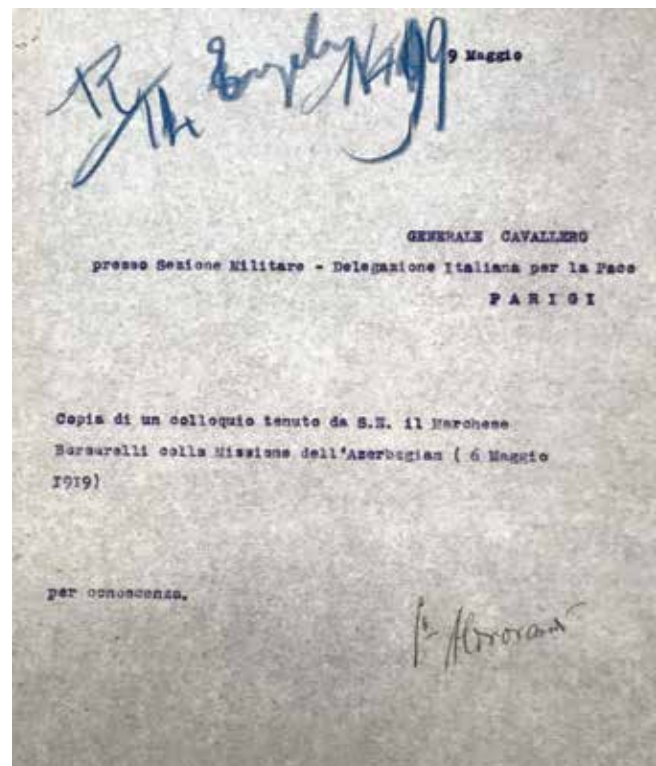


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(Italy)

# ITALY AND INDEPENDENT AZERBAIJAN (1918-1920)

**Introduction.** After the dissolution of the Tsarist Empire in 1917 and the Bolshevik coup staged in November, the Southern Caucasus faced both independence and turmoil. The short-living Transcaucasian federation split in three national and ethnic-based independent States: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The three democratic republics were ill-fated as the Red Army invaded Caucasus and communist parties seized power in 1920-1921. The Russian threat, from the “Reds” as well as from the “White” armies of General Denikin, constantly affected the short existence of the three independent States. Their international recognition was delayed until early 1920 when the Entente powers acknowledged the inevitability of Soviet invasion and switched, after years of ambiguity, to the Caucasian States. After England in spring 1919 decided to withdraw its troops from Caucasus due to the financial burden of occupation, the Entente power decided to assign a mandate to Italy as a peacekeeping power in the region. An Italian military mission was dispatched to Caucasus visiting Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan and successfully paving the way to an occupation of the whole area by the Italian troops. The sudden change of government in Italy (with the resignation of PM Orlando and the takeover of Nitti) produced a change of priorities in the Italian foreign policy. Days before the landing of the Italian troops the mission was repealed. The Italian delegation, led by colonel Melchiade Gabba, turned into a diplomatic mission in charge by the new government of establishing economic relations. The



*Documents reflecting Azerbaijani-Italian communications in 1918 - 1920 (archives of Italy)*

