

# AHMAD BAY AGAOGHLU: GREAT CHAMPION OF EAST'S EUROPEANIZATION

*Ahmad Bay Agaoghlu*

**T**he late 19th-early 20th centuries were the golden age in history not only for Azerbaijani culture and art, but also socio-political and philosophical thought. It was a period of national awakening, which fostered a plethora of remarkable personalities from all walks of life not only for Azerbaijan, but also the entire Turkic-Muslim world. Nevertheless, Ahmad Bay Agaoghlu\* (note 1) stands out in terms of his knowledge and intellect even among such outstanding personalities of the early 20th century as **M. A. Rasulzade, A. M. Topchubashov, F. K. Khoyski and N. Usubbayov.**

While recognizing the merits of the mentioned public figures, who had ushered in the emergence of contemporary national statehood for the Azerbaijani people, one should admit the fact that their efforts were aimed at fulfilling a task of a rather local scale, namely, reshaping and renewal of the Azerbaijani society. Unlike them, **Ahmad Bay Agaoghlu, who had a unique analytical mind and the gift of theoretical generalization,** and also received excellent education in France, was a more global and systemic thinker. He realized that Azerbaijan was an integral part of the vast Turkic-Islamic community, therefore, it would be essentially impossible to successfully reform and achieve development of a separate Azerbaijani society without



*A. Agaoglu. Photo of 1905*

a cardinal change of the established traditions and relations in Islamic countries.

Ahmad Bay Agaoglu was born in 1869 in Shusha, one of the most beautiful cities of Azerbaijan, which is the center of the ancient Karabakh land. Ahmad Bay, himself, noted later in his unpublished biography, *“Along with Shirvan, Karabakh is a cradle of the culture of Azerbaijani Turks, the Turkic music, literature and nationalism”* (1).

Mirza Hasan, Ahmad Bay’s father, hailed from the noble Gurdlar family, while Taze-khanim, his mother, came from Sarijaly, a generation of Karabakh noble persons.

**Ahmad Bay was born and raised in a very religious family, which embraced traditional Shia values.** Haji Mirza Muhammad, Ahmad Bay’s uncle, who was considered the head of the whole generation, was particularly religious. Notable Muslim clergymen and experts on Islamic theology of Shusha and its suburbs gathered on a nearly daily basis in a spacious hall of the family mansion at Mirza Muhammad’s initiative to have “endless and tedious metaphysical arguments on various issues of Islamic theology” (2). Mirza Muhammad liked to repeat on every suitable occasion that *“this boy of mine will become a Mujtahid”* (scholarly theologian – A. B.), apparently referring to the little Ahmad (3). Upon turning six, Ahmad was sent to a theological school. Furthermore, he was expected to study in Karbala or Najaf, one of the holy Shia Muslim centers.

**Ahmad Bay avoided following the path designated by his uncle exclusively due to the efforts of his mother. Taze-khanim, who was keen on her son’s receiving secular education in the Russian language,** started waging a covert struggle for Ahmad’s future with Mirza Muhammad, her brother-in-law.

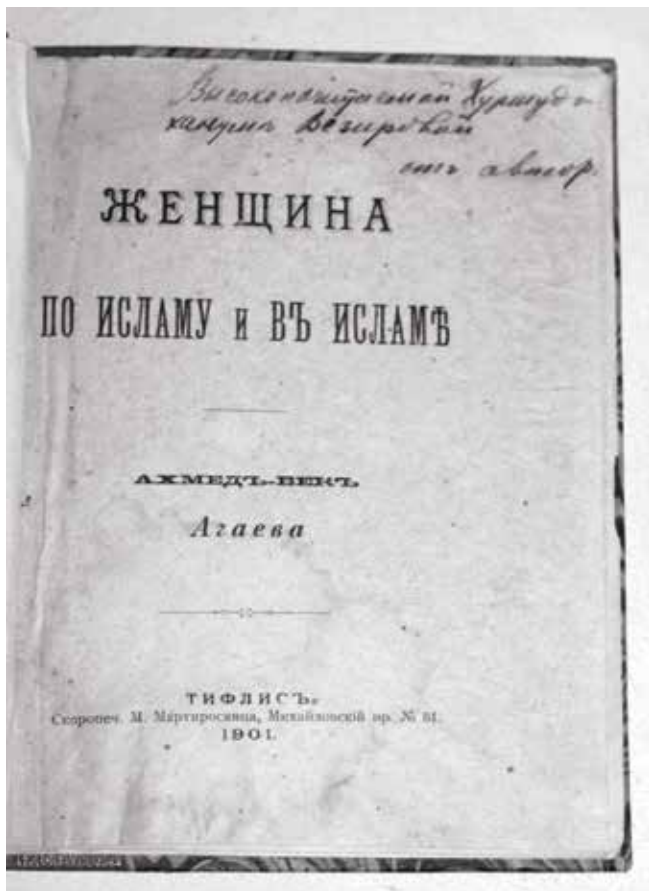
A. Agaoglu rightfully notes that this very aspiration of his mother to materialize her dream *“turned his walk of life away from Karbala and Najaf toward Petersburg and Paris”* (4). It would not be an exaggeration to say that this illiterate woman ushered in the emergence of one of the prominent Azerbaijani thinkers and public figures of the early 20th century, i.e. Ahmad Bay Agaoglu.

