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From the past

By Melaike HUSEYIN,
Doctor of Humanities in History

MAMMAD AGHA SHAHTAKHTINSKI.

Luminary Scholar of Azerbaijani
Journalism

Leipzig University main building, 1917



2025 is the year in which we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the establishment of independent journalism in Azerbaijan. Specifically, the *Əkinçi* (Ekinchi - The Ploughman) was the first privately published newspaper established in 1875 by an Azerbaijani prominent enlightener Həsən bəy Səlim bəy oğlu Məlikov (1837-1907).

Indeed, the time between the second half of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century was an era of intense press development in Azerbaijan. Then the characteristic feature of the national press was the unity of patriots, poets, writers, dramaturgs and composers around journalistic activities. The journalism of those figures was effective in understanding the social issues that Azerbaijan was dealing with and oriented on raising awareness on essential solutions.

In this article, we are excited to present to the readers one of the most prominent figures of Azerbaijani national heritage, an individual whose progressive ideas and deeds influenced the history of journalism in the Caucasus and paved the way for significant turning points in the history of press.

Prominent Azerbaijani publicist, educator, orientalist, linguist, teacher and public figure *Məhəmməd ağa Məhəmmədağlı Sultan oğlu Şahtaxtılı*, known by his journalistic pseudonym as Mehmet Bey, was born in 1846 in Shakhtakhty, Nakhichevan Uyezd, Georgian-Imereti Governorate, Russian Empire and died in 1931 in Baku, Soviet Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijani sources reveal the date of birth of Shahtakhtinski as 1846, some also indicate it as 1848, while in his resume as a member of the Russian State Duma Shahtakhtinski's birthday is indicated as 1851.(1)

After graduating from Nakhchivan city elementary school Shahtakhtinski continued his education at the Tbilisi classical gymnasium starting from the age of 14. In following years he attended and graduated from the faculty of Philosophy at the Leipzig University in 1871, listened to lectures at the Sorbonne University School of Higher Practical Education in 1899-1902. Shahtakhtinski engaged promptly in social and scientific activities at the Sorbonne, collaborating with the department of the «Asia» Society of the French Academy. Impressive are recognitions of Shahtakhtinski's competences on the international forum. He was a member of the International Phonetic Society (1899), member of the International Asian Society (1900), member of the Caucasian Branch of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (1903).

Mammad agha Shahtakhtinski in his youth



As a journalist Shahtakhtinski initiated his activity already in the 70-ties of the XIXth century. Initially he was working for the «Moskovskie vedomosti», subsequently with «Novoye vremya» and «Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti». At those newspapers, he held the position of Middle East correspondent, visited Arab countries, traveled to Iran and Turkiye many times. While in Paris, he studied history, linguistics and oriental studies, simultaneously being occupied with journalism.

After returning to Tbilisi from France, in 1894 Shahtakhtinski sold a part of his ancestral property for 18,000 Rubles, establishing his own publishing house. In 1879, he published the «*Improved Muslim Alphabet*».

In 1902 after returning to Russia from abroad, Shahtakhtinski decided to publish a newspaper. He held talks and correspondence with the administrative offices of Tsarist Russia. As a result in 1903-1905 he edited and published the newspaper «*Şərqi-rus*». In 1906, he donated that printing house to Jalil Mammadguluzade.

In 1907, Shahtakhtinski was elected a deputy to the Russian State Duma from Irevan governorate.

In 1909-1912, Shahtakhtli, was a translator-journalist at the Embassy of the Russian Empire in Istanbul. From 1919 he worked as an orientalist at the Baku State University. Due to his activities in this field, he was awarded the title of Professor by the Scientific Council of the University, becoming its first Azerbaijani professor.

When it comes to ideas of Shahtakhtinski, remarkably, he valued Islam not only as a religious belief, but also as a socio-psychological way of existence, along with its philosophical outlook. Shahtakhtinski was persistent in voicing his beliefs against the division into sects, remaining a supporter of the initial ideas of Islam. He valued postulates of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, a propagator of progress.

Shahtakhtinski shared views of Hasan Bey Melikov Zardabi and, during his own formative years, greatly benefited from the environment of Tiflis literature circles. In his articles, Shahtakhtinski criticized the feudal relations prevailing in Azerbaijan and all of the Near East, opposed tyranny, defended thoughts on



