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# STRUGGLE FOR BEING HEARD AT THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

*Stay of the Azerbaijani diplomatic delegation to Istanbul  
(January-April 1919)*

*Alimardan Bay Topchubashov - head of the  
Azerbaijani delegation at the Paris Peace Conference*



**T**he formation of the third cabinet of ministers of the Azerbaijan Republic, chaired by F. K. Khoyski, was completed on 28 December, 1918. On the same day, the new prime minister, jointly with the Par-

liament's Council of Elders, approved the composition of the diplomatic delegation to be dispatched to France for participating in the Paris Peace Conference (1). In fact, this delegation was to decide the fate of the independence of Azerbaijan and other states that emerged from the former Russian Empire.

Ali Mardan Bay Topchibashi (Topchibashev), one of the prominent figures in the Azerbaijani national liberation movement, who simultaneously acted as chairman of the country's parliament, was appointed head of the delegation. The delegation also included Mammad Hasan Hajinski, Minister of State Control and Member of Parliament, as well as MPs Ahmad Bay Aghayev and Akbar Agha Sheikhuislamov (2).

According to the general mandate issued to the delegation on 7 January, 1919, these persons were authorized to "take part in the peace conference of the powers and nations, which was to be held after the world war, as well as in all conferences, unions and agreements among states and nations, with the right to conclude all types of contracts on behalf of Azerbaijan and join any political, economic, commercial and financial alliances

## *ADR delegation to the Paris Peace Conference at work. 1920*



and treaties" (3). Moreover, MPs Mammad Maharramov, Mir Yagub Mehdiyev, as well as Jeyhun Bay Hajibayov (Hajibayli), editor of the state-run "Azerbaijan" newspaper, were appointed advisers to the delegation (4).

Since Topchibashi was in Constantinople at that time, as Azerbaijan's Envoy extraordinary and plenipotentiary to the Ottoman Empire, as well as to Armenia and Georgia, appointed in October 1918, the other members of the delegation left Baku without him. The delegation, which was temporarily chaired by M. H. Hajinski, arrived in Batumi on 14 January, 1919 and departed for Constantinople on 18 January. Representatives of the British authorities based in the capital of the Ottoman Empire were notified of its departure through a telegraph message on the same day (5). Upon their arrival in Constantinople on 20 January, members of the Azerbaijani diplomatic delegation began seeking ways of obtaining entry visas to France, which was hosting the Paris Peace Conference. It was a daunting task. A special entity had been established in the French capital by the end of 1918. The organization, the "Russian Political Council in Paris", was essentially a joint representation of the White governments of Siberia, northern and southern Russia. Shortly before the Paris conference, Admiral A. Kolchak, had been recognized by all White governments as the "supreme ruler of Russia", established the Russian political delegation as the executive body of the Russian Political Council. This body, which included four members, namely, the former head of the provisional gov-

ernment of the city of Lvov, former Russian ambassador to France V. Maklakov, Foreign Minister S. Sazonov and the head of the provisional government of the Northern Province N. Tchaikovsky, was to act as the unified White diplomatic mission at the Paris conference. One of the main tasks of the delegation was to counter all political movements of non-Russian nations seeking independence after the fall of the Tsarist Empire, in keeping with the principle of "a united and indivisible Russia".

While demagogically recognizing the right of non-Russian peoples to ethnic and cultural autonomy, just like the White generals themselves, members of the Russian political delegation ruled out any secession by nations that had been part of the Russian Empire before 1914, Poland being the only exception. A declaration dated 9 March, 1919 addressed by members of the Russian political delegation to the chairman of the Paris conference, noted that "all issues concerning the determination of the future status of the nations included in these boundaries could not be resolved without the consent of the Russian people." The declaration further stated that "no final political decision could be made in this regard until the Russian people are able to express their free will upon these issues and contribute to their solution" (6). In other words, the right to independence of the nations that had been conquered and enslaved by the Russian Empire was subordinated to voluntary consent of the conquerors themselves to grant this right

