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THE HISTORY OF THE RECOGNITION OF AZERBAIJAN'S DE FACTO STATE INDEPENDENCE AT THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

For the beginning, see IRS-Heritage 3 (26), 2016

Report on the list of documents dispatched by the Supreme Council of the Entente to Azerbaijani delegation in Paris relating to de facto recognition of the Azerbaijan Republic.



Two days later, on 24 December, Curzon prepared a special memorandum containing recommendations on the recognition of the independence of Georgia and Azerbaijan. The Foreign secretary noted that of all the republics of the Caucasus, Georgia was the most capable of independent existence, followed by Azerbaijan. Curzon emphasized that the independence of both countries was linked, because if the Bolsheviks occupied Azerbaijan, Georgia would also be doomed. Hence Curzon formulated the following suggestions for the British government:

1. To try to create an anti-Bolshevik bloc of nations, recognizing federal Transcaucasia and placing it under the mandate of either Britain or America. Then, this mandate could be extended to other anti-Bolshevik regions of former Russia, which had democratically elected governments, thus connecting Transcaucasia, the Don, the Kuban, the Terek and Ukraine into a single federal entity. The latter would later be expanded to the entire territory of the former Russian Empire, forming thus a federal democratic republic, in which there would be no room for Bolshevism. However, the implementation of such a plan would lead to an acute conflict between the mandate

*Meeting of the Azerbaijani diplomatic delegation in Paris.
At the head of the table – Ali Mardanbek Topchibashi. Hotel Claridge, 1920.*



holder and General Denikin and Great Russia-minded groups. No power would want to assume such a responsibility.

2. To refuse to recognize Georgia and Azerbaijan until the position of Denikin is finally clarified, continuing to exert pressure on him to refrain from aggression against the two republics.
3. To recognize Georgia and Azerbaijan temporarily, granting the League of Nations the right to make a final decision on the matter. If Bolshevism in Russia was defeated within five years, these countries would join a renewed federal Russia. Among other things, this decision could stop Denikin from occupying the Transcaucasia (13).

Apparently, in the early days of January 1920, steps were taken to recognize Azerbaijan and Georgia's inde-

pendence. Thus, on 2 January, British foreign experts had already prepared a report on the form of recognition of Azerbaijan and Georgia. According to this document, *de facto* recognition "differs from *de jure* recognition only in the fact:

- 1) That in the case of a state such as Azerbaijan, which has had no previous independent existence, *de facto* recognition is a necessary step to the grant of *de jure* recognition, and
- 2) *de facto* recognition involves a qualification to the effect that it is only granted on a specified condition such as e.g. the maintenance of stable Government or the decision of a Conference" (14).

De facto recognition will dispel suspicions in the republics about the allies supposedly waiting for the restoration of a united Russia. In the case of Azerbaijan, it



Ali Mardanbek Topchibashi, president of the Azerbaijani diplomatic delegation at the Paris Peace Conference

is useful for dealing with Turkish influence. At the same time, only moral responsibility towards these countries falls on the Allies. London does not prevent these republics from concluding an agreement with the Bolsheviks on favorable terms, it only strengthens their position and prevents the Bolsheviks from crushing and incorporating them into the Bolshevik system. For these reasons, the Foreign Office believes "that *de facto* recognition would meet the wishes of the republics for the time being. *De jure* recognition would depend on the decision, taken by the League of Nations or the Allies" (15).

On 6 January, a memorandum prepared on the orders of Churchill and dedicated to the settlement of the Turkish problem, also concerning the problem of the Caucasus, advised precautions in the event of London's recognition of the independence of the Transcaucasian republics: "Should it be decided to establish the independence of Georgia and Azerbaijan, the British Representative with general Denikin should be given timely warning to prepare the field and to make it clear to Denikin that he will lose Allied official support if he resists the policy of the Peace Conference in this respect" (16).