Shafiqa Efendizade, teacher and first journalist of Azerbaijan

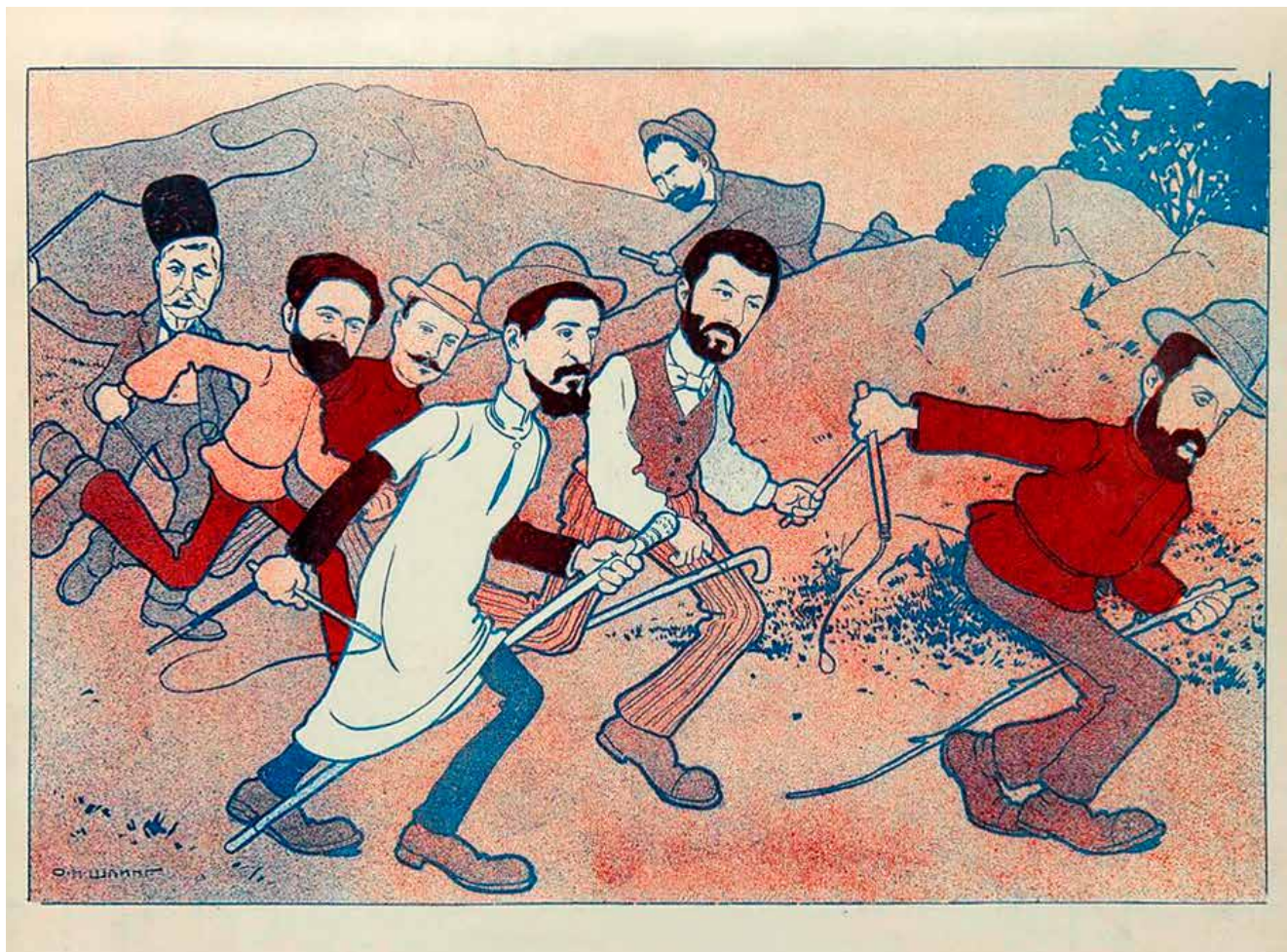
Record of Mammad agha Shahtakhtinski, 2nd State Duma of the Russian Empire, 1907



equality and education of women, spread the achievements of progressive world literature among its fellow citizens, and worked keenly on shaping interest in scientific, educational, ethical, and moral issues among the wide readership.

Then the matters of language were directly correlated with aspects of national identity. In this respect, if Mirza Fethali Akhundov was the father of ideas and steps on the way of expanding and enriching the Azerbaijani language, Mammad agha Shahtakhtinski was his follower at the time of controversial misnomers such as «Tatar», applied both to the language and as a term to define the nationality. In his article titled «How to Name Transcaucasia Muslims?» he wrote: «Recently, trying to name Transcaucasian Muslims not according to their religion, but according to their folk, they began to define us as Tatars in the Russian language. Yet, such an innovation cannot be considered successful. Instead,

Caricature by O. Schmerling from the magazine "Khatabala." Shahtakhtinski among the Caucasian deputies of the State Duma of the second convocation, 1907



it would be appropriate to call Transcaucasian Muslims Azerbaijanis, and Transcaucasian Turkic language to be called Azerbaijani as well.(2)

Shahtakhtinski's figure is exceptional from the point of view of development of Azerbaijani press, as he was that influential personality who, after 14 years of a lack of a national periodical in Azerbaijani language, was able to obtain permission from the Russian authorities, initiating publication of his own newspaper the «Şərqi-rus». Thanks to his diplomatic capacities, and tireless attempts, The Caucasian viceroy of Tsarist Russia granted consent for publication of a newspaper at the beginning of 1903. This is how the first issue of the newspaper «Şərqi-rus» was published on March 30, 1903, three times a week, becoming a daily newspaper from June 8, 1904.

