

The Genesis of the Reception of Russian Émigré Literature in Azerbaijan

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ABSTRACT

Russian émigré literature, not only as an independent literary-historical phenomenon but also as a specific model of literary communication, transcended the boundaries of its own cultural environment and rapidly entered other cultures, often exerting a significant influence on various national literatures. This rich literary heritage is regarded as one of the most widely read, translated, and studied bodies of émigré literature in the world. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, works of Russian émigré literature have also been translated and published in Azerbaijan. Therefore, investigating the genesis of the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan is important for examining contemporary trends in comparative literary studies and reception aesthetics, as well as for exploring the transnational movement of literary texts, mechanisms of cultural mediation, and the historical variability of readers' perceptions.

Keywords: Emigrant literature, Azerbaijani publications, Russian literature, Russian emigration, Russian writers.

INTRODUCTION

Because Russian émigrés in Azerbaijan had not yet formed organized literary associations, because their literature possessed a transitional character that combined pre-revolutionary traditions with elements of the aesthetics of a new era, and because literary publications appeared in a fragmented and scattered manner, no clearly defined principle can be identified in the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan during the ADR period. The publication of émigré authors in the press was primarily intended to familiarize the literary community with these writers and the ideas reflected in their works.

However, the collapse of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic a crucial stage in the history of Azerbaijani statehood and cultural development and the establishment of Soviet power in Azerbaijan brought an end to the literary policy and cultural modernization that had begun to take shape during the twenty-three months of the Republic's existence. Whereas literary policy during the Republican period had been regarded as an important component of nation-building, with support for language policy, freedom of the press, and the activities of writers and publicists, the newly established Soviet government introduced an ideological dimension into literary life based on the principles of proletarian ideology. As a result, literary independence began to disappear from the very first years of Soviet rule.

Like all other spheres of social life, literature was subordinated to Party control and transformed into an ideological instrument. Consequently, the free and nationally oriented literary environment that had begun to emerge during the ADR period was replaced by a proletarian literary culture that functioned as one of the principal vehicles of Soviet ideological propaganda.

As the new ideology consolidated itself, the works of Russian émigré writers gradually became unacceptable. Their writings came to be regarded as harmful to the Soviet system, and émigré literature was discussed only within a critical or condemnatory framework in literary criticism. The foundations of this approach were laid during the 1920s, a period when certain exceptions still existed and the works of émigré authors such as Alexander Kuprin, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, and Ivan Bunin were occasionally discussed in literary criticism.

During the 1930s, however, Party intervention and pressure on literature intensified significantly. Literary purges and political repressions began, and the works of Russian émigré writers—and in many cases even the mention of their names—were prohibited.

CONCLUSIONS

In contemporary comparative literature, interliterary relations are regarded as a structural mechanism of the literary process. Within this framework, influence, dialogue, competition among aesthetic systems, and transformations of literary canons and reading norms occur. This approach is particularly relevant to Russian émigré literature. From its earliest stages of development, Russian émigré literature was not confined by cultural boundaries but was instead directed toward multiple fragmented cultural environments. Consequently, studying its reception in Azerbaijan makes it possible to determine how the national literary milieu perceived émigré Russian literature—a body of texts that was “foreign” yet culturally and linguistically familiar.

It should also be taken into account that Azerbaijani-Russian literary and cultural relations have historically been intensive. Russian literature has long been known, read, and incorporated into educational systems and translation practices in Azerbaijan. As noted by scholars, the shared geographical space, close economic, commercial, and cultural relations, as well as the fact that both peoples lived within the same state for a long historical period first within the Russian Empire and later within the the Soviet Union made cultural and literary exchange and mutual enrichment inevitable. Although sociopolitical processes strongly influenced these relations in different periods, Azerbaijani-Russian literary ties were generally built on solid foundations, with Azerbaijani literature benefiting from Russian literature and vice versa. Russian literature’s reception in Azerbaijan expanded significantly from the late nineteenth century onward, largely due to sociopolitical developments and the cultural transformations they generated.

For example, Professor T. Jafarov, in his monograph *The Reception of M. Yu. Lermontov’s Prose in Azerbaijan*, argues that Azerbaijani interest in Lermontov’s prose was connected both to the writer’s biographical and cultural ties with the region and to translation and critical activities. Among the principal objectives of his study, the author identifies the problems of “translation, reception, and scholarly investigation.” This methodological approach is significant because it demonstrates the continuous nature of the reception of Russian literature in Azerbaijan.

