Research Article

The Evolution of Talysh Ethnic Identity: From Soviet Manipulation to Contemporary Reality

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The article delves into the historical and contemporary aspects of the Talysh people's ethnic identity, tracing its evolution from the Russian Empire, through the Soviet Union's nationality policies, to the current situation in independent Azerbaijan. It highlights the Soviet era's impact on Talysh identity, including forced assimilation and demographic manipulations, while emphasizing the resurgence of Talysh culture through digital media in recent years. This resurgence serves both as a form of resistance against assimilation and as a means to promote cultural preservation and awareness. The study underscores the importance of digital platforms in facilitating the Talysh people's efforts to reclaim and revitalize their heritage, language, and traditions, offering insights into the broader implications for ethnic minority groups navigating identity preservation within and beyond national borders.

This article focuses on a comprehensive examination of the development of the ethnic identity of the Talysh, a people at the interface of Iranian and various Caucasian cultures. Historically influenced by Persian, Russian, and Turkic cultures, the Talysh have undergone significant transformations in their identity, particularly during the Soviet era. From the beginnings of Soviet nationality policy in the Lenin era to Gorbachev, the Talysh experienced significant changes in their perception of their ethnicity. This study analyses how political and social forces influenced Talysh ethnic identity through the manipulation of ethnic statistics and nationality policies.

The research focused on the Talysh Mountains and the Lenkoran region, using a combination of fieldwork and online analysis. Due to potential restrictions on respondents during fieldwork, alternative data sources such as social media platforms and YouTube comments were explored. These

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online platforms offered anonymity, allowing participants to express themselves more freely. This context allowed for the exploration of the concept of 'digital diaspora', where Talysh people use digital platforms to preserve and promote their culture and identity across physical borders. The research examined 42 recent discussions on VK, Telegram, Reddit, and YouTube using the keywords 'Talysh' and 'Talysh people', providing a diverse range of opinions and attitudes. These findings were complemented by interviews conducted during field research.

An AI tool (ChatGPT4) translated discussions from Russian, Talysh, and Azerbaijani. Native Azerbaijani and Talysh speakers contacted during the fieldwork verified the translations. This process ensured accuracy, preserved original context and intonation, and reflected Talysh ethnic and cultural nuances.

The categorisation of messages (agree, disagree, neutral) involved cross-checking. The primary categorisation was done by an AI tool (ChatGPT4) and then revised by the researcher in collaboration with native speakers, thus reducing the subjectivity of interpretation.

While social media discussions may not always reflect reality, our study, based on a large sample of tens of thousands of responses (less than half of which came directly from Talysh people), can be considered representative in the context of the entire Talysh population of over 100,000. We approached data triangulation carefully, combining online discussions with interviews conducted during fieldwork. Despite the limitations of the interviews, they provided valuable context for interpreting the online data. This combination allowed us to gain a nuanced and authentic perspective on the dynamics of Talysh society.

In our research on Talysh ethnic identity, we focus primarily on Fredrik Barth's (1998) theory, supplemented by the concept of 'digital diaspora'. Barth's theory of ethnic boundaries is crucial to understanding how the Talysh maintain their identity, especially given their geographical location between Iran and Azerbaijan. The Talysh language and culture play a central role in reinforcing their ethnic boundaries and fostering a sense of community. This supports Barth's idea that ethnic boundaries are maintained through interaction and emphasising differences rather than isolation.

In the field of Talysh ethnic identity, the concept of 'virtual diaspora' - the use of cyberspace for online interactions between immigrants and their descendants - is significant, as explained by Laguerre (2010). This study introduces the notion of the 'digital ethnosphere', highlighting how the Talysh actively use the digital environment to cultivate ethnic awareness, promote online cultural expression, and shape their identity beyond geographical and political constraints. It provides insight

into how the Talysh maintain their cultural and ethnic identity across digital boundaries, fostering a sense of unity and belonging. It demonstrates that Talysh ethnic identity thrives not only in the physical world, but also in the virtual.

1. Who is Talysh?

The definition of the Talysh varies according to context and perspective. Some see them as a distinct group because of their unique language and culture, while others see them as an ethnic subgroup within the broader Iranian or Caucasian spectrum. Aliev notes that the Talysh language and its dialects, along with other Iranian dialects in South Azerbaijan, have ancient origins dating back to the time of Media, suggesting their participation in the region's long-standing cultural and linguistic continuity (Aliev 1989:16). In the Azerbaijani context, the Talysh are occasionally portrayed as part of the Azerbaijani nation, referred to as 'Iranised Turks' (Baytasov 2010), in line with a policy of national integration and assimilation. These different perspectives highlight the complexity of ethnic identity and national consciousness in the region.

Different definitions of the Talysh people arise from different attributes used by authors and respondents to argue for or against their distinct nationhood. Language, especially Talysh as a language distinct from the Iranian group, is an important marker of national identity. Discussions often revolve around Talysh statehood, even though it doesn't exist today, with some citing historical Talysh state formations as evidence of national sovereignty. Cultural elements, such as traditional customs, arts, and folk culture, emphasise the uniqueness of the Talysh. Finally, historical consciousness - how the Talysh perceive and interpret their past - plays a crucial role in shaping and preserving their collective identity.

The Russian encyclopaedia of the late 19th and early 20th centuries defines the Talysh as a tribe of Iranian origin who settled in the province of Baku, mainly in the Lenkoran district. This area, known as Talysh, was originally a separate khanate and later part of Persia. After the Peace of Gulustan, however, it became part of Russia. According to the 1897 census, there were about 35,219 Talysh living in Russia, most of whom remained in their original homeland. The Talysh speak their own language, which is close to Persian, and practise Shia Islam. (Talyshintsy 1890-1907).

The 1926 Soviet Encyclopedia entries describe the Talysh as part of the Iranian language group, originally inhabiting the south-eastern Azerbaijani SSR, particularly the Talysh or Lenkoran region, and adjacent parts of Iran. Azerbaijani linguistic influences are evident. This region, formerly the

Talysh Khanate, was incorporated into Russia in 1813 under the Treaty of Gulistan with Iran. During the reign of the Shirvanshahs, Talysh settlement in Azerbaijan expanded northwards, closer to the ethnically related Tatars. In the 19th century, social divisions persisted among the Talysh, including beys, clergy, militia, and royal peasants, along with traces of clan divisions. Their main occupations were agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, and handicrafts. Talysh dwellings varied from stone and wooden structures to mud or straw houses, with nomads using yurts in the summer. Traditional women's clothing included a shirt, salwar, nagara, and headscarf, often complemented by a chadra and rubend (a face-covering scarf). The Talysh practised Shia Islam with indigenous elements such as astrology and the worship of sacred groves and trees. After the October Revolution, the Lenkoran region experienced cultural and economic development, leading to changes in the Talysh lifestyle and the overcoming of backwardness (Talyshi 1946).

In a later edition of the Soviet Encyclopaedia (Talyshi 1962), the Talysh were described as living in the extreme south-east of the Azerbaijan SSR and in northern Iran. Their primary language is Talysh, but in the USSR most Talysh also speak Azeri, which is the literary language of the Talysh. They adhere to Shia Islam, and within the USSR they have largely integrated with the Azeris. The Talysh are originally descended from local indigenous tribes, and there is a notable intellectual segment of the Talysh population living in the USSR.

