

Documentary evidence of soviet repression in Azerbaijan 1920–1950

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Abstract.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the evolution, mechanisms, and socio-political consequences of Soviet repression in Azerbaijan between 1920 and 1950 based on previously underexplored archival materials. The study seeks to identify the institutional logic of repression, the role of Soviet security bodies in restructuring political and cultural life, and the regional features that distinguished Azerbaijan from other Soviet republics. **The research methodology** is grounded in the principles of historicism, scientific objectivity, and systematic analysis. To address the research objectives, the study employs historiographical analysis, source-critical examination, chronological and problem-oriented approaches, and descriptive analysis. The empirical base consists of interrogation protocols, internal correspondence, operational reports, and administrative directives preserved in various fonds of the Azerbaijan Republic State Archive. **The scientific novelty** of the study lies in the reinterpretation of Soviet repression in Azerbaijan through a comprehensive synthesis of archival evidence that has remained insufficiently studied. The research identifies regional characteristics in investigative practices, ideological narratives, and local adaptations of all-Union directives, demonstrating how central policies were implemented at the republican level. **The findings** show that Soviet repression in Azerbaijan developed through several stages, including early Sovietization, the Great Terror, and the post-war period of ideological control. These processes led to the elimination of political elites, the transformation of intellectual life, and the restructuring of social institutions. The archival materials reveal that repression functioned not only as a tool of political violence but also as a long-term mechanism of social and cultural control whose consequences extended far beyond the Stalinist era.

Keywords: Soviet repression, Azerbaijan, NKVD, archival documents, political violence, Great Terror, Stalinist policy.

Документальні свідчення радянських репресій в Азербайджані 1920–1950-х рр.

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Анотація.

Метою цієї статті є аналіз еволюції, механізмів та соціально-політичних наслідків радянських репресій в Азербайджані у 1920–1950 роках на основі малодосліджених архівних матеріалів. Дослідження спрямоване на виявлення інституційної логіки репресій, ролі радянських органів державної безпеки у перебудові політичного та культурного життя, а також регіональних особливостей, що відрізняли Азербайджан від інших союзних республік. **Методологія дослідження** ґрунтується на принципах історизму, наукової об'єктивності та системного аналізу. Для досягнення поставлених завдань використано історіографічний аналіз, джерелознавчу критику, хронологічний і проблемно-орієнтований підходи, а також описовий метод. Емпіричну базу становлять протоколи допитів, внутрішнє листування, оперативні звіти та адміністративні директиви, що зберігаються у різних фондах Державного архіву Азербайджанської Республіки. **Наукова новизна дослідження** полягає у переосмисленні радянських репресій в Азербайджані через комплексний синтез архівних свідчень, які раніше залишалися недостатньо дослідженими. У статті виявлено регіональні особливості слідчої практики, ідеологічних наративів та локальних адаптацій загальносоюзних директив, що демонструє, як центральні політичні рішення реалізовувалися на республіканському рівні. **Висновки.** Отримані результати показують, що радянські репресії в Азербайджані проходили кілька етапів, серед яких ранній період радянзації, період Великого терору та післявоєнний етап ідеологічного контролю. Ці процеси призвели до ліквідації політичних еліт, трансформації інтелектуального життя та перебудови соціальних інститутів. Архівні матеріали свідчать, що репресії функціонували не лише як інструмент політичного насильства, але й як довготривалий механізм соціального та культурного контролю, наслідки якого виходили далеко за межі сталінської епохи.

Ключові слова: радянські репресії, Азербайджан, НКВС, архівні документи, політичне насильство, Великий терор, сталінська політика.

The problem statement. The history of Soviet repression in Azerbaijan during 1920–1950 represents one of the most complex and sensitive periods in the historical development of the republic. The establishment of Soviet power in Azerbaijan in 1920 radically transformed political and social life, introducing new ideological priorities and mechanisms of control. From the first years of Sovietization, the security services became central instruments for reshaping local elites, suppressing opposition, and reorganizing social structures according to Bolshevik principles. These developments profoundly influenced cultural, intellectual, and religious spheres, gradually eroding traditional institutions and creating a new political and social reality. Despite the significance of this period, the comprehensive analysis of Soviet repression in Azerbaijan based on archival documents has not become a fully developed field of academic research. In many studies, the focus remains on general descriptions of mass arrests, deportations, and the destruction of national elites, while the internal logic of the repressive system, the phases of its evolution, and the specific mechanisms through which repression was implemented at the republican and local levels remain insufficiently examined. This gap is particularly evident when comparing Azerbaijan with other Soviet republics, where systematic studies

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 based on archival evidence have been more actively developed. Therefore, addressing this subject requires detailed scholarly investigation grounded in primary sources that reflect the decision-making processes and institutional dynamics of Soviet security bodies.

