accounting for differences in how different carpets were preserved and stored, natural dyes almost always display more vibrance and durability.

Rather than relying on woolen yarn, undyed cotton was introduced in the 1930s and became the dominant fiber used in weaving by the end of the decade. New materials including linen, hemp, and silk were used to a lesser extent, with the price and fragility of silk resulting in it only being used for commissioned pieces created outside the factory setting. The new government also standardized the terminology used to describe the weaving process and different types of carpets rather than relying on local terms that varied between districts. For example, prior to World War I, the term *palas* had referred to any reversible flat weave rug in Azerbaijan; after 1930, it specifically described a plain weave rug with a design of narrow flat stripes. This paralleled the

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Plate 2, ‘Plate 208, Mokhan (Shahsevan), Jebrail district, Karabakh,’ around 1800. Cotton and wool, 323 by 160 cm. Location not listed.

Over two centuries old, this carpet is in superb shape, with the deep red dyes of its field still free of degradation or corrosion. The dyes on the central goels and borders are similarly well-preserved, a testament to the durability of natural dyes. There is some oxidation of blackish-brown dye, but it has not corroded and the threads have not dissolved to reveal the weft and warp threads. A hand-woven piece, these is some slight distortion on the borders but the motif has not been stretched or compressed, as can occur on carpets where the weaver starts to run out of space on the loom before the carpet is complete.

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73 Wright et al., *Caucasian Carpets*, 33-34.
74 Wright et al., *Caucasian Carpets*, 36.
Plate 3, 'Plate 193, Lemberan, Barda or Agjebdi district, Karabak,' last quarter of nineteenth century. Wool, 270 by 165 cm. Location not listed.

Woven with natural dyes, the deep blue goels and cream field have been remarkably well preserved, with minimal fading. Compared to the next carpet at right, which was woven from a mix of synthetic and natural dyes, this piece has richer colors with an equally elaborate ornamented field. Variances in the shades of blues and other dyes is valued as a sign that the carpet was woven using naturally dyed yarn, as the shifting gradients is a result of the dyeing process.

Plate 4, 'Plate 47, Alpan pile carpet, Alpan, Kuba district,' early twentieth century. Wool and cotton, 140 by 86 cm. Museum of Azerbaijani Carpets and Handicrafts, Baku, Azerbaijan.

In contrast to the two images preceding this one, this carpet is woven from a mix of synthetic and natural dyes, resulting in the different shades of blue shown here. These is little range in tones across the different colors, with this homogeneity suggesting synthetic dyes were incorporated into this piece. Although a beautiful piece with an attractive range of colors, the carpet’s dyes lack the depth and variance that set the carpet to the left apart.
standardization of local designs in collective factories and weaving workshops, with regional differences fading in favor of standardized designs in keeping with Soviet principles and Azerbaijani traditions and culture.

Azerbaijan was subject to drastic economic changes after its 1928 integration into the Soviet Union, shifting from an agrarian economy with growing trade networks to a modern industrial base by World War II. Under the administration of various imperial viceroys and high commissioners, Baku was the most modernized city in Azerbaijan due to its status as the country's main port. In the first decades of Soviet rule, Ganja, Sheki, and Nakhichevan emerged as new industrial centers. Ethnic Azerbaijanis benefitted from this development, not just the ethnic Russians who had prospered under the tsarist regime. In Shirvan, another region known for its carpets, agriculture was mechanized and new canals built to improve intrastate transportation and commerce. These measures introduced new life patterns for many Azerbaijanis whose livelihoods had revolved around agricultural cycles; with the introduction of collectivization initiatives and new technology reducing the amount of work for the average agricultural laborer, the method and pattern of work changed. Changes in farming methods and the adoption of synthetic dyes may have decreased labor and permitted more time for weaving.

New institutions supporting Azerbaijan's weaving economy also sprung up, increasing weaver productivity and introducing new methods of carpet production and distribution. In 1927, the Azkhalchaittifak (Azerbaijani Carpet Association) was established as part of the Azerbaijan Art Association to process raw materials that created the yarn used to weave carpets. Members of the association received processed wool and cotton that could immediately be dyed or woven, reducing the labor required before weaving could begin as weavers and their families no longer had to prepare skeins of yarn themselves. When combined with the use of synthetic dyes, weavers could have all necessary components of a carpet delivered to them, needing only the loom and knowledge to create a new carpet. The Soviet government opened a department studying carpet design in the Azerbaijan ASSR's Institute of Architecture and Art in 1945 and established the National Carpet Museum in Baku in 1967, the first museum of its kind in the world. Azerbaijan's sustained domestic interest in its weaving industry soon merited international recognition, having