Perhaps, the final push to the recognition of the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia was a telegram received in London on 9 January from the High Commissioner of Britain in the Transcaucasia Wardrop, in which the latter reported that Colonel Stokes, the political representative of the High Commissariat in Baku, had sent

him a letter. Stokes wrote in it that on 7 January, he met with Fatali Khoyski, the foreign minister of Azerbaijan, at the request of the latter. Showing Stokes a telegram from Chicherin, people's commissar of Bolshevik Russia for foreign affairs, dated 2 January and received in Baku on 6 January, Khoyski said that the Bolsheviks proposed that Azerbaijan and Georgia, together with the Bolsheviks, attack the Volunteer Army. The "successful advance of Bolsheviks on both sides Caspian Sea has brought Bolshevik danger to door of Transcaucasia and Azerbaijan must decide very soon her policy towards Bolsheviks" (17). According to Stokes, it is possible that the Bolsheviks will try to stage a mutiny in Baku in order to force the government to take a decision that is advantageous to them. Although the current government of the country has resolute anti-Bolshevik positions, "if Great Britain will not come to its assistance, it may be compelled to make terms with Bolsheviks", Khoyski said (18).

After a comprehensive review of this issue, the Azerbaijani government decided to appeal to the UK to protect the interests and very existence of Azerbaijan. This decision was not made for any sentimental reasons. It was dictated by the immediate interests of the country and, according to Khoyski, supporting Azerbaijan, the British will also better serve their own interests, protecting the shortest way to Persia. Since the Volunteer Army will soon cease to exist, London should take an immediate decision to support Baku if it wants to save Azerbaijan from Bolshevism.

Commenting on Khoyski's words, Stokes pointed out that, in his opinion, the foreign minister of Azerbaijan was not exaggerating the danger hanging over his country. "Unless we are willing to see Bolsheviks rampant in Azerbaijan a decision to support that country cannot be taken too soon" (19). Taking into account the seriousness of the situation created by the defeat of the Volunteer Army, Stokes recommended "immediate grant of full independence and whole-hearted support to Azerbaijan, dispatch of arms and equipment including uniforms for her army and of breach blocks and ammunition for two six-inch guns at Baku" (20) and in addition, the rapid payment of the entire amount the British owed Azerbaijan for their military presence in the country. "These measures would, I consider place the Government in a position to suppress Bolshevik organizations within its borders and enable it to prevent Bolsheviks obtaining control of country", Stokes said (21).

Col Claude Bayfield Stokes, in September 1919 - April 1920 the Baku representative of the High Commissioner of the British Empire in Transcaucasia. From the summer 1920 to March 1921, the High Commissioner of the British Empire in Transcaucasia

Realizing that the Caucasus could be protected from a Bolshevik invasion only if the British took over the Caspian Sea, which, in itself, meant the return of Denikin's Caspian flotilla under British command with the replacement of its demoralized personnel by British sailors, Stokes wrote: "I have already drawn attention to Bolshevik danger on Caspian Sea and in Trans-Caspia and to situation in Dagestan which form part of same problem as safeguarding of Azerbaijan and I submit that the replacement of British Naval personnel [of Russian sailors] on armed ships in Caspian and adoption of policy towards Turks and Dagestan similar to that advocated for Azerbaijan are equally urgently required. Admiralty would doubtless demand safe line of communication before undertaking control of Caspian. Recognition of Georgia and Azerbaijan as independent States would, in my opinion, secure this" (22). The last proposal was referring to the issue of security of communications on the Baku-Batumi line, without which the British Admiralty refused to take control of the Caspian Sea. As we can see, Stokes cleverly tied this fact to the recognition of the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia. With the explicit aim of neutralizing the pro-Russian military who tried to talk only about autonomy, not independence for the Transcaucasian states at the time, Stokes pointed out that in the eyes of Baku and Tiflis "no promise of autonomy in any shape given by any existing Russian Government even if guaranteed by Allies will carry any weight.

Policy advocated above may be regarded as drastic but in my opinion half measures would be of no avail and delay would mean disaster" (23). "I entirely concur", added Wardrop at the bottom of Stokes' message (24).

