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CAUCASUS-CASPIAN REGION IN ENGLAND'S STRATEGIC PLANS IN 1918-1919

The aspiration to establish control over the South Caucasus, in particular over Azerbaijan (Baku) and the Caspian Sea, was one of the conventional and priority agendas of the British policy in the Middle East, which was perfectly in line with its core geopolitical concept with regard to Eurasia as a whole. It is no coincidence that H. MacKinder, who served as a representative of the British command in southern Russia in 1919, vigorously insisted upon the need "to secure British positions in the Caspian" (1, p.72).

In turn, Gen. Alfred Knox, a former British military representative in Russia, noted in his book titled "With the Russian Army. 1914-1917" that throughout the whole of the 19th and early 20th centuries the entire policy of England, which "is used to thinking in terms of centuries and continents", was aimed at depriving Russia of access to the open sea. "It is not the first time the Caspian and the routes leading to it have drawn the attention of the Englishmen," the London-based Times reported (2, p. 4).

The so-called Eastern Committee, established in late March 1918 and chaired by George Curzon, was a steering think-tank for the entire military and political activity of England in a vast geopolitical area spanning the Near and Middle East, as well as the Caucasus and

Central Asia. Foreign Secretary A. Balfour, Assistant Secretary, Lord Robert Cecil, Permanent Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Harding, Chief of the Imperial General Staff H. Wilson, Secretary of State for India E. Montagu, and Director of Military Intelligence, Maj-Gen. G. Macdonogh (3, p. 81) were among the committee's permanent members.

It is also worth mentioning that the English government bodies lacked a common opinion regarding the Caucasus and Persia in 1918-1919. Opposing G. Curzon's ambitious projects in the region, Secretary of State for India E. Montagu, who was a liberal, said in a speech in December 1918 that "as for defending India, I don't think we need to consider the Caucasus." "I believe this region is entirely beyond our interests," he noted. (4, p.74). These remarks stemmed from the fact that Montagu represented British establishment circles that deemed it necessary, amid the intensifying struggle for independence flaring up in the British colonies stretching from Cairo to Calcutta, to pursue a more flexible policy in the East as well as seek allies among the local national forces.

During World War I the idea of creating a continuous patch of land controlled by Britain by combining the four "C"s (Cape Town, Cairo, Calcutta), with the fourth

one being Canberra, was fueling a new drive in the British policy in the Middle East, which was asserting its control over the Caspian and the South Caucasus, in particular the oil-rich Baku. The allies sealed a victory upon the oil waves", Curzon stated in late 1918 (5, p. 433). It is no coincidence that during discussions on the goals of the policies pursued in the South Caucasus, held at a meeting of the Eastern Committee, Curzon cited the need "to defend India" and put forward a plan on long-term occupation of the key locations and communications of this region, stressing the importance of Baku and the surrounding areas "with their vast resources" (6, p. 119). A. Balfour, who believed the prey should not be missed, echoed those remarks, referring to "Batumi, Baku, the railway and the oil pipeline in between". His deputy, R. Cecil, was even more specific in his remarks, saying England must possess Baku merely due to the huge value of its oil reserves (6, p. 119). The fact that England contributed 60 percent of capital investment in the oil field development in Baku during World War I should be taken into consideration as well. (7, p. 5). According to French Senator Berenger, England was seeking to create a giant oil zone spanning "from Egypt to Burma and from the Caucasus to the Persian Gulf", in a bid to counterbalance the US oil empire (6, p. 119). Interestingly, the Americans also deemed as "the primary task of the allies to take over the key oil-rich regions of the Caucasus", which necessitated "leveraging major forces for their use in northern Persia and the Caucasus". Perhaps, this is a key agenda for the allied states, *The New York Times* concluded. (8).

