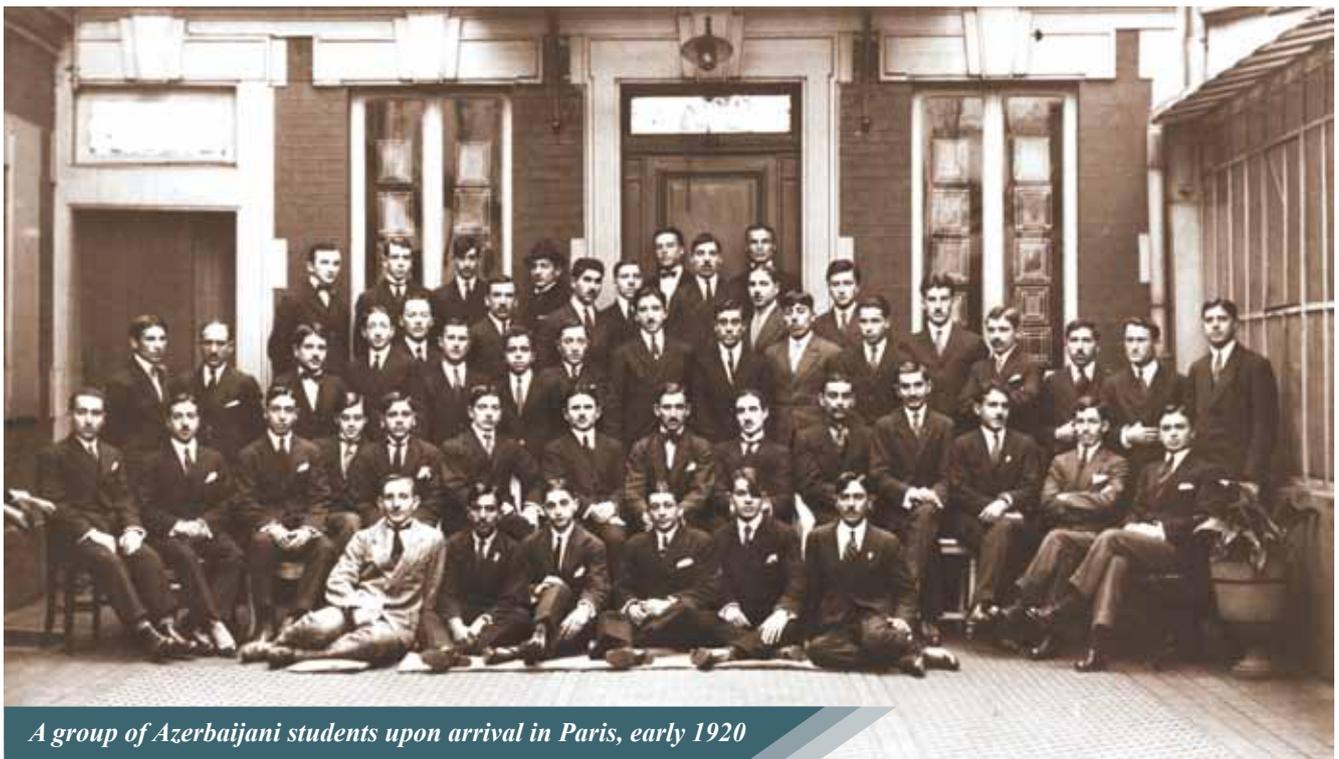


# AZERBAIJANIS IN FRANCE : HISTORY OF POLITICAL EMIGRATION

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*A group of Azerbaijani students upon arrival in Paris, early 1920*

WHAT IS A DIASPORA AND WHAT IS EMIGRATION? DICTIONARIES PROVIDE THE FOLLOWING DEFINITIONS: DIASPORA IS THE SETTLEMENT OF THE JEWS AMONG THE NON-JEWS AFTER THE START OF THEIR EXODUS FROM JUDAEA AND ISRAEL IN 538 BC; EMIGRATION IS THE ACT OF INDUCED OR VOLUNTARY LEAVING ONE'S COUNTRY FOR ANOTHER COUNTRY FOR POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND OTHER REASONS.



*Azerbaijani delegation meeting at the Claridge's hotel in Paris, 1919*

Proceeding from these definitions, we will familiarize our readers with the results of a research about the formation of Azerbaijani emigration in France. It is to be remembered though that we will be talking only about emigration from Northern Azerbaijan.

**The first wave** of emigration emerged in the 1920-30s shortly after the demise of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) in April 1920. The first people not to return to Azerbaijan were members of Azerbaijan's diplomatic mission in France led by Alimardan Topchibashov (1863-1934) who attended the Versailles peace conference. Their example was followed by the diplomats accredited in and visiting other countries, as well as representatives of the intelligentsia, bourgeoisie and servicemen who

were abroad at the time and, after 1925, most Azerbaijani students going to West European schools.