Shahtakhtinski was criticized for being on good terms with the authorities; his attitude of compromise, along with the avoidance of voicing certain problems

in a rigid and very direct way, in time became a topic that was gladly picked up by his rivals, drawing a stir of criticism and influencing negatively in some circles the opinion of the newspaper «Şərqi-rus». Ismail Gaspirali was skeptical about Shahtakhtinski's editorship, criticizing also his endeavors about alphabet improvements. We find such an attitude of Gaspirali contradictory to his ideas of «Unity in language, thought, and deeds». Shahtakhtinski was the first Azerbaijani polyglot of European languages; while his knowledge of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian was also impeccable. Who, if not him, an individual with such an academic background acclaimed also in Europe, would deal with the matters of the alphabet otherwise?

As the newspaper was published in Tiflis, the main Azerbaijani journalists of the time were not particularly happy about that, as they were not able to take part in the process of its publication activities. The intensive and fierce criticising complaint on the part of

From left to right: Bakhytzhan Karataev, Mammad agha Shahtakhtinski and Temirgali Norokonev



prominent writers such as Agayev and Topchubashov against the editor in chief Mammad agha Shahtakhtinski are known. For those who know the historical background of the Russian periodicals of the XIXth century, such a way of dealing with the matter would not be of a particular surprise. Azerbaijani intellectuals were implementing epistolar battles, openly criticising each other, in case of «*Şərqi-rus*», they found grounds such as patriotism, lack of opposition towards Russian authorities against double standards applied to the Muslim population, tendency to peaceful coexistence contra bold oppositionalism policy on the part of the editor in chief Shahtakhtinski, who was replying to his opponents in the following way: "We have been created as subjects of Russia, as loyal subjects of our Russian ruler and the Russian state, thus we must see as indispensable to nurture our religion of Islam and our language with soul and word, staying far from intrigues of international politics, whether they would come concealed with the curtain of religion or without just open, we must protect ourselves fiercely from that."(3)

Another aspect of Shahtakhtinski's activity of paramount importance is related to his attitude towards the place of women in Azerbaijani society. As one of the pioneer journalists to voice the matter, he wrote and published articles on women's conditions in the Muslim world. His writings were mainly devoted to the problems that restricted women's freedom and gradually alienated them from society and public life. Shahtakhtinski tried to make the topic popular by inviting readers to take action and share their thoughts and ideas in «*Şərqi-rus*».

Crucially, the first women's signatures in the history of the Azerbaijani national press appeared on the pages of his newspaper «*Şərqi-Rus*». Appeals signed by women were published in this newspaper under the signatures such as: «*Bir xanım*», «*Ganjali bir xanım*», «*Bakılı bir xanım*» due to his encouragement. He also published for the first time an article of Shafiqə Efendizade under her real name, facilitating specifically, initiation of professional journalism by women in Azerbaijan.

Şərqi-rus (1903-1905) "Eastern Russian" newspaper



Sensational were the ideas of Mammadaga Shahtakhtinski on marriage in Islam. He considered the polygamy of men and the seclusion of women to be one of the main reasons for the stagnation of public life in Muslim societies. According to him, polygamy not only «perverts and corrupts the family», making a slave-owning tyrant out of a man, but also “causes very sensual harm to the mental and physical capacity of the population”. Simultaneously, comparing the position of women in the East and in Europe, Shahtakhtinski emphasised that in Europe a woman is free, understands and fulfils her duty within the family, while in the East she is not able to help her husband equally, nor to sufficiently follow the due education of children.(4)

Shahtakhtinski wrote: “The purpose of the family union is that fathers and mothers raise their children as future citizens of their country.» To strengthen the institution of the family, Shahtakhtinski proposed adoption of a number of legislative acts, such as the transfer of divorce cases to the jurisdiction of state bodies, ensuring equal rights for a woman to divorce and even giving a Muslim woman the right to marry a Christian.(5)

Indeed, matters related to the condition of women were first raised with a high intensity in 1903 in the newspaper «Shargi-rus», M.A. Shahtakhtinski was presenting issues of women’s education and equality in a decisive tone, indicating such matters as veil and other important topics. In an article on the International Women’s Conference, Shahtakhtinski expressed his concern that the Turks do not pay due importance to women’s freedom, like other nations. He wrote: «Cultural and educated nations dedicate great importance to the freedom and equality of women, so why don’t we do so?»(6) Shahtakhtinski considered it very important to solve this problem, because, in his opinion, the happiness and future of the Azerbaijani people depended on the resolution of this issue.(7)

Shahtakhtinski’s greatest contribution was his pioneering attitude in debate to remove the veil. Shahtakhtinski pointed out that in some Muslim countries women do not cover their faces and this is not a requirement of Islam, but just the result of local customs. Shahtakhtinski advocated for the presence of women in society, as he believed in complete equality.(8) The newspaper began to receive letters indicating that the editor was responsible for the commotion and unrests in Baku, demanding from the newspaper to raise «more important issues».(9)

As we can see from the above presented data, still least known beyond Azerbaijan, particularly in Europe, the figure of Məhəmmədağlı Sultan oğlu Şahtakhtılı epitomizes the rare Muslim scholar, whose preparation is sufficient to offer grounded solutions to social predicaments which continue to occur even today. 🌟

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