At the same time, it should be remembered that many representatives of Russian émigré literature were prohibited during the Soviet period, while the works of some writers were presented through the prism of Soviet ideology in a distorted form. Therefore, investigating the genesis of the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan is necessary not only from a literary-critical perspective but also from sociopolitical and historical-cultural viewpoints. This requires identifying mediated forms of reception, including fragmentary references and indirect allusions, as well as examining the mechanisms through which the émigré literary heritage was reassessed during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Particular attention should be paid to issues related to literary curricula, translation policies, and publishing strategies concerning Russian literature in the post-Soviet era. The institutional mechanisms discussed by Professor T. Jafarov in his study “Issues of Reception and Transformation of Classical Russian Literature in Azerbaijan during the Post-Soviet Period” can also be applied to the reception of Russian émigré literature.

Unlike classical Russian and Soviet literature, the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan has not yet been comprehensively examined in contemporary literary scholarship. Although some studies have touched upon the reception of individual émigré writers in a fragmentary manner, the topic has not become the subject of a systematic and comprehensive scholarly investigation. Certain works discuss the formation of Russian émigré literature as a coherent artistic and cultural phenomenon, its principal waves, sociohistorical conditions, aesthetic programs, and genre-stylistic characteristics. However, studies addressing its impact on the Azerbaijani literary environment remain limited.

As in other republics of the USSR, the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan occurred under conditions of strict ideological restrictions. Therefore, attention should be devoted to identifying indirect or hidden forms of reception within the Azerbaijani cultural milieu, determining which authors and texts were

accessible to readers, and examining how interpretative strategies developed under conditions of limited information.

Post-Soviet scholarship is characterized by the reassessment of previously marginalized literary phenomena. Although interest in Russian émigré literature has increased in both academic and educational publications, a comprehensive analysis of its reception mechanisms and its influence on the contemporary literary and cultural situation of the country remains insufficiently developed.

Nevertheless, during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan emerged as a process shaped within the context of intercultural communication. This process allows scholars to identify the historical-literary, sociocultural, and institutional conditions associated with the perception, interpretation, and incorporation of Russian émigré writers' works into Azerbaijani literary and cultural circulation. The study of the characteristics of the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan, including the forms, mechanisms, and stages of perception, interpretation, and appropriation of literary works, as well as the ways in which they have been understood by Azerbaijani readers, critics, and scholars, remains highly relevant. Further research is needed into translation practices, literary criticism, educational and publishing processes, and the ideological, cultural, and historical factors that have shaped the reception of émigré literary heritage.

The classification of the reception of Russian émigré literature according to different historical periods—the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the Soviet period, and the post-Soviet period—the examination of direct and indirect forms of reception (including publications, translations, critical reviews, indirect references, and, in contemporary times, social media discussions), the analysis of transformations in meaning and aesthetic evaluation during the incorporation of Russian émigré texts into the Azerbaijani cultural environment, and the identification of the principal patterns through which Azerbaijani readers perceived and assimilated these texts, all provide grounds for viewing Russian émigré literature not merely as a historical-literary phenomenon but also as an object of transnational cultural interaction. Such an approach also helps determine the place of Russian émigré literature within the broader system of Azerbaijani-Russian literary and cultural relations.

It should first be noted that identifying the earliest examples of the translation, publication, and study of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan is difficult. The early twentieth century was marked by complex historical, sociopolitical, and ideological struggles. The state had not yet established systems for recording published materials, collecting them in libraries, or creating relevant institutions. Printed materials circulated in a scattered manner, while clandestine publications were passed from hand to hand. As a result, many publications disappeared and failed to survive to the present day. Furthermore, the first wave of Russian émigration consisted of writers and intellectuals who left Russia after the October Revolution of 1917 because they refused to accept proletarian ideology. After Soviet power was established, their literary heritage was consequently prohibited throughout the newly formed state.

Another important issue is that attitudes toward Russian émigrés were far from uniform, both during the period of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918–1920) and among Azerbaijani émigrés themselves. The complex historical developments occurring in Azerbaijan at the time, together with the views of many Russian émigrés regarding Russia's future and their reluctance to recognize the independence of national republics and the freedom of the peoples of the former empire, influenced perceptions of both the émigrés and their literary works. Consequently, discussions of the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan generally begin with those poets and writers who were permitted to return to Soviet Russia during the 1920s. In this context, one can observe how proletarian ideology prevailed over national-cultural considerations and shaped the ways literary texts were perceived, interpreted, and evaluated within the cultural environment.