Taze-khanim hired a Russian language teacher for the little Ahmad unbeknownst to her husband and brother-in-law. She was assisted in this matter by her brother, who was serving as deputy head of the Shusha city hall. The potential outcome of the secret lessons that Ahmad took in the house of Bahar, his maternal grandmother, was unclear, if it wasn’t for **the authorities’ decision in**



**1881 to open a six-grade non-classical secondary school in Shusha.** On this occasion, the Shusha district chief brought together representatives of all noble Muslim families of the city. Mirza Hasan, Ahmad’s father, was also among the invitees, since Mirza Muhammad, who was the head of the extended family, was in Tiflis at that time for health reasons. The district chief insisted that the Muslims present at the meeting send their children to Russian language schools. Many of those present, including Mirza Hasan, promised to fulfill this request to please the government official.

Having passed the admission tests, the little Ahmad was admitted to the second grade of the mentioned secondary school (5). The teachers were amazed at the boy’s academic achievements, which also impressed Mirza Muhammad, who had already returned from Tiflis. He acquiesced grudgingly and even with curses, eventually allowing Ahmad to receive education in Russian. This was a precursor of A. Agaoglu’s future destiny. **While attending the non-classical secondary school, he started dreaming of receiving a college degree in Petersburg.** He became fond of this city after reading books by Russian classical authors. However, admission to a higher educational institution required complete secondary education, which was unfeasible for



Cover of A. Agaoghlu's book "Woman by Islam and in Islam", Tiflis, 1901

the Shusha school students as it lacked the last grade. In order to realize his dream, Ahmad had to leave for Tiflis in 1886 to finish his grade school studies. One year later, in the spring of 1887, Ahmad successfully passed the final exams at the Tiflis Gymnasium. In August that same year, he headed to Petersburg to apply for the State Institute of Technology. Everything was going well in the beginning, but he faced a blatant bias of the teacher at his last algebra examination. The professor disapproved of the fact that Ahmad Bay had solved the problem in a unique manner, using a more advanced formula, which was not part of the curriculum. As a result, Ahmad Bay received a low score, which brought his sojourn in Petersburg to an end. Afterwards, **he decided to apply for a more prestigious European university, eventually opting for the University of Paris (Sorbonne).** He planned to return to Petersburg later as the first-ever Caucasus Turk who received education in this city and make those exam administrators feel ashamed. Upon his arrival in Paris in early January 1888, Ahmad Bay became lonesome in this huge city, since he knew absolutely no one there. He was struggling financially and had a hard time communicating in a new language, which made