to their own victims. At the same time, members of the Russian political delegation began working hard to discredit the governments of non-Russian nations and their representatives seeking to travel to Paris to attend the Peace Conference. Presenting the national governments of non-Russian peoples as facilitators of German imperialism and referring to the sacrifices made by Russia in World War I “for the sake of the Allies’ common cause”, the leaders of the Russian delegation initially managed to exert significant influence on the French government. Their efforts were facilitated by the fact that Georges Clemenceau’s administration, which took a hard-line anti-German stance, believed that in order to offset an anticipated revival of Berlin’s power, France needed a powerful ally in the East like Russia, which would serve as a counterbalance on the eastern borders of Germany. Since Paris considered the Bolsheviks who came to power in Russia to be henchmen of Germany and also refused to repay the enormous debt of the Tsarist government to France, Clemenceau generally relied on the White anti-Bolshevik movement and disapproved of the quest for independence of non-Russian nations, including even the Poles (7). In this regard, the French policy ran counter to the political course of British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who was seeking a compromise with the Bolsheviks. Lloyd George disbelieved the prospects of the White movement and was much less critical of the idea of state independence of non-Russian nations. The British Prime Minister’s main concern was the speediest solution of the Russian issue as he hoped to relieve Britain of the increasingly challenging military and financial burden (8). In addition, Lloyd George was keen on opening up the Russian market for British goods, which, in his opinion, would probably facilitate gradual liberalization of the Bolshevik regime, shifting it in the direction that would be favourable for the Europeans.

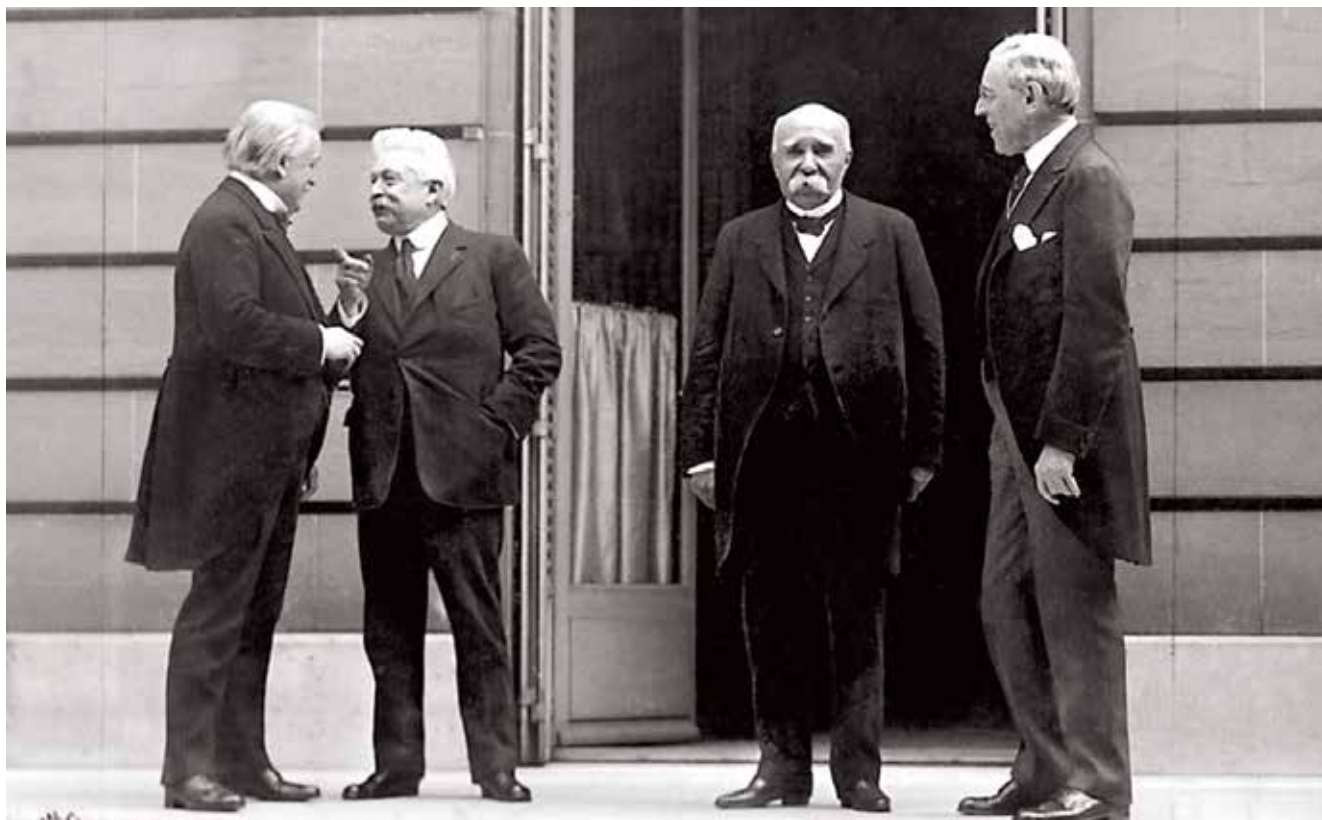
On 12 January -- prior to the formal opening of the conference -- the French-British differences affected to the fullest extent the parties’ views about whom they should consider the representative of Russia at the Conference. French Foreign Minister Stephen Pichon had to concur with the Britons that the Russian Political Council in Paris could not be recognized as a formal representation of Russia until the Allies recognized Admiral Kolchak’s provisional Omsk government, which, in turn, “was not strong enough to represent Russia as a whole” (9). However, Pichon sought to secure a privileged status for the White representatives in a different way, suggesting that members of the Russian Political Council