The specificity of any émigré literature lies in its dual or multilayered cultural identity. On the one hand, it remains connected to the literary traditions of its nation of origin; on the other, it reflects the cultural experience of the host environment. This situation complicates the process of reception because the meaning of a literary work emerges through the interaction between text and reader. Consequently, although examples of Russian émigré literature could, to some extent, be accepted within the Azerbaijani national-cultural context during the 1920s, they were rejected because of their incompatibility with proletarian ideology. Within the ideologically

regulated Soviet cultural system, national-cultural contexts were subordinated to political and censorship considerations.

To analyze the earliest translations, publications, and scholarly studies of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan, it is essential first to consider the broader stages in the development of the reception of Russian literature within Azerbaijani cultural space. It is well known that the stages recognized in Azerbaijani literary scholarship are directly linked to sociopolitical developments and, consequently, to the intensity of cultural relations between the two peoples. Each stage possessed its own distinctive characteristics and dominant forms of reception.

The first stage, the formation of prerequisites for reception (the first half of the nineteenth century), was characterized by the emergence of interest in Russian literature and the development of initial attitudes toward its perception within Azerbaijani cultural life. Russian literature entered the region primarily through the administrative and educational structures of the Russian Empire and through personal contacts between Russian and Azerbaijani intellectuals. Reception remained limited and largely elitist, confined to a relatively small circle of educated readers. Translation activity was sporadic and adaptive in nature, and the reception of Russian literature had not yet acquired a systematic form.

The second stage, the period of active formation and expansion (the second half of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century), was associated with the establishment of a stable readership and translation environment, as well as with the development of secular education and periodical press. Russian literature began to occupy an important place in the intellectual life of Azerbaijani society, and its reception was no longer restricted to elite circles. Translation activity intensified, the genre spectrum of translated works broadened, and a critical attitude toward Russian literature as an aesthetic and cultural phenomenon emerged. During this period, reception acquired a systematic character and became one of the significant factors contributing to the modernization of national literary consciousness.

The third stage, the Soviet period (the 1920s–1980s), was characterized by institutionalization and ideological regulation. This stage was marked by the contradictory nature of the reception of Russian literature. On the one hand, Russian literature became institutionally entrenched through the educational system, publishing policies, and scholarly research, and was incorporated into the official cultural canon. On the other hand, reception was restricted by rigid ideological frameworks and the methodology of socialist realism. It was during this period that the reception of Russian émigré literature was sharply curtailed and effectively excluded from cultural and scholarly circulation. As a result, only fragmentary and indirect knowledge about the émigré literary heritage survived.

The fourth stage—the transitional period of reassessment and the expansion of receptive horizons (from the late 1980s through the 1990s)—and the first decades of the post-Soviet era are characterized by the reconsideration of the previous literary canon and the transformation of receptive approaches. The weakening of ideological control facilitated the return of previously marginalized texts and authors, including representatives of Russian émigré literature, to cultural circulation. Interest in the diversity of twentieth-century Russian literature increased within the Azerbaijani cultural space, the role of individual readers' and critics' perceptions became more significant, and translation and scholarly research initiatives intensified.

The fifth and final stage—the contemporary period of academization and intercultural dialogue (from the 2000s onward)—is characterized by the transformation of the reception of Russian literature into a subject of systematic academic and scholarly analysis. Russian literature is no longer considered solely within the framework of an “influence” model but is increasingly examined as an integral component of the transnational literary process. Comparative literary studies have developed considerably, and particular attention has been devoted to issues of translation, interpretation, and cultural memory. The reception of Russian literature, including Russian émigré literature, is now systematically studied within the broader context of Azerbaijani–Russian cultural relations.