The Talysh are portrayed differently, either as an independent nation with a distinct language and culture, or as an ethnic subgroup within an Iranian or Caucasian framework. In the Azerbaijani context, they are sometimes considered an integral part of the nationality and referred to as 'Iranised Turks'. However, the actual situation of the Talysh often differs significantly from that portrayed in Soviet censuses and encyclopaedias, which reflect the assimilation and national integration policies of the time.

2. The Talysh in servitude to the Russian Tsar

The Talysh came under Russian rule in 1828 following the Treaty of Turkmenchay, which ended the Russo-Persian War and extended Russian influence in the southern Caucasus. This division of Talysh territory between Russia and Persia, particularly the Mugan Plain west of the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan, had a profound effect on their ethnic and cultural identity (Schweizer 1970). The border change complicated the seasonal migration of the nomadic Shakhseven, who spent half the year in

Persia and half on the Russian side. After the 1884 border ban, these migration routes became a source of conflict, leading to tensions between the nomads and the settled population.

The historical Talysh population in the 19th and early 20th centuries remains uncertain. In the 1860s, the dominance of the Talysh language was recorded in 142 villages in the Talysh area (Riss 1855). However, these records were not comprehensive. The first documented population data comes from N.K. Zeydlis in 1870, who listed 34.4 thousand Talysh in the Lenkoran region (Spiski... 1870). This number increased to 39.2 thousand in 1880 and 47.3 thousand in 1886 (Svod... 1898). In 1897, 34,991 Talysh-speaking Talysh were registered (Muradov 2013). However, these figures should be treated with caution, as census inaccuracies are due to inconsistent methods, political and social factors, and evolving criteria for ethnic identification.

In the late 19th century, the Mugan region, part of the Baku Governorate in Tsarist Russia, was characterised by ethnic diversity. According to the 1897 census (conducted on the basis of mother tongue), the Lenkoran region had a majority Tatar population (64.68%) - the original Tatar ethnonym was consistently replaced by the Azeri ethnonym in all documents during the Soviet period - with a significant Talysh minority of 34,991 (26.71%) and a smaller Russian population (7.43%) (Pervaya Vseobshchaya perepis' 1903).

Social tensions in the region increased following the abolition of serfdom in Transcaucasia in 1912. Poorly implemented agrarian reforms left former serfs frustrated. While the reforms ended their formal dependence on the landed estates, they failed to ensure equitable land distribution or effective resolution of property disputes. This led to resentment among former serfs who had expected improved status and access to land. Unclear property rights and unequal land distribution among peasants fuelled ongoing conflicts and escalated social and economic tensions in the region.

Despite being divided by the artificial border between Russia and Persia, the Talysh adapted to the new conditions, resulting in a growing population. In 1915, 67,552 Talysh were recorded in the Lenkoran district, living in 297 settlements (not including Lenkoran itself). It's important to note, however, that the concept of distinct ethnicity was less defined at the time. The region experienced ethnic mixing, disputes between nomadic and sedentary communities, and land issues, setting the stage for political changes during the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, which further reshaped the region's social and political landscape.

3. Early Soviet period (1917-1920)

In Tsarist Russia, national differences were exacerbated by policies of Russification and economic exploitation, which led to hostility and separatist tendencies between different peoples. This condition was intensified by Tsarism, which promoted the slogans "One Tsar, One Religion, One Language" and "Russia One and Indivisible" (Konovalov, 2019), which led to political oppression and economic exploitation of ethnic minorities.

The problem that the Bolshevik leaders recognised after seizing power in 1917 was how to build a centralised, essentially unitary state out of diverse, hostile, and separatist ethnic minorities in a situation where they themselves had previously been complicit in fostering ethnic divisions and separatism.

In 1913, Lenin and the Bolsheviks initially opposed national cultural autonomy, fearing it would divide workers of different nationalities. Stalin also opposed it, criticising its potential to perpetuate old divisions. After the revolution, however, the approach shifted. The economic solution involved industrialisation and agricultural modernisation through a centralised plan. The cultural solution emphasised linguistic autonomy while maintaining ideological unity. Later, in 1925, Stalin proposed a cultural policy that was "proletarian in content and national in form", allowing national minorities space for self-expression within the socialist framework (Towster 1951). This shift marked a significant change in the Bolsheviks' stance, as they began to advocate for the rights of oppressed peoples, aiming for a federation of nation-states, ethnic autonomy, and cultural identity to ensure stability and government support in the Soviet Union.

In the 1920s, the Soviet Union was a complex multi-ethnic state with over 175 racial and ethnic groups and some 125 different languages (Towster 1951). The Russian Civil War (1917-1922) witnessed ethnic violence, especially in ethnically mixed areas, leading to intensified and emotionally charged ethnic conflicts that deepened divisions between different ethnic and social groups (Khaziev et al. 2019). <\/p>

The 1921 census officially recorded 66,683 Talysh in the USSR, but these numbers were considered underestimated due to discrepancies between recorded data and actual observations. Soviet Azerbaijan had an estimated 80,000 Talysh living in some 330 settlements and parts of Lenkoran. This suggests a gradual increase in the Talysh population despite national changes and Turkification. The Bolsheviks faced resistance in the region during this period, and interethnic conflicts were described by

eyewitnesses as a conflict between Russians and Muslims (Morozova and Ermolenko 2013): 'What happened in Mugan at that time cannot be called a war. Whole villages with families, wagons, women, and children left at random to destroy the Tatar auls. It was a terrible but spontaneous phenomenon, the beating of every living thing, regardless of sex and age. Pregnant women were stabbed with bayonets, children's heads were smashed with rifle butts, whole auls were burned and looted' (Dobrynin 1923).

In response to instability and conflict during the civil war, the Mughan Republic was established. It was named after a historical region located mainly in southern Azerbaijan and partly in Iran. Founded as a political and military expression of resistance to the Bolshevik regime and Russian influence, the republic involved various ethnic groups, including the Talysh. The short-lived Mughan Republic (1918-1919) experienced political instability and was eventually reintegrated into the wider regional order under Bolshevik leadership at the end of the civil war. This episode serves as an important example of ethnic and political conflict in post-revolutionary Transcaucasia, particularly in the context of efforts to eliminate Bolshevik influence.

The creation of the Azerbaijani SSR involved manipulation and political manoeuvring by the Bolsheviks. They separated the link between nation and language from constitutional issues. Despite coming under Stalin's regime after the February Revolution of 1917 and the declaration of independence of Azerbaijan as the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan on 26 May 1918, the Bolsheviks were reluctant to include Azeri, the language of the emerging nation, in the constitution. This policy continued even after the Bolsheviks regained control of the region in 1920-1921 and incorporated Azerbaijan into the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan was strategically used to strengthen Soviet influence in the Transcaucasus, secure access to oil resources, and influence regional relations, particularly with Turkey and Iran (Bolukbasi 2013). Despite changes, Azerbaijani was not recognised as an official or privileged language in Azerbaijan's subsequent constitution of 1937.