75 Azadi et al., Azerbaijan-Caucasian Rugs, 37.
76 Azadi et al., Azerbaijan-Caucasian Rugs, 37.
77 Azadi et al., Azerbaijan-Caucasian Rugs, 46.
hosted the 1983 session of the International Symposium on the Art of Oriental Carpets in Baku. In just over a century, Azerbaijan had gone from exporting its textiles for display in foreign exhibitions to hosting international conferences, a change that indicates substantial improvements in Baku's and Azerbaijan's transportation, infrastructure, and hospitality sectors that had been underdeveloped or nonexistent fifty years before. The continuing interest of Western collectors in Azerbaijani textiles is a testament to the lasting interest in the craft, a trend that has been maintained for over a century after tsarist Russia introduced the first Azerbaijani textiles to Western markets.

Throughout the Soviet period, the government established a wide array of carpet factories, technical schools, specialist workshops, dyeing centers, and restoration workshops in Azerbaijan, primarily centered in manufacturing towns and districts neglected under the Russian Empire. As late as the last years of the Soviet Union, approximately thirty carpet factories and workshops were still open and actively producing carpets. The establishment of centralized workshops was part of an effort to downplay regional ethnic ties and promote a united Soviet identity. In the past, regional schools of carpet weaving were generally distinguishable by district and had substantial variations in color and composition, with local variations in design incorporated between villages. New workshops used new patterns and gathered weavers from across a region, destroying these regional variances and traditional motifs and making it challenging to interpret designs and determine their origins as village designs grew increasingly homogenous.

The establishment of these schools and workshops is particularly significant. It demonstrates a state-sponsored effort to educate new weavers and preserve old carpets, typically pieces over fifty to seventy-five years old, that predated the Soviet Union and displayed religious motifs that went against the state's official atheist ideology. These workshops would support the concept of the Soviet Union as a nursery for developing ethnic identities, actively preserving Azerbaijani culture and art for future generations. There was no economic benefit from restoring these pieces, but their continued survival indicated the government was invested in promoting the region's culture rather than suppressing it in favor of a united Soviet identity. The promotion of

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78 Azadi et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 46.
79 Bier, “Carpets For Commerce,” 166.
80 Azadi et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 37.
81 Azadi et al., Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs, 7.
82 Kerimov et al., Rugs & Carpets, 16-18.
state-run museums, weaving centers, and technical schools further demonstrates a sustained interest in Azerbaijani textiles as a cultural art form over several decades. Thus, these organizations' existence supports the academic school of thought that views the Soviet Union as a nursery for ethnic identities rather than an inherently oppressive political system.

Although Soviet support for Azerbaijan's carpet industry indicates an interest in preserving Azerbaijani culture and craftsmanship, the workshops' existence is at odds with the gradual removal of carpet designs with religious significance from workshops, erasing aspects of traditional carpet motifs. Furthermore, reports exist of families hiding older carpets from Soviet authorities to prevent their confiscation by the government during the mid-twentieth century. These actions indicate the Soviet government still placed restrictions on what designs and types of carpets could be woven and sold, permitting displays of Azerbaijani identity provided new textiles remained in line with Soviet concepts of art and constituted 'acceptable' means of cultural and artistic expression. A carpet with religious designs created in the atheist Soviet Union would not be an acceptable medium in which to display one's ethnic identity. In this sense, the Soviet Union appears as a prison of nations rather than a nursery, following the ideas of the second school of thought discussed previously. State promotion of Azerbaijani culture existed, but on a superficial level and as long as textiles and art did not contribute to a stronger Azerbaijani national identity that may have eventually threatened the integrity of the Soviet Union by agitating for greater autonomy or growing into a separatist movement.

Industrialization efforts continued throughout the twentieth century, and by the early 1990s, Azerbaijan had urbanized and maintained a highly developed economy rooted in substantial agricultural and industrial sectors, with carpet weaving remaining a major area of production. The past seventy years had witnessed dramatic social and economic changes, especially among populations that had traditionally been nomads or lived in rural villages; with a shift towards urbanization came a loss of cultural identity and traditional carpet designs, especially among Azerbaijan's nomadic populations. The increased use of synthetic dyes and relative homogeneity of Soviet-era Azerbaijani carpets from collectivized factories and state weaving schools meant that newer carpets were less popular among buyers. Collectors viewed these pieces as consumer products rather than art, lacking the idiosyncrasies and regional variations of pre-Soviet carpets.

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83 Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 7.
84 Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 37.
that had appealed to collectors. Carpet prices were consistently lower by the 1990s as Azerbaijan declared independence in 1991 and began transitioning from a command to a free market economy. Given this lessened interest by collectors, comparatively less literature on Azerbaijani carpets in the modern era is available as the most academic focus remains on pre-Soviet carpets woven before the introduction of twentieth-century industrialization efforts.