things worse. However, **Ahmad Bay started improving his skills and could understand spoken French and speak this language quite well in just three to four months.** This allowed him to begin attending lectures at the *College de France* and *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* ("higher school of applied research") from May. **Ernest Renan** (1823-1892), a prominent French philosopher and historian, was delivering weekly reports at the *College de France* at that time, while *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* was hosting lectures on the history of Oriental nations by **James Darmesteter** (1849-1894), known for his research in the area of Iranian culture and religion. A. Agaoghlu's acquaintance with these unique scholars played a key role in his future fate. Ahmad Bay began his studies at the Sorbonne law school during the 1888/89 academic year. However, his focus of interest was not limited to jurisprudence, and this versatility was apparently **influenced largely by E. Renan and J. Darmesteter.** **Afterwards, Ahmad Bay developed a keen interest in studying the history of Oriental civilizations and religions.** This is evidenced by the content of his early scientific research and writing, including a series of articles collectively called "**La Société persane**" ("**The Persian society**"), which were published in the *La Nouvelle Revue* magazine in 1891-1893 (6). These articles, which have retained their scientific value to date, analyze in detail various facets of the pre-Islamic Persian society's life, focusing on the gist and historical origin of Shia Islam, which is the official religion of Iran. **Ahmad Bay placed an emphasis on the same issue in his report titled "Mazdaism beliefs in the Shia religion" (7), which was presented at the 9th international conference of Orientalists,** held in London on September 5-12, 1892. He became the first Muslim scholar to have been granted the right to address such a prestigious event, which was significantly facilitated by J. Darmesteter's patronage. The young Azerbaijani scientist's works drew close attention of the French academia soon thereafter. Even E. Renan, who was never quick to pour praise on anyone and could hardly be considered as someone who would empathize with Muslims and Islam, hailed A. Agaoghlu's efforts, predicting that he would have a great career as a scholar. Moreover, **Renan suggested that Ahmad Bay settle down in Europe after completing his studies.** "*You are capable of becoming a world-known scholar. Do not go back to your homeland as the East will devour you,*"



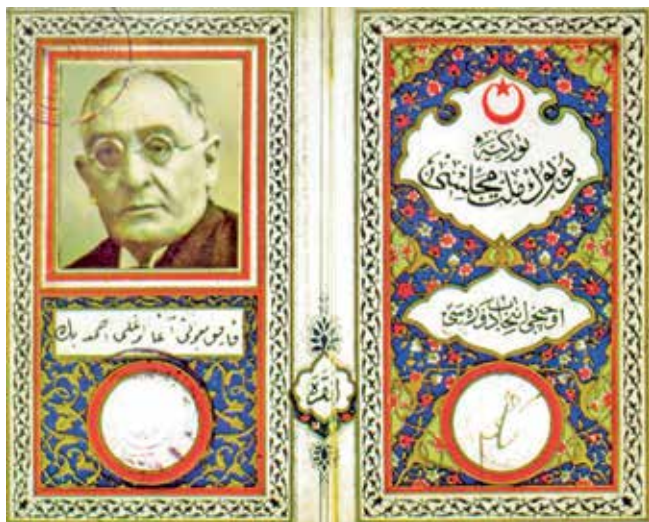
*A. Agaoghlu. Photo on a diplomatic document*



he said. A. Agaoghlu's answer to the teacher showed that he was worthy of being a true patriot of his nation. *"The East is also in need of educated people, so, I will be passing on the knowledge I acquire from you to my fellow countrymen in my home country"* (8).

In early January 1894, Ahmad Bay learned that his father had died and decided to return to his native Shusha through Istanbul. Thus, A. Agaoghlu headed back to his home country in spring 1894 after spending about six years in Paris, having gained a diploma from the Sorbonne law school and a certificate of a *College de France* graduate. But first and foremost, he was determined to leave no stone unturned to foster awakening of the Turkic-Islamic world, which had been facing centuries-old bondage of ignorance and backwardness. This remarkable thinker dedicated the rest of his life, i.e. the time period spanning from 1894 till 1909 spent in Azerbaijan, and then the period until his death in Turkey in 1939, to the solution of a daunting task, namely, overcoming a deep systemic crisis which had beset the

Muslim Turkic nations for both objective and subjective historical reasons. So, how could the Muslim East and the Turkic world's disastrous lagging behind the West be eliminated? What are the ways of achieving the Turkic nations' return to the main development path of the global civilization? Presumably, A. Agaoghlu pondered over these questions a dozen times ever since he attended the university in Paris and consistently sought answers to them. In doing so, Agaoghlu's views evolved from Iranism during the years he spent in Paris into Turkism and further into liberal nationalism during the period of the Kemalist revolution. Interestingly, Agaoghlu is the only person to have been elected to both the Azerbaijani and Turkish parliaments. Moreover, he became a member of the Turkish parliament both in the Ottoman period and after the abolition of the sultanate and the proclamation of the republic. He even managed to represent two adversarial political blocs in the Turkish parliament, namely, the "Young Turks" party *Ittihat ve Terakki*, and later the Kemalist party *Cumhuriyet*



