

AZERBAIJANI GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO ORGANIZE MARITIME DEFENSE IN 1918-1920

The constant and real threats posed to the independence and territorial integrity of the Azerbaijan Republic during all periods of its existence prompted its government and parliament to pay close attention to bolstering the country's defense capabilities [1]. During this period, outside threats were anticipated from the north, i.e. from the White Guard, and the Denikin Caspian fleet, the Russian ground and naval forces, as well as from the south-west by the Armenian Dashnak army, which was putting forth territorial claims against Azerbaijan [2].

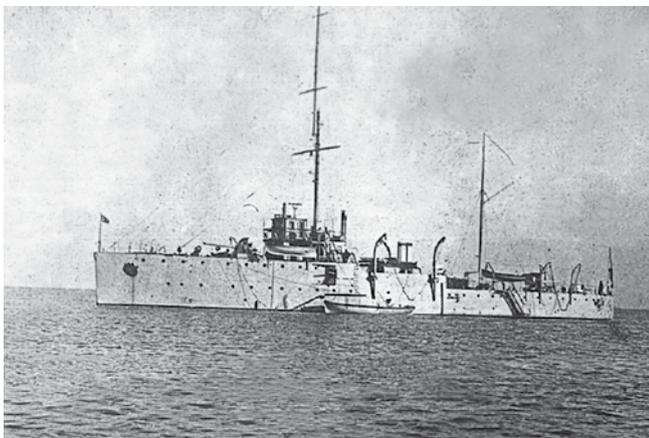
F. Khoyski, who served as prime minister and foreign minister under the Declaration of the newly formed, third Cabinet of Ministers, said at the parliamentary session on December 24, 1918 while referring to the country's domestic and foreign policy that «one of the main tasks of the government was to create armed forces capable of protecting the territorial integrity» [3, 1918, December 25]. This official statement indicated the defensive gist of the Azerbaijan Republic's military doctrine.

The country's Navy began to shape up in August 1919. Until then Azerbaijan's security on the western