Azerbaijan gained its independence on October 18, 1991, entering a period of dramatic economic, political, and social transitions. Existing scholarship has been less invested in Soviet and modern developments in the Azerbaijani carpet industry, viewing pieces as less of a fine art and more of a byproduct of an industrializing economy, lacking the importance of previous carpets. Azerbaijan's relationships with the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union led Azerbaijan towards an international market, creating carpets that reflect the growing importance and influence of its government in Moscow and associations with the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and Europe.

IV. From Tsars to Soviets: Politics and Religion

Over the near century the Russian Empire ruled Caucasia, conflicts between Russian officials and local elites were unending. Russian administrations, headed by a viceroy or high commissioner, were apathetic, inept, or abrasive with their interactions with local populations; only Prince Mikhail Vorontsov was able to work successfully with and gain the respect of the non-Russian majority during his nine years as viceroy.85 Others, such as Prince Pavel Tsitsianov, were noted for their distaste towards Caucasians and beliefs that time and force would be the best ways to bring Azerbaijan under Russian political and cultural influences and eschewed cooperation with hereditary Caucasian nobility.86 Russian officials ignored the needs of Azerbaijan’s Muslim population, limiting Muslim representation in government, neglecting to support Islamic schools, and creating initiatives that benefitted Georgians and Armenians before Azerbaijanis. Viewing a politically engaged and educated Muslim population as a threat to the empire’s territorial integrity, the Russian Empire blocked much of Azerbaijan’s population from voting in Duma elections after the 1870s. To be eligible to participate in elections, voters had to be over twenty-five and a homeowner, requirements that effectively prevented the working class and intelligentsia from

86 Rhinelander et al., Transcaucasia, 90.
voting. Additional limitations on the number of non-Christians able to be active in government assemblies meant that only two to three percent of the population could vote. As late as the 1880s, only 0.89% of Azerbaijan’s population was eligible to vote in its Duma elections. In addition to political limitations, religious discrimination against Azerbaijani Muslims intensified and eventually led to violence between ethnic Russian workers and the merchants and clergy affiliated with Baku’s bazaars. The viceroy position was temporarily replaced with that of high commissioner to restore order, introducing a period of increasingly restrictive policies that provoked a growing Azerbaijani nationalist sentiment.

Ethnic tensions continued to escalate with continued attempts to Russify Azerbaijan throughout the late nineteenth century with the importation of ethnic Russian settlers; this culminated in riots and the Tatar-Armenian War between 1904 and 1905, when Armenians, Russians, and Azerbaijaniis violently clashed with each other. The riots forced businesses to close for months, cost millions of rubles and hundreds of lives, and led to the viceroyalty's reimplementation. After 1905, Azerbaijan's merchants and middle class reacted by throwing their support behind Azerbaijani separatist and nationalist movements. The result was a new intelligentsia incorporating working professionals into its ranks, including textile manufacturers and other merchants associated with the carpet industry. Ethnic unrest flared up periodically until World War I, and Azerbaijan's intelligentsia increasingly demanded greater religious autonomy and political authority. Azerbaijan began to develop a national sense of self but was significantly slower in industrializing and in educating its population than Georgia and Russian Armenia, a gap evident by the late nineteenth century. Between 1918 and 1920, Azerbaijan briefly gained independence after the Russian Empire's disintegration, having welcomed the February Russian Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent abolishment of the governing viceroyalty. Declaring independence on May 28, 1918, the new Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was invaded in April 1920 by the Red Army, a Bolshevik-led faction in the Russian Civil War. The invasion aligned

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87 Mostashari, On the Religious Frontier, 70.
88 Mostashari, On the Religious Frontier, 94.
89 Mostashari, On the Religious Frontier, 120.
91 Mostashari, On the Religious Frontier, 120-130
92 Mostashari, On the Religious Frontier, 111.
with an internal takeover by an existing communist organization, putting an end to Azerbaijan's brief period of independence and establishing the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.⁹³

As the Soviet government consolidated power, the state's antipathy towards religion manifested itself in the lessened use of religious motifs in Azerbaijani carpets, common motifs before and during the Russian Empire's rule. An interesting shift occurred from the 1920s onwards when religious symbols began to figure less prominently in completed carpets under an atheist Soviet Union's leadership. Weavers had included various motifs referencing Islam and pre-Islamic fire and celestial cults in Caucasian carpets for centuries. Script from the Quran and architectural elements such as a mihrab were often repeated in carpet designs even when the weaver was illiterate or had never seen a prayer arch to maintain a pattern's integrity. Images such as the swastika and kubpa, a geometric shape with tooth-like projections, retreated from the Azerbaijani consciousness and lost their significance after featuring in designs since the seventeenth century. Soviet symbols replaced these religious designs as greater numbers of weavers entered state-run weaving educational facilities and collectives.⁹⁴