be allowed to address the conference informally. As a result, the parties agreed that though Russia should not be officially represented at the conference, both the mentioned representatives of this country and those who were not cited by Pichon could be heard by the conference attendees as private individuals. They could also be asked to submit memoranda (10).

Given that the arrival in France of representatives of states that emerged in the territory of the defunct Russian Empire completely depended on the goodwill of the French authorities, the approval of Pichon’s proposal by the Entente’s Supreme Council immediately meant that France had a final say in the admission or barring of any delegation heading for its capital city.

Realizing that the French were trying to take advantage of the conference venue solely for the protection of the Whites’ interests, US President Woodrow Wilson, jointly with Lloyd George, put forward an initiative on 21 January to convene a conference on the Princes’ Islands in the Sea of Marmara to be joined both by the Bolsheviks and all the anti-Bolshevik governments of the former Russian Empire (11). Having stated that he “opposed in principle negotiating with the Bolsheviks, not because they were criminals, but because by saying that they were worthy to negotiate with us we would raise them to our level”, Clemenceau nevertheless had to approve the holding of the conference under pressure of the Britons and Americans (12). However, the initiative to call a conference on the Princes’ Islands fell through, since neither the Bolsheviks nor their White opponents were keen on sitting down at the negotiating table. On 25 January -- four days after the decision to call a conference, Sazonov, speaking on behalf of the Russian Political Council in Paris, declined to participate in the event (13). On the same day, G. Chicherin, People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), in an effort to assert the status of Russia’s official government for the Bolsheviks, sent a cable to the Paris conference requesting a formal invitation of the Bolshevik government representatives to the Princes’ Islands. Lloyd George, who was not willing to give such a trump card to the Bolsheviks, stated that a regular invitation, which was sent to all potential conference participants, was sufficient (14). Moreover, in violation of the truce that was urged by the Supreme Council ahead of the conference, the Bolshevik command dealt new powerful blows on the White army, whose manpower was largely demoralized by the news regarding the Allies’ readiness to launch negotiations with the Bolsheviks (15).

*“Big Four”: David Lloyd George, Vittorio Orlando, Georges Clemenceau, Woodrow Wilson*



On 28 January, members of the Georgian delegation, who had already arrived in Paris, refused to participate in the conference as they did not consider Georgia to be part of Russia (16).

Ultimately, the Allies had to admit by the end of February that the idea of convening a conference on the Princes' Islands was a failure.

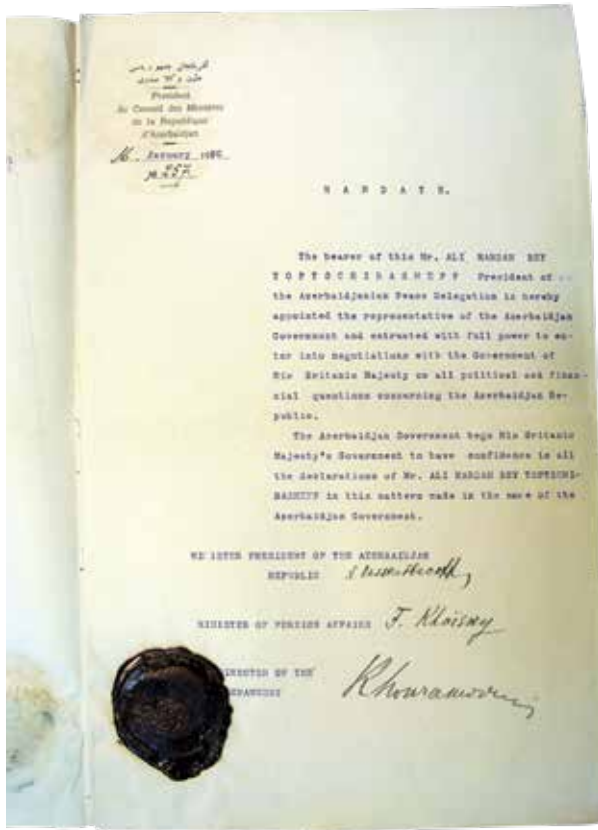
M. Topchibashi, who did not want to get ahead of himself, preferred to wait and see the outcome of the Supreme Council initiative. Official representatives of Britain and France called on him to do the same, explicitly noting that he should stay in Constantinople until the issue of convening a conference on the Princes' Islands was clarified (17).

