

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

Conclusion. See the beginning in IRS- Heritage, 3 (35) 2018

Meanwhile, simultaneously with these developments, tense diplomatic struggle over Baku was unfolding. As early as on August 27, 1918, the Soviet government signed with Germany a supplementary agreement to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which obliged the Germans not to support any third power in the Caucasus and prevent an entry of Turks there in exchange for a quarter of the oil and oil products manufactured in Baku (23, p.173). However, in light of the rampantly unfolding developments on the world war

frontlines, this agreement only looked good on paper. In turn, the Turkish troops' settling down in Baku drew fire from the Soviet government. In a protest note issued to Turkey on September 20, 1918, Turkey was accused of grossly violating the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which essentially had been renounced.

On September 21, a similar protest note was issued to the German government whereby the latter was blamed for failing to comply with the August 27, 1918 agreement. Clause 14 of that deal stated that the Germans



Turkish infantrymen. 1918

would take “measures to ensure that the Turkish troops retreat beyond the Kura river line” (23, p.173).

After taking over Baku, the Turkish troops, expanding their assault along the Western coast of the Caspian Sea, made an incursion into Daghestan, consecutively taking over Derbent in October 1918 and further Port-Petrovsk, and driving out the Cossack detachment of L. Bicherakhov, which fled by sea toward the Britons in Enzeli (23, p.173).

Nonetheless, Turkey, which sustained a defeat in World War I, had to withdraw its troops from the entire Caucasus soon thereafter, including Baku and Batumi, in accordance with the terms of the Armistice of Mudros, concluded on October 30, 1918 on board the British cruiser *Agamemnon*. In turn, as early as in the beginning of October 1918 the Soviet government suspected that there had been a secret deal between the Entente and Turkey “on handing over Baku to it”. On November 16, 1918, a British-French squadron entered the Black Sea; on November 17, units of the 39th infantry brigade, which arrived by sea from Enzeli, disembarked again in Baku (it included a total of 1,000 British and 800 Indian soldiers and officers) led by the commander of the British troops in northern Persia, Maj.-Gen. W. M. Thomson. The

British general, expressing the stance of the allied powers prior to sailing off to Baku, issued a declaration noting that “Baku with its oil fields will be occupied, while the rest of the country will remain under the control of the Azerbaijani government and its troops” (22, p.33).

It is indicative that in his early proclamations Thomson unequivocally noted that the allied troops were “on Russian soil” and had arrived in the Caucasus “to establish overall security on this Russian territory located between the Black Sea and the Caspian” (23, p.174-175). “A final decision will be passed at the upcoming peace conference, which will resolve all issues concerning this territory”, the British general said in the message (24). As for the local government, it was told that “Azerbaijan would not be sidelined from the discussions concerning the principle of national self-determination at the Paris Peace Conference (22, p.87).

After Batumi, Tiflis, Ganja, Nakhchivan, Shusha and other cities of the Transcaucasia were taken over, the Britons paid special attention to their military build-up in this region. In late 1918, England had a 20,000 people-strong contingent of troops stationed in the South Caucasus. It is not a mere coincidence that one of the first documents of W. Churchill issued when he

