

# BRITAIN'S "ARMENIAN POLICY" IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND PLACE OF THE PROBLEM IN UK ARCHIVES (1917-1920)

*Continued. For the beginning, see IRS- Heritage 3 (27) 2016, 4 (28) 2016, 1 (29) 2017*

Sources provide information about Britain's intention to incorporate the Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan, which was an oil-producing region, into its colonial empire at the end of World War I and take control of the Caspian Sea. Doctor of History Professor Parvin Darabadi notes that the British had an idea to create a whole territory by merging the area from Cairo to Calcutta under British control. This idea stimulated the new content of British policy in the Middle East – taking control of the

Caspian and territories around the Caucasus, especially oil-producing Baku (1, p. 26). This geopolitical plan also envisaged the creation of a chain of several buffer states from the northern boundary of India to the Mediterranean Sea. This chain was supposed to act as a shield during attacks on India and as the main link between Britain, Australia and New Zealand. The Caucasus-Caspian region turned into the main link, which took a special place in Britain's military-political plans at the time (1, p. 26).

*Lord George Nathaniel Curzon*





One of Britain's famous statesmen, Lord Curzon, noted that Britain's future would be solved not in Europe, but in the continent where our immigrants came from and which future generations gave back as invaders. Turkistan, Afghanistan, Caspian and Persia are part of the chessboard where the fight for world domination is taking place (1, p. 25).

Information about Britain's intention to incorporate Azerbaijan into its colonial empire and take control of the Caspian Sea is available in works by well-known researchers such as Musa Gasimli (14, p. 208), Jamil Hasanli (2, p. 249), N. K. Buzinina and K. V. Vinogradov (3, p. 119) and F. Volkov (4, p. 50). At the same time, each of these studies is right about issues concerning British plans. However, it is still not clear why the British left the Caucasus within a short period of time. First of all, why did the British arrive and what made them leave the region without foreign interference?

In 1918-1919, there was no unanimous opinion about the Caucasus in British government circles. British Secretary of State for India Lord Montagu expressed the following thoughts about the Caucasus: "As far as the issue of defending India is concerned, I believe that we

do not need to think about the Caucasus. I believe that this region is totally beyond our interests." (5, p. 74).

These thoughts are inexplicable and extremely confusing. If the Caucasus was beyond British interests, why did they arrive in the region? Our conclusion is that Britain was more concerned about keeping the colonies it took over during the war rather than expanding its colonial possessions. The Middle East was especially important for Britain. The fact that most of the energy resources were within Ottoman borders turned the Middle East into a region Britain could not give up. For Britain, where the industrial revolution had ended, it was extremely important to take control of Middle Eastern oil for ensuring the country's welfare and wealth. On the other hand, the National Liberation Movement, which emerged in Turkey as a result of new invasions following the Treaty of Mudros, declared the borders of the new Turkish state based on the borders determined by the Treaties of Brest-Litovsk and 30 October 1918. In this situation, it would be extremely difficult for Britain to protect the lands handed over to Armenia and on the other hand, to protect northern Syria and Mosul. Among all these lands occupied by



British forces, preference was given to the defense of Mosul (6, p. 164).

But all this did not mean that Baku, which was rich in natural resources, and its oil had no place in Britain's economic interests. It is impossible to name another state that had a deep understanding of the importance of oil like the British. To this end, they made every effort to totally take control of this substance (7, p. 160). As is known, oil was the strongest natural source and the main power that ruled the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Just like oil turned many states into toys and tools and gave freedom to many newly-created big and small states, it also erased gigantic empires from the historical scene. The words of famous politician Winston Churchill at the House of Commons about the importance of oil are extremely thought-provoking: "A drop of oil is more valuable than a drop of blood." (7, p. 13-14) From this point of view, the arrival of the British in Azerbaijan or to be more precise, the reason they pursued an aggressive policy in the region can be directly characterized by economic interests – oil. The well-known Turkish researcher Raif Karadag quoted the 1 July 1922 article of the prominent Times reporter Arthur Moore in his work "Petrol Storm" and says that the British came to the Caucasus to take control of Baku oil, but were forced to leave the region as they were not ready to begin a war with the Bolshevik Russian government (7, p. 62). Although these thoughts are correct, there are still some unclear things. First of all, it was impossible for the new regime, which seized power in Russia and was engaged in internal feuds, to be a rival of Britain, which had the strongest army in the world. The British could have wanted to avoid a Russian threat in the future. Of course, this is one of the possibilities. But we believe that it is more likely that Britain was more interested at the time in the Middle East, which was rich in natural resources, especially in Mosul oil. While listing these possibilities, we should not forget about the fact that Britain was forced to consider the factor of pan-Turanism, because it was of special importance for Britain to totally isolate Turkey, sever relations between this state and the Turkic world and stamp out Turanist ideas. The most convenient tool for the implementation of this plan was the Armenians. The ideas of well-known politician Lord Curzon are extremely thought-provoking: "The creation of a tampon state between Turkey and Turkic peoples is inevitable. In order to eliminate the problem, it is important to create a Christian community represented by Greater Armenia." (8, p. 427).