4. The first Soviet census in 1926

The first Soviet census in 1926 provided a demographic overview of the impact of the social upheavals caused by the Revolution, the First World War, and the Civil War. It revealed the extent and nature of the demographic losses caused by various factors.

The census highlighted the direct military losses in both world wars. For example, the Russian army was estimated to have suffered 1.5 to 1.8 million casualties in the First World War, and the Red Army

around 981,000 in the Civil War. Losses on the opposing side suggest that total military casualties may have been twice as high. Famine, which affected much of the country, caused extensive losses, with around 5 million deaths during the famine of 1921-1922. Epidemics also played a major role, causing around 9 million deaths between 1918 and 1922, nearly 4 million of which were due to typhus. The census also revealed the impact of political terror and repression, which contributed significantly to the demographic decline of the period. Political terror often resulted in unrecorded deaths (Vishnevskiy 2012).

The 1926 census revealed the profound impact of the social and political upheavals of the early 20th century on the population of the Soviet Union, which was crucial for understanding subsequent demographic changes. During this period, autonomous republics were established, and efforts were made to promote national languages and cultures. The Soviet minority policy of the 1920s and 1930s, influenced by Lenin's support for oppressed peoples seeking freedom, included a state-led programme of 'nation-building'. This programme included the allocation of small territories to officially recognised national minorities, the development of standardised national languages, and the implementation of cultural and educational initiatives in these languages. The historian Yuri Slezkine (1994) has described this policy during the "Great Transformation" of 1928-1932 as an extraordinary celebration of ethnic diversity by a state. It also included the production of children's books in national languages to ensure that every child learned socialist principles in their mother tongue.

The census provided demographic data on various national groups, including the Talysh, who were recorded as numbering over 77,323. These data not only revealed the large number of different ethnic groups but also raised questions about the complexity of their identities. Of particular importance is the work of the Soviet linguist B. Miller (1926), who visited the area inhabited by the Talysh before the census and provided valuable insights into the complexity of their linguistic and cultural identity. In some situations, this identity is intertwined with Turkish. For example, in marketplaces and commercial areas dominated by Turkish, some Talysh may identify as Turkish. At home, however, they speak predominantly Talysh in a family setting. This example illustrates the nuanced and multifaceted nature of Talysh identity, influenced by external factors such as trade and social interactions. Miller also observed that while most Talysh men are proficient in Turkish, this is less common among women, who tend to be more loyal to the Talysh language, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Lacking their own script, the Talysh were forced to use Turkish in schools and administrative institutions, which contributed to their gradual assimilation into the Azeri nationality. Nevertheless, the Talysh did not appear to be a receding or dying nation.

5. Stalin's failure: centralisation and the secret results of the census of 1937

After Lenin's death, Stalin shifted the political course of the Soviet Union towards greater centralisation, prioritising Soviet unity. This shift led to the suppression of national identities, a policy of Russification, and the suppression of minority languages and cultures, all aimed at forging a single Soviet identity that permeated various aspects of life.

In 1937, the Soviet Union conducted its second general census, designed to showcase the achievements of Stalinist policies and the unity of the diverse Soviet population. However, when the results were compared with those of the 1926 census, a stark contrast emerged, revealing the devastating effects of forced collectivisation. This period was marked by catastrophic famines, particularly in Kazakhstan (with a 27.9% decline in Kazakhs) and Ukraine (with a 15.3% decline in Ukrainians). Other significant decreases were recorded for Moldovans (19.7%), Germans (7%), Mordvins (6.8%), Marians (6.3%), Karelians (6.1%), Abkhazians (2.4%), Turkmens (2.1%), Kalmyks (1.5%), and Yakuts (0.8%).

On the other hand, there were significant increases in the numbers of Armenians (25.5%), Tatars (25.2%), Azeris (25.1%), Russians (20.7%), Circassians (20.6%), and Karakalpaks (20.2%). This phenomenon can be attributed to political factors, such as forced relocations and state pressure for changes in ethnic identification, which outweighed natural demographic movements. The growth in the number of Azeris and Karakalpaks was supported by the development of new state scientific and educational institutions, which reinforced their newly formed ethnic identity. These changes reflect the complexity of Stalinist policies and their differential impact on different peoples within the Soviet Union (Tishkov 2007).

In the 1930s, Azerbaijan underwent significant industrialisation-related migration, which had a profound demographic impact on the region. During this period, more than half a million people, mainly Russian-speaking citizens, Russians, and Armenians, moved to Azerbaijan and Georgia. In

addition, from 1937 to 1939, migration to the Transcaucasus continued at an average rate of 50,000 people per year, reshaping the demographic composition (Maksudov 1999).

The Soviet government often based its approach to nations on immediate political and strategic considerations rather than a genuine respect for their historical and cultural characteristics. In Central Asia, the original idea of uniting all Turkic peoples into a single union republic was reconsidered because of concerns about the emergence of a strong, unified Turkic entity. The situation in the Caucasus was similarly complex. The Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (TSFSR), established in 1922 with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, was presented as a model for dealing with national issues. However, it was mainly used to strengthen central control over these republics. In 1936, the TSFSR was dissolved, and three separate union republics emerged, illustrating the volatility of Soviet nationality policy.

For the Talysh, the period after the 1937 census was one of uncertainty, as they found themselves at the intersection of political and ethnic change. Classified as 'other' nationalities, they witnessed demographic shifts and political manoeuvres that affected their identity and status within the Soviet Union. In particular, the inclusion of questions on religious affiliation in this census exposed manipulation and abuse of religious identity, especially among Muslim communities such as the Talysh. This further reinforced the Soviet policy of promoting atheism and suppressing religious diversity (Tchumakova 2012).

The category of 'other' nationalities, which included the Talysh, increased by 51.2% in 1937. This reflects not only demographic changes, but also the census methodology, which favoured the main ethnic groups. As for the Talysh, their number increased to 99.2 thousand. However, this figure was not intended for publication and is only available today because this census was declassified in the late 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR. Compared to their number in 1926, when 77,323 Talysh were recorded, this is an increase of more than 28%. While this growth may seem positive at first glance, it is important to remember the context and limitations of the census at the time. The Talysh were included in the broad category of 'others', reflecting the Soviet administration's treatment of smaller and lesser-known ethnic groups at the time (Tishkov 2007).

The 1937 census, despite its methodological flaws and political manipulations that disregarded statistical principles and official government instructions, underscores the extensive assimilationist policy pursued in the Azerbaijani SSR. This policy had a notable impact on the identity of the Talysh,

who were then recognised as a distinct ethnic group. This recognition confirms the existence of a widespread policy of assimilation by the Azerbaijani authorities.

In 1937, the first forced deportations of the Talysh population to Central Asia took place. One example is a note dated 17 April 1937 from N. I. Yezhov, then NKVD narkom, to V. M. Molotov, chairman of the SNC, regarding the financing of actions related to the resettlement of Talysh from Azerbaijan to Kazakhstan. Exact data on the number of Talysh deported remains elusive, as publicly available documents and records refer to "Iranians" or "Kurds" in general, a misidentification for the Talysh of Mughan. Many deported Talysh never returned and lost their original identities. However, some sources suggest that deported groups continued to use the Talysh language in new locations (Asatryan 2011).