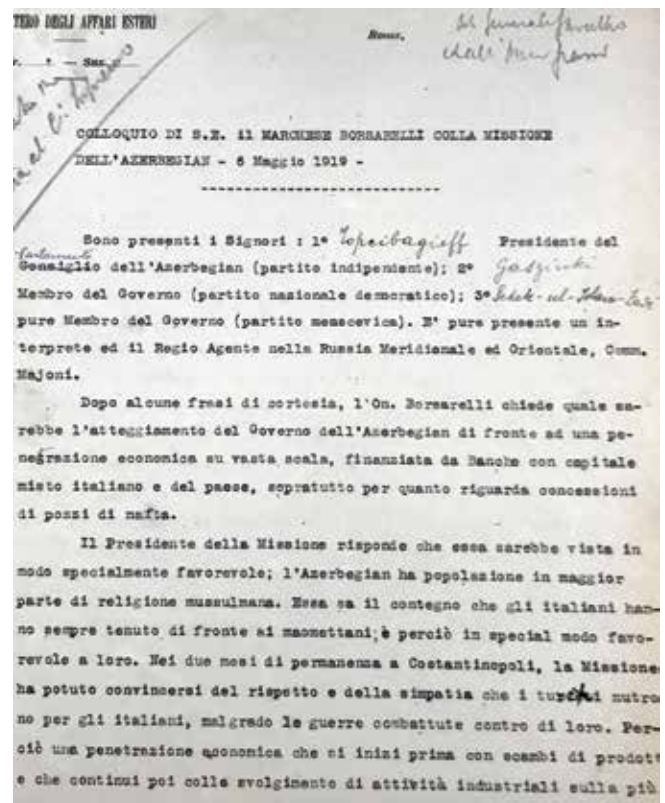
rich and almost unsearched papers of the Gabba mission - which have been recently published by Daniel Pommier and Andrea Carteny - shed a light on independent Caucasus, its political landscape and economic aspects. The twenty-months mission of colonel

Gabba. Back to Italy in summer 1920 - was important for the building of Italian relations with the Caucasians. The seizure of power by Soviets interrupted a pro-western stance of Georgia and Azerbaijani which resurfaced after the second independence in 1991.

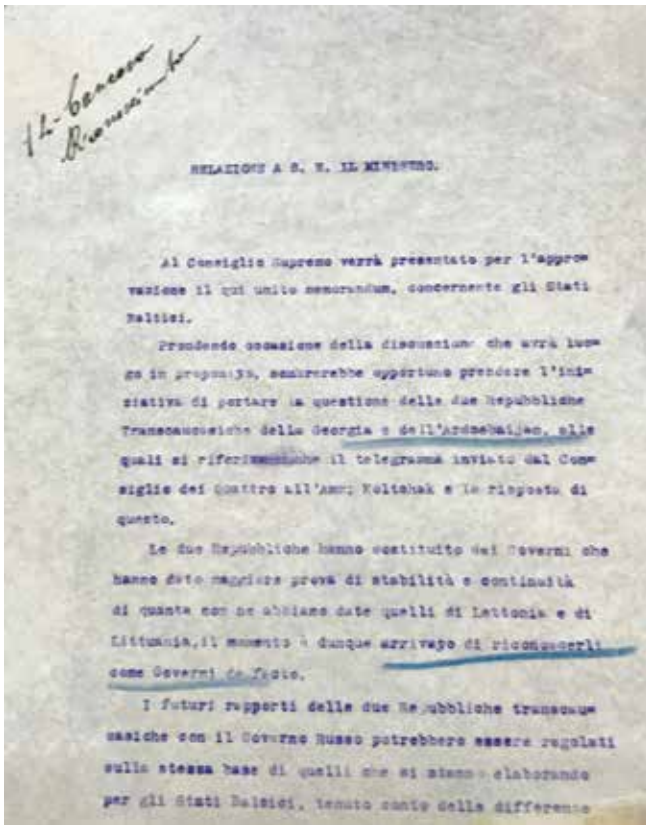
### The hypothesis of an Italian mission to Caucasus.