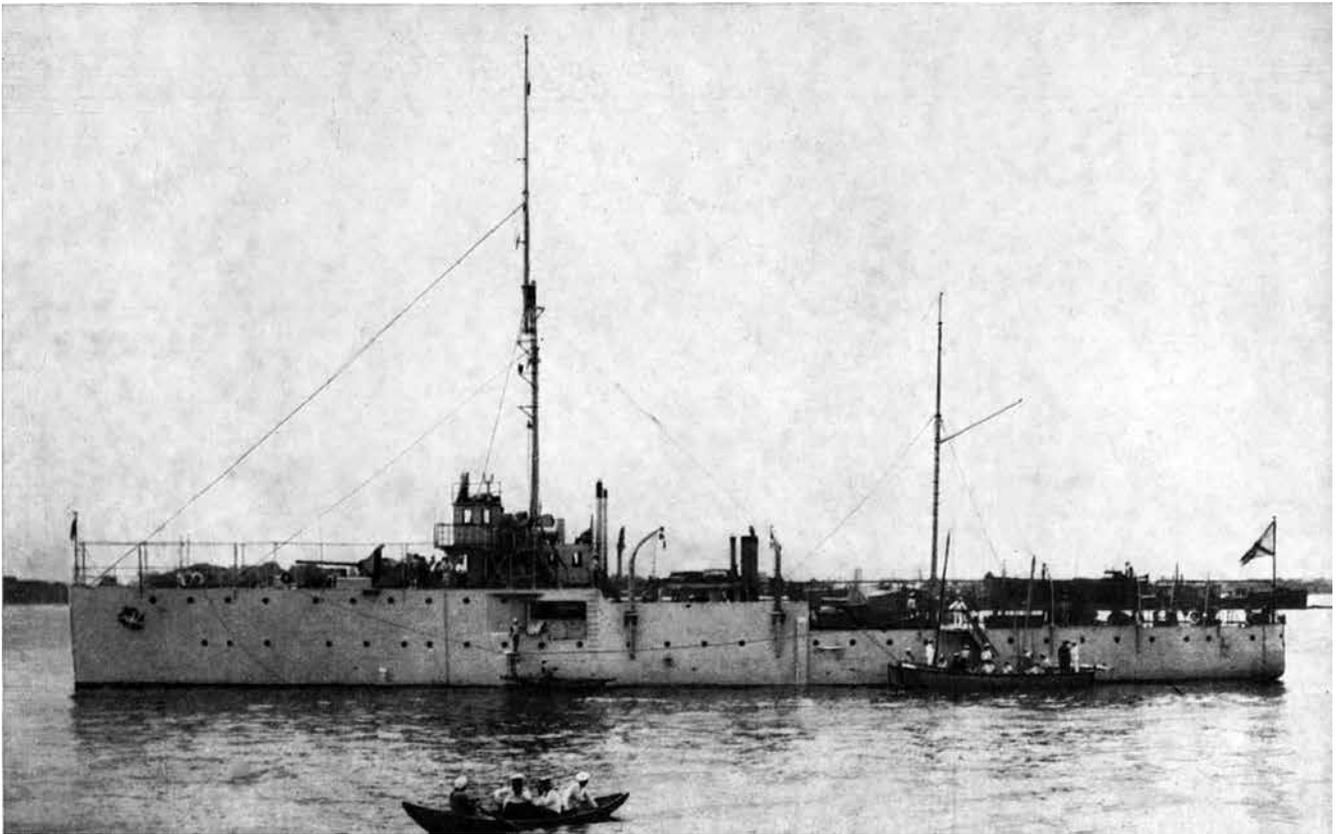
coast of the Caspian Sea had been ensured by British military ships. There was no special division or department running the military fleet even under the Ministry of Military Affairs. As for the Caspian military fleet, following the liberation of Baku by the Islamic Army of the Caucasus, its main ships, "Kars", "Ardahan" and "Astrabad", were hijacked and taken to Port-Petrovsk by the Centro-Caspian Dictatorship leaders and were returned as late as in mid-November 1918 after the Britons' arrival in Baku. The British sought to establish their own special military fleet in the Caspian [14].

In late August 1919, the British discontinued their activity in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea and withdrew their military units from this region, including Azerbaijan, simultaneously granting their naval forces to the Denikin troops. According to the agreement reached in July 1919, in early September the British granted 11 auxiliary cruisers, 12 Whitehead mine-launching speedboats, 54 cannons, about 23,000 shells and other ammunition to the Denikin Caspian military fleet led by first-degree captain A.Sergeyev [15, p. 176; 244].

The British move raised serious concerns and anxiety of the Azerbaijani government, which was well aware that Denikin had devised a plan to restore "a united and undivided Russian Empire". A letter dated August 1, 1919 and addressed to the Commander of the British Forces in Baku was undersigned by Prime Minister N. Usubbayov and Foreign Minister M.Y. Jafarov. The letter noted that according to the article published by the Rossiya newspaper on July 30, the British command handed over the Caspian fleet to the Volunteer Army. In this regard, 'the government of the republic, which is



Gunboat "Kars". Picture of 1913

Gunboat "Ardagan". Picture of 1913

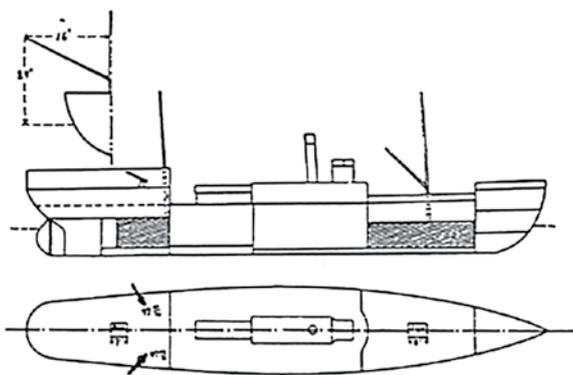
safeguarding the territorial integrity and inviolability of the state and is interested in maintaining law and order in the country, cannot allow strengthening of the forces depriving the country of the important security provision gained with such difficulty in the Caspian basin at the expense of the Caspian military fleet that has been overseen so far by the British Command, which has gained the necessary public respect and confidence" [16, v. 19]. The letter further stressed that the transfer of a part of the Caspian military fleet to the Voluntary Army "poses a direct threat to the independence and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, which naturally perturbs the population; this handover act is certainly nothing but interference with the vital interests of the people." "This implies bolstering those who adhere to a hostile stance against Azerbaijan," it said. In conclusion, the letter's authors asked the British Command to reverse its decision to hand over Caspian military fleet units to Denikin.