It is precisely here that the factor of Nakhchivan emerges as an important point.

**Nakhchivan's place in British plans.** As we study and analyze Britain's plans on Armenians, we face the following question: In what regions would this entity called an "Armenian state" have been created? It was impossible to establish this state in Eastern Anatolia and Britain itself would not have accepted it, although Britain had given the Armenians guarantees in exchange for using them as a barrier against the Turkish threat in Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus and had undertaken serious commitments and given promises concerning the establishment of "independent Armenia". The establishment of an Armenian state between Turkey and Azerbaijan in a region that included Nakhchivan and the delineation of its borders were part of British plans. Since the British did not believe pro-Turkish Azerbaijan, they trusted Armenia and were trying to hand over Nakhchivan to the Armenians in order to close Turkey's door to the Transcaucasia for good. (For more details, see 9, p. 13-14; 10, p. 74).

In 1919, the British army entered Nakhchivan. Although the main purpose was to use the Armenians as a barrier, prevent pan-Turanism and hand over Nakhchivan to Armenians, the British initially said that the purpose of their arrival was to help Armenian refugees who were called "oppressed children of the West". (11, p. 152) Otherwise, it would have been totally illogical to make a statement like "We have come here to create a Christian community represented by a tampon state called a new 'Armenian state', which is like a sword in the heart of the Turkic world, by preventing pan-Turkism and handing over Nakhchivan to Armenians".

Indeed, the main excuse was to settle Armenian refugees in Nakhchivan. British Army Major William D. Gibbon, who brought one million rubles from Baku in aid to Armenian refugees in Zangezur, was sent to Nakhchivan to resolve the issue of Nakhchivan (12, p. 190). After meeting with authorized officials of the Nakhchivan government in early January 1919, Gibbon was very hopeful. Influential persons in Nakhchivan respected him and explained their problems (For more details, see 13, p. 104-106). However, when Gibbon said that he had come to Nakhchivan to resolve the issue of Armenian refugees, the situation deteriorated. Considering the events of the past, the hardships Turks encountered in Armenia and the deplorable state of tens of thousands of Muslim refugees who took refuge in Nakhchivan and Iran, such a proposal was unacceptable. In such a

situation, Gibbon was forced to leave Nakhchivan (11, p. 153). A short while later, a delegation led by another British commissioner, Captain Frederick Eastfield Laughton, came to Nakhchivan. On 8 January, members of the National Council and the British delegation held a joint meeting and made some decisions. According to those decisions:

- 1) The British would repair the railway and put it in operation;
- 2) Telegraph lines would be opened and Nakhchivan and Sharur from Julfa to Sadarak would be controlled by Muslims and from Sadarak to Iravan by Armenians;
- 3) The Muslim boundary would be Arazdayan and the Armenian boundary Iravan Yangija;
- 4) Danzik in the Dahakand district would be controlled by Muslims and Araba by Armenians;
- 5) Nakhchivan Muslims would give the American mission 10,000 poods of grain for 50 manats per pood to be distributed among Armenian migrants (13, p. 107).

