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AZERBAIJAN'S LEGENDARY MINISTER OF WAR



Samad bay Mehmandarov – the minister of war of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, 1919

In the history of the Azerbaijani people, a great role was played by military leaders who laid solid traditions of military valor and devotion to the Motherland, serving as an example of patriotism for subsequent generations. A place of honor among these military figures is occupied by the full general from artillery, Samad-bay Sadig-oglu Mehmandarov, whose life and work are an important page in the military history of Azerbaijan.

Mehmandarov was born on 16 October 1855 in the city of Lankaran. He received his primary education in the Baku real school, and in 1873, he entered the 2nd Konstantinovsky Military School in St. Petersburg, from which he graduated in 1875. The rest of his life is devoted entirely to the military business. Over many years of service in the Russian army, his military and organizational talents were revealed. After graduation, Mehmandarov joined the First Turkestan Artillery Brigade in the rank of ensign and then served in the 2nd and 38th artillery brigades. In 1894, he was sent to the Warsaw Military District, and in 1898, he was appointed to a separate Trans-Baikal Division, in which he participated in the suppression of the 1900-1901 uprising in China. During this period, he categorically refused to comply with the order to open fire at unarmed people, deeming it unworthy of the honor of an officer (1).

During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, Mehmandarov commanded the 7th East Siberian Artillery Division, simultaneously performing the duties of the artillery chief of the Eastern Front in Port Arthur. In general, it should be noted that during the defense of Port Arthur the military and organizational abilities of Samad-bay and his high moral qualities clearly manifested themselves. For the courage shown in battles, he was awarded the Order of St. George of the 4th degree and promoted to major-general. It is characteristic that Mehmandarov, thanks not only to his purely military abilities, but also to his adherence to principles and heightened sense of officers' honor, earned respect not only among his comrades, but also from the enemy. After the surrender of Port Arthur, many officers of the Russian army were taken prisoner, and some of them agreed, in accordance with the condition for re-

*Major-General S. Mehmandarov – hero
of the defence of Port Arthur*

lease, to give a written undertaking not to participate in future battles against Japan. Others, including Mehmandarov, considered this a humiliation for their officers' honor and preferred to remain in captivity. Samad-bay gained freedom in 1905 after the signing of the Russian-Japanese peace treaty in Portsmouth (2).

Having returned to the army, Mehmandarov commanded the 7th East Siberian Rifle and Artillery Brigade and then was Chief of Artillery in the 3rd Siberian Corps. In 1908, for the special organizational abilities shown in these posts, he was promoted to lieutenant-general (3). In 1913, taking into account his high military organizational and commanding abilities, he was appointed commander of the 21st Infantry Division and met the outbreak of the First World War in this post. Already in October 1914, he took part in the Warsaw-Ivangorod operation with his unit and was awarded the Order of St. George of the 3rd degree and the St. George's saber with diamonds for his commanding abilities. In the same year, Mehmandarov was appointed commander of the 2nd Caucasian Corps. In the following year 1915, Samad-bay was awarded the title of full general from artillery (4), becoming the first Azerbaijani to be awarded such a high military rank.

After the February revolution of 1917, in the situation of growing anarchy and disintegration of the Russian army by the Bolsheviks, Mehmandarov resigned and arrived in Baku in the autumn of 1918. On 1 November, the government of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic adopted a resolution on the establishment of a ministry of war, and Mehmandarov was appointed deputy minister with the task of forming the ministry and army (5). And in these difficult conditions, the professionalism and organizational talent of the experienced officer, multiplied by his dedication to the idea of Azerbaijani statehood, bore fruit. As a result, on 25 December, General Mehmandarov was appointed minister of war of Azerbaijan (6).

It can be said without exaggeration that it was the work to create regular armed forces of Azerbaijan that was the peak and the most glorious page in the long military career of this outstanding military leader. Being in his declining years by this time, Mehmandarov, after decades of being away from home, was given a chance to serve his people and his country, and he used this chance with honor and most fruitfully. It must be pointed out that he had to work under the most difficult conditions caused not only by the general difficulties of state building, but



also by the long absence of military conscription - in the Russian Empire the Muslim population was not covered by military service. Being the central figure of military building in the ADR, Mehmandarov specifically established its place in the overall process of state building. His orders stressed that the army has no right to interfere in politics, its functions are to defend the country, and the army is the support of independence and the dignity of the republic (7). An eloquent indicator of Samad-bay's high authority is the fact that with all government changes he remained a permanent minister of war.

On 17 November 1918, the British Expeditionary Corps, representing the Entente, entered Baku. The British command demanded that the Azerbaijani government withdraw its military units and the Ministry of War from the capital. Under these conditions, the ministry was relocated to Ganja on 22 November (8). Remoteness from the capital, where there were other state institutions,

could not but affect the efficiency of work, but the business qualities of Mehmandarov, his ability to select personnel and make maximum use of their qualities for the benefit of the cause allowed them to overcome difficulties. He controlled everything that happened in the army. Thanks to the competent leadership of Mehmandarov, all spheres and branches of military building were in constant development.