Lenin and Stalin's appearance in portrait rugs marks the alteration of another weaving tradition to fit a new era, as Azerbaijani weavers had gifted Tsar Alexander III and his wife a portrait rug after their 1883 coronation that incorporated extensive Orthodox Christian iconography.⁹⁵ Shown on the following page, this is apparent in the depiction of an Orthodox icon in the upper half of the field where the Virgin Mary and infant Christ are stylized with a golden nimbus around each figure's head, their poses reminiscent of a Muslim worshipper at prayer (Plate 5). There is a segment of corrupted Cyrillic script between the icon, tsar, and tsarina, likely for decoration rather than to convey a specific message.⁹⁶ The weavers of this piece were likely illiterate and replicated the shapes of Cyrillic letters in homage to their rulers or for aesthetic purposes. Furthermore, the positioning of the icon's hands, similar to a Muslim prayer rug, indicates that the weavers used familiar cultural and religious practices to develop the composition of a carpet that depicted a ruler, religion, and culture they would have had limited interactions with (Plates 5 and 6). This rug represents increased cultural interactions between Azerbaijan and the

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⁹⁴ Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 52.
⁹⁵ Schulz, “Portraits, Photographs, and Politics.”
Plate 5, Portrait Carpet of Tsar Aleksandr III and His Wife Maria Feodorovna with a Representation of the Icon Yaroslavskaya Oranta, Azerbaijan, after 1883. Materials and dimensions not available. In private collection.

Note the tiered borders with geometric protrusions, the dominance of browns and blues in the border, and deep red in the ground of main field. Directly above the czar and czarina is a cream space containing corrupted Cyrillic text. Polychrome piece with reds, greens, yellows, and blues. The black dye is well-preserved, with no visible degradations or corrosions around the tsar and tsarina.

Plate 6, detail of rug in Plate 5 showing woven text.
Russian Empire outside of Caucasia, however one-sided and limited such a relationship may have been. Portrait rugs continued to be woven during the Soviet era in the Caucasus and Central Asia, although lacking the religious imagery commonplace in Imperial Russia.97

As mentioned earlier, the *kubpa* was common in Azerbaijani carpets for centuries, carrying religious and celestial meaning for pre-Islamic religions and symbolizing decorative elements on mosques for Muslim weavers. After the 1920s, the *kubpa* lost its spiritual meaning as weavers favored new designs with explicit Soviet connotations, including the hammer and sickle or five-pointed star.98 Similarly, the swastika disappeared from many Azerbaijani carpet designs after 1930, having been a common motif in carpets between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, symbolized the four elements and having a history as an Indian religious symbol. Birds with seven or five legs, another design with religious significance, developed during the first half of the twentieth century before losing popularity in the second half of the century. As the *kubpa* and similar designs lost their significance, older designs with secular or natural imagery remained unchanged such as depictions of flowers, songbirds, and rivers.99

The carpet in plates seven and eight display the *kubpa* motif, with two *kubpas* framing three central medallions in an early twentieth-century carpet from Shirvan. This piece is different from most Shirvan carpets as its primary colors are deep reds and browns rather than dark blues; however, it does display a typical combination of dense ornamentation with a more open field.100 This is evident in the clear visibility of the red background despite the presence of multiple decorative *goels*, several tiered borders with elaborate decorations, and the incorporation of geometric motifs. There is an absence of animal imagery, and each *kubpa* frames a section of the main field, capping off the end of the weaver’s design much in the way ornamentations do on a mosque (Plates 7 and 8). Given the period this was produced, it was likely dyed with natural dyes and woven with wool and cotton threads, resulting in vibrant colors that display minimal fading and deterioration nearly a century after its completion. Given its dimensions, it would have fit on a smaller wooden loom and would not have been woven in a larger regional workshop, as was the case for larger pieces produced for local nobility or export. The inclusion of this carpet provides

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97 Schulz, “Portraits, Photographs, and Politics.”
99 Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 52.
an excellent example of a regional design with minimal external influence and the depiction of a motif with strong traditional and religious significance absent in future carpet designs.