The historiography of Soviet repression in Azerbaijan has evolved gradually and remains uneven, reflecting both the complexity of the topic and the long-term difficulty of accessing archival collections. Early research, including works by Qasimov (Qasimov, 2020) and İsmayilova (İsmayilova, 2025), focused primarily on the political background of repression and the general portrayal of mass persecutions, offering descriptive accounts rather than systematic analysis of institutional practices. While these studies drew attention to the tragic fate of political and cultural elites, they did not engage deeply with the procedural logic of the Soviet security organs or the mechanisms through which repression was implemented at the republican level. A significant expansion of the empirical base occurred only after the partial opening of archival materials preserved in the Azerbaijan Republic State Archive (ARDA). The documentary collections housed in fonds such as f. 1 (government administration), f. 12 (Cheka–GPU operational materials), f. 20 (OGPU–NKVD regional correspondence), f. 28 (judicial documents), and f. 276 (investigative files of the Great Terror period) provide extensive evidence on institutional decision-making, interrogations, and the everyday functioning of the repressive apparatus. The publication of selected documents by the Institute of History made some of this material available to a wider scholarly audience, but the majority of fonds including internal directives, interrogation protocols, and operational summaries remain insufficiently explored.

International scholarship offers valuable methodological frameworks. Foundational works by Conquest (Conquest, 2008), Applebaum (Applebaum, 2003), and Viola (Viola, 2007) analyze the Soviet repressive system, the Gulag, and Stalinist state violence across the USSR. However, these studies although crucial for understanding all-Union patterns devote limited attention to the South Caucasus, where national composition, local administrative structures, and specific socio-political conditions shaped distinct trajectories of repression. As a result, Azerbaijan's experience remains insufficiently integrated into comparative analyses of Soviet state violence. Ukrainian historiography occupies a particularly important place due to its deep engagement with archival material. Studies by Pesotsky (Pesotsky, 2020) and Kulchytsky (Kulchytsky, 2018) demonstrate how interrogation files, agency reports, and NKVD correspondence can be analyzed to reconstruct the decision-making mechanisms and ideological narratives of the security services. These approaches closely parallel the types of documents preserved in ARDA, especially within fonds 12, 20, and 276, making them highly relevant for the methodological development of Azerbaijani research.

More recent works, such as Kravchenko's (Kravchenko, 2025) analysis of administrative processes during the Soviet period, illustrate how micro-historical approaches can illuminate broader structural dynamics. This perspective is essential for Azerbaijan, where repression affected a wide range of social groups including political elites, rural communities, religious figures, and educators and where individual investigative cases preserved in fonds 28 and 276 reveal the multilayered nature of state violence. Thus, the examination of existing scholarship demonstrates that, although various aspects of Soviet repression in Azerbaijan have been studied, the field lacks a comprehensive analysis based on the full spectrum of available archival material. The richness of ARDA's documentary collections underscores the need for systematic research that integrates interrogation protocols, institutional correspondence, operational reports, and administrative directives into a coherent analytical framework. This gap highlights the relevance of the present study, which aims to utilize these underexamined archival resources to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Soviet repression in Azerbaijan.

Analysis of Sources and Recent Research. The historiography of Soviet repression has been extensively developed in international scholarship, particularly in studies focusing on the Stalinist political system and mechanisms of mass violence. One of the most influential works in this field is Robert Conquest's analysis of the Great Terror, which highlights the centralized nature of repression and the role of state security organs in implementing political purges across the Soviet Union (Conquest, 2008). Similarly, Michael Ellman has examined statistical and institutional aspects of Soviet repression, emphasizing the administrative logic and systemic character of political violence during the Stalinist period (Ellman, 2002). In recent decades, broader comparative approaches have also been developed. Studies of Soviet political violence in Eastern Europe and the USSR have explored the social and cultural consequences of repression, demonstrating how these policies reshaped political institutions and everyday life (Applebaum, 2003; Connelly et al., 2011). Such works underline the importance of archival sources for understanding both the scale and the mechanisms of repression.

