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# LAST SPRING OF THE FIRST REPUBLIC

The period of 1918-1920, during which Azerbaijan was developing as an independent parliamentary republic, completed its century of evolution from an object of regional rivalry between Russia, Turkey and Persia into an independent, albeit unequal subject of international relations, dependent on external political and military support. This period was not marked by the establishment of equal relations between the ADR and Soviet Russia, which only emphasized the central position of Azerbaijan in the Russian Transcaucasian strategy. Recognizing the possibility of a temporary compromise on independent Georgia and Armenia, which eventually led to the conclusion of peace agreements with these republics, the Bolshevik leaders of Soviet Russia excluded the diplomatic recognition of the ADR even theoretically. **Rich in natural resources, which were particularly valuable for the Russian economy weakened by world and civil wars, and holding a unique geo-strategic position, Azerbaijan was an immeasurably more important "target" for Soviet Russia than Georgia and Armenia.**

As a result, the 23-month period of the life of the ADR was marked by two opposing trends. The Azerbaijani side consistently implemented a policy of establishing equal relations with Soviet Russia. This course reflected the objective interest of the national government in addressing three major problems in the "northern" direction: securing diplomatic recognition on the part of the largest and most powerful neighbor; establishing equal interstate relations with it, guaranteeing the security of the ADR; restoring economic and trade exchanges with Russia and traditional Russian markets for Baku oil and other export products.

The Russian side conducted a policy of diplomatic non-recognition of the ADR and military and political pressure on it, weakening its positions in the international arena and deliberately undermining the foundations of Azerbaijani statehood from inside and through the efforts of regional Caucasus and Baku Bolshevik organizations, whose representatives legally operated in Baku and were



*S. M. Kirov at a parade in Baku. May 1920*

even represented in the national parliament. In the chaos of foreign intervention, civil war and "Red Terror", which dealt a blow, first of all, to the Russian people, a new kind of Soviet imperial state was born. It was built on a different social, political and ideological basis, but the geopolitical aim of its leaders remained unchanged - collecting the territories of the former "suburbs" and creating forms of interaction between the "center" and "periphery", which was traditional for any empire.

The occupation of Azerbaijan, which occupied a comfortable position on the approaches to Turkey and Iran (important in terms of effective implementation of the geopolitical goals of Bolshevik Russia in respect of these countries) and had a sea port providing the shortest path to the Central Asia region made it possible to solve a number of other strategic objectives of the new Soviet-Russian leadership.

Firstly, it provides a convenient base in the region for further Sovietization of Menshevik Georgia and Dashnaksakan Armenia and, ultimately, for the return of the whole of the Caucasus into the sphere of Russian influence.

Secondly, it was important in terms of addressing the purely defensive task of blocking competitor powers' access to the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.

*Military ships of Soviet Russia in the Baku port.  
May 1920*



Thirdly, it created favorable conditions for supporting the national liberation movement in Turkey, which, by virtue of its anti-imperialist character, became the only regional ally of Soviet Russia at that stage.

Fourthly, the establishment of the Soviet regime in Azerbaijan in April-May 1920 had the most important ideological and political importance for orthodox Bolsheviks, who stood for the promotion of communism outside Soviet Russia. The military coup in Baku allowed the Bolshevik Politburo to proceed to the “export of the revolution” to Persia. It was in Persia where, through the territory of Azerbaijan, the campaign for organizing an anti-government coup supported by leftwing forces began in the middle of May 1920 (and ended ingloriously in autumn 1921).

And finally, the change of power in Azerbaijan provided a unique opportunity to transform proletarian Baku into a regional center for promoting communist ideas and consolidating all the national liberation movements of the East as allies of Soviet Russia in its “revolutionary struggle against capitalists and imperialists”.

**Another important factor in the fall of the ADR and the occupation of Azerbaijan was the proximity of the strategic aspirations of Kemalist Turkey and Soviet Russia in the region, based on the interest of both regimes in mutual support for each other.**

From the moment power in Turkey was taken over by the Grand National Assembly (TBMM), which began its work on 23 April 1920, and the national government headed by Mustafa Kemal, its leadership launched a consistent policy of cooperation with Soviet Russia. It was Russia that was the only source of military-technical, financial, material and political support for the Kemalists.