A large proportion of first emigrants was made up of those leaving the Soviet Azerbaijan legally or illegally at the time. A legal departure was recorded when family members living abroad paid for an exit visa in hard currency. The illegal crossing of border entailed major difficulties and enormous risk. There weren't too many people venturing to leave the country in this way. There was also another form of departure – forceful deportation. All Azerbaijanis who had Iranian passports were deported to Iran in 1938.

**The second** or post-war wave of emigration was largely made up of former POWs who had not returned home after 1945. They were left with no option, especially after Stalin de-

clared “victors do have to justify themselves”. This category included those who courageously fought as part of the French and Italian Resistance.

The third wave included those who went abroad in the 1970-80s in search for economic prosperity.

In the early 1990s, Azerbaijani communities started emerging in most of the developed countries of Europe and Asia. Perhaps **the first European association of Azerbaijani emigrants was established in Paris, France. There were grounds for that. The foundation of France's familiarization with Azerbaijan was laid by the compositions of French Orientalists Barbier de Meynard, Alphonse Silver and Lucien Bouve, works of well-known writer George Sand, those of Polish Orientalist Alexander Hodzko who lived in France, as**

**well as our remarkable countryman Ahmedbek Agaoglu, a graduate of Sorbonne and College de France (1888-1894).** In French archives I have discovered nine articles by A. Agaoglu published in the most prestigious French magazines and one published in an English edition between 15 March 1891 and 15 October 1893.

It should be indicated that extensive work on promoting Azerbaijan in France was conducted by our first diplomats during their official accreditation in the country (May 1919 – April 1920). On 9 August 1919, the Paris prefecture registered the France-Caucasus committee. The first paragraph of its charter said, “The Committee has been established with the aim of facilitating the development of economic relations between France and the republics of the Caucasus: Georgia and Azerbaijan.” French diplomat and Orientalist Edmond Hippo was elected president of the Committee, while vice-presidents were prince Mikhail Sumbatoff from Georgia and Miryagub Mirmehdiyev, a member of an Azerbaijani delegation to the Versailles peace conference, on behalf of Azerbaijan. The delegation led by Alimardan Topchibashov was publishing the “Azerbaijan” news bulletin until May 1920 and the above-mentioned Lucien Bouve was its editor. A total of 12 issues of the bulletin were released. Also published in this short period of time were a colored French-language geographical map of Azerbaijan and three books: “The Caucasian Azerbaijan Republic”, “Economic and financial situation in Azerbaijan” and “The anthropological and ethnic make-up of the population of the Azerbaijan Republic”.

In the late 1919, the “Revue du monde musulman” magazine published an article by a member of the Azerbaijani delegation, Jeyhunbek Hajibeyli, headlined “The first Muslim republic”. The article referred to unique sources to provide an overview of Azerbaijan’s history, geography and

economic development.

After the collapse of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on 28 April 1920, the Azerbaijani diplomats and businessmen of France established the Association of Azerbaijani emigrants headed by Alimardan Topchibashov. A student community was led by D. Rahimov. Thanks to the efforts of our countrymen Abbasbek Atamali, Farizbek Vekilli, Kasim-zade, Zohra khanum Hajibeyli, Peri khanum Topchibashi, Liya khanum, Nazenin khanum and Rena khanum, **Uzeyir Hajibayov’s undying comedy “Arshin Mal Alan” was staged at Paris’s “Femina” theater**



*Alimardan Bey Topchibashov’*

**for the first time in French language. The comedy had been translated by the composer’s brother Jeyhunbek. Featuring in the performance were French actors Dervalle (Sultanbek), Monte (Asker), Passani (Gulchohra), Magali (Asya) and others.**

Popular performer of Caucasian dances Rufatbek Khalilov featured in the same program with well-known performers of Russian and Gypsy romances, Alexander Vertinskiy and Nyura Masalskaya, in the famous cabaret “Caucasian cellar” in the Pigalle Street of Paris.

Despite a dire financial situation,

Azerbaijani emigrants carried on the benevolent mission of promoting their country. Doctor of Law Miryagub Mirmehdiyev published two books, “Problems of the Caucasus” and “Soviet regime: sources and essence”, in French and two books in Russian. A large article by writer and former Azerbaijani ambassador to Turkey, Yusif Vezir Chemenzeminli, “Insight into Azerbaijani literature”, was published in “Revue du monde musulman” magazine. In the early 1920s, the six-volume “Encyclopedia of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” printed by the world-famous publishing company Larousse contained brief biographic information about well-known Azerbaijani publisher Magomed aga Shahtakhtinskiy. In October 1926, the first issue of the “Azerbaijan” magazine, the organ of the Musavat Party, was published in Paris, while in 1930 the party’s chairman Mamed Amin Rasulzade published two books, “Azerbaijan’s fight for independence” in French and “Pan-Turanism associated with the Caucasus problem” in Russian. Work by Jeyhunbek Hajibeyli “The dialect and folklore of Karabakh (Caucasian Azerbaijan)” was published in Paris in 1933. Our countryman and lawyer Aga Gasim Gasim-zade defended his doctoral thesis on “The Bosphorus and Dardanelles: legal aspects” in Sorbonne.