In another letter dated August 8, 1919 and sent to the Commander of the allied forces in Baku, Foreign Minister M.Y. Jafarov noted that his government, considering the importance of comprehensive assistance to those fighting the Bolsheviks, had intended to use the ships obtained from the British "to defend the coast and counter the Bolsheviks". The letter said that "the

government of the republic stated that if the allies' command passed a decision to disarm the Caspian military fleet after eliminating the Bolsheviks in the Astrakhan region, on the other coast of the Caspian and in other nearby areas, and warding off the direct threat posed to the Azerbaijani capital and coasts, it would agree to disarm its own ships". In the letter, the Azerbaijani government also expressed discontent over Britain's handing over a significant part of the Caspian military fleet to the Denikin army, given that "such a decision passed by the British government leaves the capital and shores of the state unprotected from a potential threat posed from abroad and by the Bolsheviks, which has alarmed the population".

On August 4, the Azerbaijani government made a request for granting ships "for the protection of the coast on these or other terms in the amount granted previously to the Volunteer Army in order to safeguard the state borders from the sea".

In another letter dated September 2, 1919 and sent to the high representative of the chief commander of the Armed Forces under the Chief Allied Command in Russia's south and the South Caucasus, Foreign Minister M.Y. Jafarov said that "the vessels of the former Caspian military fleet, disarmed by the British Command



Hydrographic vessel “Araks”

(referring to the “Kars” and “Ardahan” ships – auth.) are entirely at the disposal of the Government of the Azerbaijan Republic and the Government does not accept the claim of any party”).

The correspondence regarding Britain’s handing over the Caspian fleet warships to the Denikin forces continued in the fall of 1919. Thus, Foreign Minister Jafarov recalled once again in his letter dated October 26, 1919 to the High Commissioner of the Allies in the Caucasus, Colonel Gaskel, the British government’s High Commissioner in the South Caucasus Wardrop and the chief of the Italian military mission in this region, Colonel Gabba, that the transfer of the Caspian military fleet to the Volunteer Army had caused “a real threat to the independence of the republic and the inviolability of its territorial integrity”. In response to the concerns voiced by the Azerbaijani side as early as in August, the British did their utmost to assure it that “the fleet would not take any moves against Azerbaijan”. However, the Azerbaijani government rightfully anticipated a real threat from the Denikin supporters. The mentioned letter said, “As for defending Azerbaijan from sea, neutralizing the ships handed over to the Volunteer Army is the paramount condition as their very presence in the Caspian represents a great threat to Azerbaijan from sea. Moreover, the following important factor was taken into consideration: the Denikin fleet “could easily pass to the Bolsheviks’ side, which would secure their full dominance in the Caspian.” The Bolshevik riot aboard the “Orlyonok” ship of the Denikin-backed Caspian military fleet was cited as an example in this regard. The letter authors suggested either granting the Caspian military fleet ships to the White Guard while transferring them to the disposal of the Government of the Azerbaijan Republic or neutralizing the ships while granting them to the disposal of the allied powers. A proposal was even made to hand over the Volunteer Army’s Astrabad naval

base on the Ashuradeh island to Iran or the British naval command “since this base significantly ensured hegemony in the Caspian Sea”. However, despite persistent requests and warnings of the Azerbaijani government, most of the vessels of Britain’s fleet in the Caspian were handed over to the Denikin forces, which was a menace for the Azerbaijan Republic. The British, themselves, admitted this fact. One of the British documents, compiled in September 1919, noted that “the handover of the Caspian fleet to Denikin leaves the Azerbaijani capital directly endangered” [20, p. 130].

