

# From *ignis mundi* to the world's first oil-tanker

The legacy of the Nobels' oil empire in Baku

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This article analyses mechanisms of heritagisation that transformed oil from a natural to a cultural resource through the case study of the Branobel corporation, which operated in Azerbaijan from the late nineteenth century, and by reflecting on the role of the Branobel corporate narrative in heritagisation of oil and in justification of the world order based on fossil fuels. The narratives developed by the Branobel corporation introduced their business legacy as a part of global heritage. In the article I refer to the 'The Thirty Years of Activity of the Oil Production Association of the Brothers Nobel. 1879-1909' published in 1909, that not only reports on Branobel's industrial achievements, but promotes the history of oil, propagating its civilisational importance, while describing the company as an evolutionary part of this history. In their branding strategy, Branobel referred to the ancient religious cults and mythologies of Azerbaijan, for example in the case of the world's first oil-tanker 'Zoroaster', designed by Ludvig Nobel. The images of Ateshgah, 'The Fire Temple of Baku', were used on the company's emblems to connect symbolically the industrial oil mining with the 'eternal fires' worshipped at the Absheron Peninsula as 'the lights of life'.

## Introduction: the legacy of oil

The economic and technological history of the Russian oil industry is well studied and documented as it underpins Russia's economic, political and social sustainability. However, research into the geopolitical, natural and cultural history of oil in the late Russian Empire and USSR is

limited. Only recently has the history of the heritagisation of oil and its transformation from natural to cultural capital in the region between the Baltic and Caspian Seas become the subject of critical analysis and artistic critique (Kalinin 2019; Engström 2019; Etkind 2021; Seits 2023). The deliberate concealment of the history of international entrepreneurship in the Russian Empire and the USSR during the Soviet era is one of the reasons for the lack of research on industrial heritage.

This article analyses mechanisms of heritagisation that transformed oil from a natural to a cultural resource, using the example of the Branobel corporation, which operated in Azerbaijan from the late nineteenth century, and by reflecting on the role of the Branobel's corporate narrative in the heritagisation of oil and in justifying the formation of a world order based on fossil fuels. The narratives developed by the Branobel corporation present their business legacy as part of global heritage. The theory employed in this analysis is the concept of heritagisation by David Lowenthal (1985, 1998) and his method of contra-distinction of the legacies of the past from the history of commercialised historical narratives, which enables us to explore the environmental consequences of the use and

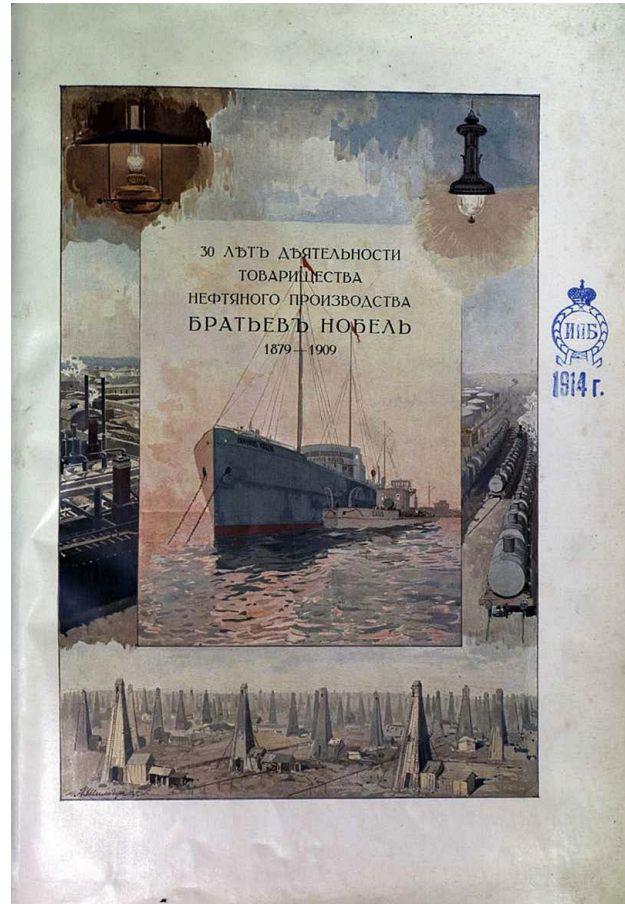
appropriation of oil and water resources through the exploitation of local religious symbols, traditions and cults.

In this article, I reflect on the business-promotion strategies and mechanisms that the Nobels devised and developed, often intuitively, by approaching and exploiting local religious symbols. They used the legacy of numerous regional cults, traditions and beliefs to integrate into local cultures, present themselves as heirs of natural wealth, and legitimise the colonisation of the Absheron Peninsula, which went far beyond the region and contributed to the change of human–nature relations that have developed in the course of the industrialisation of oil throughout the world.

The methodological focus of this article is on the corporate representation and exploitation of Azerbaijan's local religious symbols, which Branobel used in corporate emblems, the names of their tankers, etc., which communicated the company's business philosophy and demonstrated their respect for local cultural heritage with the intention of civilising the region through technological progress.

The Branobel corporation was founded in 1879 in St Petersburg and Baku by the Swedish brothers Robert and Ludvig Nobel. They soon became monopolists in the Russian and Western European oil markets until their industrial empire was swept away by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

The Nobels left a huge material and intellectual legacy in different parts of the Russian Empire. Their business philosophy has greatly contributed to the economic, social and cultural transformation in the Southern Caucasus, which in turn increased Russia's dependence on oil production and set the stage for a new geopolitical world order based on fossil fuels. In this article, I focus on the socio-cultural aspects of these transformations in order



The front page of 'The Thirty Years of Activity of the Oil Production Association of the Brothers Nobel, 1879-1909'.

to analyse the processes of legitimisation of the industrial colonisation of natural resources in Azerbaijan.

Branobel was the first company in the Russian Empire to 'whitewash' its business through the use and appropriation of local traditional cultures and religious cults. On the other hand, it was a pioneer in developing an integrated approach to improve the ecological situation in the regions where it operated, and its efforts to develop clean oil production set the standard for other refineries in the area.

## Approaching the local heritage

According to David Lowenthal, heritage is always administered, in contra-distinction from history, which possesses some evidence of truth. In *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (1998), Lowenthal marked out a divide between history and heritage, highlighting a path of the total commercialisation of heritage into the tourist industry, while the ‘two routes to the past are habitually confused with each other’ (p. x). The past is heritagised through its mythologisation and stereotyping, strategies that the Nobels chose to use in approaching the religious cults of the Baku region, setting the standard for corporate narratives adopted by many companies.

