

Musa Qasimli, Turkey-USSR: From Coup d'état to Collapse. 1980-1991 (Moscow: Insan Publishing House, 2010) 416 pp. ISBN 978-5-85840-018-9 (Russian)

Alexander KORNILOV *

Serious books on Soviet-Turkish relations are still numbered and it is always very interesting to know that a new monograph devoted to the subject is written and published. This is such a case with the much lauded book written by Baku Professor and Azerbaijan Parliament Deputy, Musa Qasimli. The late professor Vitaliy Sheremet, Nicolay Kireyev, and Dr. Fatih Özbay — along with some others — can be named as long-time researchers and relations of the respective countries involved in the research process.

Prof. Dr. Qasimli is well-renowned within the Azerbaijani historiography and historical research circles. He is the author of numerous books and articles pertaining to 20th century Soviet-Turkish relations, has written on the dynamics of the 1920-1922 Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, and is an expert on the 1920-1945 Azerbaijani struggle for national independence. He has devoted some of his works to the study of senior Aliyev's policies in pre and post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

Qasimli examined primary sources for his book; he specifically focused on documents which had never been published before. Kept away for many years with top secret seals, the archives of Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, and Georgia have now become accessible due to the tireless efforts of Qasimli. In particular, Qasimli used rare materials from the state archives of the Azerbaijani Republic: the political archives of the presidential administration, the archives of the Ministry of National Security, and the foreign policy archives of the Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. With regard to Turkish archives, Qasimli referenced primary sources of the governmental state archives, the National Assembly archives and library, and the archives of the Anadolu Agency. In order to attain a more balanced and objective sample of the Soviet-Turkish historical case, Qasimli traveled to the United States (U.S.) where he continued his research in the national security archives, the George Washington University archives and at the U.S. Library of Congress. Moreover, he was able to successfully obtain much needed materials from Georgian libraries and archives.

Chapters of Qasimli's book are well written and his passionate interest with the topic is clearly reflected with the way he articulates his words. It is a book thoroughly well written by a professional and well-experienced historical scholar. Qa-

*Professor of International Relations, Nizhny Novgorod State University, Russia.
e-mail: kotva64@mail.ru

simli begins his first chapter with how the Soviet Union sought a strategic warm seas access and consequences this entailed for Turkey. Russian audiences would be interested to know that Turkey not only suffered severely due to an economic crisis, but also from the effects of terror attacks both during and after the Suleyman Demirel government and the 1980 coup. The second chapter informs the audience of the changes in Soviet-Turkish relations that took place as a result of the 1980 coup. Qasimli is convinced that bilateral relations between the two states experienced a difficult period of a new Cold War as West-East relations demonstrated at the grand level.

The death of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982 brought about changes in Soviet leadership. Normalization of Soviet-Turkish relations, Qasimli asserts, started with an official visit by the then Turkish Foreign Minister İltis Türkmen to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1982. With this visit the proverbial ‘ice’ began to melt. Both sides were interested in discussing and moving in the direction of settlement with regard to issues straining their bilateral relations. It is important to note here that details of İltis Türkmen’s visit to the USSR and his biography, along with his colleagues’ notes of him, could be found at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs segment of the book. Despite the thaw in relations, the USSR did not cease in its efforts to attain its geopolitical goal of obtaining a strategic access to the Mediterranean Sea. Qasimli’s book details the efforts of the USSR and its support of leftist/Communist and nationalist parties of the region, including such Cypriote and Armenian factions. Turkey — a staunch NATO ally — continued to pursue a pro-Western foreign policy. These strategic trends narrowed the field of Soviet-Turkish cooperation.

The Ankara visit of the Soviet Premier Nicolay Tikhonov in 1984 and its importance are discussed by Qasimli. After conducting intense talks with the Turkish prime minister of the time, Turgut Özal, the two leaders signed the Long-Term Program of Economic, Trade and Scientific Cooperation for the years 1986-1996. This visit proved that Premier Özal espoused a very pragmatic approach towards the development of state ties with the USSR. The Soviet leader Tikhonov also espoused such a view and practice and relations prospered because of it.

Chapter 7 of the book is devoted to Gorbachev’s ascent to power. Mikhail Gorbachev is widely known for his so-called ‘New Thinking’ in international relations and for his famous Perestroika. Nevertheless, Qasimli describes the new Soviet leader as a destroyer of old schemes and approaches, including traditional wisdoms. According to Qasimli, Gorbachev heeded advisors who espoused negative and suspicious views of Turkish foreign policy. Despite some controversial statements by the author, the audience discovers a curious panorama of power struggle inside the Kremlin. One of the outstanding participants of the struggle was Heydar Aliyev, the future president of independent Azerbaijani Republic.