The carpet in plates seven and eight is an excellent example of a regional design with minimal external influences. It depicts a motif with strong traditional and religious significance that weavers eventually excluded from later carpet designs. This contrasts with the carpet shown in plate nine, a flatweave zili carpet from the Shirvan design school woven in 1925 (Plate nine). A more recent piece, this carpet is also elaborately decorated with a polychrome field. It was dated according to both Christian and Islamic calendars, with the years 1925 and 1324 both woven around the two primary goels. The weaver's name may have been included in the design, as the name "Gol Andam" is woven alongside the dates.101

Plate 7, 'Plate 81, Arjiman Shemakha district, Shirvan,' early twentieth century. Cotton and wool, 265 by 143 cm. Location not listed.

Unlike the majority of Shirvan carpets, this piece has a deep red background rather than deep blue. In keeping with the Shirvan style, it is densely decorated, although it still keeps part of the field open, exposing the deep red behind various decorative goels. Geometric shapes are prominent, with less natural or animalistic imagery than seen elsewhere.

Plate 8, detail of plate 7, showing the kubpa motif. Note the geometric, tooth-like protrusions running around the perimeter of the kubpa. This design faded from Azerbaijani carpets after the early twentieth century.

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In contrast to the last example, dark blue is the dominant color in the field, overlaid by reds and creams, a standard color palette for the region. There is no kubpa or other motif with religious significance (Plates 9, 10, 11, and 12). The possible presence of the weaver's signature may be an indicator of growing educational initiatives instituted after World War I, as only a fraction of Baku's population was literate under the Russian Empire. If the Soviet government educated weavers enough to write or weave their names into their productions, an increased proportion of Azerbaijan's population had received at least an elementary education by the mid-1920s, something limited to the upper classes in past decades. The lack of religious emblems in these later productions indicates a continued decrease in the use and promotion of traditional carpet designs with religious significance under Soviet governance, a trend continuing throughout the twentieth century. The inclusion of an Islamic date in the rug signals that although government support for religion was lacking, Azerbaijan's population remained predominantly Muslim.

The decrease in the use of religious motifs could result from a deliberate attempt by the Soviet government to suppress subversive religious imagery in carpets that were sold and used throughout the union. Otherwise, the change could have represented an effort by the weavers

Plate 9, 'Plate 116, Zili (parts of Khorjin in Soumak technique). Baku, capital of Azerbaijan.' 100 by 75 cm. Dated, both Christian and Islamic: 1324 = 1925 (1322, 1926). Details in plates 10, 11, and 12, from top to bottom: bird with two legs, Islamic and Christian dates, carnation motifs.

Smaller weaving likely part of a larger design. Elaborate floral motifs including carnations and vines. Between the two main goels are several birds, all with two legs rather than the five or seven that carried religious or spiritual significance.
themselves to create pieces that would be more appealing to markets outside Azerbaijan or that would face less censure from their local government. Regardless of the reason, after the 1930s, these weaving motifs started to lose religious significance or disappear from the weaving record, outside of some surviving carpets with religious designs that weavers preserved for aesthetics or tradition's sake.

The disappearance of religious symbolism in rugs supports the concept of the Soviet Union as a prison of nations rather than a nursery of ethnic identities. Azerbaijan's population benefited from the new political system and gained greater political representation under the Soviet Union than had been possible under the Russian Empire. The removal of the empire's viceroyalty system also removed Russian officials who resented and were unwilling to work with the native population, allowing for greater Azerbaijani political autonomy. Weaving traditions such as portrait rugs adapted seamlessly to the new regime, facing no opposition from the Soviet government. However, the abandonment of religious motifs indicates that restrictions on carpet designs existed, especially in state-sponsored workshops. Azerbaijani weavers were able to practice a traditional craft as members of the Soviet Union but sacrificed artistic autonomy. Weavers discarded designs that had remained significant for centuries as the collectivization of the weaving industry intensified. Traditional art changed to respect the new political system, indicating the Soviet Union was more interested in consolidating power and maintaining control over its population rather than allowing open artistic expression among its ethnic minorities, at least when religion was a factor.

V. From Tsars to Soviets: Education, Gender, Class and Ethnic Roles

Before the mid-nineteenth century, Azerbaijani weaving generally fell within three subgroups and was woven by women in their village homes or larger urban workshops. Weavers either produced high-quality pieces in palace workshops, worked as serfs in small workshops for a local feudal lord, or wove carpets for dowries and personal use privately in the home. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a smaller number of workers transitioned to factories producing larger rugs for local nobility and medium-sized rugs for mass production and exportation, a byproduct of the kustar movement. Most weavers remained outside the large factory system, a trend that continued into the twentieth century under the Russian Empire. As the

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102 Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 45.
Caucasus tended to be socially conservative, weaving provided a creative outlet for women living in a more restrictive society and a way to furnish one's home and demonstrate domestic skills to a prospective husband.\textsuperscript{103} Weaving remained a women's craft, absent of male involvement outside of managing the sheep used for wool and assisting in ceremonial preparations for a new carpet.