Diplomats A. Topchibashi, J. Hajibeyli, A. Sheikhusislamov, M. Mirmehdiyev, M. Maharramov, A. Atamlibekov, M. Salimov, A. Hajinskiy, M. Mirbabayev, A. Guliyev, representatives of the second wave of emigration G. Suleymanov, T. Tagiyev, M. Aliyev who subsequently joined them and many others conducted an active campaign to condemn the occupation of Azerbaijan by the Russian Red Army. It was thanks to the efforts of Jeyhunbek Hajibeyli, Akper aga Sheikhusislamov and Abdurahman Fatalibeyli that the Azerbaijani desk of Radio Liberty was established in Munich.

Representatives of the older gen-

eration were gradually replaced by their children. The best-known of them was Umm El-Banu (1905-1992), the daughter of oil magnate and ADR trade minister Mirza Asadullayev. The pen-name of the Azerbaijani writer was Banine and she was known in France not only as the author of many novels and essays and a translator of Dostoevsky's books, but also as a connoisseur of Bunin, Teffi and German writer Ernst Junger.

Banine left Azerbaijan at the age of 19 in 1924. The direct descendant of the millionaire families of Asadullayev and Nagiyev, she started her life in Paris almost from scratch. After trying herself as a secretary, fashion model, translator and journalist, she followed the advice of her French friends and tried her luck in literature. Her first novel "Nami" caught the attention of famous French writer Jean Paulhan (1884-1968).

Banine's second writing, "Caucasian days" (1946), in which the writer revealed some amazing recollections of your childhood, elevated Banine to France's elite literary circles. Prominent writers Ivan Bunin (1870-1953), Andre Malraux (1910-1976), Henry Montherlaine (1896-1972), Nikos Kazantsakis (1885-1957), Ernst Junger and others became her close friends. In his letters Bunin described Banine as a "black-eyed gazelle" and "the queen of Shemakha".

After the "Caucasian days", Banine published nine more books and translated five books from Russian, German and English into French. Banine's command of French deserves special mention. The fact that the author is not French is stated only in the biographic notes in her books.

Despite her advanced age, Banine was an active member of the "Azerbaijan Evi" association established by the author of this article in Paris in 1990. She has made numerous statements for the French media condemning Armenian aggression against Azer-

baijan. Her interviews on radio, with Panorama magazine and Le Monde newspaper were a contribution to the protection of her home country.

An outstanding artist and sculptor and one of the prominent followers of avant-gardism, Selim Turan, the son of a well-known Azerbaijani public figure, scientist and publisher Alibek Huseynzade, spent 50 years in Paris. His creative work was affected by the acquaintance and friendship with such prominent culture figures as Henry Matisse, Serge Poliakoff, Pierre Soulages, Hans Artung and Jean Bazaine.



*A memorial plate on a building at 37 Decamp Street in Paris where A. Topchibashov*

It is also worth mentioning the merited doctor of Strasbourg and Baku Universities, the editor-in-chief of the French Turkological magazine "Turkika", Iren khanum Melikoff, and her daughter Shirin khanum. It was in collaboration with them that we conducted the first international colloquium "Azerbaijan: the past and the present" in France in 1984. Shirin khanum published the book "From an epic legend to opera: development of the Koroglu theme in Azerbaijan" in Baku, translated into French and published Anar's "The sixth floor of a five-storey building" novel in Paris, as well as librettos for Uzeyir Hajibayov's "Leyli and Majnun" and "Koroglu" operas.

France, which became a second motherland for first Azerbaijani emigrants, still cherishes the memory

of them. In January 1997, on the instruction of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev, we approached the French Embassy in Azerbaijan with the suggestion to perpetuate the memory of Alimardan Topchibashov in Paris. French Ambassador Jean-Pierre Guinhut welcomed the initiative and a memorial plate was soon established on a building at 37 Decamp Street in the center of Paris where Alimardan Topchibashov used to live.

Also, on the instruction of Mr. Heydar Aliyev, I have visited south-western France twice to gather evidence confirming that Azerbaijanis took part in French Resistance. The documents are currently kept at the Azerbaijani Embassy in France. In fact, a monument perpetuating the memory of our countrymen Ahmediya Jabrayilov, Mirzaxan Mamedov, Nuru Abdullayev, Huseyn Rza Mamedov and others who have sacrificed their lives for the liberation of the French town of Rodez from fascism was erected in 2005.

In conclusion of this small overview, I would like to add that while Azerbaijan was subjected to an information blockade (1989-1992) our countrymen managed to publish four French-language books about the developments in Karabakh and one in Azeri (in Arab script), "Bloody Years" by Mamed Said Ordubadi, jointly with the natives of Southern Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis of France also took an active part in the First World Congress of Azerbaijanis in Turkey (Kaiserli, 28 May - 3 June 1990).

Azerbaijani-French relations have consistently developed in all directions since Azerbaijan restored state independence. Relations at state level have opened up new opportunities for the Azerbaijani Diaspora in France. This, however, is a topic for a separate article, and we hope to return to that in one of our next issues. 🌟