The Nobels produced a continuous history of the oil industry in Russia in the anniversary books published for the celebration of Branobel’s twenty-five and thirty-year jubilees in 1904 and 1909, which was after the death of Ludvig and Robert, the company’s founders.<sup>1</sup> The narrative contributed to establishing not only the economic and social, but also the cultural and even moral grounds of the new world order, which today is still rooted in the ‘underground’ world of fossil fuels.

## Heritagising family history to lay the foundation for ‘fair capitalism’

The moral aspects – the goodness and justice of capitalist entrepreneurship in rela-

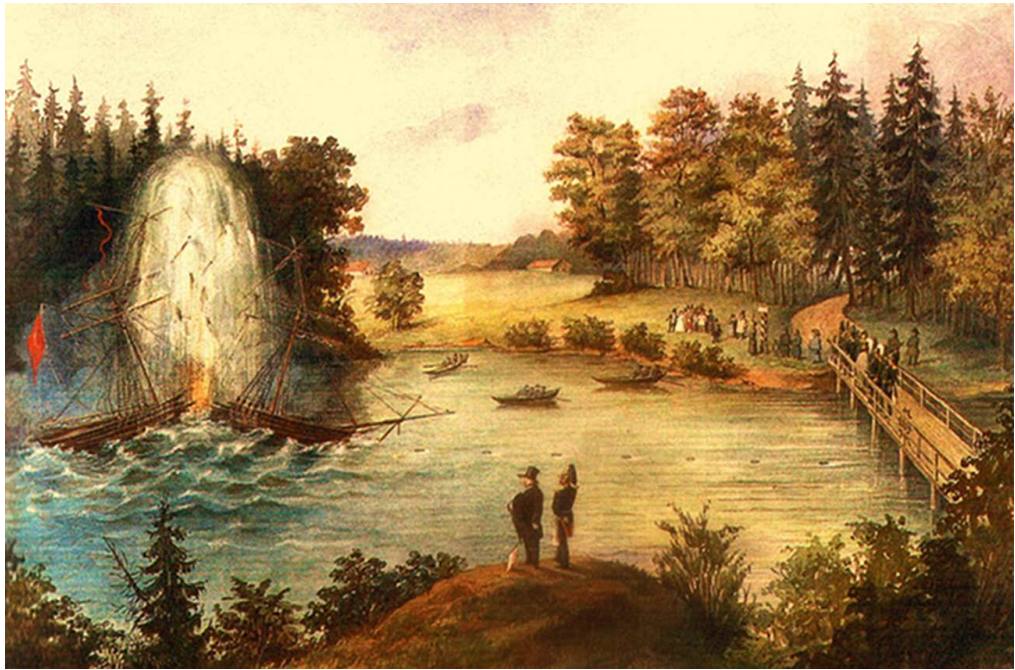
tion to the objects of their exploitation: labour force, natural resources, social and cultural capital – were important features of the theory of ‘fair capitalism’ developed by Ludvig Nobel, the head of the family’s industrial empire in Russia. It anticipated the later modernist aesthetics of *life-building* (*zhiznestroenie*), which soon became the central concept of the Russian avant-garde and an important aspect of the Swedish *folkhemmet* (common home) theory of state-building.

Nobel’s ‘Russian history’ began in 1837, when Immanuel Nobel came to St Petersburg at the invitation of the Russian government, impressed by his successful experiments with underwater mines. It was literally an explosive fire on 12 October 1840 (Jangfeldt 2022: 44) that ignited a star of success for a talented inventor and less fortunate businessman who fled to Finland and Russia from his Swedish creditors. Soon Immanuel Nobel opened a mechanical workshop in St Petersburg and in 1842, when his wife Andriette Ahlsell and their three sons Robert, Ludvig and Alfred arrived in St Petersburg, the family reunited.<sup>2</sup> The following year their youngest son Emil was born.

Immanuel’s business thrived on military commissions for war machines until Russia’s defeat in the Crimean campaign of 1853–6, which led to sanctions that severely curtailed Russian military production. For Immanuel this meant another round of financial problems, and in 1859 he returned to Stockholm to continue working on his ‘greatest love’ – explosives and nitroglycerin. On 3 September 1864 this ‘playing with fire’ turned into a tragedy, when his twenty-three-year-old son

1 Празднование двадцатипятилетия Товарищества Нефтяного Производства Братьев Нобель (‘Celebration of the Twenty-Five-Year Anniversary of Association of the Brothers Nobel. 1879–1904’); Тридцать лет деятельности товарищества нефтяного производства братьев Нобель 1879–1909 (‘The Thirty Years of Activity of the Oil Production Association of the Brothers Nobel. 1879–1909’), hereafter cited as ‘The Thirty Years 1909’.

2 Robert Nobel, the eldest son came to St Petersburg a few months later (Jangfeldt 2022: 48–9).



*Взрыв подводной мины в присутствии его императорского высочества великого князя Михаила Павловича в 1837 году* ('An explosion of the underwater mine in the presence of His Imperial Majesty the Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich in 1837'). A watercolour by Immanuel Nobel. Mechanical Plant 1912: 5.

Emil was killed in an accidental explosion at the family laboratory in Heleneborg in Stockholm. Soon Immanuel Nobel fell ill with a stroke and never fully recovered, dying on 3 September 1872, on the eighth anniversary of Emil's death.

The life of Immanuel Nobel was full of ups and downs. His story was cherished by his children as a family legacy and became a cornerstone for the mythologised narrative of the 'Russian Rockefellers'. In the anniversary books, family letters and descendants' memoirs (Nobel-Oleinikoff 2020), Immanuel Nobel is transformed into a legendary figure, whose life represented the ideal of a tireless inventor and an unmercenary scientist seeking the truth and selflessly working for the benefit of mankind (Mechanical Plant 1912: 4).

A family story has become a family legacy and a heritagising narrative that began with Immanuel Nobel's bold, even

reckless, move to Russia. Although he returned to Stockholm, it was in St Petersburg that the spark of his genius lit the victorious torch of the Nobel industrial empire; the oil, 'discovered' by his eldest son Robert in 1873 in Azerbaijan, 'the land of eternal fires', kept this torch alive until it was abruptly extinguished by the 1917 Revolution.

### **Birth of Branobel: the 'oily' path to success and the industrialisation of the mythologised past**

After Immanuel Nobel left Russia, his son Ludvig settled issues with his father's creditors and in 1862 opened a mechanical plant. After Robert 'discovered' oil in the Absheron Peninsula in 1873, they founded an oil company in Baku. By developing mining, refining and transportation of oil in the Southern Caucasus, the Nobels produced innovative industrial, logistical and



urban infrastructures, creating new sustainable urban and ecological systems that improved the locals' living conditions.

Branobel was officially registered in 1879 and soon became the largest oil firm in Russia and the second largest in the world after the Rockefeller corporation. In the late nineteenth century the Nobels were already well-established businessmen and had good connections with the Russian political, economic and financial elites. Their industrial empire included a variety of industries, from weapons to machinery and high technology, which gave Branobel the resources for the rapid industrial appropriation of Baku oil.