Referring to the scenario for the unfolding of future military and political developments in the Caspian, the document said that “undoubtedly, when the operations against the Bolsheviks end, the presence of a naval fleet in the Caspian may bring about disruption of the political balance on its shores.” “The Azerbaijani government hopes that the basin will be neutralized when there is only commercial fleet there, as before,” it said. The document said further that adequate neutralization would also meet the interests of Britain, which had strengthened its positions in the East. Thus, the Caspian Sea will serve as a major waterway between the West and the East in the future. International security of this route will become a political necessity for the countries interested in its inviolability as well [20, p. 131].

The content of this document indicated that Britain was looking to eliminate Russia’s conventional dominance in the Caspian Sea. As for the relationship between Azerbaijan and Denikin, the British command found a solution. Shortly before withdrawing its army from the South Caucasus, it set up a 5-mile demarcation line between Azerbaijan and Georgia in the territories controlled by the White Guard. Moreover, the commander of the British army in the South Caucasus, Maj.-Gen. Q.N. Corn wrote on June 11, 1919 in a letter sent to Prime Minister N. Usubbayov that Denikin had been “told not to allow his army’s crossing this line southward” [21, p. 97].

Overall, the pullout of the British army from the region was due to several circumstances. Firstly, the military-political situation in Russia was changing due to the Denikin army’s success and the Red Army’s being prompted to tackle strategic defense. Secondly, the rise of the national liberation movements in the colonial and dependent countries of the East, including Egypt, India, Afghanistan, Turkey and Iran, required leverag-

“Aliabad” ship at Cape Bayil. Picture of 1913

ing additional military and financial resources. Thirdly, the government had to reckon with people’s growing weary of wars in Britain and the intensifying massive anti-war movement. Nevertheless, N. Usubbayov said in response to a query from the Socialist faction regarding measures taken by the government to strengthen the country’s defense capabilities during the parliamentary session on September 1, 1919 that “the greatest danger and undesirable development for us was the handover of a part of the Caspian military fleet to the Denikin army”. “Can they transfer the rest of the fleet to Denikin and what can we do except protesting it?” he asked. Afterwards, the prime minister informed the parliament that General Corn had tried to appease the Azerbaijani side after it aired grievances in this regard. “We have granted to Denikin not just a couple of small ships, but a large amount of other items, including tanks, and if he uses them against Azerbaijan, the Caspian military fleet vessels will seem like a drop of seawater. It was stipulated that the inviolability of Transcaucasian republics would be protected after all these items have been granted,” he said [26, p. 131].

The importance of strongly defending the shores of the Azerbaijan Republic from threats at sea was illustrated by the developments that occurred in Mughan in the summer of 1919. The Bolsheviks staged an armed revolt against the central government there, establishing a small “Mughan-Lankaran military fleet”, which included the “Dmitry Milyutin” steamboat, “Vstrecha”, “Pereboynya”, “Kura”, “Bailov” and “Kaspi” combat boats equipped with one cannon each, as well as several motorized barges equipped with 47 mm caliber cannons and machine guns [22, p. 22]. The fleet ships, cruising along the south-western coast of the Caspian Sea, were conducting intelligence, maintaining operational communications with the coastal defense facilities and opening fire upon attacking Azerbaijani units from sea. The fleet’s vessels often appeared 30-32 miles away from Baku, which was a serious concern for the local authorities [3, 1919, July 22]. The “Special Maritime Expedition”, which was organized by the Bolsheviks and operated from the spring of 1919, was a big headache for the authorities. The expedition included about 20 fishing boats and motorized barges, as well as 200 sailors. Those vessels secretly transported oil and oil products to Astrakhan and brought groups of fighters, weapons, ammunition, etc. back to Baku [23, p. 42-45].