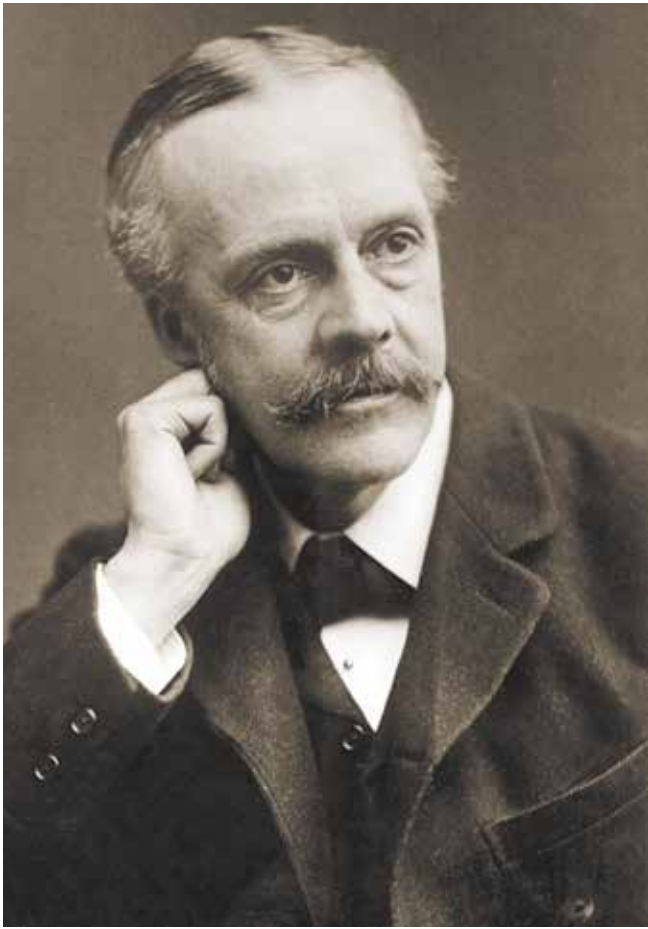
Overall, Curzon's geo-political plan envisaged establishing a chain of buffer states stretching from the northern borders of India to the Mediterranean, which would serve as a shield to ward off the threat of attacks on India and as the main route that would link Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand. (9, p. 32). The Caucasus-Caspian region, which was a centerpiece in England's strategic military plans in that period, was inevitably turning into a central converging point. "The Caspian is a hub traversed by all significant trade routes, and if we are just now beginning to heed attention to this inland basin, it does not mean that we were previously absolutely unaware of its commercial and political value. We have been aware of this for a long time. The Caspian is one of the old British interests," *The Times* reported. (10).

In June 1918, British Secretary of State for War A. Milner told the command of the British troops in Mesopotamia that "Her Majesty's government was attaching... great importance to securing permanent control over



George Nathaniel Curzon

the Caspian" (3, p.83). Moreover, the Britons had a substantiated opinion that "the control at sea can be exercised only by the one who possesses Baku". (11, p. 126). British general Lionel Dunsterville rightly noted that "taking over Baku would hand over to the adversary all the reserves of oil required for restoring railway traffic and navigation in the Black Sea (oil is pumped from Baku to Batumi through a special pipeline); the same circumstance would allow the enemy to assert dominance in the Caspian Sea, use the entire bulk of valuable goods in numerous Caspian seaports and gain free access to Asia and Afghanistan". (12, pages 29-32). It is therefore no coincidence that the main task facing the military expeditions led by Gen. L. Dunsterville and Gen. W. Malletson was to invade the major Caspian ports Anzali, Baku and Krasnovodsk (presently the city of Turkmenbashi) and to seize the entire Caspian fleet (13, p. 114-115). First of all, this would allow them to significantly weaken the positions of their irreconcilable rivals, Germany and Turkey,



Arthur James Balfour

in the Near and Middle East, prevent a potential attempt by Germany and Turkey to outflank western Persia and break into India through the trans-Caspian region and Khorasan. Secondly, this would ward off the real revolutionary-Bolshevist threat posed by Soviet Russia to the Eastern colonial possessions. Finally, establishing control over the Caspian would allow the Englishmen to secure the maritime flanks of their troops in the South Caucasus and Turkestan, directly contact the “white” armies of Gen. A.I. Denikin in the northern Caucasus and Admiral A.V. Kolchak in the Urals, facilitate their connection in the Volga river mouth and thus sever the link between southern Russia and its central “Red” governorates.

All this was perfectly in line with Britain’s key geo-political goals in the East, such as boosting its position in the Near and Middle East, estranging the Caucasus and Turkestan from Russia and seizing the oil riches of Mesopotamia, Persia and Azerbaijan. Such a policy was being justified by the conventional concept on the need “to defend access” to the British India from the oncoming of



Oliver Wardrop

German-Turkish troops through the trans-Caspian region, as well as “eliminate Bolshevism to the east of the Black Sea” as it was mentioned during a meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers, held on November 13, 1918 (4, p. 60).