The Nobels came to Azerbaijan to take what they believed was theirs because they possessed the technological means and financial resources to tame and improve local nature in order to civilise these barbaric territories. The Nobels were not distinguished by a mystical or sentimental attitude towards oil. Their corporate narrative is stingy with descriptions of nature and shows no sympathy for the traditions or peoples of Baku. On the contrary, in correspondence between the brothers and family members, nature and local customs are dismissed, and laudatory and touching words are given to the Villa Petrolea, a green Eden built by the Nobels as an oasis among wild deserts saturated with oily smoke (Jangfeldt 2022; Nobel-Oleinikoff 2020; Åsbrink 2001).

Locals and nature were mere sources and material for constructing the Nobels' industrial empire. But why, with such a pragmatic approach, did they make Ateshgah, the image of the ancient Zoroastrian temple of fire worshippers, the central symbol of their oil corporation? By the time Robert arrived in Baku, the eternal fires of Ateshgah had already been exhausted by oil mining. Why did they



The Ateshgah Temple on the cover of the 'Celebration of the Twenty-Five-Year Anniversary of the Association of the Brothers Nobel. 1879-1904' (1904).

choose a dying shrine of the uncivilised past as the main symbol of their enterprise?

I have not yet found the original comments of the Nobels either about the choice of the Ateshgah Temple as a symbolic image for their corporate emblem, or about the history of its design. Therefore, I can only assume that Nobel proposed considering the image of the Ateshgah Temple as a symbol of the relationship between oil, its use by humans and its cultural and industrial appropriation. The 'eternal' fires burning in the Ateshgah Temple were their invisible source; the oil that supplied the ancient cults fuelled the industry of the Branobel firm, feeding technological progress. The Ateshgah Temple was a shrine of various

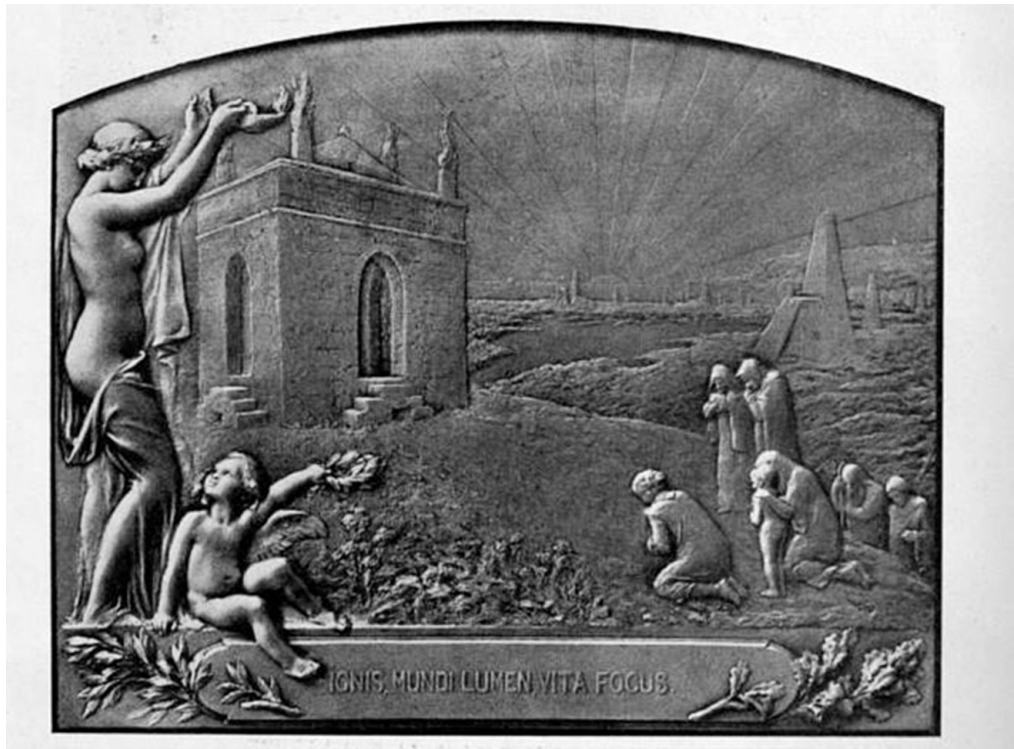
religions and cults in Absheron: a universal cultural symbol of this diverse region that could well fit with what would now be called Branobel's 'globalist' ambitions.

The Ateshgah of Baku, or 'The Fire Temple of Baku', had been used as a Hindu, Sikh and Zoroastrian tabernacle since 1745, as some wall inscriptions show, when the temple was built on the spot of an older place of worship (Ashurbeyli 1992; Alakbarov 2003).

The four elements of Zoroastrian beliefs were *ateshi* (fire), *badi* (air), *abi* (water) and *heki* (earth). Fire was worshipped here as the 'matter' of creation, the life-giving and world-producing *materies*. Choosing Ateshgah – a temple that had maintained eternal fires for centuries – as the main symbol of their company, the Nobels declared themselves the defenders of eternal fires, claiming the right to store and

dispose of them for the benefit of mankind.

However, the temple was man-made, it was built around eternal fires to worship and protect them, and it therefore symbolised the cultural appropriation of these lands. By the time the Branobel emblem was designed, the natural fires of Ateshgah were extinct, under the pressure of industrial mining, leaving the temple empty and abandoned. The lit fires on Branobel's emblems are reminiscent of a promise to restore them; yet not with Zoroastrian prayers, but with modern technologies of industrial oil-pipes, which were installed in the new Soviet era, after the Nobel empire was consumed in the flames of the Revolution. Finally, the bright light of the fires sparkling against the black night sky symbolises the lights of civilisation that oil still grants to humanity.



'Ignis, mundi lumen, vita[e] focus' ('Fire, the light of the world, the hearth of life'), a commemorative medal for 'the production of a billion poods of crude oil by the Brothers Nobel Association'. The Thirty Years 1909: 72.

The industrial production of oil in Azerbaijan began in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Nobels were among the main appropriators of the natural landscapes of Azerbaijan and the first to record not only the social and infrastructural transformations that they caused to the 'land of eternal fires', but also cultural ones. They turned their companies' industrial and financial progress reports into a historical corporate narrative, helping to establish the canon of the corporate-success narrative genre. It necessarily begins with the founding father's decision to take control over his miserable life, mobilise his outstanding talents to overcome obstacles and, with the support of his devoted family, who shared the hardships on their thorny path from rags to riches, earn success.