On 10 January 1920, Paris hosted a meeting of the foreign ministers of the Entente, which decided to recognize Azerbaijan and Georgia *de facto*. Coming up with this initiative, Curzon noted that at the meeting of the Supreme Council on the same day, Lloyd George pointed out the seriousness of the situation in South Russia and the Caucasus, which was facing the danger of a direct invasion by the Bolsheviks. The matter had not only a military but also a political aspect. Based on this, he wanted to submit his following considerations to the heads of the Entente governments: The fate of Armenia will be resolved by the Peace Conference sepa-



rately, as part of the settlement of the Turkish problem. As for Georgia and Azerbaijan, countries subjected to a triple threat from Denikin, the Bolsheviks and the Turks, he proposes granting those states *de facto* recognition. "The countries he mentioned had shown a firm desire to become real states. [...] To recognize their "de facto" governments would be equivalent to according them support" (25). The Allies acted in the same way in respect of the Baltic States.

Philippe Berthelot, Secretary General of the French Foreign Ministry, said that he had already spoken on this matter with Lord Curzon in London and reported the contents of this conversation to Clemenceau, who supports the *de facto* recognition of Azerbaijan and Georgia with the proviso that the boundaries of these states with Armenia must be established afterwards. Curzon agreed with this view. Italian Foreign Minister Vittorio Scialoja said that he was also inclined to *de facto* recognition on the same conditions as in the case of the Baltic countries. Hugh Wallace and Keishiro Matsui, US and Japanese representatives, said that they would request the views of their governments in this regard. Thus, Berthelot said that the *de facto* recognition of Azerbaijan and Georgia should be a joint act of the Entente Supreme Council.

As a result, the minutes of the meeting recorded the decision that "the Principal Allied and Associated Powers should together recognize the Governments of Georgia and Azerbaijan as "de facto" Governments, subject to the



reserve that the representative of the United States and the representative of Japan would request instructions from their Governments on the question" (26).

On the same day, Lord Curzon sent a telegram to the Foreign Office in London, in which he reported that on his initiative, the Entente Supreme Council decided to recognize Azerbaijan and Georgia *de facto*; representatives of the British Foreign Office could inform the two governments (27).

At the same time, the telegram emphasized that "recognition of *de facto* independence of Georgian and Azerbaijan Governments does not of course involve any decision as to their present or future boundaries, and must not be held to prejudice that question in smallest degree" (28).

On 12 January, Wardrop informed the governments in Tiflis and Baku of this decision (29). By this time, the representatives of the Azerbaijani delegation in Paris were aware of the decision, although the Azerbaijani delegation received the official text of the resolution on *de facto* recognition only on 30 January (30) after a special request to the General Secretariat of the Conference to send the text (31).

Attributing this decision of the Allies to the evolution of the civil war in Russia, on 14 January A. M. Topchibashi wrote to M. J. Mekhtieff and A. A. Sheikhlislamoff, the members of Azerbaijani delegation, who were in London, that "since the arrival of the British ministers here, the center of gravity moved to Paris again. At the same time, serious events in the South of Russia and in particular in the Caucasus coincided with

it, as after taking Taganrog, Novocherkassk and Rostov, the Bolsheviks moved on further and, apparently, were already in Tikhoretskaya.

All this, combined with some of our as well as Georgian efforts, forced masters of the world to pay attention to our republics. The Council of the Three discussed our question twice and finally decided to recognize Azerbaijan and Georgia *de facto* as both these countries proved their ability for independent living and established order at home. They have already given us and the Georgian government a telegram on recognition through Wardrop. But at the same time, we have not received anything official here: We have the information that we will get it tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. We have some information on recognition and we have just had a meeting with the Georgians, where we exchanged views and stated that Azerbaijan and Georgia are *de facto* recognized. For the time being, we decided to wait, and then, when the question clears up completely, we will work even harder. But in general, we all need to keep the balance and I want us all to prove that we take the matter seriously and continue our work without worry. I want us to conduct this line of ours in sorrow and joy. Therefore, I ask you both not to interrupt the work you have started there and to continue it with even greater energy" (32).

De facto recognition opened up new prospects for the Azerbaijani delegation in Paris. Now that the whole world is convinced of the commitment of the Azerbaijani people to the ideals of independence and their ability to establish a stable government with a positive agenda, the Western powers were ready to start new specific

Members of the Azerbaijani diplomatic delegation at work

forms of cooperation with Baku. The fact that at the end of April 1920 the country's independence was crushed by the Bolshevik boot amounted to a temporary triumph of brute force. In an historical perspective, the commitment of the Azerbaijani people to independence was unswerving, as events have shown 70 years later. ❁

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