Denikin’s frequent attempts to carry out aggressive acts against Azerbaijan were evident. A meeting of the State Defense Committee of the Azerbaijan Republic was attended by N. Usubbayov (chairman), S. Mehm-andarov, A. Safikurdski, Kh. Malik-Aslanov and M. Jafarov. Participants of the meeting, called on October 21, 1919, discussed the views voiced on October 17 by the representative of Russia’s Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Armed Forces in Azerbaijan and the letter by the chief of the Naval Department under the Commander-in-Chief, Vice-Admiral Gerasimov dated September 21, 1918. The latter noted that in accordance with Clause 8 of the Treaty of Turkmenchay, concluded between Russia and Iran on February 22, 1828, only these two countries are authorized to maintain commercial fleets in the Caspian Sea and only Russia may run a military fleet in the basin. The letter explicitly pointed out a threat to Azerbaijan emanating from White Russia. Russia “could not have allowed Azerbaijan to keep a military fleet in the Caspian or let commercial ships sail under any flag other than the Russian one”. In turn, the Foreign Ministry of the Republic was instructed according to the State Defense Committee’s decision to convey the following points to the representative of Russia’s Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Armed Forces in Azerbaijan: firstly, the Treaty of Turkmenchay was concluded between Russia and Iran and could be mandatory for these two countries, but not for a newly independent state; secondly, Azerbaijan, a Caspian littoral state, possesses seaports and commercial fleet vessels, which will sail under the Azerbaijani flag. The Foreign Minister was also instructed to express an objection to the allies’ High Commissioner, Col. Gaskel and O. Wardrop. Soon thereafter, Foreign Minister M.Y. Jafarov told Denikin’s representative in a



“Goytapa” ship at Cape Bayil. Picture of 1913

response letter that his government “deemed the demand to halt the sailing of vessels in the Caspian under the flags of countries other than Russia as an attempt to undermine the good neighborly relations established with the Volunteer Army’s command and as an aggressive move that is inconsistent with the efforts aimed at holding talks between that command and the government on concluding an agreement on economic and other issues”. The minister said further that “as before, the Azerbaijani fleet will sail under its national flag”.

A number of measures taken by the Azerbaijani government in those years inspired public confidence in the strengthening defense capabilities of the country. However, the government of the republic faced a number of objective and subjective challenges in 1919-1920 relating to the build-up of its ground troops and the Navy. The challenges were caused not only by the inadequate military logistics, but also the lack of professionals with in-depth knowledge of naval affairs.

Russian chauvinism was clearly manifested in compiling the naval fleet, which constituted the elite of the former empire’s armed forces. Essentially, representatives of the Caucasus, Central Asian, northern, Jewish and other non-Slavic ethnic minorities were sidelined from the Navy. By barring “alien” nations from service in the Navy, the Tsarist government was “particularly protecting the purity” of the officers’ corps. Only the children of noblemen and officers were allowed to enroll in the Maritime Cadet Corps, which was the main institution training naval personnel. According to the regulations of the cadet corps, “worshippers of the Muhammadan religion” could be admitted exceptionally “with permission from the very top” [24, p. 23]. Suffice it to say that almost no Azerbaijani officers who received higher military education served on the largest combat ships of the Navy, including “Kars” and “Ardahan”. Captain Hasan Chilingarzade and first-rank captain Gitanchizade, who were on duty at the “Ardahan” and “Astrabad” ships, were the only Azerbaijani servicemen