Aliyev, according to Qasimli, did his best to maintain the balance of power/approaches and sided with decision-makers who preferred to develop relations with Turkey for mutual benefits sake. At the same time the audience can agree with the author in that both super-powers – the United States and the Soviet Union – toyed with Turkey and benefitted from this, if not outright exploiting it.

The most interesting part of the book is the historic description of the visit Prime Minister Özal conducted to the USSR in 1986. Qasimli's detailed analysis of the event and demonstration of the event's importance exemplifies Turkish attitudes to the development of relations with the USSR at the time. Prime Minister Özal believed in a set of views regarding cooperation with the Soviets. First, good relations were needed with Turkey's northern mighty neighbor for national security's sake. Second, it was the delicate geographical location of Turkey that dictated the policy of balance between NATO and Warsaw Pact states. Qasimli characterizes this latter point with the term 'maneuver' and states that Turkish diplomacy of the period skillfully conducted this balancing policy. Lastly, Özal was anxious of rapprochement with the USSR while Greece and status of Cyprus presented problems. That is why cooperation with USSR was such an imperative for Özal and his government. When Qasimli states the extent of pragmatism in bilateral relations, he does not mean with this that the leaders of the two states ignored difficult issues to discuss. Turkey elicited the USSR to curtail Armenian influence and pressure the Bulgarians in order to implore them to cease the oppression of the Turks located in Bulgaria. The USSR, in return, demanded from Turkey to reconsider its NATO policy in the Black and Mediterranean Seas.

The 1986 USSR visit of Prime Minister Özal was successful if one is to accept the official narrative of it. However, this was not the case with regard to personal relations. Özal was ill treated, argues Qasimli; Gorbachev did not devote his time to meet the Turkish Prime Minister. Regardless, however, this could be symptomatic of another factor. The reason of this cold reception was not because of Gorbachev's deliberate policy towards Turkey, but lay more so with the weak foreign policy qualifications of the USSR Secretary-General of the Communist Party. In this regard, Gorbachev did not understand and/or accurately conceive of the importance and potential of many countries in the 1980s world — especially that of Turkey. Furthermore, the Soviet leader was advised by a staff that was focused on Western foreign policy orientation and did not take 'oriental' countries much into account.

Qasimli's book is full of new and sometimes extraordinary facts of contemporary foreign policy events in Turkey. The audience is given the opportunity to acquaint with many outstanding and influential personalities of the 1980s Turkey. These include generals, politicians and diplomats: Süleyman Demirel, Kenan Evren, Bülent Ulusu, İlder Türkmen, Vahit Halefoğlu, Kurtcebe Alptemoçin, among oth-

ers. Qasimli's book is supported by a solid bibliography and index of names. Qasimli has demonstrated a very high level of research and has conducted an excellent historical method of document analysis and of oral history. At times a member of the book's audience may pay attention to a marvelous fact that has no written basis or source. This means that Qasimli had found and asked living witness or participant of the event in question. Such personages could be politicians, assistants or interpreters of negotiations or they could be the foreign minister or even a president or prime minister of the countries in question. While there can be no doubt that oral accounts need to be tested, Qasimli has right to use his own interview materials for his text and he bears the responsibility for his data. An important fact to remember is that some of these sources — no matter if in Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan or elsewhere — asked to remain anonymous because they are or once were important public servants.

In his conclusion, Qasimli stresses two periods of Soviet-Turkish relations within the period of 1979-1991. He suggests dividing this period into two sub-periods: 1979-1982 as the first stage and 1982-1991 as the second. If the first sub-period was marked by so called "new Cold War", the second sub-period was followed by a step-by-step thaw in relations between the two countries.

Although both countries were divided by Cold War stereotypes and policies, Soviet and Turkish leaders managed to conduct pragmatic politics and achieved solutions to a variety of common threats and problems. After the USSR disintegrated, its succeeding state — Russia — lost some of its Black Sea and regional strategic positions. The opposite was the case with Turkey and it became a significant regional power in the Balkans, Black Sea, Transcaucasia and Central Asian regions. Turkey and Russia both need each other and are capable in contributing to peace and cooperation in the world. The friendship between the peoples of Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan can be thusly sustained. Qasimli reminds his audience and calls upon them to learn from the lessons of modern history so that they can avoid making the same tragic mistakes in future.