These stages reflect the evolution of the reception of Russian literature within the Azerbaijani cultural space—from an episodic and elitist form of perception to an institutionally established and academically interpreted process. Each stage corresponds to a specific type of reception determined by historical circumstances, cultural

policy, and the level of development of readership and translation environments. Such a periodization provides a methodological basis for a more detailed analysis of the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani–Russian literary and cultural relations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were shaped by historical developments, socio-political transformations in the Caucasus, and Azerbaijan’s incorporation into the political and cultural sphere of the Russian Empire. It was precisely during this period that cultural interactions emerged and intensified. As the educational system expanded, the Russian language became firmly established as a cultural mediator, creating a sustained dialogue between Azerbaijani and Russian literature. During the nineteenth century, Russian culture became one of the principal agents of modernization in Transcaucasia. Through administrative governance, secular education, and the press, the Russian language evolved into the primary medium of intellectual communication within the region. In particular, the establishment of Russo-Tatar schools, gymnasiums, and teachers’ seminaries contributed to the formation of a new generation of national intellectuals. This emerging intellectual milieu perceived Russian literature not merely as an aesthetic model but also as an important source of enlightenment and social thought. As scholars have noted, at a time when Azerbaijani literature—long dominated by Eastern literary traditions and primarily developing within the framework of Romanticism—began to form a new realist and European-oriented literary environment in the first half of the nineteenth century, Azerbaijani writers and thinkers became acquainted with innovative European and Russian literature, translated literary works, and, inspired by them, began producing new original works.

Particularly significant was the role of nineteenth-century Russian classical literature in the formation of realism and Enlightenment ideas within Azerbaijani literature. The works of Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, Nikolai Gogol, Leo Tolstoy, and Ivan Turgenev became well known among Azerbaijani readers and were translated into Azerbaijani. The Caucasian themes present in the works of Russian writers constituted an important symbolic and ideological aspect of Azerbaijani–Russian literary relations. Lermontov’s Caucasian writings, in particular, not only contributed to shaping the artistic image of the region within Russian literature but also generated a strong resonance within the local intellectual environment. His literary legacy exerted an indirect influence on the development of both Romantic and Realist tendencies in Azerbaijani literature.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the press and translation activities played an especially important role in expanding Azerbaijani–Russian literary relations. Russian-language newspapers and journals published in Baku and Tiflis became major platforms for the formation of literary and social thought within the region. By publishing not only literary works but also literary-critical and journalistic materials, these periodicals strengthened intellectual communication between Russian and Azerbaijani authors.

The activities of Azerbaijani intellectuals educated within the Russian educational system became one of the principal driving forces of this cultural dialogue. Through educational institutions and the efforts of Russian-speaking intellectuals, Russian literature became institutionally entrenched, reading practices developed, and Azerbaijan’s integration into the broader European cultural space was facilitated. Acting as mediators between Russian and Azerbaijani cultural traditions, intellectuals contributed to the transmission of literary, philosophical, and scientific ideas. Knowledge of the Russian language provided access to an extensive corpus of texts and contemporary intellectual debates, transforming the Russian-speaking environment into one of the principal channels of cultural communication.

The emergence of a Russian-speaking intelligentsia was largely facilitated by the development of a secular educational system. The establishment of gymnasiums, real schools, teachers’ seminaries, and Russo-Tatar schools laid the foundations of a multi-level educational infrastructure. Russian literature was taught as an integral component of the educational canon, while familiarity with Russian classical authors was regarded as an important element of students’ intellectual socialization.

Furthermore, the establishment of higher and secondary educational institutions, libraries, bookstores, and printing houses in cities such as Baku and Tiflis significantly improved access to Russian and European literature. Teachers, journalists, and publishing professionals helped create a stable intellectual environment in which contemporary literary and social issues could be discussed. Through lectures, public readings, and periodical publications, Russian literature became part of the everyday cultural practices of urban intellectuals.

It should also be noted that the formation of a readership and translation environment in Azerbaijan during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was one of the decisive factors in the development of Azerbaijani–Russian cultural and literary relations. It was during this period that institutional and socio-cultural foundations were established for the sustained reception of Russian literature. A bilingual readership capable of reading literary texts both in the original language and in translation emerged, and traditions of literary mediation took shape. The establishment of Russo-Tatar schools, gymnasiums, real schools, and teachers' seminaries contributed to the spread of literacy and the formation of a new intellectual stratum oriented toward Russian and European culture.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the development of urban culture and the growth of periodical publishing led translation activities into a qualitatively new stage. Translations of Russian prose, poetry, and drama became more regular and professional in character.

As a result, by the early twentieth century Azerbaijani readers, although still relatively limited in number, had already become acquainted with the works of several Russian poets and writers. Their works were translated and published, and reviews were written about them. Although separate book editions of Russian literary works remained uncommon, excerpts from the writings of Russian authors were translated, information about them was published, and their works appeared in periodicals and almanacs while also being taught in educational institutions.

