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A Historical and Comparative Study of Azerbaijani-German Scientific, Pedagogical, and Literary-Cultural Relations (19th-Early 20th Centuries): Education, Language, and Intellectual Exchange in the Caucasus

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Keywords

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Abstract

Azerbaijani-German relations encompass a historical period of nearly two centuries and represent a significant chapter in the cultural, educational, and intellectual history of the Caucasus. Based on primary historical sources and archival materials, these relations began in the early nineteenth century and developed through multifaceted scientific, pedagogical, literary, and socio-cultural interactions. This study examines the evolution of Azerbaijani-German relations with a particular focus on education, language, and scholarly cooperation. Special attention is devoted to the establishment of German settlements in Azerbaijan, the development of educational institutions within these communities, and the role of German and Russian scholars in advancing Azerbaijani studies. The article also highlights the importance of the Azerbaijani language as a regional lingua franca in the Caucasus and the contributions of prominent intellectual figures—such as Friedrich Bodenstedt, Boris Dorn, and Müller—to the study of Azerbaijani history, literature, and linguistics. The findings demonstrate that Azerbaijani-German cooperation significantly influenced the modernization of education and the dissemination of European scientific thought in Azerbaijan, while simultaneously enriching German Oriental studies.

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1. Introduction

The history of Azerbaijani-German relations represents a rich and complex field of interdisciplinary research encompassing education, science, literature, and cultural exchange. Historical evidence suggests that these relations began at the start of the nineteenth century and evolved dynamically over time through institutional cooperation, intellectual mobility, and mutual scholarly interest.

Official historical records confirm that, in the early nineteenth century, German colonies were established on Azerbaijani territory. Among the most prominent settlements were Helenendorf and Annenfeld, which played a crucial role in fostering educational and cultural interaction. Helenendorf was located near the city of Ganja in the Göygöl district, while Annenfeld was situated in the Shamkir region. Historical accounts also mention the existence of another German settlement, Markovka, near Aghstafa.

These colonies did not function solely as agricultural communities but became important centers of education and cultural transmission, significantly contributing to Azerbaijani-German pedagogical relations.

2. German Educational Institutions in Azerbaijan

One of the most remarkable aspects of German settlement life in Azerbaijan was the establishment of general education schools. The school in Helenendorf was founded in 1879, while the Annenfeld school had already been established in 1837. Both institutions were notable for their progressive educational practices, including co-education, as boys and girls studied together—an uncommon feature for the period.

In 1890, these schools were transferred under the authority of the Russian Ministry of Public Education and were reorganized as primary schools. In addition to theology and the German language, students were instructed in a range of subjects taught in Russian, reflecting the multilingual educational environment of the Caucasus.

Archival sources also indicate the existence of German schools in other districts and villages across Azerbaijan. A particularly important reference comes from L. Modzalevski, an official of the Caucasian educational district, who published in 1880 a Russian-language work in Tiflis titled *"The Development of Education in the Caucasus from 1802 to 1880."* In this work, Modzalevski noted that before the arrival of Russian administrative authorities, Basel missionaries had already established schools in the Azerbaijani city of Shusha in 1827, where many Muslim children showed a strong preference for learning German.

3. Industrial Education and the Gedabek Copper Smelting Plant

Further evidence of Azerbaijani-German educational cooperation can be found in industrial contexts. Archival documents preserved in the Russian Central Archive in Saint Petersburg indicate that in 1890, a school was established in the village of Galakend, in the Gedabek district, as part of a copper smelting enterprise.

The Gedabek Copper Smelting Plant, founded between 1856 and 1885, was owned by foreign capitalists and produced copper and copper products. Gold and silver extracted at the facility were supplied to Russian markets and exported abroad, primarily to Germany. The associated school was financed through industrial revenues and educational funds, reflecting a close link between industrial development and education.

4. Russian Expansion and Cultural Transformation

The incorporation of Azerbaijan into the Russian Empire in the early nineteenth century, while politically driven, unintentionally created favorable conditions for the development of scientific, pedagogical, literary, and socio-political relations between Azerbaijan and European nations. Although Tsarist Russia was often described as a “prison of nations,” it simultaneously served as a conduit for Western European intellectual and cultural influences.