Common goals in consolidating their regional positions and the mutual interest in supporting each other in the military and political confrontation with the victorious powers did not leave any chance for the future of independent Azerbaijan. Convincing arguments about the true role of the Turkish factor in the organization of the Bolshevik coup in Azerbaijan in March-April 1920 are cited by the authoritative American scholar Tadeusz Swietochowski. “In those frantic days of spring, Turkish Kemalists who were in Baku, seeking to turn the events in favor of the Ankara government, intervened in what was happening,” he noted. In early April, they met to coordinate the actions of their groups. Some of the participants in

the meeting worked in conjunction with the Azerbaijani communists before that and were among the organizers of the Turkish Communist Party in Baku in March. The Coordinating Center, which included Halil Pasha and Fuat Sabit, adopted a resolution that determined Turkey’s policy toward the Azerbaijan crisis. Its three main points were: 1) Rapid overthrow of the present, pro-British government of Azerbaijan and its replacement by a government that is able to cooperate with the Bolsheviks; 2) Establishment of a committee for the implementation of changes in the government, which will include Bolsheviks with units in charge of propaganda, printing, publishing business and military activities; 3) Occupation of Baku by the Red Army only at the request of the Turkish Communist Party - in the opinion of the committee, which is shared by the Turkish and Azerbaijani Communist Parties, the conquest of Azerbaijan must be avoided” (2, 54).

Thus, the establishment of absolute control over the South Caucasus was necessary for both regional powers to provide a channel of military-technical support from the Russian Bolsheviks to the government of Mustafa Kemal. **In this context, the role of Azerbaijan not only as a corridor that would connect Turkey and Russia, but also as a source of raw materials for supporting the future Bolshevisation of Turkey was growing.**

The significance of the Azerbaijani factor in Russian-Turkish relations is already proved by the fact that the first foreign policy act of the Great National Assembly was an appeal to Azerbaijan. On the opening day of the Great National Assembly and five days before the capture of Baku – on 23 April 1920 - Mustafa Kemal demanded that Azerbaijan allow “Soviet troops to move to the borders of Turkey to defend them from British attacks” (1, p.368). At the same time, one of the prominent Kemalists and emissary of Mustafa Kemal in Baku, Halil Pasha, tried to convince the ADR leadership that they had no reason to fear the arrival of the Red Army forces, which, he claimed,

“would only pass through the territory of Azerbaijan on their way to Anatolia, where they would join the Turkish war of liberation” (2, 54). Halil Pasha, Swietochowski notes, “even presented evidence of the good intentions of the Russians, saying that he would soon take over the command of the Eleventh Army” (ibid).

A few days later days – on 26 April, Mustafa Kemal sent the Russian government a message explaining the strategic line of the Young Turks government in relation to Soviet Russia and the three South Caucasian republics. Pledging to “connect all his work and all military operations with the Russian Bolsheviks that aimed to combat imperialist governments”, he clearly and unequivocally outlined in this letter the basic line of Ankara’s regional strategy – refuse to expand its influence in the South Caucasus region and recognize it as a Russian dominance area in exchange for political, military, technical and material support from Moscow. **“If the Soviet forces plan to open military operations against Georgia or force Georgia through diplomatic channels and through their influence to enter into an alliance and expel the British from the territory of the Caucasus, the Turkish government undertakes military operations against imperialist Armenia and pledges to force the Azerbaijan Republic to enter the circle of Soviet states,”** the Turkish leader promised.

As a result, it was Turkey that rendered the most active support to Soviet Russia in the occupation of Baku in the shortest possible time, which was later confirmed by Turkish leaders themselves. “With our influential help and assistance, these armies (meaning the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Armies - ed.) easily passed through the North Caucasus and entered Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis met the troops who arrived with complete peace of mind. The Soviet armies took the necessary military and strategic measures on the borders of Armenia and Georgia and began to establish direct communication with us,” Mustafa Kemal said at a TBMM meeting on 14 August 1920 (1, p.368).