Research specifically devoted to Azerbaijan has developed more gradually. Early studies have primarily focused on general descriptions of the persecution of national elites and the tragic consequences of the 1937–1938 repressions (AMEA Tarix İnstitutu; Əmrahov, 2022). While these

works contributed to documenting the scale of repression, they often relied on limited source bases and did not fully explore the institutional functioning of Soviet security bodies in the republic. At the same time, the opening of archival collections in the post-Soviet period has created new opportunities for research. Archival materials preserved in the Azerbaijan Republic State Archive contain interrogation protocols, operational reports, administrative correspondence, and investigative files that reveal the internal procedures and decision-making processes of Soviet security institutions. The systematic examination of these documents makes it possible to analyze how central Soviet directives were implemented at the republican and local levels and how repression influenced political, cultural, and intellectual life in Azerbaijan.

Purpose. Given this, our study aims to identify and analyze the main forms, mechanisms, and stages of Soviet repression in Azerbaijan during 1920–1950 based on archival materials, placing particular emphasis on how the security apparatus operated at different levels and how these practices shaped political, cultural, and social life. The study seeks to determine the institutional logic of repression, the categories of individuals targeted, and the ideological narratives reflected in investigative documents, operational summaries, and administrative correspondence. At the same time, it aims to assess the significance of Azerbaijani archival sources for understanding the broader system of Soviet state violence and their role in reconstructing regional variations of Stalinist policies.

The results of the research. The archival materials used in this study make it clear that Soviet repression in Azerbaijan did not emerge suddenly but developed gradually as political priorities in Moscow shifted. In the earliest years of Soviet rule, the documents show how the new authorities focused on eliminating former political leaders, members of the local intelligentsia, and religious figures. Many of the accusations from the early 1920s rely on broad and often vague concepts such as “counterrevolutionary intent” or “national-bourgeois sympathies,” phrases that appear repeatedly in the files preserved in ARDA (ARDA, f. 1, siy. 89, iș 123, p. 6). What stands out is how similar the terminology is to language used in other Soviet republics, especially Ukraine, where Applebaum (Applebaum, 2003) and Pesotsky (Pesotsky, 2020) describe nearly identical patterns. This strongly suggests that, from the beginning, the ideological foundations of repression were coordinated and standardized across the Soviet space.

The materials from the late 1920s and early 1930s reveal a different kind of pressure, one tied to collectivization and the restructuring of rural life. Reports from village-level committees and district organs frequently refer to resistance to collectivization, concealed property, or the alleged influence of religious leaders (ARDA, f. 20, siy. 11, iș 212, pp. 23–24). Although many of these accusations were thinly substantiated, their purpose was not merely punitive. Rather, they aimed to break local networks of trust and weaken any form of community cohesion that could slow down the collectivization campaign. This logic matches observations made by Kulchytsky (Kulchytsky, 2018), who notes that similar tactics were employed in Ukraine, where informant networks expanded rapidly and “preventive” arrests became routine. The Azerbaijani files show a comparable pattern, though the scale was adapted to local demographic and social conditions.

The period of the Great Terror stands out sharply in the archival record. The files from 1937–1938 are marked by a striking uniformity. Interrogation protocols preserved in ARDA fond 276 follow nearly identical formats, with prewritten accusation templates that investigators filled in with minor variations (ARDA, f. 276, siy. 6, iș 354, p. 9). Many cases involving teachers, writers, and cultural workers rely on allegations of “pan-Turkist connections” or “foreign ideological influence,” themes also highlighted by Qasimov (Qasimov, 2020, p. 52). When read alongside Conquest’s analysis of quota-driven purges (Conquest, 2008, p. 141), the Azerbaijani materials confirm that the Great Terror relied less on individual evidence and more on fulfilling centrally assigned categories of guilt. Several files repeat the same sentences almost word for word, giving the impression that the investigative process had become a mechanical procedure.

The post-war materials point to yet another shift. By the late 1940s, the scale of arrests had decreased, but political and ideological oversight had intensified. Reports from educational and cultural institutions describe investigations triggered by a single “incorrect statement,” foreign literature, or even perceived indifference to Soviet rituals (ARDA, f. 31, siy. 1, iș 96, p. 12). In many cases, these episodes did not lead to imprisonment but resulted in disciplinary measures, forced transfers, or continuous surveillance. This pattern is consistent with developments in other Soviet republics, where, as Lisna and Mykhailiv (Lisna & Mykhailiv, 2019) note, the authorities increasingly sought to monitor public expression and intellectual life rather than rely on mass repression.

The archival record also shows that Azerbaijan experienced a limited but significant involvement in the Soviet deportation campaigns of the 1940s. While the scale did not match the mass deportations in Crimea or the North Caucasus, certain groups most notably Meskhetian Turks and some Kurdish families were forcibly relocated, as documented in ARDA fond 124 (ARDA, f. 124, siy. 5, iș 97, p. 11). These documents contain precise lists of family members, inventories of household property, and orders outlining the logistics of transportation. When viewed alongside Viola’s broader

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 study of “special settlements” (Viola, 2007), the Azerbaijani material suggests that deportations in the South Caucasus were applied selectively, targeting specific groups rather than entire regions.