Historical events such as mass deportations have had a significant impact on inter-ethnic relations. The deported group often loses influence and resources, while the party behind the deportations may strengthen its position. Furthermore, the priorities of these groups may change, with an initial focus on cultural and economic growth or political influence giving way to the importance of security, social and cultural issues such as community rebuilding or recognition of their rights and identity. These events also have strong emotional and cultural implications, including feelings of pride, trauma, and the desire for cultural preservation, which can make future relationships more difficult.

6. 1939-1953: Deportation and demographic changes of the Talysh community in the Azerbaijani SSR

Mass deportations began in 1939 when the Talysh population in the Azerbaijani SSR numbered 87,510. These deportations differed from other Soviet transfers in that the Talysh were often relocated within the same republic. Some were moved from areas north of the Astara River to the Apsheron Peninsula, Baku, Sumgait, and Derbend as part of Azerbaijan's strategy to divide and weaken Talysh identity. This policy aimed to separate southern and northern Talysh, undermining their ethnic and cultural cohesion. The deportations had lasting consequences, forcing the Talysh to leave their traditional lands and adapt to new regions, ultimately contributing to the erosion of their language, culture, and social ties.

"Fortunately, for a variety of reasons, the decrees on the expulsion of the Talysh were not fully implemented in our country, so that the total extermination of the Talysh did not take place. However,

this did not cool the zeal of the leadership of the newly formed Soviet Republic, namely its leader Bagirov. When Bagirov appeared in our region, we were all terrified. He personally and directly carried out the executions, and many more Talysh died in the famine he caused between 1938 and 1960. There are no documents about these crimes, but we, the local people, remember them. And God knows it too" (interviewee from Lenkoran, 86 years old).

The change in borders in the early 19th century, when some Talysh became part of Russia and others remained in Persia, had less impact than Stalin's deportation policy and the efforts of local Soviet leaders to create a unified Azerbaijani nation. From 1939 to 1953, the Yardımlı region underwent significant demographic changes that had a lasting impact on the Talysh community in Azerbaijan. This process, officially part of a wider policy to increase security in the area close to Iran, began in 1939 with the forced deportation of residents from the villages of Təzəkənd, Sibroni, Alili, and Abılı, whose inhabitants were resettled in Birəhmətə.

A direct participant in the deportations recalls her family's experience: “I wish I had never seen the day when Stalin decided our fate. I remember how one day they came to take us away from our village. It was like a bad dream. They took us all to the Biləsuvar district, which was Pushkin's district at that time. It was like being uprooted, like having your heart torn to pieces. We felt lost in our new surroundings. What we considered home was now a distant memory.”

But the deportations were not confined to that year. In 1942, during the Second World War, the inhabitants of other villages, including Abasallı, Köhnə Qışlaq, Pirdovdan, Ovra, and Laceyir, were expelled from the Yardımlı area. This trend continued until 1953, when the villages of Arvana, Qarovuldaş, Deman, Avaş, Binələr, Perinbel, Əlvərəz were deported to the Muğan and Şirvana areas, Oncəkələ, Peştəsər, Şatıker, Niyazoni, Nığlə, Fındıqlı, Qışlaq, Vəlişli, Xanbulaq, Avaraq, Məceyir, Əliabad, Limar, Şələ, Iəzran, and Eçara. This large-scale resettlement has resulted in the dispersal of the Talış population throughout the southern region of the country, significantly changing the demographic structure of the area.

Another interviewee, who wished to remain completely anonymous, said: "My family comes from one of the deported villages. The stories my grandparents told me are full of pain and nostalgia. We lost not only our homes, but also part of our identity. In those days, many things were done not by Stalin, but by the local leaders. Stalin had no idea what was happening all over the country. The main reason for this was Mir Jafar Bagirov. Whatever he told Stalin happened. Our history in Azerbaijan is a history of suffering. The ASSR government, under Bagirov's leadership, carried out deportations of us, the

Talysh, to resettle Turks in our homes. Bagirov personally visited Zuvand and drew up a list of villages to be evacuated. This completely changed the ethnic structure of Talyshistan. An example of this is the period from 1949 to 1952, when only the Talysh were resettled from our region of Zuvand, leaving the Turkish villages untouched. The inhabitants of these villages, called 'Ahli Van' by the local Talysh, i.e., those who came from the area around Lake Van, were allowed to stay. This is not just a distant past, because the current authorities in the Republic of Azerbaijan continue the same policy of assimilation. Our stories and sufferings are forgotten and overlooked, but we must never forget them. These events have left deep scars and are an unspoken testimony to our pain."

7. The Khrushchev Thaw and the Soviet Census of 1959

Russification was promoted in the post-war period, although Khrushchev's reforms after Stalin's death temporarily allowed greater cultural expression by minorities. However, an analysis of the humour magazine Krokodil shows that while the USSR criticised Western colonialism and racism, it perpetuated similar racial and ethnic stereotypes and narratives at home, creating a hierarchy dominated by Russian ethnicity. This highlights the double standards on issues of racism and colonialism (Shevtsova and Grin'ko, 2018).

In Soviet Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani was designated as the state language in the 1950s, a status confirmed by the 1956 constitutional amendment and further strengthened by the 1978 constitution and the 1989 law. Azerbaijan thus became one of the three Soviet republics where national languages were granted state language status (Garibova and Asgarova 2009).

In the 1959 census, the Soviet Union officially recorded the lowest number of Talysh ever: only 85 people. This dramatic decline was officially justified by their 'voluntary' identification as Azeris, but the census commissioners refused to count the Talysh. The situation at the time is illustrated by a quote from one of the respondents who tried to assert his identity: “I am always Talysh! I said to the commissioners, why are you erasing us from history? Where is our right to self-determination? But we couldn't do anything, they said they had instructions from above that they had to follow". This statement reveals the deep sense of frustration and loss felt by many Talysh in the face of centrally controlled assimilation.

8. The late Soviet era and Gorbachev's perestroika

In the 1970s and 1980s, during the Brezhnev era and beyond, sovietization continued with an emphasis on integrating different nationalities into one Soviet nation, but these efforts often remained superficial and national differences persisted. In 1978, a group of Talysh protested against the planned 1979 census, demanding to be registered as Talysh, but were refused, citing their assimilation into the Azerbaijani nationality. According to Krista Goff, who quotes Talysh in her book, they were not asked about their nationality at all in the 1959-1979 census.

A turning point came during Gorbachev's perestroika, when Talysh nationality was again included in the 1989 census, with 21,196 people identifying themselves as Talysh. In the late 1980s, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Talysh in Azerbaijan formed the Talysh National Restoration Party, which was renamed the Party of Equality of the Peoples of Azerbaijan, reflecting the growing self-confidence of the Talysh on issues of ethnic identity and autonomy.