The Russian Empire laid the foundations for broader social change, although the government achieved few concrete results. The first generation of Azerbaijan's intelligentsia started to develop after 1849 when Prince Mikhail Vorontsov, the most capable Russian official, introduced legislation to educate the children of local nobility and merchants, a proposal meant to promote regional trade and commerce in Azerbaijan.\textsuperscript{104} Further educational policies followed in 1853 to improve the quality of education in the Caucasus. However, these policies did little to accommodate Muslim populations' needs, favoring Georgian and Armenian Christians. For example, in 1850, approximately ninety percent of Muslim (predominantly ethnic Azerbaijani) children in the Caucasus were illiterate. In 1897, ethnic Azerbaijani literacy in the province of Baku was only 2.5 percent, while non-Azerbaijani minorities maintained substantially higher literacy rates. Despite comprising a majority of the population, Azerbaijanis made up only 4.5 percent of Baku's student population in 1904; three-quarters of the students were Armenian and Russian minorities.\textsuperscript{105} Fifty years after Vorontsov's reforms, there was a negligible increase in Azerbaijani literacy and the vast majority of Muslim children remained out of school.

Education initiatives supported by the Russian Empire focused on targeting demographics with the potential to increase Azerbaijani presence in the civil service and trade. Rural, poor, and Muslim populations whose education was unlikely to benefit the state directly were far less likely to benefit from new educational initiatives. The lack of state interest in educating Azerbaijan's population stemmed from the Russian Empire's hostility towards the idea of an educated Muslim population within its borders.\textsuperscript{106} With Azerbaijan’s language and people having Turkic roots, it may have appeared especially vulnerable to influence by the Ottoman Empire’s concepts of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism. An educated Muslim population within Azerbaijan could potentially seek to secede from the empire, presenting a threat to the Russian government and resulting in the empire’s lack of interest in educating Azerbaijan’s Muslim population and supporting the

\textsuperscript{103} Kerimov et al., \textit{Rugs \\& Carpets}, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{104} Mostashari, \textit{On the Religious Frontier}, 56.
\textsuperscript{105} Mostashari, \textit{On the Religious Frontier}, 74.
development of cultural institutions in Azerbaijan. In this sense, government support for carpet weaving resulted from the industry's potential for economic gain and ability to support newly emancipated peasants rather than its status as an Azerbaijani cultural institution. The showcasing of Azerbaijani carpets outside of the Caucasus acted to increase the craft's presence in the international market and demonstrate the empire's vast territorial holdings.

As the Russian Empire remained unable or unwilling to provide education to more of Azerbaijan's population, local Azerbaijani merchants, clerics, and industrialists independently operate religious and secular schools with mixed success. Schools in Azerbaijan were a mix of Islamic institutions, Russian *gimnaziums*, and secular Russo-Tatar schools that taught students both Russian and Azerbaijani; these institutions were found in cities with little, if any, formal education provided in rural areas. The first two categories provided either an inferior education or did little to meet the needs of ethnic Azerbaijani children. The third category was more successful in educating ethnic Azerbaijani children in their language and religion but struggled to receive government funding. Oil booms in Azerbaijan provided a new group of industrialists and entrepreneurs willing to fund education in the late nineteenth century. The most prominent was Haji Zeinalabedin Taghiev, who established schools for Muslim, female, and rural groups, especially for workers and children associated with his factories. During the 1890s and 1900s, Taghiev founded evening, vocational, and technical schools for village children and women, providing a decent education, Islamic instruction, and lessons in the Azerbaijani language. However, most of Azerbaijan remained uneducated and stagnation persisted in education, gender rights, and other areas of society until Azerbaijan’s integration into the Soviet Union.

Under the Soviet Union, opportunities for education and the liberalization of gender roles increased. Nearly all carpet weaving and embroidery continued to be done by women through the 1920s and 1930s, preserving their statuses as traditional female crafts. The Soviet government made dramatic strides in education, increasing literacy rates and vocational training for many Azerbaijanis who earlier tsarist reforms had not impacted. In the twenty years between 1920 and 1940, Azerbaijan achieved almost universal literacy as the number of open schools increased ninefold, with the first Soviet schools opening in 1928. Women benefitted greatly from these