Describing the Nobel brothers' life in Stockholm while their father was away in St Petersburg, Bengt Jangfeldt recalled one of Robert's 'most painful memories', when his mother Andriette sent him to buy a cheap meal and he lost the coin (Jangfeldt 2022: 57). 'Struggling parents sending children to sell on the streets' became a canonic episode of a poor childhood of many would-be self-made billionaires. The image of Immanuel's children selling sulphur matchsticks (an iconic Swedish invention) on the streets, struggling to make ends meet, was among the family legends of the start of the rocky path to success (p. 57). After years of hard labour and tireless studies, they had grown into great inventors and wealthy industrialists capable of bringing the whole world to prosperity.

A success story that begins with misery demonstrates the potential of human genius to withstand obstacles and legitimatises the controversial turns on the path to success that are hard to omit from the narrative. The life experience of 'matchstick-selling' has become a cliché in Western

corporate narratives, drawing sympathy and reinforcing the moral right to take sometimes 'inevitably ambiguous' decisions. For example, the biographic narrative of another world-famous Swedish industrialist, Ingvar Kamprad, the IKEA founder, recalls a similar period recorded in various sources, including the main site of his institutionalised legacy, the IKEA museum in Älmhult, describing the start of Kamprad's striking story and 'the birth of IKEA': 'as a young boy he sold matches and fish he had caught in Lake Möckeln' (The birth of IKEA 2023).

### **Creating a narrative to own history: the uses of 'oil history' in the Southern Caucasus**

Robert Nobel came to Baku in 1873 in search of walnut wood for rifles, but did not find enough of good quality. However, it was the right moment to 'discover' oil in the region, since in January 1873 the Russian government abolished the contract system, when the state leased oil-rich lands to private companies only for four years without a guarantee of renewal. This allowed industrialists to buy land and invest in oil-mining (Jangfeldt 2022: 151). Robert could not miss this moment and convinced his brothers Alfred, and primarily Ludvig, to start the oil business.

The anniversary books introduce the history of oil production in Baku as inextricably linked with the rise of Branobel. They provide a meticulous historical account of the emergence of a new industrial empire within the borders of the Russian Empire. Branobel promised not only to civilise Russia's remote corners, but to contribute to the modernisation of the whole world, as oil was declared as the main fuel of global technological and social progress. Brita Åsbrink, one of the leading scholars of the history of the Nobel oil empire,

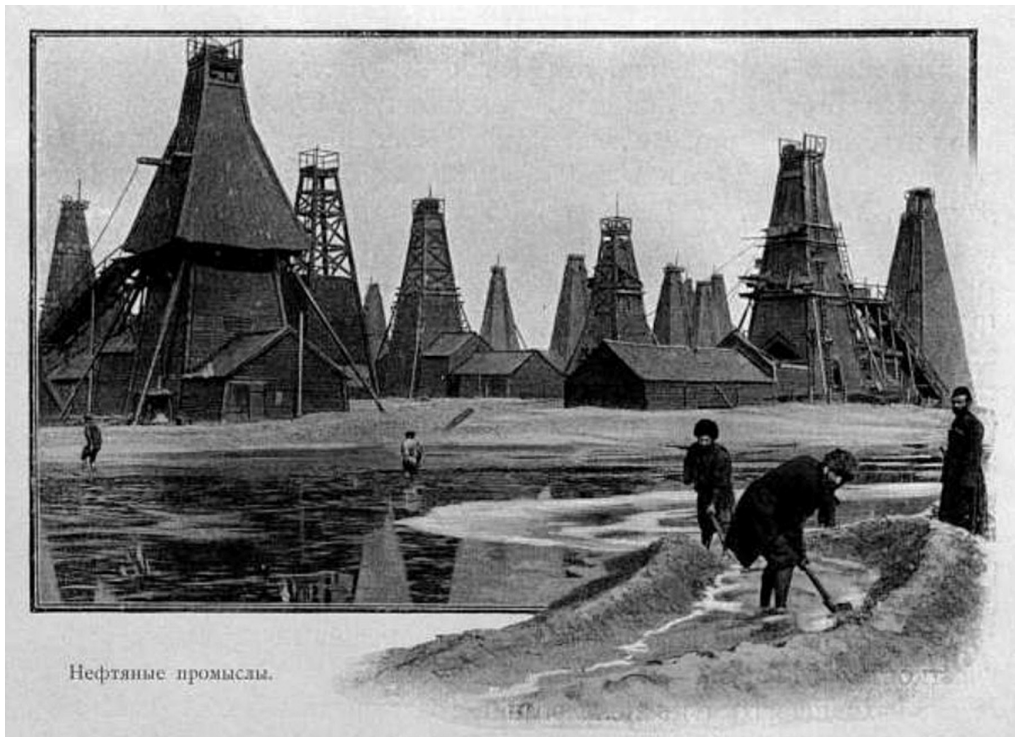
turned the prediction made by Ludvig Nobel in 1864: ‘Petroleum har en lysande framtid’ – ‘Petroleum has a bright future’ (Jangfeldt 2022: 154), into the title of her book (Åsbrink 2001). It was not just that oil had a good future, but that a future based on oil was supposed to be good.

‘The Thirty Years of Activity of the Oil Production Association of the Brothers Nobel. 1879–1909’ is an almost 350-page publication with original hand-painted illustrations, photographs, graphics and statistical tables. The book celebrates Branobel’s business accomplishments by creating a continuous narrative of the history of oil from time immemorial. The book creates the history of ‘a civilisation,’ built by the Nobels within the space of the Russian Empire in just thirty years, while ultimately changing the country’s economic, social and cultural landscapes. Notably, this change was claimed to had been achieved

not only by political and socio-economic transformations, but primarily by scientific and technological improvements (Seits 2023).

The book opens with a chapter on the disputes about the organic and inorganic origin of oil (The Thirty Years 1909: 1–2) and talks about oil mythology and related cults of the Absheron Peninsula. The authors note that oil has been known here since antiquity, giving humanity ‘a wonderful poetic page that has inspired more than one talented poet in recent centuries’ (p. 3).

Reference to the poetic, rather than pragmatic, quality of oil, which inspired ancient mythology and modern poetry, sets the tone for the narrative, prompting readers to think that the ultimate goal of some of the world’s largest industrialists was not just profit, but to maintain spiritual and cultural components of a civilisation that allowed it to flourish over the centuries,



Нефтяные промыслы.

Oil fields. The Thirty Years 1909: 23.





A mud volcano at Cheleken. The Thirty Years 1909: 2.

while Branobel was the connecting link of this uninterrupted symbolic chain.

Branobel's narrative does not recognise the existence of systematic oil-production on the Absheron Peninsula before the arrival of Robert Nobel, despite the mention of such Russian entrepreneurs as Ivan Mirzoev, Vasiliy Kokorev, Pyotr Gubonin and Alexander Benkendorf, and other industrialists who dominated oil production in Baku at that time. (The Thirty Years 1909: 18). According to the 'The Thirty Years', oil was extracted haphazardly, timidly and without confidence in success (p. 19). The state policy of regulating oil-bearing lands was still cumbersome and inefficient, which deprived the oil industry of predictability and stability, so entrepreneurs considered oil production only as a means of making quick money (p. 45).