Taken together, these findings show that repression in Azerbaijan followed the logic of all-Union policy while also reflecting local realities. The accusations, the investigative procedures, and the ideological categories used in the documents mirror trends observed across the Soviet republics, yet the scale and intensity varied according to the region’s own social structure, ethnic composition, and political sensitivities. The archives make it clear that although the instruments of repression changed over time from physical elimination to ideological supervision the underlying mechanism of state control remained remarkably consistent throughout the period studied.

The archival materials also demonstrate that repression in Azerbaijan was not limited to political persecution; it extended deeply into the domain of everyday life and interpersonal relations, creating an atmosphere of omnipresent suspicion. Numerous village- and district-level reports from the 1930s show how neighbors, colleagues, and even family members were drawn into the investigative logic of the state, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes under pressure. Informant networks, which expanded rapidly during collectivization, became one of the defining features of Soviet control. In many of the cases preserved in ARDA fond 20, it is evident that accusations were often rooted in personal conflicts, economic disputes, or local rivalries, yet once documented, these accusations took on a political character that was almost impossible to refute (ARDA, f. 20, siy. 11, iş 212). The transformation of ordinary disagreements into “counterrevolutionary activity” not only amplified the scale of repression, but also changed the sociocultural psychology of communities. As scholars such as Jones and Applebaum have noted, the blurring of boundaries between political and personal spheres was one of the most corrosive elements of Stalinist governance, and the Azerbaijani archival cases confirm the intensity of this process at the local level. What emerges from these sources is the picture of a society that was gradually reconfigured to internalize surveillance as a normal condition of life, making the mechanisms of repression self-sustaining even in periods when arrests numerically decreased.

Another significant finding revealed by the Azerbaijani archives is the extent to which repression became embedded in institutional life, particularly within educational, cultural, and administrative structures. Files from fond 31 and fond 113 show recurrent investigations launched in pedagogical institutes, scientific organizations, museums, and publishing houses. These investigations were often triggered by ideological audits, assessments of curriculum content, or denunciations related to perceived “incorrect interpretations” of history or literature (ARDA, f. 31, siy. 1, iş 96). The cases highlight how intellectual activity whether scholarly research, teaching materials, or artistic expression was constantly weighed against ideological orthodoxy. This pattern closely mirrors observations made by Lisna and Mykhailiv regarding the southern Ukrainian regions, where the boundary between acceptable and prohibited intellectual discourse narrowed dramatically throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The Azerbaijani archival evidence reinforces this pattern and adds a regional dimension: in Azerbaijan, the themes of nationalism, Turkism, and foreign cultural influence were treated with particular suspicion, making intellectual fields especially vulnerable. As a result, repression not only removed specific individuals but also shaped institutional priorities, research agendas, and educational programs for decades to come. The influence of these processes is visible in the homogenized structure of academic life in the post-war period, where innovation was permitted only insofar as it aligned with ideological expectations.

In addition, the archives shed light on the subtle but powerful mechanisms of administrative pressure that persisted even after the peak years of the Great Terror. Documents from the late 1940s reveal patterns of administrative harassment: sudden workplace transfers, unexplained demotions, restrictions on travel, and ongoing monitoring by local party committees. These practices did not necessarily result in formal criminal charges, but they served as effective tools of control and discipline. For instance, several files in fond 28 describe teachers or research staffs who were repeatedly summoned for questioning based on their “lack of sufficient enthusiasm” in participating in public rituals or political meetings. Although such cases often ended with official warnings rather than imprisonment, the psychological and professional consequences were long-lasting.

This “soft repression,” which emerged strongly after 1945, corresponds with broader Soviet trends identified by Connelly and Roseman, who note that the post-war state increasingly relied on ideological conformity and administrative oversight rather than large-scale violence. The Azerbaijani documents show that this transition was equally pronounced in the republic and that loyalty, discipline, and ideological visibility became essential criteria for social stability and career advancement. Equally important is the evidence showing how repression reconfigured ethnic and regional relations within Azerbaijan. While the republic did not experience mass ethnic cleansings on the scale of Crimea or the North Caucasus, the selective deportations of Meskhetian Turks, Kurdish families, and certain groups considered “politically unreliable” created significant demographic and social shifts (ARDA, f. 124, siy. 5, iş 97). These movements, though more limited, nonetheless altered local community

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structures and contributed to long-term mistrust between certain populations and the Soviet administration. Comparative analysis with Viola's work indicates that these deportations followed the same logistical and ideological templates applied across the USSR: standardized lists, centralized orders, and the categorization of entire families as potential threats based on presumed national, cultural, or geopolitical affiliations. The Azerbaijani archive adds nuance by showing how regional administrators sometimes negotiated or reinterpreted these directives, reflecting the complex relationship between central commands and local implementation.