The documents kept in the Archives of the Historical Office of the Army General Staff (AUSSME) concern the activities of the military mission in Transcaucasia (from January 1919 to July 1920), which evolve in the summer of 1919 in "Royal political agency to the three Transcaucasian republics". The end of the state independence respectively of Azerbaijan (April 1920), Armenia (October 1920) and finally Georgia (February 1921) would have led to the closure of the Royal Agency, which since the summer of 1920 would no longer be led by Colonel Melchiade Gabba, replaced by a civil official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The most pressing issue of the Italian political and military leadership, once the decision has been taken to send the exploratory mission led by Gabba, is the knowledge of the territory in its geographical, political and economic aspects. Between March and April 1919, therefore, the Italian mission is being prepared: Colonel Gabba, as soon as he receives the assignment, sends a memo to the Chief of Staff of the Ministry of War Colonel Rota, explaining the immediate needs of the mission. Gabba requires the identification of a representative of the *Regia Marina* (the Italian Royal Navy), the knowledge of the means to reach the Transcaucasia, the technical and auxiliary personnel available to the mission. There is shortage of documentation available on the area, which is solved with any possible mean, by using the few prewar materials available. Important background information comes from the capital of the Ottoman Empire where the Italian ambassador Carlo Sforza sends a detailed report to Minister for Foreign Affairs Sidney Sonnino, on 19 April 1919. He reports on the oil resources of the Caucasus and their possible exploitation. While in other areas of Transcaucasia the conditions left by the war do not allow an adequate exploitation: "Baku, on the other hand, is in full efficiency as the disastrous consequences of the political conditions caused by the events before the armistice. The pipe [the "pipeline"] from Baku to Batum works quite regularly under the supervision of the English occupation". Sforza lists all the local and foreign companies operating in Baku: the Nobel who funded the Baku oil industry, the other Russian companies, the Pollak owned by English and Dutch syndicate. While Sforza is in favor



of economic penetration, he sees an "Italian military adventure in the Caucasus" with disfavor, which would require huge expenses and the use of personnel not possible to foresee from the beginning". On 6 May 1919, the Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs Borsarelli meets the Azerbaijani delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. Borsarelli, assisted by Majoni the consul in southern Russia, faces an understandable resistance to Azerbaijani delegates to "hypothesis of an Italian occupation". The Azerbaijanis are unaware about the Gabba mission and the decision taken by the Council of Four. They agree to develop the broader commercial and technical cooperation but refuse to send any military detachment, fearing a loss of independence. In the meantime, at the highest political and military levels, the reports on the Transcaucasian situation continue. This is the case of the report sent from Batum by the commander of the ship *Roma*, Giovannini, directed to Admiral Thaon di Revel, to Prime Minister Orlando, Minister for Foreign Affairs Sonnino and Supreme Commander General Diaz. In addition to economic and political information, Giovannini reports precise data on the price of oil, on the state of oil companies of Baku, on the conditions of the "tubing" and on the stocks of crude oil present in the region. He adds some considerations on the populations of the area