English mounted police in the streets of Baku. 1919



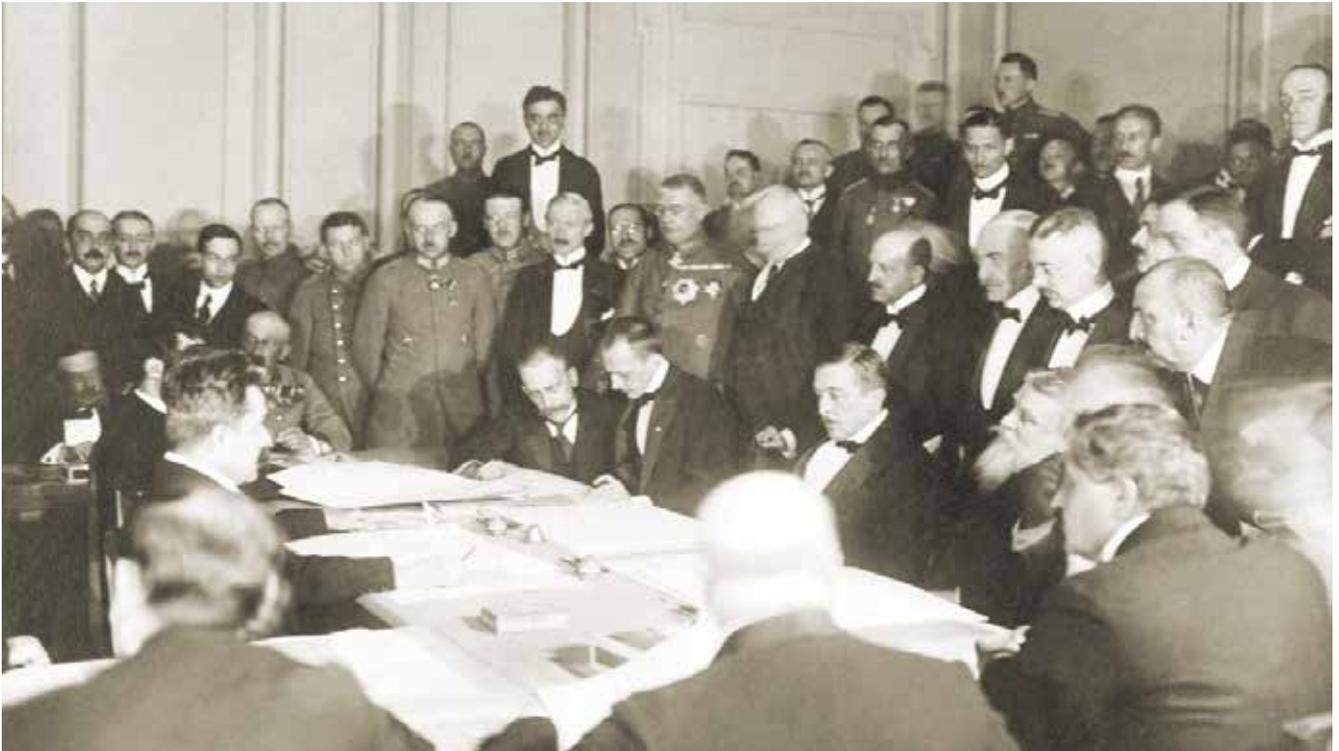
served in the new capacity of Minister of War was a note sent on February 14, 1919 to imperial chief-of-staff Henry Wilson whereby he sought an update regarding "the current actual role of the British armed forces, which were holding the Baku-Batumi railway, as well as the British Navy, which controlled the Caspian Sea coast" (15, p.87). Afterwards, Churchill admitted in his published memoirs that in this period independent Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia were deemed by the

Entente as states designated to counter infiltration of Bolshevism to Turkey and Iran (15, p.106). Certainly, this was no secret for Moscow either.

Overall, Churchill highly appreciated the military and strategic importance of the occupation of South Caucasus. "The British troops disembarked in Batumi and quickly occupied the Caucasus railway from the Black Sea to the Caspian, in other words, stretching to Baku. They arranged a flotilla of ships, which soon there-



The signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. 1918



after secured dominance in the Caspian Sea. The British troops have become possessors of one of the biggest strategic lines in the world". (25, p.105).

Having subdued the Caspian Military Flotilla (CMF) and about 150 trade vessels, the Britons swiftly tackled establishing their Navy in the Caspian. The CMF military ships and the merchant fleet based in Baku lied at its core. In August 1918, the Socialist-Revolutionary trans-Caspian government handed over all the ships at its disposal in the Caspian to the Britons. (26, p.334). Those ships were equipped with weapons withdrawn from the Black Sea fleet vessels, as well as those delivered from England. A total of 13 fighter motor boats equipped with Whitehead torpedo launchers were also delivered to Baku by rail across the Black Sea (27, p.6).

After taking over Port-Petrovsk at the Chechen island (near the coast in Daghestan) on January 13, 1919, the Britons set up naval and air bases (comprised of 80 planes) there (28, p.54-57). This enabled the Britons to launch air attacks on Astrakhan. In general, as early as in spring 1919 the Britons stationed 18 military maritime units in the Caspian (including five auxiliary cruisers and four gunboats), according to Soviet intelligence data (29, p.156). The assertion of control over the Baku-Krasnovodsk-Enzeli triangle made the Britons' hopes for complete dominance over the entire Caspian seabed quite feasible, with all military and strategic advantages

involved. This enabled the Britons to intensively supply by sea the White detachments of Denikin and Kolchak with arms, ammunition and oil products. Moreover, the commander-in-chief of the British forces in the South Caucasus, Gen. G.M. Miln testified that "the presence of the British army also served a useful goal: preventing warfare between the troops of the Volunteer Army and the armies of the Caucasus republics" (30, p.73).