110 Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 46.
reforms, making up one-quarter of enrolled students by 1940.\textsuperscript{111} Having previously woven carpets to create one's dowry, weaving in schools and factories increased women's potential for economic independence and broke ties to traditional ways of life, including the importance of a dowry created by the prospective bride. These schools offered six-to-twelve month courses on carpet weaving, training a new generation of weavers that adopted new technical and artistic styles.\textsuperscript{112} By 1930, schools specializing in carpet weaving had started to open; the establishment of Baku’s Y. M. Gagarin Young Pioneer Palace gave Azerbaijani children weekly practice carpet weaving, opening the craft up to citizens regardless of religion, ethnicity, or social class. Between 1961 and 1963, the government established technical colleges to teach weaving and train carpet designers, the latter being an initiative sponsored by the National Azerbaijan M. A. Aliev Institute of Art.\textsuperscript{113}

These developments are significant for several reasons, namely, in that they mark a substantial departure from traditional carpet design and weaving methods. Institutionalizing the weaving process meant a new generation of weavers did not learn their craft from a mother or grandmother in their ancestral village, where weavers would have learned a select number of designs based around a regional variant. Differences between districts became less pronounced as weavers congregated in regional schools and factories. Greater access to industry meant that there was less of a reliance on handmade tools and traditional methods of yard production. Village weaving rituals, imbued with religious or superstitious significances, were left out of a factory or collectivized setting. In past generations, had a weaver worked at a regional workshop, she still would have memorized only one or two designs and returned home to weave after marrying, likely remaining illiterate and incorporating new designs into traditional motifs through memory.\textsuperscript{114} Attending a state-sponsored vocational school also meant that weavers could gain an education, learn previously unknown designs from different districts, and forego traditional village designs in favor of those taught in collectivized workshops.

Differences between old and new carpet designs are apparent when comparing plates thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen with plate sixteen. The first three carpets were woven while Azerbaijan was part of the Russian Empire and contain explicit religious imagery, including the \textit{mihrab}, moon and crescent, \textit{kubpa}, and \textit{mokhtur}. All three carpets are from different regional

\textsuperscript{111} Azadi et al., \textit{Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs}, 37.
\textsuperscript{112} Azadi et al., \textit{Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs}, 28.
\textsuperscript{113} Azadi et al., \textit{Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs}, 47.
\textsuperscript{114} Kerimov et al., \textit{Rugs & Carpets}, 12.
Above: Plate 13, ‘Plate 1, Kuba Shaher, Mihrabi Kuba, district centre, Kuba.’ End of the nineteenth century. Wool, 184 by 126 cm. Location not listed.

This carpet incorporates explicit religious imagery, including a mihrabi prayer niche, moon and crescent symbol with both Islamic and pre-Islamic significance, and inscription in Azerbaijani running along the top border in navy and white. Inscription references difficulties imposed by tsarist policies, reaffirming commitment to Islam in spite of external pressures.

To right: Plate 14, ‘Plate 78, Arjiman, Shemakha district, Shirvan.’ 1907. Wool and cotton, 309 by 119 cm. Location not listed.

Five goel medallions dominate the main field, with red kubpas at either end, symbols associated with fire, Zoroastrianism, and later Islam. Flowers, stars, and animal motifs decorate the field, with toothlike projections extending off to the sides. Either Arabic or Azerbaijani script is on the upper right side of the rug, between the top kubpa and the top goel. Overall, this provides an interesting assortment of imagery that would be far less prominent in Azerbaijani weaving in decades to come.
Plate 15. ‘Plate 144, Mihrabi Chirakhly, Kedabeck district, Gyanja,’ 1910. Wool and cotton, 135 by 86 cm. Location not listed.

In contrast to the piece at right, this carpet has obvious religious imagery, most notably the mihrab prayer niche that dominates the main field. Around the niche are roses, and inside a box with a diamond symbolizing protection against evil where a mokhtur, or sacred stone, could be placed during prayer. On either side of the top of the mihrab and directly under the point of the niche are short lines of text, although a potential meaning is not clear.

In comparison to plate 16, this is a carpet that could be used for prayer and is not a secular piece.


Use of natural dyes produces a deep blue background on the main medallion and borders, with a rusty red field, smaller goels, and mace-shaped designs in each corner. The year ‘1948’ is woven in the upper-right border, making this one of the later carpets photographed. Minimal Islamic or religious imagery, lacking a mihrab, prayer lamp, kubpa, or other motifs with implicit religious meaning.