The pro-Russian position of Turkey in this period was also confirmed later by representatives of Soviet Azerbaijan. A letter from the first representative of Soviet Azerbaijan in the RSFSR, Behbud Shakhtakhtinski, (20 September 1920) to Deputy Foreign Minister Lev Karakhan contained recognition of the fact that **“before the coup in Azerbaijan, the Turks strongly insisted on its alliance with Russia, and contributed a lot to the coup there”** (3, op.51, p.321a, d.54859, l.7ob).

**The independent stance and pro-Western orientation of the ADR were perceived by all political forces**

**in Turkey as a potential threat to its interests.** Moreover, for Kemalists the independent ADR was a “barrier” on the vital path of communication and rapprochement with Moscow, and for the Young Turks - an obstacle to the spread of Turkish influence in the Caucasus and Central Asian regions in the future. The logical final in the development of this trend came in the spring of 1920, when Turkish nationalists and communists joined forces and began to provide open support for the implementation of the plans of Moscow and Baku Bolsheviks to seize power in Baku and other regions of the ADR.

As a result, the Turkish factor - in cooperation with Russia - played an important supporting role in the process of occupation and subsequent Sovietization of Azerbaijan.

However, an equally important role in the decline of the First Republic was played by the lack of full-fledged military, political and diplomatic support from the allies - the victorious powers of World War I (the US, Britain, France, Italy and Japan, which formed the Supreme Council of the Paris Peace Conference that opened on 12 January 1919. Later, in March 1919, after Japan was “cut off”, it became a “Council of the Four”).

In the strategy of the “G4” countries, recognition of the independence of the ADR and other national republics established on the outskirts of the former Russian Empire was seen not as an independent objective, but as an objective derived from relations with Soviet Russia. Therefore, **the ADR was supported by the “allies” only insofar as it met the interests of the economic blockade of Bolshevik Russia and narrowing of the scope of its influence in the European and Transcaucasian directions.**

At the initial stage - in 1918-1919, the leading Allied Powers were unanimous in the need to weaken the geopolitical positions of Soviet Russia around the perimeter of its borders, seeing it as a source of the Bolshevik threat to the civilized West. The most active supporter of the emerging anti-Russian policy of the Allies was London – it had the most profound reasons for wanting to weaken Russia. Britain traditionally viewed it as a geopolitical rival across the Eurasian continent and was not interested in a strong centralized state, which could claim the British zone of interests in the Balkans, the Middle East and particularly in India, reviving in place of imperial Russia.

However, in spite of their belligerent attitude, **at the beginning of 1919, the ruling circles of Great Britain felt the limit of their ability to exert military pressure on the Bolsheviks.** In this country, there was such a political situation that the expansion of the armed anti-Bolshevik intervention and the continued economic block-

*Leadership of the Azerbaijan SSR and the 11<sup>th</sup> Red Army at the Baku railway station. May 1920*

ade could cause serious domestic political and economic turmoil. The British government faced more important domestic and foreign policy issues: the settlement of the financial crisis in the country, the fight against the parliamentary Labor opposition, which opposed the intervention in the civil war in Russia, the rapid rise of the strike movement against the background of the growing influence of trade unions and soldiers' uprisings demanding immediate demobilization.

The situation in the countries of the British colonial system was not stable either. The unrest in these countries showed how vulnerable the position of London was in the colonies and its limited ability to preserve its influence in the Caucasus. Chief of the British General Staff Henry Wilson wrote in this regard in April 1919: "All my efforts are now linked to withdrawing our troops from Europe and Russia and concentrating all our efforts on new outbreaks of the uprising, i.e. England, Ireland, Egypt and India." (4, 404)

In addition, after the end of the First World War and the capitulation of Germany, Anglo-French disagreements began to escalate. (5, 188)

All these processes affected the British government's policy towards the ADR. There came **the final stage of the re-evaluation of its capacity to support the independence of the Caucasian republics - especially Azerbaijan and Georgia, and curb the irreversible process of the restoration of control over this region by Moscow**. As a result, British troops, who were considered guarantors of the fragile independence of the ADR, were withdrawn from the Caucasus by the end of August 1919, not counting a small garrison in Batumi and the diplomatic mission in Baku headed by the High Commissioner for the Caucasus Oliver Wardrop.