Through this complex historical process, Northern and Western Azerbaijan became integrated into the socio-economic and cultural development trajectory of Western Europe. Progressive figures from Russian and European intellectual circles played a key role in introducing advanced educational ideas, scientific methodologies, and literary trends into Azerbaijani society.

5. Language, Literature, and Intellectual Exchange

A particularly significant aspect of Azerbaijani-German relations was the growing scholarly interest in the Azerbaijani language. During the nineteenth century, Azerbaijani functioned as a regional lingua franca throughout Transcaucasia and the broader Orient. As contemporary observers noted, just as French served as the dominant language of Europe, Azerbaijani fulfilled a similar role in much of the Caucasus and Western Asia.

The Russian writer and Decembrist Bestuzhev-Marlinsky famously wrote in the Tiflis-based Russian newspaper *"Tiflisskiye Vedomosti"* that “through the French language one could travel across Europe, and through Azerbaijani one could travel across Asia from beginning to end.”

As a result, many European travelers, scholars, and writers sought to learn Azerbaijani. The language was included as an independent subject in state school curricula in cities such as Tiflis, Yerevan, Derbent, Kutaisi, Stavropol, and Gori. According to the 1885 Transcaucasian school regulations, students who demonstrated excellence in Azerbaijani language studies were awarded gold and silver medals.

6. German Scholars and Azerbaijani Studies

German and German-trained scholars made substantial contributions to the study of Azerbaijani history, language, and culture. Among the most prominent figures was Friedrich Bodenstedt, a German poet and translator who played a vital role in introducing Azerbaijani literature to European audiences. His travels in Azerbaijan and deep interest in its language, culture, and educational system remain a focal point of scholarly analysis today.

Another key figure was Boris Andreyevich Dorn (1805–1881), a German-born scholar who served as a professor at Saint Petersburg University and became an academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1842. Dorn’s works—based

on Persian and local sources—are considered foundational studies in Russian Orientalism, particularly regarding the history of Shirvan.

Dorn also maintained correspondence with the Azerbaijani philosopher, writer, and educator Mirza Fatali Akhundov, supporting his innovative alphabet reform project. Additionally, Dorn conducted extensive research on Azerbaijani historical monuments and collected linguistic and ethnographic materials during his travels to Lankaran and the Caspian regions (Ahmadov, 2021).

Similarly, Academician Müller (1848–1913) played a significant role in advancing Azerbaijani–German scholarly relations. As a professor of Oriental languages at the Universities of Königsberg and Halle, Müller conducted extensive research on Arabic, Turkish, and related languages, producing critical editions and bibliographic works that strengthened the foundations of Oriental studies.

The history of Azerbaijani–German relations constitute a valuable chapter in the broader narrative of European–Caucasian intellectual exchange. Through educational institutions, linguistic engagement, scholarly collaboration, and cultural dialogue, these relations contributed significantly to the modernization of education and scientific thought in Azerbaijan while enriching German Oriental studies.

The legacy of these interactions—embodied in schools, academic works, and intellectual networks—continues to shape contemporary understandings of intercultural cooperation and historical connectivity between Azerbaijan and Germany.

Mirza Kazimbek was widely recognized by his contemporaries as the “Patriarch of Russian Oriental Studies”, a title reflecting both the breadth and depth of his scholarly influence. He was awarded the prestigious Demidov Prize on three occasions and received a diamond ring from the Queen of Great Britain in recognition of his scholarly achievements. His academic works were translated into several European languages, including German, and published widely across Europe, contributing significantly to the dissemination of Oriental knowledge in Western scholarly circles (Modzalevski, 1880).

Kazimbek’s intellectual mission was explicitly aimed at introducing the ancient and rich cultures of the Orient to Russian and European audiences. Owing to his international scholarly reputation, he was elected not only to the Russian Academy of Sciences, but also to academic institutions and learned societies in Great Britain, Germany, France, Denmark, and the United States of America, reflecting the global significance of his contributions to Oriental studies (Ahmadov, 2017).