The Nobels oppose their 'predatory' competitors and advocate a rationalised oil-industry as the basis for a sustainable future:

The young industry, still predatory, without any tradition, was waiting for its organisers, armed not only with money, but also with science, and

energy, and correct commercial calculation, and, which is very important, persistent patience for real successes. (The Thirty Years 1909: 46)<sup>3</sup>

The primordial conditions of oil-mining, that was still carried out mainly by drawing oil with wooden or leather buckets from natural oil puddles and man-made wells scattered throughout the Absheron Peninsula, required rationalisation, modernisation and regulation, which could establish not only economic, but also social and cultural order in the region, in other words, would civilise it. And these were the Nobel brothers (hence the name 'Branobel'), who accepted this difficult fate to combine their efforts and capitals to cultivate and civilise the wild Azerbaijani lands. The establishment of Branobel, was

3 My translation. Original text in Russian: 'Молодая, еще хищнически поставленная, не имеющая никакой традиции, промышленность ждала своих организаторов, вооруженных не одними деньгами, но и наукой, и энергией, и правильным коммерческим расчетом, и что очень важно, настойчивым терпением относительно реальных успехов.'

thus a rational solution to the complex natural and man-provoked challenges that hindered the region's prosperity, giving it a chance for a 'bright future' (The Thirty Years 1909: 47).

One of the narrative's central references to the mythologised history of the region is the story of Prometheus, who granted fire, and therefore eternal life, to mankind, and who was punished for that by being nailed to the highest mountain of the Caucasus, which emphasised the blessing that the lands of Baku and Absheron Peninsula possessed from the ancient gods.

The myth of Prometheus is perhaps the most symbolic for the didactics of the heritagising narrative developed by the Nobels, since the fire brought by Prometheus to mankind gave them a civilising and empowering light that bestowed immortality on humanity. The figure carrying in her raised hand the burning torch of a liberating civilisation is a classic image that originates from the myth of Prometheus. Today it is closely associated with symbols of freedom and victory, like the Statue of Liberty in New York or the Eternal Flame on Mamonov Kurgan in Volgograd, lit in memory of the Battle of Stalingrad.

In the Nobel emblems, the figure carrying a torch in her raised hand is one of the main symbols of their victory over the vagaries of nature and the wild, uncivilised conditions of the oil-rich region, which is now tamed 'in her hands'. Remembering the myth of Prometheus, the Nobels recognise that civilisational freedoms are earned in a fierce struggle with both natural and man-made obstacles. In their retelling of the Prometheus myth they write:

A semi-god Prometheus, wishing good to the miserable population of the earth, stole fire from the immortal gods and taught people how to use

it, in the hope that they would also become immortal.

And it is for a good reason that folk art, in its unlimited fantasy, put a thought into the wise head of Zeus the Thunderer to punish Prometheus by nailing him to the top of the Caucasus Mountain, behind which the rich fields of oil and gas happened to lie, and which served as the sources for the sacred eternal fires. Fairy-tale Prometheus did not make a mistake: light and heat made mankind immortal. And ancient philosophy put the three obligatory elements in the ground of immortal being: earth, water and fire. (The Thirty Years 1909: 3)<sup>4</sup>

In their narrative, the Nobels introduced themselves as representatives of the world of science, reason and the Western order, who came to the wild and undeveloped corner of the Russian Empire to bring civilisation. In other words, they appropriated the myths associated with this region to draw a symbolic line linking their

4 My translation. Original text in Russian (modern orthography): 'Полубог Прометей, желая добра жалкому населению земли, похитил у бессмертных богов огонь и научил обращаться с ним людей, в надежде, что они также будут бессмертными. И недаром народное творчество в своей неограниченной фантазии вложило в мудрую голову громовержца Зевса мысль наказать Прометей, приковав его к вершине горы Кавказа, за которыми как раз и оказались богатейшие залежи нефти и газов, послуживших источником вечных священных огней. Сказочный Прометей не ошибся: свет и тепло сделали человечество бессмертным. И древняя философия в основу вечного бытия положила три обязательных элемента: землю, воду и огонь.'



A medal, minted in commemoration of 'the mining of a billion pounds of raw oil by the Branobel Association'. The Thirty Years 1909: 73.

civilising industrial activities with the symbolic heritage of the local past. This line of inheritance justified the Nobels not only as colonists, but also as heirs to the oil wealth, who took on the role of gods (since they came from a 'more civilised community' who lived on Olympus (read: in the West).

The narrative argues that Branobel was a necessary solution for the civilisation of the natural and social landscapes of Absheron. Their industrial activities severely altered its natural and cultural landscapes and traditional lifestyles, which required not only political but also moral legitimisation of their dominance and the means of industrial colonisation of the region. This conditioned

a narrative that aimed to establish a historical and symbolic continuity between the region's traditional pasts and its industrial appropriation by Branobel, presented as an inevitable evolutionary stage of a civilising progress. Branobel's narrative provided an early example of a heritagisation of history, turning the past that they did not relate to into their own legacy.

The Nobels did not merely invent these symbolic threads of heritagisation; they searched for them in the region's own history to weave them into the history of their appearance in Azerbaijan as a symbolic and necessary mission. It is hard to say how deliberate this heritagising storytelling was, as the brothers' nearly fanatical devotion to entrepreneurship and scientific inventions, often to the detriment of their personal lives, health and financial stability, referred to pre-modernist idealistic thinking within the *life-building* concept no less than to the capitalist enthusiasm of the era of industrial revolutions, resulting in what Ludvig Nobel called *fair capitalism* (Mechanical Plant 1912).

Their faith in technological progress and rationalisation of political and social systems as society's main driving forces formed the grounds for the imminent creed of modernism. The Nobels saw the potential for modernisation in the local Azerbaijani heritage, considering themselves to be the discoverers of its treasures in order to process them and pass them on to humanity. They turned their own story into local and later into world heritage.

### Oil as heritage and as a commodity

The Nobel brothers played a leading role in establishing a new order of relations between natural resources and their industrial appropriation in Azerbaijan. Oil had traditionally been used here for heating and lighting, and as a medicine, indeed

panacea, for people and animals. Just like water, oil was used as a raw material and not as a product for processing. Oil was a gift of nature, and this gift was entirely dependent on the Earth and her desire to lower her 'black blood' pressure, releasing the excess on her surface to the delight of miserable humanity.

