LEAH FELDMAN

Leah Feldman is assistant professor of comparative literature at the University of Chicago. Her work explores the poetics and politics of global literary and cultural entanglements in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Her book *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus* (2018) exposes the ways in which the idea of a revolutionary Eurasia informed the interplay between orientalist and anti-imperial discourses in Russian and Azeri poetry and prose, offering an alternative vision of empire, modernity and anti-imperialism.

Interview by Thomas Roueché
Portrait by Hetta Malone

Thomas Roueché How did you come to work on the Caucasus, and in particular this period?
Leah Feldman It was quite by chance! While working on my PhD at UCLA in the comparative literature department I became interested in the literature of Muslim writers and thinkers in the Russian empire and found a great mentor in Professor Azade-Ayse Rorlich, a Tatar historian who was teaching at neighbouring USC. I had enrolled in a Turkish class when Professor Rorlich called to tell me that a historian from Baku State University, Altay Goyushov, would be lecturing that fall on Azeri language. I arrived the first day of class. There were no textbooks or dictionaries and Altay Muallim conducted the class based on the famous early 20th-century satirical magazine *Molla Nasreddin*. You can imagine the estranging experience of learning a language through satire! I think this always framed my approach to reading the language. In a sense I was trained through the particular hybrid and playful Arabo-Persian-Ottoman linguistic-cultural idiom of that early 20th- century moment. It is one that I fear is disappearing from the modern language and culture of contemporary Azerbaijan in many senses, between post-Soviet nationalism and dominant contemporary Turkish and Anglophone spheres of influence. Inspired by the work of Cəlil Məmmədquluzadə [or Jalil Mammadguluzadeh], I applied for a Fulbright and landed in Baku a year later determined to study the Azeri avant-garde.

TR How would you describe the cultural world of early 1920s Baku?
LF Baku at that time fascinated me as both a cosmopolitan home to exiled or unemployed Russian revolutionary writers and artists and as the "threshold", if you will, of an Eastern international imaginary. As a student of comparative literature, I had been studying the work of Edward Said with my mentor Aamir Mufti at UCLA and was fascinated by the ways in which Baku, as a revolutionary oil hub, made the Caucasus both the site of a continuing Russian Orientalist fantasy, and the capital of an anti-colonial "window to the East" that was echoed much later in the decolonial imaginaries of the 1950s and 1960s.

TR Your book's title references "Eurasia", a non-national term that has become in recent years, as you discuss, something of a buzzword for the new right. Why was it important for you to reclaim this term?
LF I don't know that I'm reclaiming it. Eurasia for me is a supranational geopolitical discourse with its roots in a local Orientalist tradition, which as you say has been co-opted by neo-traditionalist figures, such as Aleksandr Dugin, as a kind of disavowing neo-imperial claim. In the book's introduction, I wanted to show how the ambivalent use of the term Eurasia in the 1920s – as both a call to an anti-imperial Eastern international and as a discourse used to re-annex former Russian imperial territories in the Caucasus – is also reflected in the term's resurgence amid the empire's collapse in the 1980s, first with Lev Gumilev's ethnogenesis and then Dugin's fourth political theory. I attempted to address the power of Eurasianist discourse, while exposing the ways in which it remains politically problematic.

TR Likewise, it strikes me that you tell a very non-national story in a context and a region in which culture has become vitally important to the self-definition of nation states. How did you navigate that?
LF Yes, this was an enormous challenge! I encountered much resistance from local academics and in accessing archives in Baku, though admittedly these are not unique challenges for researchers in the region. I was constantly pushed to use the term Azerbaijani instead of Azeri, though to my mind the nation state was ahistorical to the moment I was writing about. Much of the cultural elite would now like to reclaim a cohesive national mythology beginning with the [1917-1918] Baku commune. Rather, it struck me how fluid the cultural borders of the Caucasus were during this period. Məmmədquluzadə spent much of his life in Tbilisi, as did Mirza Fatali Akhundov, who is also now often claimed for Iranian nationalism as well. The transnational story of the Caucasus from the fin de siècle to the 1920s was characterised by an amazing linguistic, religious, literary and artistic heterogeneity that in the book I call the heterologic and heterodoxic character of the Caucasus as *threshold*, following the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.