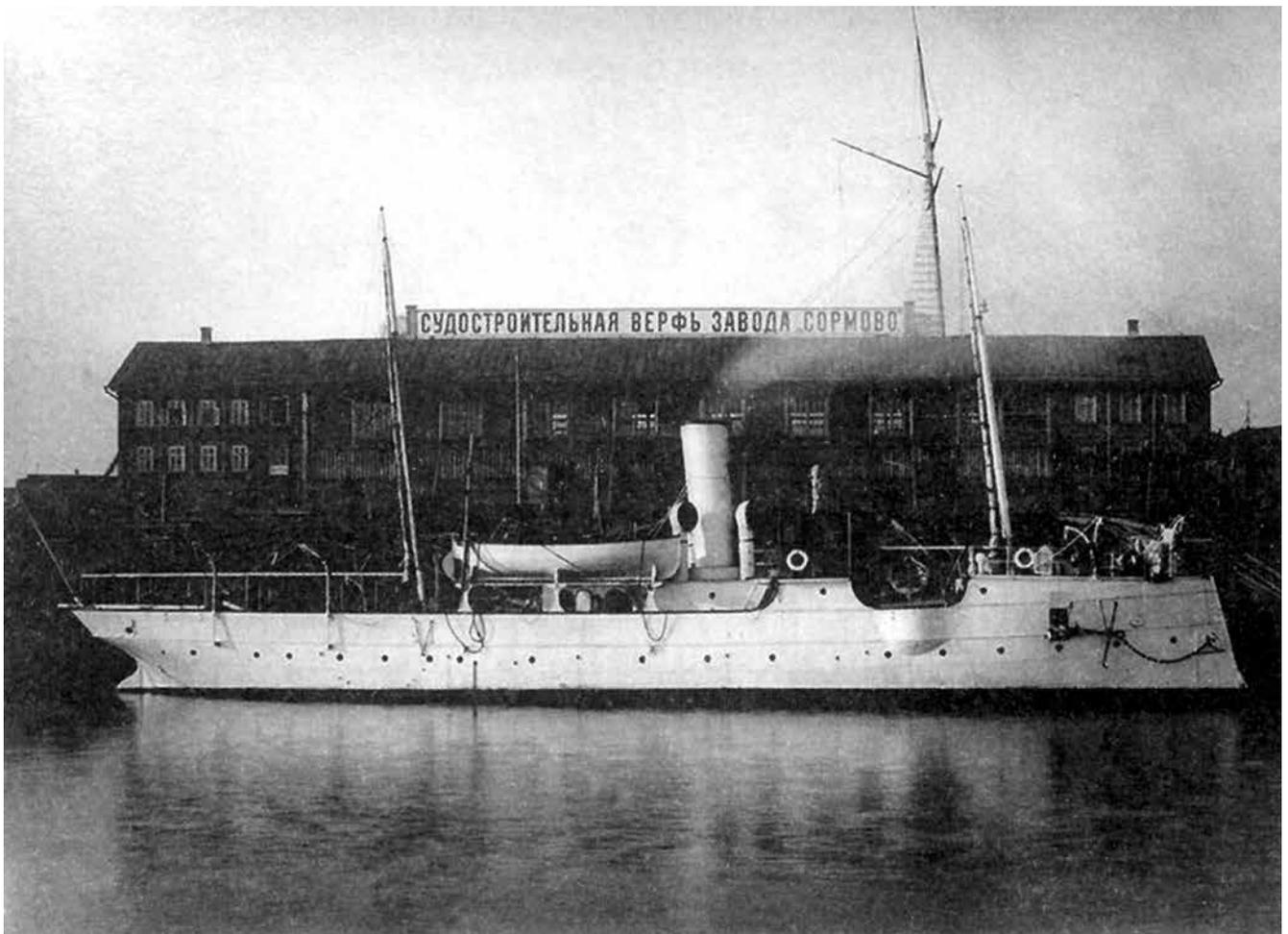
there [25, p. 19]. The same held true for the personnel of the ships as the Azerbaijanis serving there were brought in from the commercial fleet and had no experience of service in the Navy. The above-mentioned factors stood in the way of establishing a steering body of the naval fleet. It is also noteworthy that there was no department or section dealing with the fleet even in the Ministry of Military Affairs. The solution of all issues pertaining to the Caspian military fleet was previously vested in the Ministry of Transport. Nevertheless, the government was attempting to introduce certain regulations concerning naval affairs. First of all, a special division in charge of the Navy was established under the General Staff in order to exercise centralized control over naval affairs; the newly established body was comprised of six full-time positions, including chief adjutant (Navy officer), his deputies and aide, two secretaries and two messengers. ❁

to be continued in the next issue

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*Messenger ship "Astrabad" at the Sormovo plant pier.
Photo of the early 20th century*



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