9. Post-Soviet era

The Soviet policy of simultaneously creating a new Soviet nation - the Azerbaijani - and promoting Russification was paradoxical. This paradox deepened after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Newly independent Azerbaijan struggled with its identity. In December 1992, just 14 months after declaring independence, the Azerbaijani government passed a law declaring 'Turkish' (not Azerbaijani) as the country's state language in order to 'restore historical justice' to the nation's name and language, which had been Turkish until Stalin's 1937 constitution. The three-year debate over the name of the language divided opponents of Turkic into two camps: those who supported Azeri (mostly Russian-educated intellectuals with a weak sense of a common Turkic identity) and those who supported Azeri Turkic (liberal intellectuals). The dispute ended with the adoption of the first post-Soviet constitution in 1995, which designated 'Azerbaijani' as the state language (Garibova and Asgarova 2009).

In 1993, amid political and military tensions in Azerbaijan exacerbated by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Colonel Alikram Hummatov established the short-lived autonomous state of the Talysh-Mugan Republic. This republic, proclaimed in south-eastern Azerbaijan and comprising seven administrative districts around Lankaran, was a response to political chaos and a military uprising against President Abulfaz Elchibey. However, the independence movement led by Hummatov was

quickly suppressed after Heydar Aliyev came to power and did not gain significant public support (Babirov 2019).

This attempt at autonomy was the Talysh's second major step towards political independence after the First Mughan Republic of 1918-1919, reflecting a strong ethnic consciousness and resistance to assimilationist policies, both Soviet and Azerbaijani. Although both attempts failed, they are important milestones in the history of the Talysh autonomy movement and the recognition of their identity. Demographic changes reflected in the 1989-2009 census show that while Azerbaijan's total population grew by 27%, most ethnic groups did not achieve this average increase, and many experienced sharp declines. The exceptions are the Azeris, who increased by 41%, the Turks by 115%, and the Talysh by as much as 429% (State Statistics Committee of AR 2009), which can be interpreted as a result of their growing ethnic consciousness and their desire to identify themselves as a separate ethnic group, not just as part of the Azerbaijani nation.

In many post-Soviet countries, such as Turkmenistan with its authoritarian regime, minorities face assimilationist pressures such as restrictions on education and publications in their languages. The Turkmen Baloch resist assimilation by maintaining their language and culture through strong community ties, demonstrating that the state has power but isn't all-powerful. (Kokaisl and Kokaislova, 2019).

Since the post-Soviet period, the Talysh population in Azerbaijan has not only grown demographically, but also expanded its online presence. Starting with a few personal websites in 2003, the virtual landscape now boasts higher quality resources, their own domains, and at least two portals focused on Talysh issues, indicating a heightened sense of identity awareness (Ter-Abrahamian, 2005). At the same time, Talysh literature and education in the Talysh language have developed despite obstacles from the Azerbaijani government, demonstrating efforts to develop ethnic and cultural identity.

10. Current Talysh reality

10.1. Historical and cultural roots

Historicism plays a crucial role in the self-identification of ethnic groups such as the Talysh, with over 20% of Talysh-related online content focusing on historical discussions. This highlights the community's strong interest in historical narratives. The belief that ancient origins validate an ethnic

group's contemporary existence, despite its often irrational basis, is widely held. This notion is evident in both public and online discussions, where ethnic groups with less documented histories are sometimes subjected to derogatory comments - "the Talysh do not have a rich enough history to be entitled to their own state."

As far as the Talysh are concerned, discussions of historical claims and ethnic identity are full of pseudo-arguments. Fredrik Barth's theory of ethnic boundaries suggests that ethnic identities are maintained by social boundaries that separate groups, rather than by isolation. This concept is exemplified in debates about Jardimli, where the Talysh were deported during the USSR era. Debates often focus on whether the Talysh were historically present in Jardimli, with some arguing that its primary inhabitants were Turks, a point used by some to implicitly justify the deportation of the Talysh. Pro-Turkish debaters point to the absence of Talysh toponyms in Jardimli as evidence of the absence of a Talysh presence. In contrast, pro-Talysh debaters are convinced that the Talysh language and people in Jardimli have been Turkified over time. They use the name 'Talysh Mountains' as a counter-argument, arguing that the mountains would not have been called that if the Talysh were not originally there.

The debate on Talysh ethnic identity explores its historical roots and the development of its identity in the context of cultural assimilation. Discussions highlight the impact of external influences, particularly from neighbouring ethnic groups, on the formation of Talysh identity. The concept of 'Turkification', which refers to assimilation into Turkish culture and the consequent dilution of Talysh cultural and linguistic distinctiveness, is frequently mentioned. There is also considerable concern about historical revisionism and the need to preserve authentic Talysh history against dominant cultural narratives. The diminishing recognition of the Talysh as a distinct ethnic group and the critical role of historical consciousness in maintaining their ethnic distinctiveness are central themes.

These arguments reveal the conflation of concepts related to ethnicity in different historical periods, which is a common phenomenon in discussions of ethnicity. Although understandings of ethnicity vary dramatically between the 18th and 21st centuries, debaters often compare and conflate these concepts without regard to historical context.

Discussions about Talysh historical migrations, territorial claims, and historical rights show how the past shapes contemporary identity. On the one hand, the arguments suggest a tendency for some groups to rewrite or reinterpret history according to their contemporary interests, a process known as

historical revisionism. On the other hand, there is a desire to preserve and protect original historical and cultural narratives that are considered authentic. This process reveals how contemporary groups seek to use history to reinforce their own ethnic identity against dominant views and narratives.

At the centre of the intense debates, which reveal deep contradictions in ethnic perceptions and historical memory in the region, are discussions about the history of the Talysh khanate and its influence on contemporary Talysh politics and identity.

For the Talysh, the affirmation of the existence of the Talysh Khanate is crucial to the consolidation of their national identity and historical claims. As one participant in the discussion put it: 'The Turk is as afraid of the truth as a rabbit is of a drum! But even the official historical archive of the Azerbaijani state confirms documents related to the Talysh Khanate," suggesting that even in the context of Azerbaijani institutions that are generally unsympathetic to the Talysh, the existence of the Khanate cannot be ignored. Evidence of statehood is extremely important to the Talysh, as the tradition of statehood is seen as strong evidence of an existing nation. There is a sense of pride and identity associated with the Khanate's past, emphasising its role in shaping the cultural and political landscape of the region. Discussions also touch on the territorial extent of the khanate, as well as the khanate's capital cities, with differing views on whether Astara or Lankaran served as the main centre of power, highlighting the fluid nature of historical boundaries and the impact of these changes on contemporary regional politics. "The khanate originated in Astara and for a long time Astara was its capital".

The Azeri panellists, on the other hand, take the opposite view: "In history, there was no ruling entity called the Talysh Khanate." This view seems to be motivated by a desire to challenge the Talysh national identity and historical claims. In the context of contemporary politics, where Azerbaijan dominates as a nation-state, the Talysh and other ethnic minorities in the country are often perceived as subordinate. Thus, Azerbaijanis want to prove to these groups that they are insignificant compared to the 'official' nation, which has its own state.

Debates about the Talysh Khanate are central to the region's national and political narratives, revealing the contradictions in national perceptions and historical memory between ethnic groups.

Historical migrations and territorial claims of the Talysh

Discussions about the historical migrations of the Talysh and their territorial claims are an important element in understanding their ethnic and cultural identity. This debate not only encompasses the

movements of different ethnic groups, particularly the Talysh, but also explores the complex issue of territorial claims.