When the Nobels first came to the Absheron Peninsula, they took as much oil from the earth as they could. As technology advanced, they began to extract and refine as much oil as they needed, changing the natural and cultural hierarchies in the region. Neighbouring companies soon adopted the Nobel cycles, which stimulated the production and replication of the new social order in the late Russian Empire and beyond. The Nobels took over the local landscapes; extracting and processing their natural resources; redesigning the coastline of the Caspian Sea through the construction of modern embankments; laying out exotic gardens in deserts; watering salty sands with fresh water from the Volga River; and filling the hot cellars of the elegant Villa Petrolea with imported ice.

The Nobel brothers, far from conceptualising or aestheticising their technological achievements, nevertheless contributed greatly to the establishment of modern cultural and political relations between underground remains and people, increasing the resistance between humans and nature. The natural qualities of local landscapes no longer mattered so much; nature could not dictate lifestyles or form traditions and religious cults. Underground resources could be extracted and exported, flora and fauna could be imported and replanted, and polluted air cleaned.

Industrial appropriation transformed oil from a mystical supplier of eternal fires into a trivial commodity and materials for endless products. Once the object of

mysterious discoveries, oil had become an object of greedy exploitation, the cause of wars, the impetus for cultural revolutions and the overthrowing of political regimes.

At the turn of the century, approaching modernism was already demanding social justice and cultural acceptability of political and economic actors, arguing that they should become life-builders and not just profit-takers. Politicians and businessmen had to be not only powerful, but also 'good'. In its narrative, Branobel presented oil as the predominant moral legitimisation of its colonial enterprise, which exploited all the resources of the region, from natural and human to cultural and religious.

Robert found oil-mining in Baku in its primordial form. Everything else he saw was raw, too, from the legislature to roads, infrastructure and housing. The Nobels established a completely new cycle of oil production, refining and transportation, accelerating the economic and social development of the Russian Empire from the Caspian to the Baltic Sea. They saw their mission as close to the mission of Prometheus – to teach the barbarians to use the sacred eternal fires to build a new secular civilisation, independent of the gods.

The Nobels were among the first to create a corporate narrative with a moral dimension, a necessary part of modern corporate ethics that supports the company's profits and ensures its recognition in society. The morale and strong corporate reputation of Branobel literally saved the lives of the 'Baku Nobels' during the Bolshevik Revolution, as it was their local employees who helped them flee the Bolsheviks and escape safely to Sweden (Nobel-Oleinikoff 2020; Jangfeldt 2022).



## Approaching religions and myths to claim inheritance

In the anniversary publication, the Nobels also refer to Egyptian and biblical stories about oil, demonstrating appreciation of the historical legacy of Caucasian oil. In ancient Egypt, they note, oil was used as a medicine, for embalming bodies, and as an ingredient in construction materials such as asphalt (The Thirty Years 1909: 4).

The narrative further credits a biblical story when the Jews migrated to Persia and hid the sacred fire in a well. Returning to Palestine with the prophet Nehemiah, their descendants searched for this sacred fire, but found 'thick water', which, touching the red-hot sacrificial stone, flared up with a bright flame. The place of wonder was fenced off, praised as a sacred shrine, and called 'the place of purification' – *nephtar* or *nephta*<sup>5</sup> (The Thirty Years 1909: 4).

Narratives about oil emphasise its importance to humanity, stressing the significance of technological improvement in oil-mining and refining. The anniversary publication speaks of Greek fire burning over the water surfaces – phenomena that entertained the visitors of Baku at the time when Robert and Ludvig Nobel started their oil kingdom. The narrative recalls the story of the Russian Prince Igor's unsuccessful campaign against Tsargrad (Constantinople) in 941–4, when the Byzantine Emperor Roman burned Igor's boats entering the Bosphorus with Greek fire shot from copper pipes (The Thirty Years 1909: 3).

The authors continue with Herodotus, Plutarch, Dioscorides recalling *nephtar* (Dioscorides described oil as a substance used for lighting) and Pliny, who, relating the myth of Medea, mentioned that she

killed her rival, Creusa, the new passion of Jason, by putting on her head a crown smeared with oil escaping from the sacred fire (The Thirty Years 1909: 3).

Another legend related to the Absheron Peninsula recounts that Alexander the Great, travelling through the territory of modern Baku, burned a young boy, splashing 'burning water' on his body (The Thirty Years 1909: 4).

In ancient cults oil was valued for its qualities and ability to support the sacred purifying fire – one of the four basic elements along with air, water and earth. The 'eternal' fires that engulfed the Absheron Peninsula were caused by the release of oil; and yet it was the divinity of the fires, and not their origin, that various cults, including Zoroastrians, protected by building temples around them. Hence the ancient myths, such as that of Prometheus, who, it was believed, used oil to give people eternal life, use oil only indirectly – as a source of fire, or omit mentioning it at all.

## The secularisation of the eternal fires

The eternal fires of Baku symbolised God's enduring power of creation. The symbolism of eternal fires had passed down the millennia, and Branobel was among the first to exploit it as a branding strategy with a legitimising and even moralising connotation, contributing to the rapid secularisation of sacred fires. In the twentieth century, eternal fires became widely used as part of secular memorials and commemorative rituals around the world.

The first 'secular' eternal fire in modern history was lit on 11 November 1923 in Paris by André Maginot over the grave of the unknown soldier of the First World War at the Arc de Triomphe. Since then, the fire has not been extinguished, and representatives of veterans' associations kindle it daily.

5 In Russian, oil is *нефть*.

This tradition was appreciated in the USSR. The first eternal flame was lit in Leningrad on the field of Mars on 6 November 1957, on the eve of the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution, in memory of its fallen heroes. This fire became a source of eternal flames throughout the USSR, and for the most famous one – on the grave of the unknown soldier in Alexandrovsky Garden in Moscow by the Kremlin Wall (lit on 8 May 1967, on the eve of the Great Victory Day). The tradition of lighting new ‘eternal fires’ from those already burning, though non-religious, is nevertheless connected with the eternity of the ancient and unceasing Ignis Mundi.

In all cases the ‘eternity’ of the flames is powered by natural gas piped to the memorials, and what in ancient times was a miracle of nature, a demonstration of the divinity of life-giving matter, is today the industrialised incarnation of secularised symbolism.

It is outside the scope of this article to engage in a deeper analysis of another controversial case from the history of the Olympic flame in the modern Olympic movement, revived in Amsterdam in 1928. Recently, the international Olympic flame race has attracted numerous protests, often unrelated to the original idea behind the torch relay. The controversy is rooted in the ideological background of the first Olympic torch relay ceremony organised by Carl Diem during the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin under the patronage of Joseph Goebbels, and in Diem’s speech to the Hitler Youth at the Berlin Olympic Stadium in 1945. The modern history of the Olympic flame, symbolically associated with the liberating fire of Prometheus, recalls the relevance of the secularised symbolic practices of ancient cults and provides ground for a critical analysis of the ideologisation and politicisation of ancient symbols in the modern world.