Thus, Azerbaijani–Russian cultural and literary relations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created a solid foundation for the sustained reception of Russian literature in Azerbaijan. The educational, translational, and readership environment formed during this period provided an important historical and cultural basis for literary reception processes throughout the twentieth century, including the reception of Russian émigré literature. These relations should be viewed not as a one-sided influence but rather as a multidimensional literary and cultural dialogue based on mutual enrichment. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a stable readership and translation environment had emerged in Azerbaijan, ensuring the regular presence of Russian literature within the country's cultural life. This environment subsequently created the necessary conditions for more complex forms of literary reception, including the reception of Russian émigré literature. In this process, readers and translators acted as the principal agents of cultural mediation, determining both the direction and character of interliterary dialogue.

As is well known, following the victory of the October Revolution in Russia, intellectuals who refused to reconcile themselves with the new ideology formed the first wave of Russian emigration. After the Revolution, the Caucasus entered a period of profound political and social crisis. However, the attainment of independence by the Caucasian republics, including the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, attracted many Russian émigrés to the region. Historically regarded by Russian writers as a refuge of freedom, the Caucasus became one of the principal destinations for those fleeing the revolutionary upheavals.

With the outbreak of the Russian Civil War, the Caucasus became one of the major centers of Russian emigration. Historian Tadeusz Swietochowski notes that “between 1918 and 1920, Baku and other cities became important places of refuge for Russian émigrés.” This was due both to the relative distance of the Caucasus from the revolutionary centers and to the developed cultural environment of industrial cities such as Baku and Tiflis. Those who arrived included poets and writers, teachers, military officers, former imperial officials, and anti-Bolshevik activists who refused to accept Soviet power. During this period, the Caucasus became a significant center of the Russian-language press and an important transit and cultural hub of Russian emigration. It served as a site of intensive literary and journalistic activity and as a space of interaction between Russian and local cultures.

Russian émigration in the Caucasus between 1917 and 1920 played a significant role both in the formation of émigré literature and in the cultural life of the region. The distinguished researcher of periodical publications A. Balayev observes that “Russian émigrés actively participated in the Baku press and influenced public opinion.” Nevertheless, their presence in the Caucasus was largely temporary. Many émigré writers resided in the region only briefly before the establishment of Soviet rule compelled them to continue their migration to Europe and other countries.

Between 1918 and 1920, the works and activities of émigré intellectuals such as Ivan Bunin, Alexander Kuprin, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Zinaida Gippius, Sergey Gorodetsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksey Tolstoy, Pyotr Struve, Vlas Doroshevich, and Alexander Amfiteatrov received coverage in the Caucasian, including Azerbaijani, press. Newspapers served as the principal platform for uniting émigrés and disseminating their political ideas. Journalism and the essay predominated within émigré literary production, focusing on themes such as the collapse of the empire, the perception of the Revolution as a tragedy, the loss of the homeland, the search for a new identity, and anti-Bolshevik sentiments. The Caucasus itself was often represented as a transitional space. Such ideas naturally generated sympathy among the peoples of the Caucasus, who had historically struggled for freedom and self-determination.

Velimir Khlebnikov and Sergey Gorodetsky played a particularly important role in the reception of Russian émigré literature in Azerbaijan. Both spent time in Baku, actively participated in literary life, and published in the local press. Although many émigré writers never visited Baku personally, their works frequently appeared in Azerbaijani periodicals, especially in newspapers such as *Kaspi*, *Bakinskaya Mysl*, and *Bakinski Rabochy*.

During the period of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR), Russian émigré literature developed in close interaction with the local cultural environment. Its émigré character, journalistic orientation, and emphasis on issues of national identity allow it to be regarded as an important stage in the histories of both Russian and Azerbaijani literature. Although this literary milieu did not acquire a fully institutionalized form, it nevertheless played a certain role in Azerbaijan's cultural development and proved significant for subsequent literary processes. It should also be noted that it was precisely after this period that a number of Russian émigré writers turned to Eastern themes, which, in turn, contributed to the emergence of new artistic images and motifs in their works.

Most of the literary texts published during this period were reprints of works that had already appeared in Russian-language publications. Some studies also mention small brochures and pamphlets published in Tiflis and Baku in limited print runs and circulated within literary circles.

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