The debate about ethnic roots includes discussions about whether the Talysh have always lived in their current regions or whether they migrated from elsewhere. Sometimes bizarre and unverified information appears in these discussions, such as claims of a historical Talysh presence in Lebanon. This unusual information often causes confusion among discussants and highlights the importance of verified and thorough historical sources in shaping contemporary territorial claims and identity. Many panellists question such claims and point to the importance of relying on documented sources rather than unverified information or hearsay.

Discussions of the Talysh focus on their settlement, origins, and the historical migrations that have shaped their current geographic distribution. These debates highlight the possibility that the Talysh originated in different regions before settling in their current locations, with particular attention to the South Caucasus region. The debates also explore how neighbouring civilisations and empires, including the Persian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia, have influenced the migration of the Talysh throughout history.

One of the main themes of these debates is the question of who has a claim to a particular territory. Is it a particular nation that has owned this territory in the past? This question reflects a deeper dilemma: why should a nation have a claim to a territory when another nation, whose members were born there and feel at home there, now lives there? The discussion thus reveals that many so-called historical claims are based on the legitimate assumption that the right to a home is natural. However, this home has begun to be mythologised in a broader sense, especially with the rise of nation-states such as Azerbaijan, where the idea is created that it is the home of the Azeris and others (in the context of the discussion, the Talysh) have less right to feel at home there unless they become as Azeri as possible.

The discussion of the historical migrations of the Talysh and Jardimli provides concrete examples of how these issues play out in practice. Discussions of territorial claims often involve strong national and ethnic emotions, which is symptomatic of the complexity and sensitivity of these issues. Claims that several generations have lived continuously in a particular area are important in this debate and are used to justify claims to a particular territory: "The Talysh are an ancient people, not immigrants". Those who are seen as immigrants are always at a disadvantage in their claims to territory because

they have come to someone else's home, even though their ancestors settled in the territory centuries ago.

For example, an Azerbaijani participant in the debate emphasised his people's historical presence in the region by saying: "Our great-grandfathers lived here in the village of Alar. We are Turks, Azerbaijanis. But you are Armenians. Be a little wise". This quote not only demonstrates the Azeri belief in their historical claim to the territory, but also highlights the tension between Azeris and Talysh by equating the Talysh with the Armenians - seen in this context as the main enemy. The call to "be a little wise" can be interpreted as an appeal to the Talysh to understand the reality as seen by the Azeris and to adapt to their expectations.

The Azerbaijani discussants emphasise their historical claims against the Talysh and their land. There are references to ancient Turkish roots in the Caucasus and claims that Talysh territory was historically inhabited by Turks.

This confrontational rhetoric is an example of how historical claims and ethnic identity can be used to reinforce national narratives and advance political agendas. It is also an example of how historical claims to territory can lead to deep divisions and tensions between different ethnic groups in the region.

There is a strong sense of historical entitlement among Talysh participants in the discussions, as they claim that the Talysh have been indigenous to certain areas for centuries. The discussion often mentions specific regions (such as Jardimli) and emphasises that these areas have been central to Talysh history and culture. Participants also express concern about the current political and geographical boundaries, which do not reflect the historical territories of the Talysh, and point to the complexity and sensitivity surrounding issues of ethnic identity and territorial claims. "The current borders of the republics often divide historically and culturally connected peoples, as illustrated by the village of Nyugdi near Derbent in Dagestan, with its oldest Armenian temple dating from the 4th century. This absurdity of borders mirrors the absurdity of the administrative division that existed under the Tsar and that the Bolsheviks brought to its absolute peak".

Discussions of the historical migrations and territorial claims of the Talysh contribute to an understanding of their contemporary identity. These issues demonstrate the importance of historical claims and ethnic identity formation in the context of the power and political dynamics of nation-states.

10.2. Language and writing aspects

Paul Brass points out that the importance of one's own language and script in defining ethnic identity is ambivalent, and different ethnic groups may prioritise historical consciousness or religion over the use of their own language (Brass 2023). In the case of the Talysh, however, the issue of language is significant, and in Talysh-related discussions, linguistic aspects make up about 20% of the content. The Talysh language, used in the home environment and on cultural occasions, is considered essential to maintaining a distinct Talysh identity. The language serves not only as a means of communication, but also as a link between generations and a means of transmitting cultural heritage.

In discussions about the Talysh language, various posts are categorised as laudatory, informative, and critical. Laudatory posts express admiration, pride, and the historical and cultural significance of the Talysh language. Talysh is often associated with Iranian languages, including Persian and Tajik, suggesting deep historical and linguistic ties. Although Tajikistan is 2,500 km away from Talysh-inhabited areas, Tajiks actively participate in online discussions, emphasising the linguistic and cultural proximity.

Informative posts focus on the history and origins of the Talysh, mention its geographical spread, and discuss linguistic diversity and multilingualism among the Talysh. Critical posts express concern about the possible disappearance of the Talysh language in the future and the feeling that it is being marginalised or under-supported. However, critical voices against the dominant language of the area where the Talysh live - Azerbaijani - do not appear much in the discussions.

The discussions also reveal a consensus on the close linguistic affinity of the Talysh language with Iranian languages, emphasising its ethnolinguistic roots. In addition to Iranian languages, other languages such as Azeri, languages of Caucasian ethnic groups, Armenian, and Kurdish are often mentioned in connection with the Talysh language.

The kinship of the Talysh language with the Tatar language is prominently mentioned in the discussion, and their common 'one blood' is often emphasised, suggesting a deep cultural and historical connection between the two ethnic groups.

10.3. Religious and cultural affiliation

In online forums, around 15% of discussions revolve around Talysh religious and cultural affiliations, revealing a strong link between their beliefs and practices. The role of Islam in the Talysh community

is prominent, with references to Allah and expressions of solidarity. These discussions also explore relationships with neighbouring groups such as Tats and Zaza (sometimes associated with Kurds), highlighting cultural and religious differences and similarities. Interestingly, the Tat discussions reveal some non-Muslim Tats with links to mountain Jews, a topic not raised in the Talysh conversations.

Religious and cultural practices are central to the Talysh ethnic identity, with both Shia and Sunni followers, mainly differentiated by their geographic origins—mountainous or lowland regions. Despite these religious distinctions, there's a unified Talysh community identity that overlooks Sunni-Shia differences, focusing instead on shared religious and cultural traditions that foster a collective identity.

The discussion often tends to focus on the fact that religion is a unifying force for the Talysh, providing them with a sense of belonging and community. For example, one post reads: 'May Allah be with the oppressed and protect our brothers the Zazas'. This comment highlights the importance of religion as a source of solidarity and support beyond the Talysh community.

Islamic greetings such as Asalamu Aleykum are common in many discussion posts, indicating the shared faith between the Talysh and other Muslim groups in the region. In addition, Talysh religious identity is often linked to their ethnic identity and cultural heritage, as evidenced by comments describing the Talysh as a 'religious and warrior nation'.