## **Southern fuels to the northern lights: the world’s first oil tankers**

The continuity of the mythologised historical legacy, which the Nobels presented themselves as heirs to, is recorded in the name of the world’s first metal sea oil-tanker, ‘Zoroaster’, designed by Ludvig Nobel and Sven Almqvist in 1878 to transport oil from the Southern Caspian Sea to the north-west.

Ludvig Nobel improved the ship-building system invented by the brothers Nikolai and Andrei Artemjev, who owned a small admiralty in Astrakhan. The Artemjevs placed cistern chests on the schooner ‘Alexander’, which could take up to 80 tons of oil charged with a handpump. From 1874 they had transported oil from Baku to Nizhnii Novgorod using their oil-tanker. Since 1878 they used steam pumps. The cisterns were separated by airbags to prevent damage (Kartskhiya *et al.* 2021: 1385). Soon, the Artemjevs redesigned their entire fleet and increased the capacity of oil-tankers to 513 tons on the schooner ‘Elizaveta’ (Kretov 2021). Another of the Artemjevs ideas implemented by the Nobel brothers was to return schooners filled with cargo.

Most of the ships that delivered oil in oak barrels had to bring empty and dirty barrels back, hence they could not take on extra cargo. The Artemjevs covered the flat bottoms of their cisterns with reed litter and took aboard dry cargo, raising their fleet’s profitability up to three times compared to their contemporaries (Kretov 2021). The Volga River and the system of canals connecting the Baltic and Caspian Seas provided oil to European Russia as well as to western and northern Europe. This new method of oil transportation soon became known to the international industrial world as ‘the Russian method’. Ludvig Nobel improved the technology, and the first metal 250-ton tanker that used mazut as

fuel instead of coal was built at the Motala and Norrköping shipyards in Sweden. If 'Zoroaster' was not the world's first oil-tanker, then it was the first to transport oil in tanks across the seas. Under the Russian flag it proceeded from Sweden through the Baltic Sea and the Neva River to Baku, where it arrived on 9 June 1878. During its first voyage, the 'Zoroaster' paid homage to Nobel's mansion in St Petersburg, the heart of the Nobels' industrial empire and their family home, by mooring on their private pier.

Although the narrative of 'The Thirty Years' mentions some 'efforts' at transporting oil by tankers before 'Zoroaster', they are regarded as insignificant and even dangerous (The Thirty Years 1909: 146–7). The names of the Artemjev brothers are not mentioned in order to emphasise the importance of one of the key milestones of the Branobel's heritagising narrative.

The name Zoroaster referred to another famous 'local' of Baku, who brought the

lights of civilising knowledge to humanity. In the anniversary book Zoroaster is called 'a native of the north-eastern slope of the Caucasian ridge', who used local fires to create a fire-worshippers' cult 'based on the religious and philosophical teaching about light and fire' (The Thirty Years 1909: 146–7). 'Svet', which means 'light' in Russian, was the name of another revolutionary ship of the Nobel fleet built in Sweden in 1885, the first tanker used to export oil to northern and western Europe. Therefore, the wild oily fires of the Southern Caucasus were mastered by enlightening technologies brought from the West in order to deliver light to the world. Branobel's next trans-Atlantic oil tankers also received the 'enlightening' names of 'Luch' (Beam) and 'Blesk' (Shine).

Thus, the narrative emphasises that technological marvels, powered by fuel engines, brought *civilisation* to the East and South from the West and North, although the names of the oil-tankers, the bearers of



The world's first maritime oil-tanker 'Zoroaster'. The Thirty Years 1909: 150.



this civilisation, paid symbolic tribute to the homeland of natural, but still ‘uncivilised’, resources, which made these miracles possible.

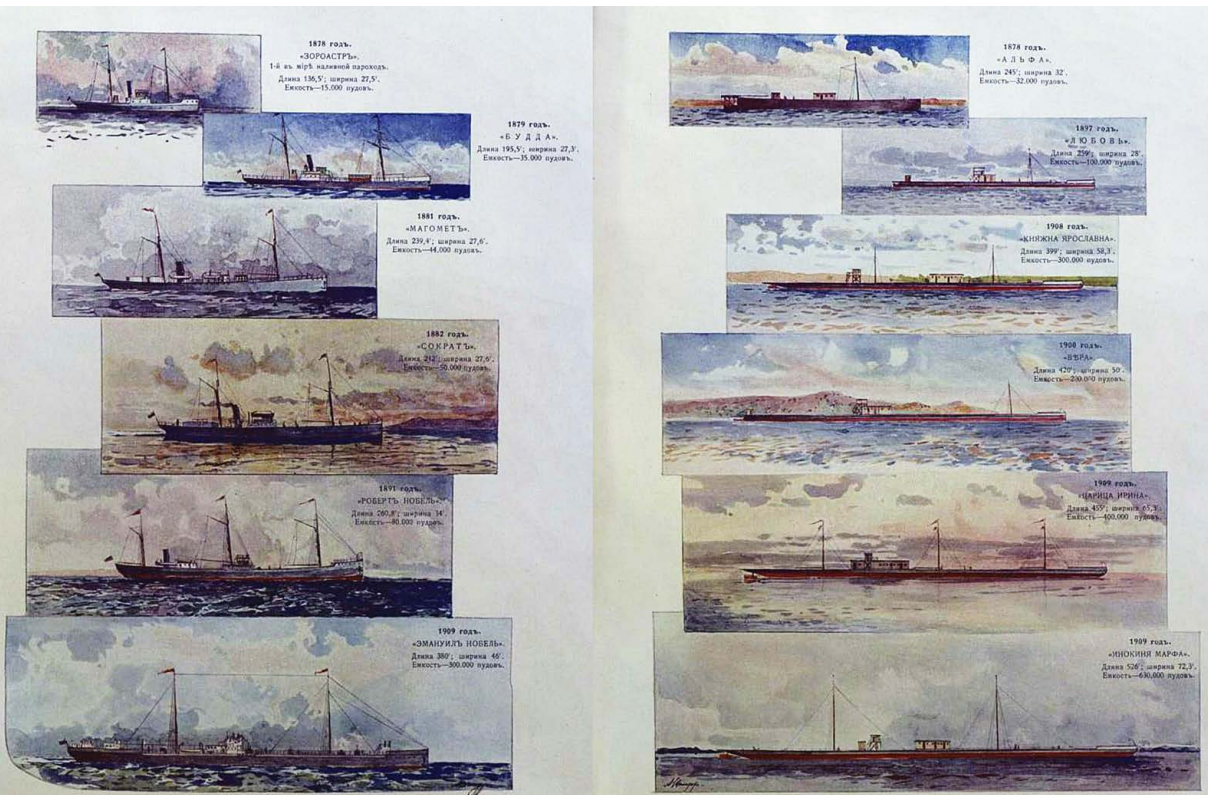
The tanker ‘Zoroaster’ was designed by Ludvig Nobel with attention to the need to adjust to the harsh conditions of the Caspian Sea and to transport large volumes of oil. Soon the Nobel fleet became the largest private fleet in the world and the second-largest in the country after the Imperial Navy. Most of the names given to the first Nobel tankers carried religious or philosophical symbolism, among them ‘Moses’, ‘Magometh’, ‘Tatar’, ‘Brakhma’, ‘Spinoza’, ‘Socrates’, ‘Darwin’, ‘Koran’ and ‘Talmud’.