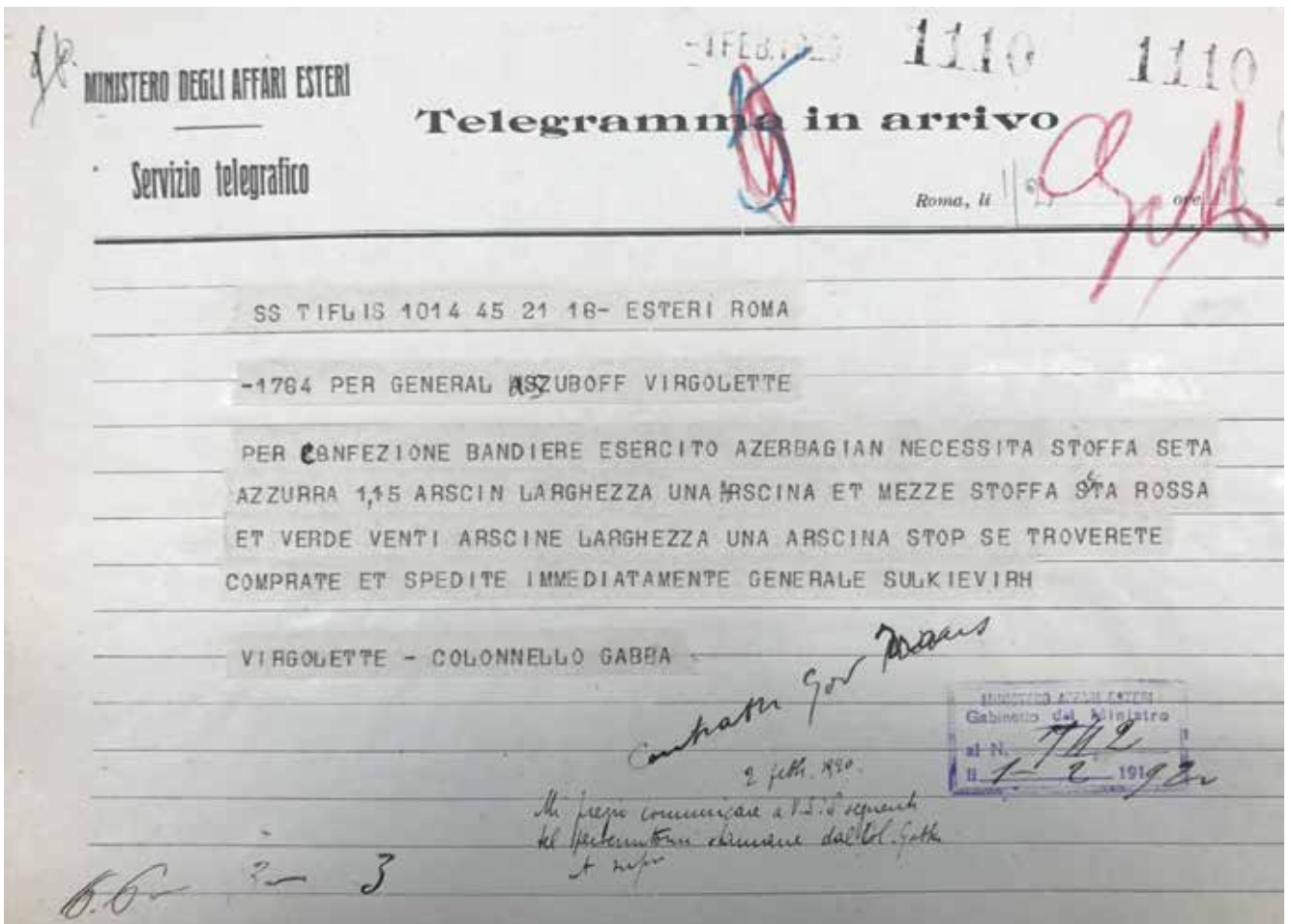


stating that: "In Georgia the population is turbulent, and devoted to robbery and brigandage; on the Tiflis railway line trains are sometimes stopped by bands of brigands, and travelers and looted goods. In the Azerbaijan, the population is milder, but the struggles between the Muslim element and the Armenians are continuing. In Dagestan, the population is insensitive to restraint and almost completely escapes the control of the English. The whole region, although for more than a century under the domination of the Russians, has not been assimilated and sees Russians as oppressors; the dominant spirit is favorable to independence." The subsequent report of 30 May 1919 is a long context-analysis, carried out by Captain Granafei, probably due to Gabba's request and addressed also to Admiral Thaon di Revel, the supreme commander of Italian Navy. Captain Granafei, after summarizing the political and military events of the area, reiterates the need, by the Transcaucasian republics (to which are added the Dagestan mountaineers and the now autonomous Batum district) of a presence of a strong European power, acting as a guarantor of the newly conquered independence. The resources required to protect the new republics, explains the naval officer, can be repaid with substantial economic benefits. Since the British withdrawal, Italy can aspire to be

such a power, by assuming a clear position on Denikin and independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia. In the telegram of May 31 sent to Paris the deputy of Gabba Micheli (Gabba returned to Europe to report to the Paris peace conference) explains how strong is the apprehension in Baku for Denikin's advance and the expectation, given the imminent British withdrawal, for the arrival of the of Italian troops scheduled for June 12, 1919.