An interesting framework emerges in the discussion of Talysh religious and cultural affiliation, with some participants expressing the view that ethnic and religious differences between Muslim groups in the Caucasus are insignificant and that all Turks form a larger Turkish Ummah. "I am a Georgian from Adjara, glory to the Turks, Allahu akbar, we are one Ummah". This view, while not universally shared, reveals one possible interpretation of religious and ethnic identity in the region. It also emphasises a shared religious identity as superior to ethnic identity, reflecting the historical evolution of understandings of ethnicity, particularly in the 19th century, when the term 'Turk' was often used to refer to Muslims in general, regardless of their ethnicity.

In her study, Ingeborg Baldauf (1991) describes how the term 'Turk' was used in different contexts in the 19th century, including to refer to different Turkish peoples, speakers of the late Chagatai language, and Muslims in general. This use of the term demonstrates the inconsistency and complexity of defining a 'Turkish' identity. Historical analysis shows how the concepts of ethnicity and religion have changed and been interpreted in different political and social contexts.

Religion serves as an important factor in defining and reinforcing Talysh ethnic identity, building bridges between different groups in the region. Discussants stress the importance of religious tolerance and mutual respect, reflecting their desire to live in harmony with other ethnic and religious groups. Relations between the Talysh and other ethnic groups, such as Iranians, Tajiks, and North Caucasian ethnic groups, are mentioned in the context of shared religious and ethnic ties.

10.4. Talysh identity and social perception

Discussion of the perception of the Talysh in Azerbaijani society reveals the complexity of their social status, which oscillates between being seen as separatists and loyal citizens. In Lenkoran, the centre of the Talysh community, feelings of injustice are mixed with a desire for recognition. While some Talysh express strong anti-Azerbaijani attitudes, others, also with a strong Talysh ethnic identity, seek to be perceived as loyal citizens contributing to the prosperity and unity of the country.

Assimilation, particularly in the area of language adaptation, raises concerns about the preservation of Talysh ethnic identity. The adoption of Azerbaijani as the main language of communication carries the risk of losing unique elements of culture and identity. This trend raises questions about the future preservation of Talysh ethnic distinctiveness.

The rich cultural heritage of the Talysh people, their language, and traditions is spoken of with pride, emphasising ancient historical roots and cultural continuity. Discussions draw attention to globalisation, which is perceived ambivalently - on the one hand, it blurs certain cultural differences, but on the other hand, through many channels of communication, it allows unprecedented connections even between dispersed Talysh groups, thus contributing to the preservation of culture and ethnic identity.

The Talysh currently face a number of challenges, including issues of political representation, cultural protection, and recognition of their community. These debates reveal the efforts of the Talysh to assert their rights and maintain their identity in a dynamic political and social environment. The complex relationship between history, politics, and ethnic identity is key to understanding contemporary social dynamics in Azerbaijan, while the debates about the Talysh offer further insights into aspects of multicultural coexistence.

10.5. Relations with other ethnic groups and multiculturalism

Although the Talysh maintain a degree of distinctiveness (as well as similarity) with other ethnic groups, particularly through the sharing of certain cultural and religious elements such as Islam, the concept of a unified Talysh community is in fact less homogeneous than it may first appear. Pride and awareness of Talysh ethnicity are strong and unifying elements among the Talysh, but political views and attitudes vary widely within the group. While shared stories and narratives are essential to maintaining Talysh ethnic identity, the diversity of political views reveals the complex realities of their social and political life.

The government of Azerbaijan is aware of the importance of ethnic minorities in the country, not only in terms of cultural richness, but more importantly as a demonstration of its friendliness and tolerance. It has an interest in showing how well minorities are doing under its administration. However, support for minorities is often limited to superficial expressions of folk traditions, while a deeper identity and the possibility of granting autonomy to these groups remains in the background or is considered undesirable. Minorities are encouraged to identify publicly as Azerbaijani first, and only then can they express their specific ethnic identity.

The Talysh, like other minorities in Azerbaijan, face similar difficulties in maintaining their ethnic identity and culture within a state policy that favours the dominant Azerbaijani nation. This common situation leads to a sense of cohesion between the different minorities, as they support each other in their efforts to preserve their cultures and languages. Despite their official representation as part of Azerbaijan's cultural mosaic, the various ethnic minorities make up a small fraction of the country's total population, accounting for less than 1%. Exceptions are the Lezgins, Armenians, Russians, and Talysh, who account for 1-2% of the population, according to official statistics. Contemporary Azerbaijan's ethnic policy, which in many ways follows the Soviet approach to nation-building (emphasis on the state nation), sometimes obscures the true ethnic diversity of the region. This has a direct impact on inter-ethnic relations in the country.

In discussions of inter-ethnic relations, the Talysh often refer to groups with similar historical and cultural backgrounds as their 'best friends'. They usually include the Tatas and Zazas in this category. Conversely, in discussions that focus specifically on the Tats, it is not the Talysh, but rather the Tajiks and Persians who are cited as the closest ethnic group to the Tats. References to the similarity of the

Tat language to Farsi and Tajik are also common in these discussions, with Tat participants considering these languages to be fully mutually intelligible.

The discussions often include contributions from participants from different regions of Azerbaijan, as well as from outside Azerbaijan, such as Yakutia, St. Petersburg, and the Central Asian republics, who express solidarity with the Talysh and encourage their cultural and overall development. "I am an Azerbaijani and I am friends with Talysh families, perhaps this is quite normal."

In the context of discussions about the Talysh's "greatest enemies", the issue of assimilation and cultural erosion often comes up. An interesting aspect of the discussions is the occasional criticism of the Talysh themselves, who, according to some, are willingly being assimilated and are not sufficiently developing a Talysh identity. The Talysh identify their enemies as those who support the suppression or weakening of their language and culture. This attitude is illustrated by a quote from a pro-Talysh panellist: "Talysh people who speak Turkish are still Talysh people. The fact that they don't speak Talysh is mainly the fault of the Turks." This statement points to a deep resistance to assimilation processes that threaten the preservation of authentic Talysh identity.

Strong resistance to historical figures and ideologies that have contributed to their oppression or assimilation often emerges in Talysh discussions. Lenin and Stalin, as well as Mir Jafar Bagirov, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, are the most commonly mentioned in this regard. These figures, along with communist ideology and contemporary Azerbaijani nationalist ideology, are seen as key factors in efforts to assimilate the Talysh. At the same time, the Talysh fear of Pan-Turkism resonates in the discussions, while Azerbaijani participants often emphasise the alleged common enemy of all Azerbaijani citizens - the Armenians: “Why should we be divided when we can get along so well together? After all, we all have a common enemy - the Armenians."

The portrayal of 'enemies' in the discussions is characterised by themes of division, conflict, and ideological opposition. Enemies are often not explicitly named but are implied in the context of divisive actions and ideologies that threaten social harmony or national integrity. Outside forces or entities that are perceived to threaten Azerbaijan's national unity or territorial integrity, for example, by supporting ethnic minorities, are also frequently mentioned in discussions.

Discussions of ethnic conflict in Azerbaijan often refer to the tensions and disputes that the Lezgins, in addition to the Talysh, have with the country's dominant Turkic Oghush groups. These conflicts relate to issues of land rights, the preservation of cultural identity, and the struggle for political autonomy. Both the Lezgins, who live in the northern regions of Azerbaijan, and the Talysh, who live

mainly in the south, are struggling to maintain their cultural and linguistic identity within a state policy that favours Azerbaijan's Turkic culture and language. "All peoples living on the territory of Azerbaijan are Azerbaijanis, and they must understand this soon."