As far as the US is concerned, they were much more concerned about promoting their project of a new world organization - the League of Nations - at the Paris Conference. At the heart of Washington's European policy in late 1918 and early 1920 was to create an equilibrium system, in which the Germans would deter Britain and France and the small countries of Europe - large ones. Only such a system could ensure the leading position of the US in the post-war world and its role as a European and world arbitrator. As for the Russian direction of American policy, it was derived from the above line. Russia became an element of the European system of



checks and balances, counterbalancing Germany. For this reason, **the question of the new republics proclaimed on the territory of the former Russian Empire was considered not in terms of their recognition, but in the context of creating a counterweight to Russia**, pushing the Bolshevik government to fulfill the role that was assigned to it.

In connection with the above, the US was not in a hurry to recognize and give political support to the newly independent republics of the former Russian Empire, including the ADR. It is this position of the US that the chairman of the Azerbaijani delegation at the Versailles Peace Conference, Ali Mardanbay Topchubashov, drew attention to in his reports from Paris. He noted that at the meeting of the delegation with US President Wilson held on 28 May 1919, the latter clearly and unambiguously determined the position of his country: 1) The USA does not want to divide the world into small pieces; 2) It would be better for Azerbaijan to be filled with the idea of forming a confederation in the Caucasus; 3) This confederation could be under the protection of some power on behalf of the League of Nations; 4) The question of the recognition of the ADR cannot be resolved before the Russian question (6, 61).

As for the position of continental Europe, in conversations with members of the ADR delegation at the Paris Conference, representatives of Italy even said that if the "a Russian Federal Republic (meaning not a Bolshevik, but a bourgeois-democratic republic - author) is established, then, perhaps, the Caucasian Confederation will join the Russian Federation". (6, 65) As a result, Rome's position on the Azerbaijan issue was clearly articulated on 31 July 1919 in a telegram from the head of the Italian military mission in the Transcaucasia, Colonel Gabba,

to ADR Foreign Minister Jafarov: "No Italian troops will be dispatched to the Caucasus to replace the British troops." Italian priorities lay in a completely different area. "The Government of the Kingdom of Italy wants to maintain friendly relations with the government of your country and contribute to the development of commercial, financial and industrial relations between the two countries," the document said. (7, 302-303)

France was even less willing than its allies to support the independence of the ADR, which was not included in the scope of its interests. In December 1917, France and Britain divided spheres of "responsibility" in the territory of the former Russian Empire (London confirmed the validity of this agreement on 13 November 1918). In accordance with this division, the UK area of responsibility was the North and South Caucasus, while France was responsible for Ukraine, Crimea and Bessarabia.

**Thus, despite the fact that Bolshevism was still considered by the Western allies, and, above all, the United Kingdom, which had interests in Persia, Turkey, India and the South Caucasus region, to be a major factor destabilizing their regional positions, they were in no hurry to tie their hands in relation to future Russia - perhaps friendly to the West – through the recognition of the ADR.**

But at the end of 1919, when there was a change during the Civil War in Russia and a threat of a Bolshevik advance on Persia and Turkey through the Caucasus, the "moment of truth" came for the Allies. On 17 November 1919, British Prime Minister Lloyd George made a speech in the House of Commons and expressed deep concern about the situation in the Caucasus and the threat of a Bolshevik advance on the Middle East. It is notable that in his speech the prime minister mentioned Azerbaijan twice as a country that does not want to be part of Soviet Russia. In late November, Lloyd George had a conversation with the head of the US delegation to Paris, Polk, warning him that united Bolshevik Russia was becoming a serious threat to Europe, so "Georgia, Azerbaijan, Bessarabia, Ukraine, the Baltic provinces and Finland, as well as, possibly, Siberia, too, should be independent." (Cited in 5, 203).