2. Azerbaijani Students in Germany and the Transmission of Pedagogical Thought

The development of Azerbaijani–German scientific, pedagogical, and socio-cultural relations was also closely linked to the activities of Azerbaijani intellectuals who pursued higher education in Europe, particularly in Germany. One of the most prominent figures in this context was the renowned educator, publicist, and reformist intellectual Mahammad Ağa Shahtakhtlu (1846–1931).

Shahtakhtlu was born in 1846 in the village of Shahtakhtlu, located in the Sharur-Daralayaz region. He received his initial education at the city school of Nakhchivan and later completed his secondary education at the Tiflis Gymnasium. Seeking advanced academic training, he traveled to St. Petersburg, where he learned German, and subsequently continued his studies at Leipzig University in Germany. He later completed his higher education in France at the prestigious Sorbonne University, specializing in Oriental languages (Ahmadov, 2006).

Shahtakhtlu worked extensively in the press of Russia and Western Europe, delivered public lectures, and published numerous articles addressing educational reform, linguistic modernization, and cultural progress. Possessing fluency in twelve languages, he gained significant recognition within European intellectual and academic circles. His activities were received with particular interest in Germany, France, the United States, Iran, and Türkiye, where his ideas contributed to broader debates on education and modernization.

The dissemination of progressive European pedagogical ideas in Azerbaijan—facilitated by figures such as Shahtakhtlu—represents one of the most important achievements of Azerbaijani–German intellectual exchange. These ideas were gradually integrated into the curricula of Azerbaijani educational institutions, shaping the pedagogical worldview of future teachers and intellectuals (Ahmadov, 2021).

3. German Pedagogical Thought and Its Influence in Azerbaijan

Among the European pedagogues whose ideas exerted a lasting influence on Azerbaijani educational thought were Johann Amos Comenius, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, and particularly the German pedagogue Adolf Diesterweg (1790–1866). Diesterweg’s educational philosophy played a decisive role in shaping modern pedagogical discourse in Azerbaijan.

Diesterweg’s life and pedagogical legacy occupied a prominent place in the university textbook *History of Pedagogy*, which was taught in Azerbaijani higher education institutions. The author of this textbook, Professor A. J. Seyidov (1892–

1977), characterized Diesterweg's ideas as fundamentally opposed to social stratification, national exclusivism, and clerical control over education. Diesterweg advocated democratic principles in schooling, defended the autonomy of education from the church, and further developed the progressive ideas of Rousseau and Pestalozzi (Seyidov, 1968). According to Seyidov, Diesterweg was held in such high esteem by German educators that he was referred to as "the teacher of German teachers." His works were translated into multiple languages, and a medal was established in his honor. Importantly, Diesterweg's pedagogical ideas transcended national boundaries and found devoted supporters not only in Germany, but also in Russia and Azerbaijan, where they were adapted to local educational contexts. Seyidov concluded that Diesterweg's pedagogical legacy possesses not only historical significance but also enduring relevance for contemporary education.

4. Azerbaijani-German Cultural Relations in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Periods

The Soviet era marked a new stage in the development of Azerbaijani-German cultural relations. During this period, numerous works of German literature were translated into Azerbaijani and widely published. These included Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the dramas of Friedrich Schiller, and the poetry and prose of Heinrich Heine, Gerhart Hauptmann, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Erich Maria Remarque, among others. Following the Second World War, scientific and technical cooperation was established between Azerbaijani and German research institutions. The Institutes of Physics, Chemistry, and Inorganic Chemistry of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, as well as the Shamakhi Astrophysical Observatory, engaged in collaborative research with German scientific organizations. During this period, the works of Azerbaijani scholars were translated into German and published abroad, further strengthening bilateral academic ties.

5. Independence and the Contemporary Stage of Cooperation

After the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, Azerbaijani-German relations entered a qualitatively new phase. The recognition of Azerbaijan's independence by the Federal Republic of Germany on 31 December 1991 provided strong momentum for the renewal and expansion of diplomatic, cultural, and academic relations between the two countries.