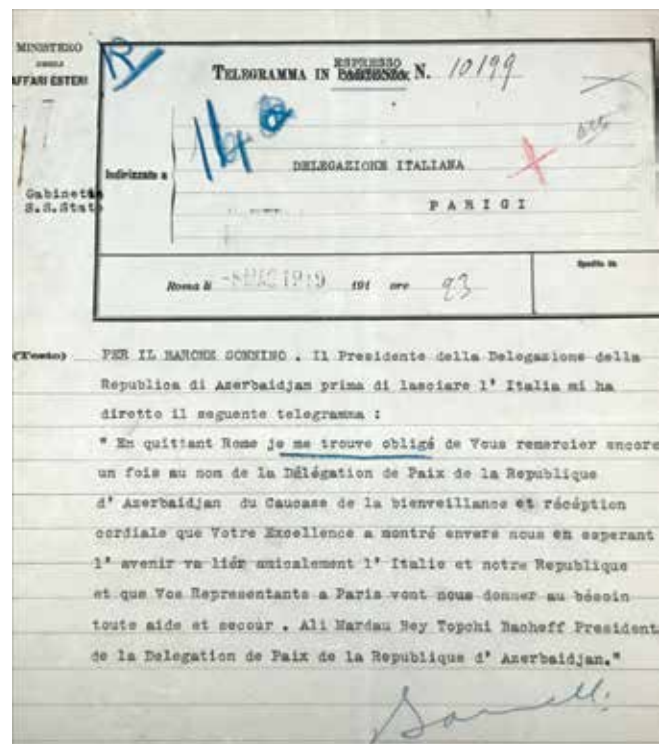
**The economic bid for Italy in Azerbaijan.** Since the first weeks of activity, the Italian mission has worked hard to identify the economic benefits that would be the main motivation for sending troops. Due to the economic centrality of Baku in the pre-war period, the Azerbaijani capital continues to be considered as the financial and banking center of the Caucasian region. In the telegram of 2 June 1919 Micheli requires authorization - in view of the imminent withdrawal of the British troops - to the takeover (from the British authorities) of the Russian State Bank of Baku and of the shipping controller, ie the merchant maritime authority. This move is considered by Micheli as fundamental, in the vacuum of power given by the British withdrawal, to ensure a decisive political and economic influence on the region in Italy. The following day Micheli sends to his superior a political and military note dedicated to the English and to the relationship with Denikin. The Italian officer explains, once again, the ambiguity of British politics: "while wanting to respect and favor the independence of the republics of the Transcaucasus, the British believe that the most important issue is that of the fight against Bolshevism and its diffusion. Hence the continuous and unconditional support to Denikin and to the admiral Koltciak." The most important problem is the possibility that the Russian forces, in order to secure sure routes of communication, could occupy the territory of Georgia and Azerbaijan. It is therefore necessary to send at least one Italian brigade to occupy Baku and Tiflis. The Italians want to replace the British, implementing a strong political discontinuity with the British intervention. In Rome, in the following days, there is a new meeting with Azerbaijani diplomats. It is once again Majoni to confer with Aziz bek Tairof qualified as "represent Azerbaijani at the Supreme Command". The Azerbaijani diplomat expresses the deepest satisfaction with the sending of the Italian mission and changes the position expressed by the Azerbaijanis in May: "the delegation of my country, presided by the President of Parliament, Mr. Topçubaşov expressed in the interview Marchese Borsarelli as being contrary to any sending of troops. There is now a *revire-*





ment: the troops will be well received since there was an excellent impression of the Italian Military Mission". The Azerbaijanis hope for a maximum cooperation of economic and political nature between the two countries.

**End of the project of the Italian mission.** In the following documents, Gabba informs his deputy Micheli that the Italian intervention would no longer take place and that the staff of the mission would be greatly reduced. A new Italian government take power presided by Francesco Saverio Nitti with a narrow perspective of the Italian foreign policy, more focused on economy rather than military adventures. The new Foreign Minister, Tommaso Tittoni, communicates to Gabba the information, to be disclosed to local governments, on the redefinition of the Italian mission, which should be redirected towards commercial purposes. Renounce to the military intervention does not halt the political activity of the mission. In a telegram from Baku of 21 July 1919 Granafei informs Micheli in Tiflis on the request for participation addressed to Italy and to the other allied military representatives (there are also French and