From the very first days of his work in the Ministry of War, Samad-bay personally visited military units in order to get acquainted with the situation on the ground and analyzed the existing problems. It turned out that the most burning problems were desertion and poor organization of military conscription. To overcome these problems and raise the faith in the army among the population not accustomed to compulsory military service, Minister Mehmandarov addressed the citizens of Azerbaijan on 25 December, and on 25 February 1919, he delivered a keynote address in the parliament. In this speech, as well as in his letters and orders, Samad-bay sharply condemned the evasion of military service by the sons of wealthy persons. Thanks to his efforts, an effective system was established in the country to involve all citizens, who reached the draft age, in military service without exception, and interaction was established with the police to send deserters and draft dodgers to enlistment offices. Concurrently, targeted measures were taken to improve conditions for military service.

An important factor that led to achievements in military building was work with personnel. Being, as noted above, a strong organizer, Minister Mehmandarov not only skillfully selected personnel, but also knew how to establish a working environment, combining attention and trust with high exactingness and discipline. In this way, he helped to promote such prominent military figures as Ali-aga Shikhlinski, Mahammad-bay Sulkevich, Habib-bay Sultanov, Ibrahim-aga Usubov, Javad-bay Shikhlinski, Abdulhamid-bay Kaytabashi and Teymur-bay Novruzov. It should be noted that 28 generals served in the armed forces of Azerbaijan in that period (11).

An equally important area of the work of the minister and the minister of war himself was the training of officers. And the fact that the Azerbaijani people were debarred from military affairs for many years played its negative role here. On 1 December 1918, by order of the minister of war, a school of ensigns was formed on the basis of the school of sergeants (12), and a little later, in October 1919, a military school was established on the basis of the latter (13). Along with this, a school of military

sappers, a military railway school and a military paramedical school in Shusha were established.

Increased attention was paid to the "nationalization" of military building in Azerbaijan. Despite the strong influence of Russian and Ottoman military traditions, Minister Mehmandarov sought, by borrowing the best aspects of these schools, to transfer them to local, Azerbaijani soil. From the very first days of his work as minister he instructed the transfer of the army to the Azerbaijani language. Non-Azerbaijani officers were given a period to learn the commands in the Azerbaijani language. Those who could not cope were threatened with dismissal from the armed forces (15). On orders from the minister of war, the order of military greetings was introduced in accordance with Azerbaijani traditions and transition to a new military uniform corresponding to the traditional Azerbaijani costume was started. First of all, the old caps were replaced with papakhas. The necessary conditions were created for the servicemen to hold religious rites, and religious festivals and the Novruz national holiday were solemnly celebrated in the armed forces. On such days, those guilty were forgiven. The ministry of war approved sketches of the banners of military units and formations, and organized a study of the military history of the Azerbaijani people in the armed forces.

In order to ensure the security of borders in the complex military-political situation of that time, great attention was paid to increasing efficiency and flexibility in the management of the armed forces. Purposeful measures were taken to increase the fighting efficiency of the army and improve its supply.

The historical milestones of Mehmandarov's tireless activity as minister of war are the creation of a fortified defensive system around Baku and on the northern borders against the danger of an offensive by General Denikin's army, effective measures to repel the White Guard invasion in the southern region of the country, and in March 1920 – repelling the aggression of neighboring Armenia in Karabakh. It should be noted that during the days of the invasion by Armenian troops Mehmandarov moved his headquarters to Ganja, from where he directed the measures to repel the aggression both in Karabakh and in the Gazakh-Agstafa zone.

On 28 April 1920, the 11th red army invaded Azerbaijan and captured Baku. In view of the coup d'état, Samad-bay Mehmandarov resigned as the republic's minister of war. His last order, for all its brevity, gives a vivid idea of the depth of the drama of this outstanding military leader and sincere patriot of his homeland.

"Order-238

On this day, I gave up my post to the military and naval commissioner Chingiz Ildrim, newly appointed by the Soviet government.

Declaring this, I express my heartfelt gratitude to all my dear colleagues for their honest and valiant service.

I have no doubt that under the new government they will also serve honestly and valiantly for the benefit of our beloved Azerbaijan.

Goodbye, with all my heart I wish all of you, from the eldest to the youngest asgar, all prosperity, success and happiness, both in your career and family life.

God willing.

Minister of War

General from Artillery Mehmandarov"

Immediately after the coup, the new authorities arrested Mehmandarov and the deputy minister of war of Azerbaijan, General Ali-aga Shikhlinski. However, thanks to the intervention of Nariman Narimanov, chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the AzSSR, both were released, although they were forced to live in Moscow for a year. In the summer of 1921, Mehmandarov returned to Baku and began to work in the People's Naval Commissariat. In 1924-1928, he taught at the United Command School. And in 1929 he retired. In 1931, Samad-bay Mehmandarov died and was buried at the Chambarakand cemetery in Baku (17). ❀

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The article, based on archival and literary sources, briefly describes the life path and activities of the distinguished Azerbaijani military leader, the minister of war of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918-1920, Samad bay Mehmandarov (1855-1931). The author gives the biggest prominence to Mehmandarov's participation in the defense battles for Port Arthur during the Russian-Japanese War and his achievements in military building in Azerbaijan.