On 5 January, in a detailed telegram analyzing the situation in Azerbaijan, the British emissary in Baku, Colonel Stokes, stated: "If His Majesty's government is in favor of maintaining friendship with Azerbaijan or establishing control over it and eliminating Turkish influence and Bolshevism, it is important to provide it with his immediate support". Noting the need to supply small arms and am-

munition to the Azerbaijani army, he called on London to take decisive action: "The threat coming from the Bolsheviks in Azerbaijan can be eliminated only in one of two ways: a) Immediate friendly support for Azerbaijan and b) sending of British troops to Baku."

On the basis of this message, on 6 January Wardrop telegraphed Lord Curzon from Tbilisi: "The Bolsheviks were not able to shatter Europe and agreed with the Muslims (Turkey - author) to attack the UK. ... The swift collapse of Denikin is very likely, and the Transcaucasia is becoming the bridge that Britain should protect". "I would like to convince the government of His Majesty of the need to take immediate action to support the Transcaucasia against the Bolsheviks and the Turks," he noted further.

The question of what British policy in the Middle East should be like and how to respond to the Bolshevik threat in the Transcaucasia was considered at the 9 January meeting of the so-called "Eastern Committee" - a special body of the British government established in 1918 to develop a coherent British policy in the Middle East (the chairman of the Committee was Lord Curzon) (8, 197-199). The point of view of the Ministry of Defense finally prevailed and was brought to the attention of members of the British delegation to the Peace Conference in Paris in a telegram dated 12 January. Its essence was as follows: "To maintain control over the Caspian Sea, it is necessary to hold the line of defense from Batumi to Baku with the help of two allied divisions, and their number may have to increase. Due to the situation prevailing throughout, these forces cannot be assigned from British resources. As for the provision of **financial assistance to the armed forces of Georgia and Azerbaijan, this issue is not being considered in the light of the possible imminent collapse of General Denikin. In this case, such assistance will not be able to help these countries to protect themselves from the Bolsheviks until troops are sent their aid.**"

As a result, London refused plans for the active armed defense of the region and military support for the ADR.

It was on the initiative of Curzon that the so-called "second Paris conference" was convened on 10 January with the participation of the foreign ministers of Britain, Italy and France, as well as the US and Japanese ambassadors to France. Speaking at this session of the Supreme Council of the Allied Powers, Curzon gave an analysis of the situation in the Caucasus on the basis of the telegrams from his representatives in the region, warning about the threat posed by the Bolsheviks and

their possible alliance with the Kemalists. On 11 January, the Supreme Council adopted a resolution on Curzon's proposal, noting that **"the allied and united powers jointly recognize the governments of Azerbaijan and Georgia at the de facto level"**. This decision was made by representatives of Britain, France and Italy. Later it was joined by Japan, while the United States expressed its refusal.

On 15 January, the French Foreign Ministry hosted an official ceremony to hand over this decision to the Azerbaijani delegation. On 15-19 January, the issue of providing military assistance to the two recognized republics was discussed at the level of military experts. On 19 January, the Supreme Council attended by the heads of the Azerbaijani and Georgian delegations once again thoroughly discussed ways to support the Transcaucasian republics (9, 13-15).

Summing up the meeting, the British prime minister spoke about the urgent need to provide assistance to the republics of the Caucasus in the form of weapons, military equipment and munitions. At the same time, he reiterated the impossibility of sending troops to Azerbaijan and Georgia, noting that these republics should strengthen their defense at the expense of their own armies. As a result, the Supreme Council adopted a resolution, according to which **the Allies, not having the ability to send troops to the Transcaucasian republics, express their intention to help with supplies of weapons, military equipment and food.**

In fact, the Allies did not render any major arms assistance to the ADR. Canadian researcher Margaret MacMillan says that recognizing the Caucasian republics, the United Kingdom supplied them with a certain amount of weapons. "The Ministry of Defense took advantage of this situation in order to get rid of surplus Canadian weapons made by the Ross company, which were famous for their ability to jam even in non-combat conditions," she wrote. (4, 443) 🌟

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*Memorial plaque installed during the years of Soviet power on one of the houses in Baku. The inscription on the plaque reads: "On April 26, 1920, at a joint emergency meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the Caucasian Regional Committee of the RCP (B), a plan was drawn up to overthrow the Musavat government"*