MINISTERO DEGLI AFFARI ESTERI

Div. Gab. Ministro

Telegramma-Posta

N. 4/2

Roma, li 2 Gennaio 1920

Indirizzato a Direttore Generale della Pubblica Sicurezza

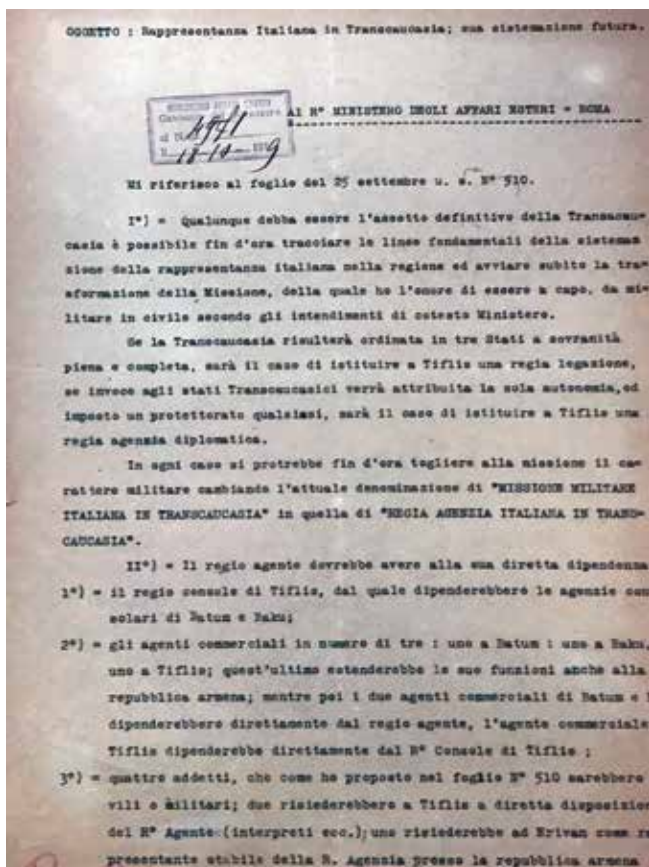
Ministero dell'Interno

(Testo) Come é noto a codesto Ministero trovansi da qualche mese in Italia il Generale Ussuboff con incarico del Governo dell'Azerbaijan di acquistare materiale vario per l'equipaggiamento dell'esercito che il nuovo Stato sta organizzando.

Il Ministero della Guerra non si è opposto al Governo dell'Azerbaijan materiale non bellico esuberante contro nafta e benzina, ma non potendo cedergli oggetti di vestiario, consigliò il Generale Ussuboff a rivolgersi all'industria privata. Fu così che questi concluse regolare contratto con la Ditta Chiono Ghella & C., la quale si impegnò a fornire all'Azerbaijan entro il mese corrente 25.000 uniformi complete contro lane, pelli e cotone.

La Ditta Chiono Ghella, molto nota nel Caucaso, era stata raccomandata dalla nostra Missione a Tiflis ed aveva in corso un analogo contratto con la Georgia.

Il contratto sopra accennato, esaminato dalla Commissione Interministeriale riunitasi presso questo Ministero, fu pienamente approvato ed il Ministero della P.



American envoys) to an arbitration commission for the resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh problem. In the following months, the Italians will show a very balanced position on this issue. Azerbaijan is lately recognized in its *de facto* independence by the Paris Peace Conference on 12 January 1920, together with Georgia. Gabba communicates the profound disappointment of the Armenians, officially still unrecognized, for this success obtained by the Azerbaijanis. The documentation here presented, available in the Historical Archives Office of the Military Staff is useful to shade an unprecedented light both on the relevance of the brief experience of Azerbaijani independence and modernization as well as on the aspects of Italian foreign policy. Italy after the conflict, showed a strong interest in the Caucasus region and the Italian military cadres perceived the economic and strategic potential of Azerbaijan and the whole Caucasian region. Moreover, in an area troubled by ethnic conflicts, the Italians set themselves as a stabilizing and compromising force between the parties in conflict, refusing any discrimination or favoritism on ethnic or religious grounds. 🌱

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