Like plate 15, it incorporates traditional Azerbaijanian motifs and symbols, but without any clear religious significance. This does not mean that no rugs with religious imagery were created during this period, but this design is far more representative of Soviet-era productions than plate 15.
schools, resulting in a wide variety of designs, motifs, color palettes, and means of depicting similar images and concepts, such as the two different styles of the *mihrab* prayer arch in plates thirteen and fourteen (Plates 13, 14, and 15). The last carpet, woven twenty years after Azerbaijan joined the Soviet Union, is absent of any religious imagery and is less elaborate than its counterparts. Its red field holds four medallions, and though this relatively sparse decoration is not unique to Soviet-era rugs, this piece lacks the character that many older Azerbaijani carpets have (Plate 16). In later collectors' eyes, the changes under Soviet collectivization sacrificed regional variance for increased production and state-approved standardization, with the massive social and economic changes in the Caucasus reducing the value of Azerbaijani carpets and the regional variations among different carpet designs.115

The Soviet government's support for Azerbaijan's carpet industry indicates a sustained interest in supporting Azerbaijan's culture rather than utilizing it as an economic colony. Azerbaijan had its own language, dominant religion, territory, a nationalist movement, and had declared sovereignty in 1918; combined with the development of its oil reserves by the Russian Empire, it met the Soviet Union's qualifications for an exploited state. The Soviet Union's support of Azerbaijani cultural practices seemingly aligns with Soviet efforts to support formerly exploited states that were "victims of Great Russian Chauvinism."116 This indicates that Soviet policy demonstrated a desire to act as a nursery for Azerbaijan's ethnic identity rather than as a prison of nations. However, Azerbaijan was not on the Bolshevik party-state list as a victim of Russian chauvinism, garnered less support for its national identity than other ethnic groups, and received comparatively less support from the Soviet government than neighboring Georgia and Armenia.117

Throughout the twentieth century, the Soviet government continued to reaffirm itself as a strong proponent of national identity.118 The promotion of Azerbaijani carpets that followed state-sanctioned designs provided a way for the Soviet Union to outwardly support the development of non-Russian native traditions while ensuring these cultural forms were absent of controversial political, religious, or social implications.119 The Soviet Union considered Azerbaijani carpets to be crafts or folk art, lacking the same potential for political subversion that literature or poetry may

115 Azadi et al., *Azerbaijani-Caucasian Rugs*, 7.
The collectivization of Caucasian carpet industries further contributed to the homogenization of carpets and their treatment as a craft for production and sale rather than a fine art. The Soviet government assembled weavers to create designs taught in state schools and workshops rather than their traditional village, tribal, and religious designs. The Soviet Union used Azerbaijan's carpet industry to illustrate its success in nurturing new ethnic identities; however, the industry relied on standardized designs that did not reflect an individual weaver's ethnic, village, or religious identity. Later rugs consequently lacked the stylistic quirks and regional variances that had made earlier Azerbaijani carpets appealing to purchasers and merchants. In short, the Soviet government was not wholly acting as a nursery of ethnic identities. Displays of Azerbaijani culture in weaving were permitted, but only in a manner that made concessions to Soviet concepts of what appropriate weaving practices and carpet designs were. The only ethnic identity nurtured by the government was that which conformed to Soviet ideology, stripping away religious motifs and traditional weaving practices from Azerbaijan's carpet industry.

Conclusion

Between the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, political, economic, and social changes irrevocably transformed the Azerbaijani carpet industry and its weavers' practices. Transitioning from an economic colony under the Russian Empire to a member of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijanis were met with increased political and educational opportunities, a rapidly industrializing economy, and a government that, to an extent, encouraged the development of an Azerbaijani national identity. In Azerbaijan's large carpet industry, these changes produced a shift towards synthetic dyes, greater mechanization of the weaving process, and the collectivization of weavers to produce carpets that increasingly abandoned traditional weaving practices and motifs in favor of more homogenous designs at state-run workshops. Comparing different carpets from various historical periods clearly demonstrates these changes to the carpet industry.

When considering the changes undergone by Azerbaijan's carpet industry under the Soviet Union, it is apparent that the state functioned as both a nursery of ethnic identities and a prison of

nations. Azerbaijani weavers promoted their culture through carpets. As the Soviet Union educated weavers and centralized the carpet manufacturing process to allow for more efficient weaving during the twentieth century, it acted as a nursery and aided in the growth of one of Azerbaijan's most important cultural practices. However, there were limits to the government's generosity, and under the Soviet regime, weavers abandoned designs with Islamic and pre-Islamic religious significance that had featured in Azerbaijani carpets for centuries. Furthermore, the standardization of designs and centralization of the weaving process sacrificed the regional variances and handwoven look of Azerbaijan's carpets to increase the rate of carpet production and produce more standardized pieces, decreasing the cultural value of Azerbaijani carpets woven during and after the mid-twentieth century. Soviet support for Azerbaijan's national identity was contingent on displays of identity reflecting government ideology and principles. This limiting factor meant the state functioned as much as a prison as it did a nursery. Developments in Azerbaijan's carpet industry thus reflect both historical schools, with changes to the production and styles of carpets acting as markers for larger political, social, and economic changes over multiple generations.
Bibliography


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