The corporate narrative presents a success story that does not mention difficulties, grey financial schemes, political dramas,

protests and betrayals, and quarrels within the family. The problems described were mainly caused by ‘nature’, pursuing a proto-modernist aesthetics of resistance between nature and man.

However, nature fought back against the forcible appropriation by humans of the ‘natural’ oil through fires that plagued Branobel’s factories and warehouses. At these moments, the narrative describes the transition of the oil from the state of *black gold* and life-giving substance, from the state of *nephtar* – thick purifying water, to the *devil’s water*, raising its flames from the underworld, while the firefighters, taming the devil, ‘boiled in hell’ (The Thirty Years 1909: 78–81).

The very process of oil refining was aimed at taming it, at purifying and turning *black* oil into *white* oil, just as the city



The increase of the Branobel sea tankers in size. The Thirty Years 1909.



of Baku was turned from a *Black (dirty) City* into a *White (pure) City*. Nobel's scientific innovations fuelled the competition between the divine powers of nature and human genius in the struggle to purify the material and spiritual and to maintain the eternity of mankind through industrialisation and the exploitation of the 'inexhaustible' blood of nature.

The fact that the wealth of the Nobels was formed not by oil production, but by the production of weapons, was not emphasised in their narrative. Immanuel Nobel's 'greatest love' – underwater mines – that brought him to Russia, dynamite invented by Alfred, and military submarines manufactured by Ludvig in Tallinn at the Noblessner shipyard, were powered by powerful diesel engines and all kinds of incarnations that oil managed to provide mankind.

By a sad and symbolic irony, the fate of the Ateshgah Temple in Surakhani replicated the paths of industrialisation of Azerbaijani landscapes and the appropriation of their spiritual matters. For centuries, its eternal flames had been reliably fed by natural gases coming from beneath the place of worship of Ateshgah, attracting myriads of pilgrims. The industrialisation of Baku and its suburbs, such as Surakhani, greatly weakened the flames. The stronger the industry of the Nobel brothers grew, the more the eternal flames were depleted. By the time the Ateshgah Temple was proudly placed on the emblem of Branobel, the flame of Ateshgah had almost died out.

The image of the Ateshgah Temple on the Branobel emblem symbolises the secular heritage of the region, marking the victory of scientific human genius and technological progress over ancient mysticism, when nature smoked the same air with spirits and gods.

Since the 1880s, the Ateshgah Temple, left flameless and empty after the death of



The Ateshgah Temple on an Azerbaijani postage stamp, 1919. Wikipedia 2023.

the last Parsee, was visited not by pilgrims, but by industrialists seeking entertainment on a rare holiday, and Western financiers exploring the potentials of Baku, which was no longer the kingdom of eternal fires, but of oil.

The cultural appropriation of the ancient shrine, that transformed it from the *Home of Ignis Mundi* into a tourist attraction, can be seen on the 1919 Azerbaijani postage stamp that depicts Ateshgah with 'fake' fires from the past – a symbol not of history, but of the reconstructed legacy of the place. In the background, numerous drilling towers, protected by a Muslim crescent, rise and claim their takeover of the land and the future.

Baku's modern emblem bears a reference to the region's ancient nickname, the 'Land of Fires', resembling three golden flames in the blue sky above the turquoise waves of the Caspian Sea, accentuated by a dark ribbon of oil fields hidden in the earth, thus representing the four matters of creation: air, fire, water and earth.

The Bolsheviks captured Azerbaijan in 1920. Two years later, the Ateshgah Temple was closed. For the next forty years it functioned as a warehouse, which destroyed its

precious frescoes. In 1964, it was turned into a museum, and the flame was returned to the temple, which is now supplied by industrial gas pipelines. Today, both tourists and believers visit Ateshgah, whose fires were extinguished by the industrialisation of these sacred lands. However, the story came full-circle, returning the flames through modern gas-pipes, symbols of a new oil cult that keeps the ancient shrine as its precious souvenir.

### Conclusion

In their corporate narratives, the Nobels declared themselves to be explorers of oil, which they promoted as a civilisational tool to bring enlightenment to the region. The beginning of mass oil production in Azerbaijan in the mid-1800s and its further industrial appropriation by Swedish entrepreneurs contributed to economic and technological progress in the Russian Empire. Oil became the strength and curse of these territories, while the Nobels participated in the formation of a new world order based on fossil fuels, and contributed to the heritagisation of oil, which the USSR inherited and developed to complete the dependence on 'black gold'. Oil still nurtures Russia's neo-imperialist ambitions, remaining the subject of ideological and political manipulation and sustaining its political interests.

In 1883, shortly before the eternal fires of Ateshgah died out, the famous British engineer and traveller Charles Marvin visited the 'the region of the eternal fire', and was later to describe his adventures in the book of the same name, in which he admitted the end of the era of mystical fires and predicted the rise of a civilisation of technological progress fuelled by oil:

A few years ago a solitary figure might have been daily seen on the shore of

the Caspian Sea, worshipping a fire springing naturally from the petroleum gases in the ground. The devotee was a Parsee from India – the last of a series of priests who for more than 2,500 years had tended the sacred flame upon the spot. Round about his crumbling temple were rising greasy derricks and dingy kerosine distilleries – symbol of a fresh cult, the workshop of mammon – but, absorbed in his devotions, the Parsee took no heed of the intruders. And so time passed on, and the last of the Fire-Worshippers died, and with him perished the flame that was older than history. And yet not so. The flickering light the Gueber priests have kept alive from the epoch of myths, had only quitted the ruined temple to reappear in a million brilliant jets throughout a region stretching for thousands of miles around Baku – in the cities of the icy north, in the teeming villages of middle Russia, here and there upon the southern steppes; lighting up the strong-holds of the Caucasus, the caravanserais of Persia, the tents of Askabad and Merv; flaring in the furnaces of hundreds of steamers on the Caspian and Volga, and locomotives traversing the valleys of the Frosty Caucasus. The worship of the Eternal Fire in Surakhani temple is dead; the Priest has left behind no followers; but the oil that dimly lit a shrine now illuminates an empire, and bids, ere long, to give light and heat to an entire hemisphere. (Marvin 1891: 1–2) ■

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