On December 23, 1917, Prime Minister G. Clemenceau, Foreign Minister S. Pichon and Gen. F. Foch, on one side, and Lord Milner, Lord Robert Cecil and British military officials from the other, reached agreement in Paris on a British-French convention regarding future activities of France and Britain in southern Russia. This accord envisaged providing assistance to the White movement, as well as geographic division of the spheres of activity of these two powers throughout the largest area of the former Russian Empire that they would be able to cover.

“France could unfold its actions against ‘the enemy’, i.e., Germany and hostile Russia, north of the Black Sea, while England would take on the east of the Black Sea, countering the Turks,” W. Churchill wrote in his memoirs. Thus, according to Clause 3, the French zone had to in-

clude Bessarabia, Ukraine and the Crimea, while the British zone would cover the territory of the Cossacks (referring to the Don region, Kuban, Terek, the Lower Volga region and the Urals), the Caucasus, Armenia, Georgia and Kurdistan.” (14, p. 166). Turkestan was also in Great Britain’s sphere of influence due to its geographical proximity to Afghanistan and the colonial possessions in India. Moreover, the British cabinet was placing a special emphasis on Baku and the Caspian Sea, which was deemed to have “great military, political and economic importance” (15, p.50).

According to French General Staff officers, England was pursuing two goals in the Caucasus in this period. Firstly, it aimed “to drive Russia back to the North Caucasus and thus contribute to the independence of Georgia and Azerbaijan”; secondly, it sought “to prevent establishment of a state in this region that would be an ally of the revitalized Russia and thereby jeopardize England’s relations with the Muslim world” (16, p. 37). Explaining the stance taken by England with regard to the states that emerged shortly after the collapse of the Russian Empire, D. Lloyd-George noted in his memoirs that during this period there was no doubt for providing support to the “small or new states” (17, p. 327).

It is quite interesting that the Americans also considered “taking over very important oil-rich regions of the Caucasus as the paramount task of the allies”, which required “leveraging major forces for their use in northern Persia and the Caucasus”. Possibly, this is an extremely important agenda for the allies, The New York Times reported. (8).

Overall, the Entente was seeking to create “a sanitary cordon” of its own kind consisting of the new South Caucasus states, which would be one of the important elements of the giant Baltic region-Black Sea-Caucasus-Caspian-Central Asia “geopolitical arch”.

As early as in December 1917, the British cabinet passed a decision to send interventionist troops to Baku and the South Caucasus. According to the assignment issued on December 24, 1917, a top-secret military expedition, which was set up in early 1918 in the British-occupied Baghdad and consisted of a relatively small but a selective combined detachment of the allied forces (about 1,000 British, Australian, Canadian, Zelian, South African and Indian elite servicemen, selected from among the Mesopotamian and Western fronts, with several dozen armored vehicles and semi-trucks), under the command of Gen. L. Dunsterville, was to travel from Baghdad to Baku to prevent an anticipated but



Lionel Charles Dunsterville

unlikely invasion of India from Germany and Ottoman Turkey. This military unit was named «Dunsterforce» after its commander.

The detachment of Gen. W. Malleon, in turn, was entrusted with the mission to head to Mashhad for further advancement into the eastern trans-Caspian region.

Having taken over the northern Iranian port of Anzali in the summer of 1918, the Britons were preparing intensively to disembark their troops in Baku, which was envisaged in the event of a successful anti-Bolshevik coup, which was being masterminded by the local opposition Socialist-Revolutionary Menshevik-Dashnak bloc.

Baku’s geopolitical significance was later articulated quite clearly in the memoirs of Gen. L. Dunsterville. “Our capturing Baku would lead to the following consequences: severed access to oil reserves and closure of the doors in Central Asia (18, p.122). In particular, the command of the British troops in India considered Baku and the Caspian Sea as a key gateway to Central Asia and the Middle East.



Commander of the British troops, General Dunsterville, and Colonel Arutyunov, commander of the troops of the Central Caspian Dictatorship

"Our plan boiled down to dominance over the Caspian Sea, and since we could achieve this only by invading Baku, it was necessary to defend this city against its capture by enemies (referring to the Turks - N.A.). Baku had tremendous importance, and any risk of trying to take it over was definitely justified," L. Dunsterville wrote in his memoirs (18, p.123).

A quite numerous British intelligence network launched its activity in Baku during this period. Notably, it included British intelligence officer, Captain Reginald Tig-Jones and the British consul Ronald McDonell, who also served as a major of the British intelligence service.

Mishaps at the frontline led to the intensified efforts of internal opposition in Baku, spearheaded by right-wing socialist revolutionaries, Mensheviks and Dashnaks. Taking advantage of their legality and maintaining ties with the Dunsterforce expeditionary detachment, which had settled down in northern Iran, they significantly stepped up their advocacy for bringing in British troops, simultaneously masterminding a coup to overthrow the Soviet regime in Baku and establish their own rule.