This period witnessed the organization of mutual national culture days, the establishment of the Nizami Ganjavi Cultural Institute near Berlin, the publication of the Azerbaijani-language journal *Neue Brücke* (New Bridge), and the formation of sister-city partnerships, such as that between Ludwigshafen and Sumgait. These initiatives symbolized the deepening friendship between the Azerbaijani and German peoples.

Since the 1960s, student mobility has played a particularly important role in bilateral relations, with German students studying in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani students pursuing education in Germany. This exchange reached its peak in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Notable cultural milestones include the publication in 1983 in Düsseldorf of Azerbaijani poet Nabi Khazri's work on the life and poetry of Mirza Shafi Vazeh in German, and the publication in 2015 of Azerbaijani scholar Humeyir Ahmadov's English-language study on the modernization of higher education and European integration. Both works were received with considerable scholarly interest.

6. Current State of German Language and Cultural Studies in Azerbaijan

Today, German studies occupy a stable position within Azerbaijan's educational system. A Faculty of German operates at the Azerbaijan University of Languages, and German is taught in general secondary schools, vocational institutions, and universities across the country. Specialized German language textbooks have been developed for grades 5–10 as well as for higher education institutions.

At present, Azerbaijan hosts a community of highly qualified specialists in German language, literature, and culture, ensuring the continuity and further development of Azerbaijani-German academic and cultural relations.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on historical, archival, and bibliographic sources concerning the development of Azerbaijani-German scientific, pedagogical, and literary-cultural relations from the nineteenth century to the contemporary period. No experiments were conducted, and no human participants, personal interviews, or clinical/medical data were involved. Therefore, ethical committee approval and informed consent were not required for this research.

The author adhered to principles of academic integrity, including accurate attribution of intellectual contributions, responsible interpretation of historical materials, and avoidance of plagiarism. When referencing historical figures, institutions, or communities, the study seeks to maintain a respectful and scholarly tone, avoiding discriminatory or stigmatizing narratives. Any limitations in historical sources—such as incomplete archival records or uneven documentation—are acknowledged implicitly through reliance on multiple categories of evidence (e.g., encyclopedic sources, archival listings, published memoirs, and secondary scholarship).

Conclusion

This article has examined key historical trajectories in the formation and evolution of Azerbaijani-German scientific, pedagogical, and literary-cultural relations across an approximately two-century period. The findings demonstrate that these relations developed through several interconnected channels: (1) settlement and institutional presence (including German colonies and schools in Azerbaijani territories), (2) scholarly interaction and Oriental studies, (3) translation and literary mediation, and (4) twentieth-century scientific-technical cooperation and post-1991 cultural diplomacy. The study highlights that early nineteenth-century developments—particularly the emergence of German educational institutions in Azerbaijani regions and the documented activity of foreign missions and schools—created an initial infrastructure for sustained intercultural contact. Subsequently, academic and intellectual engagement expanded through the work of prominent Orientalists and researchers whose interests connected the Caucasus with wider European scholarly networks. In this context, the role of translators, educators, and cultural intermediaries proved essential: they transformed localized knowledge into transferable intellectual capital and enabled the mutual circulation of ideas, language, and literature.

A further conclusion is that Azerbaijani-German relations were not limited to symbolic cultural exchange; rather, they evolved into structured institutional cooperation, especially in the Soviet period and after the Second World War, when scientific and technical collaboration became more visible. Following Azerbaijan's restoration of independence in 1991, bilateral relations acquired renewed political and cultural significance, expressed through cultural institutes, publications, city partnerships, student mobility, and modern German-language instruction within Azerbaijan's educational system. Overall, Azerbaijani-German relations can be understood as a historically layered phenomenon in which education, scholarship, and literature functioned simultaneously as instruments of modernization, communication, and cultural continuity. The long-term stability of this relationship suggests that it remains a productive foundation for contemporary cooperation in higher education, research, intercultural studies, and cultural diplomacy.

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Conflict of Interest

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