The point is that as early as by the end of 1918 the Britons' policy with regard to the Caucasus republics had undergone very tangible changes. On January 22, 1919 Gen. Miln stated that "there would be no interference... with the internal affairs of the Caucasus states" (31).

Such a substantial adjustment in England's policy in the region in that period certainly raised suspicion of the Denikin supporters regarding true plans of the Britons with regard to Russia, and there were actually grounds for this suspicion. Thus, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, as well as George Curzon, believed that undivided Russia would be a "lethal danger" for the British Empire and even "for overall peace". He bluntly stated at a meeting of the cabinet of ministers on July 25, 1919 that he was "very concerned that a united Russia would be a huge threat to us in the East" (3, p.87). In addition, England intended to grant a part of the territory to Persia at the expense of Russia and Turkey "when the borders of Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkestan



Winston Churchill

are drawn" (3, p. 89). The conclusion of the Anglo-Persian treaty of August 9, 1919 further strengthened England's position in the southern pre-Caspian region. In turn, the Denikinites accused the British of "supporting and facilitating... the separatism of the ethnographic groups of Transcaucasia", and in the aftermath of this, "real force (implying the Volunteer Army – cit. by the author) remained as the only means of raising the Russian flag over Transcaucasia" (32, p.97).

At the same time, the Britons strongly supported the Armenian government, which had established an alliance with Denikin and was ready to grant its territory, as well as its military and economic potential, to the Entente. As a "reward", it received from England the territory of the Kars province and a part of the Erivan governorate. In addition, in spring 1919, the Allies actually encouraged Armenia's aggressive actions with regard to Nakhchivan and Zangezur. Cadet B. Baykov, one of the leaders of the Russian National Council in Baku, cited "the lack of sincerity in the Britons' attitude toward the Russians, in particular, Denikin and the Volunteer Army". "In addition to their policy that had always been ambiguous in all respects, including in Baku, it was pursued by British military policymakers who served in the colonies,

especially in India where hatred toward the Russians and the conviction that India was under a threat from Russia was the basis of Gen. Thomson's activity," Baykov said. (33, p.74). Very tough Russian-British stand-off in Central Asia in the second half of the 19th century, which nearly caused the outbreak of an open war between the two powers, still rang a bell. In that period the oil factor was significant in England's policy in the Caucasus-Caspian region, though Curzon believed that the Britons were not placing enough emphasis on the importance of oil and the Baku-Batumi oil pipeline. The oil strategy was an important and integral part of the effort to assert Britain's hegemony in the Near and Middle East, as well as the competitive struggle with France and the United States. At that time, England had the undisputed geopolitical superiority in this oil-rich region. Chairman of the Bibi-Heybat oil company Herbert Allen noted in late 1918 that after "the British troops appeared in the Caucasus from Batumi on the Black Sea to Baku on the Caspian Sea and from Vladikavkaz to Tiflis...the British government had an excellent opportunity to exert decisive influence on the giant extraction in Grozny, Baku and the Caspian oil fields" (34).

Meanwhile, in fall 1918, the central Soviet government and naval command took urgent measures to bolster their naval forces in the Caspian (27, p. 63, 85, 88). In a cable sent to the Revolutionary Military Council of the Caucasus-Caspian department of the Southern Front dated November 12, 1918, V.I. Lenin demanded that the Astrakhan-Caspian Military Flotilla "conquer the Caspian Sea, equally assisting the North Caucasus Army" (35, p.205).

Whereas in fall 1918 military operations of the Astrakhan-Caspian Military Flotilla were sporadic, the onset of spring in 1919 saw the launch of an active phase in the warfare in the Caspian Sea, with varying success. Notably, during a maritime battle that took place on May 21, 1919 in the Tyub-Karagan Bay, the Anglo-White Guard naval forces inflicted considerable damage to the detachment of Soviet warships, sinking several ships of the Astrakhan-Caspian Military Flotilla (27, p.10, 140).