Finally, the expanded analysis of the archival corpus reveals the profound symbolic impact of repression on Azerbaijan's intellectual and cultural identity. The destruction of elite networks, the silencing of prominent writers, educators, and religious figures, and the reorientation of creative institutions fundamentally reshaped the trajectory of cultural development. Many of the investigations preserved in fond 276 contain confiscated manuscripts, personal letters, unpublished research, and educational programs that were never restored or reintegrated after the individuals were arrested. The loss of such materials represents not only the silencing of individuals but also the erasure of alternative cultural and scholarly pathways that might have influenced the evolution of Azerbaijani identity. In this sense, repression operated not only as a political mechanism but also as a cultural filter, shaping what could be remembered, published, or taught. The archival materials thus provide a rare window into the intellectual worlds that were interrupted and, in many cases, permanently eliminated.

Conclusions. The analysis of archival materials from the State Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan makes it possible to reconstruct a more detailed picture of the mechanisms and consequences of Soviet repression in Azerbaijan between 1920 and 1950. The examined documents demonstrate that repression was not an episodic or chaotic phenomenon, but rather a systematic and institutionalized policy carried out by Soviet authorities in order to consolidate political control and reshape the social structure of the republic. Through arrest records, interrogation protocols, sentencing documents, and official correspondence, the archival sources reveal how repression became an integral element of governance, targeting individuals and groups perceived as ideologically unreliable or politically undesirable. The materials clearly indicate that repression affected multiple layers of Azerbaijani society. Representatives of the intellectual elite, including scholars, educators, writers, and cultural figures, were among the primary targets. Their persecution had far-reaching consequences for the development of science, culture, and national intellectual life. By eliminating or marginalizing influential intellectuals, the Soviet authorities significantly weakened the institutional foundations of Azerbaijani cultural and academic development. At the same time, repression extended beyond intellectual circles and reached ordinary citizens, including peasants, workers, and local administrators. This demonstrates that the repressive apparatus was designed not only to neutralize potential political opposition but also to impose ideological conformity across the broader population.

Another important finding of the study is the bureaucratic and procedural nature of repression. The archival documents show that repression was implemented through a complex administrative system that involved investigative bodies, judicial institutions, and party structures. Arrests, interrogations, and sentencing procedures were often formalized through documentation that gave an appearance of legality, even though the outcomes were largely predetermined by political considerations. In many cases, the accusations were based on vague charges such as "counter-revolutionary activity," "nationalism," or "anti-Soviet propaganda," which allowed the authorities to criminalize a wide range of behaviors and opinions. The archival evidence also highlights the broader social and psychological effects of repression. The climate of fear created by arrests and political persecution had a profound impact on everyday life. Individuals were forced to demonstrate loyalty to the Soviet regime, avoid expressions of dissent, and distance themselves from people who had been labeled as "enemies of the people." As a result, repression functioned not only as a mechanism of physical elimination but also as a powerful instrument of social control that shaped patterns of behavior, communication, and public discourse within society.

Furthermore, the study confirms that the legacy of Soviet repression continued to influence Azerbaijani society long after the period under consideration. The destruction of intellectual networks, the disruption of educational and cultural institutions, and the long-term stigmatization of families associated with repressed individuals had enduring consequences. These effects contributed to the formation of collective historical memory and continue to shape public discussions about the Soviet past in contemporary Azerbaijan. The findings of this research underscore the importance of archival sources for understanding the historical reality of repression. Many aspects of Soviet political repression remain insufficiently studied, particularly at the regional level. The materials analyzed in this article demonstrate that archival documentation provides valuable insights into the specific mechanisms, масштабы, and human consequences of repression in Azerbaijan. Continued research in this field will not only deepen our understanding of Soviet political history but also contribute to the

broader process of reassessing the historical experience of societies that lived under authoritarian regimes.

In conclusion, the archival analysis presented in this study allows us to view Soviet repression in Azerbaijan as a multidimensional historical phenomenon that combined political coercion, administrative control, and ideological enforcement. By examining the documentary evidence preserved in national archives, the research contributes to a more nuanced and evidence-based understanding of the Soviet repressive system and its lasting impact on Azerbaijani society.

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