TR How do these cultural responses that you look at help us understand the way artists and writers responded to a world turned upside down?
LF I think in many ways because the Caucasus had been such a dynamic space of linguistic and cultural exchange during the early years of the annexation and shortly following, many artists saw the new Soviet organisations as opportunities for the construction of a Muslim Communism (in the case of Tatar intellectual Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev) or an Eastern International (in the case of Nariman Narimanov). Organisations such as the Bakkavrosta, the Baku division of Russian Telegraph Agency or ROSTA, which produced Bolshevik propaganda and the avant-garde art journal *Iskusstvo* [Art], received Soviet funding but without strong censorship or central oversight and so were able to produce a wide range of complicated work. This was a short window of time before Stalinisation centralised administrative control and many of these figures were executed either in the purges or under dubious circumstances.

TR How does looking at the cultural impact of the Russian Revolution change when one sees it from Baku?
LF I think the vantage of Baku highlights the ways in which revolutionaries initially allied with many local intellectuals before Stalinisation and used these connections to forge an early and influential, if forgotten anti-imperial narrative. While Baku's oil has long been considered one of the reasons for the region's geopolitical significance for the Bolsheviks, its importance as a cultural centre and avant-garde poetics are often forgotten.

TR Your work does a lot to situate the Russian Revolution in the same context as other revolutionary moments – Turkey in 1907, Iran in 1906-1911. Could you say a bit more about your global perspective on revolution?
LF The Bolshevik's reannexation of the former imperial territories put the revolution into conversation with modernisation discourses in Turkey and Iran, particularly on the issues of script reform and Muslim modernism; these were conversations that had a rich history in the Caucasus and Central Asia from the mid-19th century with the publication of transnational Turkic journals from Ismail Gasprali's *Tercüman* to Məmmədquluzadə's *Molla Nasreddin* in Tbilisi and Baku, as well as rich theatre traditions across the region. The Bolsheviks capitalised on these existing discourses of modernisation in the theatre and press, so I would argue that the transnational exchanges actually preceded and informed the Bolshevik revolution.

TR The creative boom you discuss includes both literary works, but also the celebrated weekly magazine, *Molla Nasreddin*. What was their relationship to each other? I'm interested in the way you give context to this publication.
LF *Molla Nasreddin* was certainly unique in the incredible breadth of both its readership and its contents, which ranged from literary works to political cartoons. Its readership extended from the Ottoman Empire to India. Particularly unique to the journal were the cartoons that enabled it not only to be legible across a wide Turkic reading public, but also as a form of public culture that appealed to populations who could not read its language or script. Frequently shared in public readings in coffee houses, the cartoons also facilitated community conversations about a range of topics from education, censorship, public health, to script reforms. In this sense, *Molla Nasreddin* had a unique mass appeal. Because of its large Iranian readership and Arabo-Persian vocabulary, the journal played a role in shaping revolutionary connections abroad.

TR What are you currently working on?
LF I am engaged in three projects. I am co-editing a special issue of *boundary 2*, hopefully forthcoming in 2021, on the rise of the global new right. My contribution to the issue grew out of my book introduction on the rise of neo-Eurasianism amid the collapse of the Soviet empire. My current book manuscript, *Feeling Collapse*, expands on that story as a kind of bookend to the first book, analysing the collapse of the Soviet empire from the vantage of aesthetic experiments in the former imperial periphery of the Caucasus and Central Asia. I am interested in thinking through art experiments from video art and collage to performance art and theatre, from Tbilisi to Almaty, that index the experience of collapse: feeling timeless, feeling worthless, feeling stateless and feeling movementless. The last of these addresses the collapse of the utopian dreams of the left International and artists' attempts to construct alternative visions of belonging that resist post-Soviet neoliberal incarnations of authoritarian nationalisms. Growing out of that interest in refashioning an international left imaginary, I am co-writing an art book with artist collective Slavs and Tatars that presents an archive of avant-garde Communist Internationalist children's literature, but imagines a queer, decolonial, multilingual and multiconfessional intervention into that archive. ⊙