"I established communication with Baku by means of almost daily couriers and our friends, Socialist revolutionaries, appeared to be able to stage a coup d'etat soon, i.e. overthrow the Bolsheviks, establish a new

form of government in Baku and invite the Englishmen to assist them," Gen. Dunsterville wrote afterwards (18, p.159). Contacts with the British general were also established by representatives of the Armenian National Council, who were simultaneously setting the stage for negotiations with the command of the Islamic Army of the Caucasus, which was advancing toward Baku in the summer of 1918, as well as with the Germans.

Betting on the local Dashnaks and right-wing Socialist-Revolutionaries, as well as numerous former officers of the Tsarist regime based in the city, who controlled the Baku Naval Aviation School, were panic-stricken over the approach of the Turkish army to Baku and supported bringing in the Britons to the city, McDonell largely contributed to their establishing contacts with Gen. Dunsterville, who had settled down in Anzali (19, p. 43-44).

At the same time, on 12 June 1918, right-wing Socialist revolutionaries and Mensheviks, supported by the British residency, attempted to stage an anti-Bolshevik riot on the "Ardagan" gunboat in Baku. The rebels planned to arrest members of the Baku Council of People's Commissars, dissolve the Baku Council and form a Socialist revolutionary government, which was to invite "British comrades", that is, British troops, to Baku. The commander of the Baku Naval Aviation School even

Main goal of the English policy in the Caucasus - oil

suggested to McDonnell “dropping incendiary bombs upon oilfields” (20, p. 204). However, this undertaking, which lasted only a few hours, culminated in a complete failure and the arrest of the plotters (21, p. 45-46).

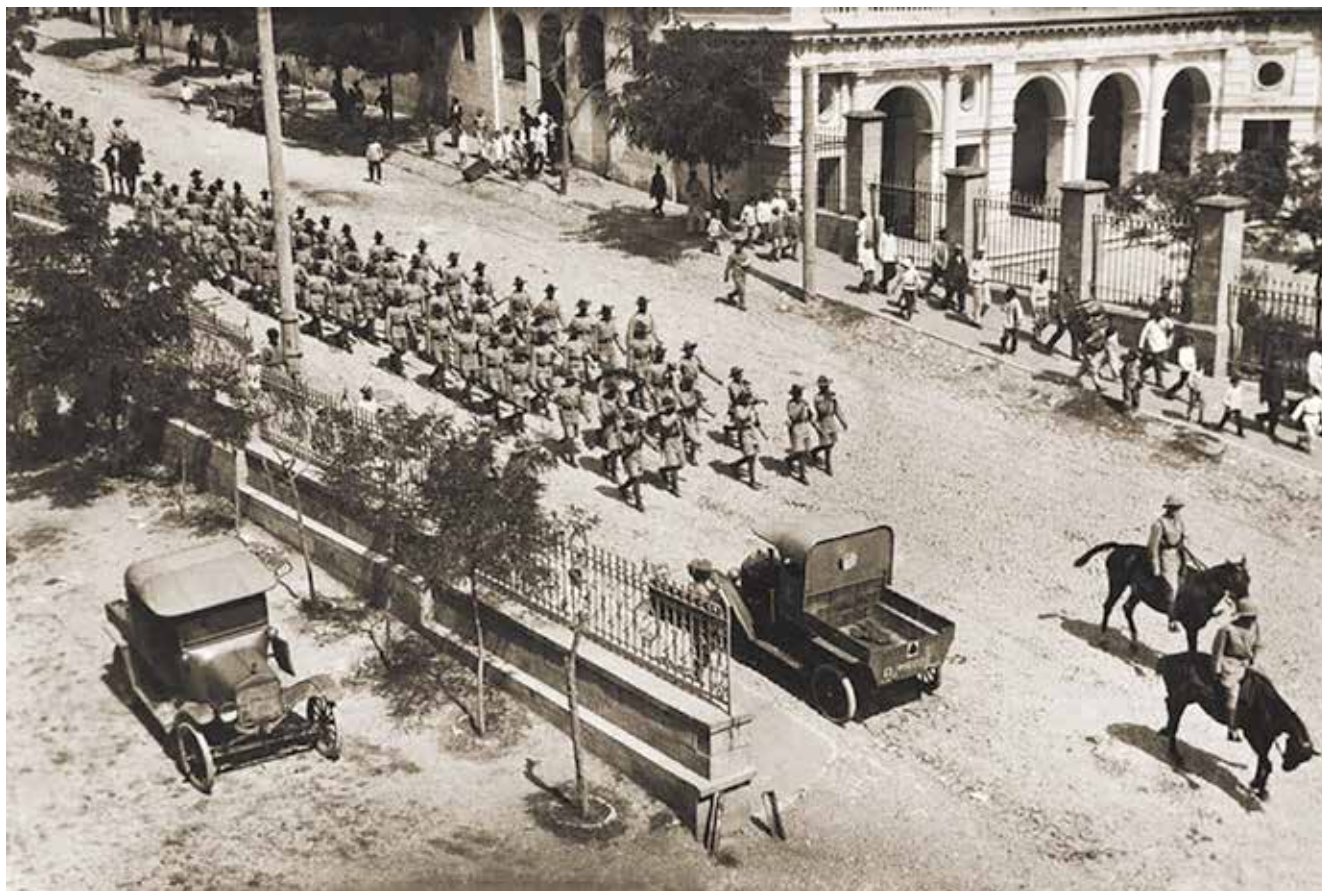
Meanwhile, the power in Baku was taken over by right-wing Socialist-Revolutionary-Menshevik-Dashnak bloc, which formed its government on August 1, 1918. It was “the dictatorship of the Central Caspian region and the Presidium of the Interim Executive Committee of the Council of Workers and Soldier Deputies”, which, as previously agreed, formally invited the Englishmen to defend the city from the besieging Turkish army.