10.6. Relations with the Soviet past and political issues

As is clear from the internet discussions and the interviewees' testimonies, the Soviet period had a fundamental and negative impact on Talysh identity. Although the Soviet era brought pressure for ethnic assimilation, it also allowed for the emergence of new forms of national consciousness and social interaction - but this is only mentioned in the discussions during Gorbachev's perestroika.

Criticism in the debates focuses on Soviet policy towards ethnic groups in the region, which favoured Turkic groups, apparently with the aim of separating the region from Iran in every way. The Bolshevik opening to Turkey in 1918 and the establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan is seen in the debates as a key moment in the formation of ethnic boundaries. This policy is seen as manipulative, leading to attempts to merge difficult to reconcile ethnic groups, such as the Talysh and Oghuz Turks, under a single national identity.

The confusion in Soviet administration, particularly in the classification of ethnic identity in identity documents, is seen as an example of a chaotic and intrusive approach that led to confusion and problems with ethnic identity. "For us Talysh, they wrote in our documents that we were Turks or Azeris - nobody could do anything about it, and it was still passed on to our children. When there was a census and we wanted to register as Talysh, it was impossible because they had abolished this nationality.

Discussions reveal negative perceptions of Soviet involvement in the region's ethnic and national affairs, highlighting the long-term impact of Soviet policies on contemporary ethnic and national tensions in the region.

The political context of the Talysh community is marked by events such as the short-lived existence of the Talysh-Mugan Republic in 1993. This historical moment provokes different reactions among the Talysh: some see it positively as an expression of the desire for cultural autonomy ("it is a pity that we did not have more strength then to maintain, if not an independent republic, at least an autonomous one"), while others point to the subsequent perception of the Talysh by the majority society as separatists, which makes their efforts to be loyal citizens of Azerbaijan more difficult. "We are the Talysh: They just tried to turn us into separatists and enemies. With Azerbaijani brothers. said another

participant: We only want respect and recognition of our culture within Azerbaijan, not the division of the country.

The Azerbaijani discussants were overwhelmingly negative about the establishment of the republic, accusing the Talysh of self-centredness and lack of concern for the common good. However, some Azerbaijani participants defended the Talysh: "Not all Talysh wanted their own republic. Many of them just want to live in peace in Azerbaijan and be part of our society, not separate from us".

Cases of the arrest and imprisonment of members of the Talysh minority, such as Gilal Mamedov, editor of a Talysh newspaper, are also still being discussed. These incidents are seen as an example of Azerbaijan's repressive measures against the Talysh, and they continue to attract the attention of the Talysh after more than a decade.

10.7. Current challenges and perspectives

An extension of the concept of digital diaspora involves the active use of the digital environment by the Talysh for the development of their ethnic consciousness and identity. This concept of 'digital ethnosphere' reflects how the Talysh use online platforms to create and share cultural elements, allowing them to shape and develop their identity across physical and political boundaries.

In the digital age, the development of Talysh ethnic identity encounters the double-edged effects of digital technologies. As Boyd (2010) notes, social media and online platforms allow for greater and more democratic access to information and communication, but they also create space for the spread of misinformation and the formation of polarised groups. This phenomenon is particularly worrying in the context of ethnic minorities such as the Talysh, where narratives that shape perceptions of their identity can be manipulated.

Sunstein (2001) points to the dangers of 'echo chambers', where individuals and groups become trapped in isolated information bubbles that reinforce their prejudices and limit their exposure to diverse views. In the case of the Talysh, this can lead to the creation of a distorted image of their identity, reinforcing historically unfounded perceptions of Talysh exceptionalism and association with important empires and personalities.

Brunt and Cere (2011) highlight the ways in which digital narratives of minority groups can be interpreted and often misrepresented in the wider media and social context. This misrepresentation can lead to stereotypes and misunderstandings that negatively affect perceptions of the Talysh by other societies and ethnic groups.

In the context of the 'digital ethnosphere', it is important to emphasise that while the digital space offers new opportunities for the Talysh to maintain and develop their identity, it also presents a number of challenges that need to be carefully addressed in order to maintain an authentic and positive representation of Talysh identity in the digital age.

In the context of the research undertaken, it is crucial to note that in the Soviet space, traditional research on interethnic relations has often focused largely on the interactions between the titular peoples and the Russians, who in many ways played a prominent role. Smaller nations and potential inter-ethnic conflicts have generally received less attention, except in situations of significant conflict, such as clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks in Central Asia. In this context, it is useful to refer to the work of Krista Goff (2021), who discusses ethnic issues in the Soviet Union, focusing on majority-minority relations, particularly in Azerbaijan, and emphasising the importance of examining clashes between 'titular' and 'non-titular' groups and their impact on the current situation. These clashes and the responses to them influence narratives about the Soviet republics and their development, which is also relevant to contemporary understandings of ethnic relations and identities in the region, such as the Talysh. This perspective can provide a useful context for understanding how the digital environment affects ethnic groups in post-Soviet spaces. The narratives of the oppressor and the oppressed are highlighted in the discussions analysed. Members of non-titular peoples, including the Talysh, highlight oppression at the hands of both Russians and Azeris. Conversely, Azeris point only to oppression by Russians and downplay the forced assimilation of the Talysh.

11. Conclusion

The article examines in detail the development of the ethnic identity of the Talysh from their position in the Russian Empire, through the changes of the Soviet period, to their current position in independent Azerbaijan. It analyses how the Soviet era had a profound impact on the Talysh community, with its manipulation of the census, policy of forced registration as another nationality to suppress ethnic identification, and forced relocation. These tactics were part of a wider effort by the Soviet government to centralise power and assimilate ethnic minorities in order to suppress ethnic differences and create a unified Soviet identity. In Soviet Azerbaijan in particular, these efforts took the form of assimilation and incorporation into the Azerbaijani nation, which disrupted the continuity of the preservation and development of Talysh culture, language, and identity.

The research also highlights how adjustments to census data and deportations in specific years affected the demographic structure of the Talysh, leading to long-term changes in their social and cultural organisation. Although the collapse of the Soviet Union brought new challenges similar to those of the Soviet period, in the digital age, the Talysh have found ways to rebuild and strengthen their ethnic and cultural identity. Digital platforms have become a means of overcoming historical injustices and supporting the preservation of their language and culture. The digital ethnosphere shows how the Talysh are actively using the digital environment to develop their ethnic consciousness, strengthen their cultural production in the online world, and shape their identity beyond physical and political boundaries.

This process is crucial for overcoming historical traumas and the long-term effects of the Soviet era. The study highlights how digital technologies enable the Talysh to preserve their cultural heritage and promote intercommunity dialogue, facilitating a better understanding and appreciation of their identity in a wider geopolitical context. Despite new risks such as misinformation and ethnic polarisation, the digital ethnosphere offers the Talysh people tools to strengthen their ethnic identity and protect their culture and language in the dynamic and changing political environment of contemporary Azerbaijan.

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