Evaluating his success in this period, commander of the British Navy in the Caspian, Commodore D. Norris wrote, "We are withholding the Bolshevik forces in the northern part of the Caspian Sea, restraining the emergence of local Bolshevism and the threat of a Bolshevik disembarkation from sea". (36, p.161). In the spring and summer of 1919, the British supplied the White Guard

General Anton Denikin. 1919

armies of Denikin and Kolchak with weapons, ammunition and petroleum products through the Caspian Sea very intensively. In this period the British flotilla and aviation actively backed the assault of Denikin's troops on Astrakhan (37, p.46).

Meanwhile, in summer 1919 the British cabinet of ministers passed a decision to pull British troops out of the South Caucasus. Firstly, it was due to the altered military-political situation in Russia in light of the successes of Denikin's army, which forced the Red Army to shift to strategic defense; secondly, the decision was due to the increase of the national liberation movement in the colonial and dependent countries of the East, namely, Egypt, India, Afghanistan, Turkey and Persia, which, in turn, required leveraging significant additional military and financial resources; finally, in England itself, the government had to reckon with the mass movement "Hands off Soviet Russia!" that was gaining ground and the overall weariness of the population and the army over the war. Moreover, England waged an unsuccessful war in 1919 in Afghanistan, which led to the independence of this country.

Nevertheless, England had no intention to give up its positions in the South Caucasus completely. A

decision was made to maintain a part of the British troops in Batumi, which remained the country's base on the Black Sea. Besides, possessing the final destination point of an oil pipeline from Baku, the Britons could also control exports of Azerbaijani oil.

At the same time, back in May 1919, England suggested that Italy send in its troops to replace the British military units. Initially, Vittorio Orlando's government agreed to send Italian troops to the South Caucasus and even began preparing the 12th army corps for this purpose. However, Francesco Nitti's administration, which succeeded it, merely delegated a mission there to clarify the overall situation in the region (38, p.217).

In 1919, approximately between August 20 and August 29 inclusively, British troops withdrew from the territory of the Azerbaijan Republic. During the pull-out from Baku, the British command handed over to Denikin's Caspian Military Flotilla 11 auxiliary cruisers, 12 speedboats equipped with Whitehead mines, 54 weapons, and a large quantity of ammunition and equipment (27, p.153).

At the same time, a British document compiled in September 1919 noted that "the handover of the Caspian flotilla to Denikin is a direct threat to the capital

of Azerbaijan". Furthermore, the document indicated that "when the operations against the Bolsheviks are completed in the future, further existence of a military fleet in the Caspian Sea would be a violation of the political balance on its shores. The Azerbaijani government hopes that the sea will be then neutralized and only commercial fleet will continue to exist in the Caspian waters". It further said, "Such neutralization meets the interests of England, which now has a foothold in the East, since the Caspian Sea will become a great waterway from the West to the East in the future; securing this waterway internationally will also be a political necessity for all other countries interested in its inviolability." (39).

Nevertheless, England had no intention to give up its positions in the Transcaucasia completely. A decision was made to maintain a part of the British troops in Batumi, which would remain the country's main base on the Black Sea. Possessing the final destination point of an oil pipeline from Baku, the Britons could also fully control exports of Azerbaijani oil.

As for the extremely complex relationship between Denikin and the Azerbaijan Republic, a real threat of an incursion of the White troops into Azerbaijan and occupation of Baku emerged after the seizure of the city of Derbent in June 1919. The British command found a way out of the situation by setting up shortly before withdrawing its troops from the South Caucasus a 5-mile demarcation line between the territory occupied by the White Guard troops, and Azerbaijan and Georgia, thus helping to eliminate the threat to these countries from the north. Overall, the leading powers of the Entente, especially England and France, at that time were playing a very complicated dual, and sometimes tripartite game in the Caucasus. On the one hand, assistance was provided to the White movement in the North Caucasus in the struggle against Bolshevik Moscow; on the other hand, the Allies were not interested at all in the restoration of the Russian Empire and were doing everything possible to make sure that the idea of a "united and indivisible" Russia would merely remain a good wish of Denikin and Kolchak. At the same time, they were supporting by all means the illusions of the governments of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, which were seeking to assert their sovereignty with the aid of the West. Depending on the specific circumstances, the leading Entente powers maneuvered, acting in accordance with the "divide and rule" principle, which they managed to do up to a certain time, before they

were completely driven out of this region by Bolshevik Russia for many decades. ✪

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