Laughton met and negotiated with the National Council government in Nakhchivan and sent an urgent report to the 27<sup>th</sup> Division Headquarters proposing that a military governor's office be created in Nakhchivan and Armenia be ordered to relocate armed forces in the south to Iravan. On 26 January, General George T. Forestier Walker, military intelligence chief William Henry Beach, the chief of the headquarters Charles Gratten Bellew and the commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> brigade Robert N. Stewart and their deputies gathered together. Following the discussions, Laughton was appointed military governor of Nakhchivan in the rank of lieutenant-colonel and was informed that a platoon from the 8<sup>th</sup> brigade would be sent to him (11, p. 154).

When the British authorities in Nakhchivan started their activities, they first planned to gain influence in the region. Thus, the British protected Muslim-populated areas from Armenian claims and attacks and tried to please the Turkic population by giving some posts to the local population. They even treated Armenians and Azerbaijanis equally and tried to create a veneer of impartiality and please the population by opposing some Armenian proposals. In some way, this lived up to their expectations. There is no doubt that such a step by the British, who concealed their real plans and true intentions regarding Armenians, had its own reasons, first of all, because the British did not have enough forces at the beginning. For this reason, Governor Laughton

did not have all authority. In some issue, he asked the Nakhchivan government for permission and was able only to put forward proposals (11, p. 156-157). However, the true intention of the British became clear in March and their relations with the local population started to be disrupted. Although initially, they did not use force when they came to Nakhchivan, the British, who tried hard to send grain to Armenian refugees, subsequently dispatched the grain they had bought to Armenia and distributed it among refugees. The pro-Armenian policy of the British gradually became even more apparent. The arrival of General William M. Thomson in Tiflis from Baku on 10 March was the beginning of a change in British policy. The American historian of Armenian origin, Richard Hovhannisian, writes that the Turks were well-organized from Kars to Nakhchivan. The British realized the Muslims' expansionist policies and figured out Turkish involvement in it (12, p. 235-236). General Thomson immediately took action and sent two fully-equipped companies from the first battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rajput light infantry regiment to Nakhchivan on 16 March. A week later, the Rajput commander Lieutenant-Colonel John Chalmers Simpson set off to take over the military governor's powers from Laughton (12, p. 236-237). Sending Lieutenant-Colonel Simpson to Nakhchivan, General Thomson himself came from Tiflis to Iravan on 28 March and met with the Armenian government. The Armenian government demanded tough measures against the region's Turkic population in order to settle refugees in Nakhchivan and Sharur. Thomson accepted the Armenians' demand and made certain decisions. According to Thomson, paying people who were to be resettled for material damage and giving the refugees necessary assistance for settling in Nakhchivan and Sharur were mandatory. These decisions were even added to the report prepared by General William Beach to be presented to the British representatives at the peace conference (12, p. 237). The main purpose was to settle Armenians in Nakhchivan and Sharur, historical Turkic lands, and thus place these regions under Armenian control. The British military circles gave some instructions to General Keith Maitland Davie who was responsible for Iravan, Kars and Nakhchivan. According to this plan, the Kars and Nakhchivan regions would be handed over to Armenia before the Paris Peace Conference and the military governor's office in Nakhchivan would be abolished. All this work would be completed by 30 April and British soldiers would then start leaving the region (12, p. 137) As we can see here, the British

*Frederick Eastfield Laughton*

would have completed their mission after Armenian control of Nakhchivan was secured.

Thus, it was decided to place Nakhchivan under Armenian control temporarily. Initially, Nakhchivan had no idea about such a plan. After the British prepared the necessary plan on the form of forcible annexation, they notified the government and population of Nakhchivan about the situation. Mirza Bagir Aliyev writes in his work "Our Bloody Days": "...There are rumors in Nakhchivan today that the Nakhchivan county has allegedly been handed over to the Aramina tribe (Armenians – E. Sh.). The city of Nakhchivan is called an Armenian land. This terrible news made the population really worried. The Nakhchivan National Council summoned the Muslim population to the main mosque, and official papers about the aforesaid rumors and our policy were read out to the Iravan population by the acting chairman of the council there. The population gave some explanations... When the issue was discussed, those present in the mosque unanimously expressed their allegiance to the Azerbaijani government." (13, p. 119) ❀

*To be continued***References:**

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