*Certificate of a member of the Turkish Grand National Assembly owned by A. Agaoghlu*

*Halk Firkasi*. This gave some critics a reason to accuse him of lacking a backbone and even political conformism. However, these allegations were groundless, given that those political transformations had been prompted by the ever-changing situation. It is no coincidence that similar “volatility” was characteristic of many other well-known Azerbaijani public and political figures of that period. We recall that A. M. Topchubashov, who initially served as a member of the liberal-monarchist cadet faction in the Russian Empire’s State Duma, later became parliament chairman of the independent Azerbaijan; this happened over just one decade. Over the same period of time, M. A. Rasulzade turned into the founder of the national ideology and statehood of the Azerbaijani Turks after being a Hummetist and a Marxist.

While joining different political parties and organizations, A. Agaoghlu never backed down from his main goal, which focused on getting the Turkic nations off their knees, putting an end to their backwardness and achieving their filling the ranks of the most developed world countries. As for the completely different and even conflicting ideologies supported by Agaoghlu, all of them, in fact, merely served as a means of fulfilling the main task. As is known, the methods of achieving any goal are usually chosen in accordance with the requirements of the time period in question and the emerging circumstances. Following many years of research and contemplation, Agaoghlu arrived at a conclusion that the only way of materializing his dream was complete Europeanization of the Muslim Turkic world. At the same time, Agaoghlu, who was a true patriot of the Turkic world, hoped that the Turkic people, whom he considered to be the most civilized ethnic group in Asia next

only to the Japanese, would be the driving force for the renewal and modernization in the Islamic world. In this context, it comes as no surprise that Agaoghlu, together with Y. Akchura and A. Huseynzade, became one of the founders of political Turkism, a purely secularist ideology, which completely and irrevocably turned the Turkic nations “from Mecca to Altai” (9). It is also noteworthy that in comparison with like-minded persons, Agaoghlu adhered to a more consistent and principled position on the issue of Europeanization. For instance, A. Huseynzade suggested that the Muslim Turkic nations confine themselves to the use of the West’s scientific and technical achievements. In contrast, Agaoghlu was convinced that the introduction of European technologies and innovations without a drastic change in the way of thinking and mentality would not only fail to yield the desired result, but on the contrary, would be detrimental and further aggravate the situation. He noted that *“the European civilization has defeated other cultures not only with its science and technology but also all other elements without exception. Therefore, those who want to be rescued with the aid of this civilization should embrace it entirely with all of its components. Mastering the Western civilization in bits and pieces will not yield the desired result”* (10).

A. Agaoghlu suggested that a mere replication of Western achievements in the Muslim East without fostering a radical change in the moral principles of society and people’s mindset would be fruitless.

*“You can draw up constitutions and convene majlises (assemblies) as much as you like, but if our essence and consciousness do not change and despotism has taken hold in each of us and its manifestations could be traced in our households, on the street, in meetings and our line of conduct, we will not be able to move forward on par with modern societies,”* Agaoghlu said (11).

He stressed further that the reason of the inefficiency of European institutions’ efforts in the Eastern countries should be sought not in their essence, but in *“our narrow-mindedness and limitations in our way of thinking,”* which *“makes us perceive any innovation unconsciously and just rhetorically and then emasculate its entire essence when it is applied in practice”* (12).

Agaoghlu warned the Turkic nations, saying: *“By adhering further to the traditions that have long outlived their usefulness, we will vanish completely, or else, we will build our lives upon new foundations, having abandoned them decisively and across the board”* (13).

*A. Agaoghlu (far left) with M. K. Atatürk and his associates*



Agaoghlu was referring to European values when he mentioned the “new foundations”. It is quite natural that M. A. Rasulzade, the founder of the Azerbaijani national ideology, regarded him as “*the most serious ideologist of the historical Europeanization movement in the Middle East*” (14).

Ahmad Bay Agaoghlu, a great thinker of the Turkic and Islamic world, “who considered democracy a pivotal and binding element of nationalism” (15), died in Istanbul on May 19, 1939. He was buried in the Ferikoy Cemetery. ❖

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