On August 4, an advance detachment of British troops comprising 150 servicemen, who had arrived by sea from Anzali, disembarked in Baku. This was followed by the arrival of a second group of the military contingent consisting of 130 soldiers and officers with two armored vehicles on August 6. On August 17, the commander of the British expeditionary squadron, Maj.-Gen. L. Dunsterville arrived in Baku on board the “President Kruger” frigate with his command unit. The detachment comprised units of the Ghent and North

Stafford regiments, the Warwick, as well as other units, totaling slightly over 1,000 bayonets with 16 weapons and several armored vehicles (11, p.184, 224, 251, 267).

Commodore D. T. Norris, appointed to this post by the chief of the royal British forces in the Caspian Sea, also arrived in Baku during those days with 180 sailors and several 4-inch weapons. This was due to the fact that the Caspian had a special place in England’s strategic military plans in that period. Moreover, “this is not the first time the Caspian and the routes leading to it have drawn the attention of the Englishmen”, the London-based Times said. (2). The point is that as early as the beginning of the 18th century the Englishmen tried to establish their fleet in the Caspian, though this attempt was unsuccessful. In June 1918, British Secretary of State for War A. Milner told the command of the British troops in Mesopotamia that “Her Majesty’s government was attaching... great importance to securing permanent control over the Caspian” (3, p.83).

Nevertheless, the Englishmen failed to secure control over Baku in that period due to the small contingent of their troops. Thanks exclusively to the high combat



Parade procession of British troops in Baku

skills and stamina of the English military units they managed to hold the fort for one month. However, it was obvious that these forces were insufficient for ensuring the defense of the city. This was understood in the top English military circles as well. Thus, according to a cable of the military ministry dated July 6, 1918, in the event of a threat of the Turkish forces' taking over Baku, Dunster-ville was assigned to eliminate oil pipelines, petroleum tanks and oil refining facilities, but not wells, given that the long-term interests of British oil companies were still taken into consideration. In addition, the Britons were also mindful of the military-strategic factor suggesting Turkey's imminent defeat in the world war, therefore, they were reluctant to spill much blood for the sake of their local "allies".

In the meantime, military operations that unfolded in the vast Black and Caspian Sea regions played a significant role in the Caucasus scene of warfare during the stand-off between Soviet Russia and the Entente powers in 1918-1920. In view of the real threat of its invasion by the German Navy of the Black Sea Fleet, a

squadron was drowned in Tsemes Bay as early as June 18, 1918, in accordance with the orders issued in Moscow. On November 16, 1918, an Anglo-French squadron, which had entered the Black Sea, played a significant role in securing control of the Allies over the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus. This led to the invasion of "the western naval gates of the Caucasus", Batumi, by the Britons. Moreover, Batumi, a site for the concentration of their fleet, served as the main base for the British troops in the Caucasus and as a port used for the transshipment of Baku oil to the West. ♦

Story to be concluded in next issue

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