Interestingly, unlike other diplomatic delegations, the Armenian delegation, chaired by A. Agaronian, left Constantinople for Marseille without hindrance as early as 20 January -- when the issue of holding the planned conference on the Princes' Islands was not completely resolved, and subsequently arrived in Paris on 4 February (18). On 26 February, the joint delegation, comprised of both Caucasus and Turkish Armenians, was heard by the Entente's foreign ministers. The Armenians opted to act single-handedly, though the Azerbaijani delegates met with the Armenian delega-

tion members in Batumi as early as 15 January in a bid to find common ground for joint statements in the international arena, while Topchibashi, a dedicated Caucasus confederate, deemed it necessary from November 1918 to establish a unified Caucasus delegation, which was the only way to attain success (19). In addition, the Armenians sought to solve their problems at the expense of the Azerbaijanis and Georgians by compromising the latter (20).

The situation took a different turn in early March after it became clear that the planned conference on the Princes' Islands would not take place. From then onward, Britain did not see any reason to deny representatives of non-Russian nations the right to arrive in Paris and the Entente countries as a whole. On 1 March, the British Foreign Office issued a telegram, addressed to Admiral Richard Webb, British Assistant High Commissioner in Constantinople, which said, "His Majesty's government have no objection to North Caucasian and Azerbaijan delegations, now in Constantinople, being allowed to proceed to Paris provided French authorities at Constantinople agree.

If necessary military authorities may at their discretion detain any members to whom they have special objections" (21).



## *Mandate of the ADR government issued to the Azerbaijani delegation at the Paris Peace Conference*

Having appealed to representatives of the British military command, Topchibashi received a message on 6 March saying that the British government did not object to the Azerbaijani delegation's participation in the Paris Peace Conference if the latter managed to obtain an entry permit from the French authorities (22).

Further challenges caused the Azerbaijani delegation to stay in Constantinople for two more months. First, the French command issued travel permits to only four of the six members of the delegation, demanding that not only the other two representatives, but also the entire technical staff comprised of secretaries and translators stay in Istanbul (23).

In an effort to obtain permission for the entire delegation to visit Paris, along with at least part of the secretariat (three secretaries), Topchibashi wrote a letter to Louis Francois Franchet d'Esperey, a French general who served as the commander-in-chief of the Entente's army in the Middle East. The letter noted that since the delegation consists of people from different backgrounds and the Azerbaijanis do not have diplomatic representatives either in France or elsewhere in Europe, unlike

the other Caucasus nations, the absence of two members of the delegation and technical staff would irreparably harm its activity (24).

The appeal had a reverse effect as Franchet d'Esperey, himself, was reportedly a staunch supporter of "a united and indivisible Russia" who was hostile to both the Bolsheviks and the national aspirations of the non-Russian peoples. As early as in January 1919, the French general told Lloyd George that he was in favor of a "united Russia" (25). Perhaps, the French stance regarding the Azerbaijani delegation did not improve, but to the contrary, became even tougher, under the influence of d'Esperey's views.

On 15 March, Topchibashi received a letter from Colonel Foulon, the technical adviser to the High Commissariat of the French Republic in the Middle East, saying that "a new circumstance" had prompted him to make a request in Paris to grant an entry permit to both Topchibashi and Muhammad Hashim, his secretary, to go to France (26). By that time, all the delegations of the Caucasus nations in Constantinople had received an entry permit and either arrived in Paris or were on their way to the French capital. Though Topchibashi sent a special note on 21 March, addressed to G. Clemenceau, Chairman of the Paris Peace Conference, requesting approval for the Azerbaijani delegation's arrival in Paris (27), a message was received on 25 March from Gustav Leon, a second-class Commissioner of the French Republic. Leon informed Topchibashi that French Foreign Minister Stephen Pichon had ruled out a visit to France by any member of the delegation (28). Afterwards, messages were received from the US Commissioner and Italy's High Commissioner saying that the US and Italian governments had no objections to a visit by an Azerbaijani delegation to Paris provided that they managed to obtain French visas (29).

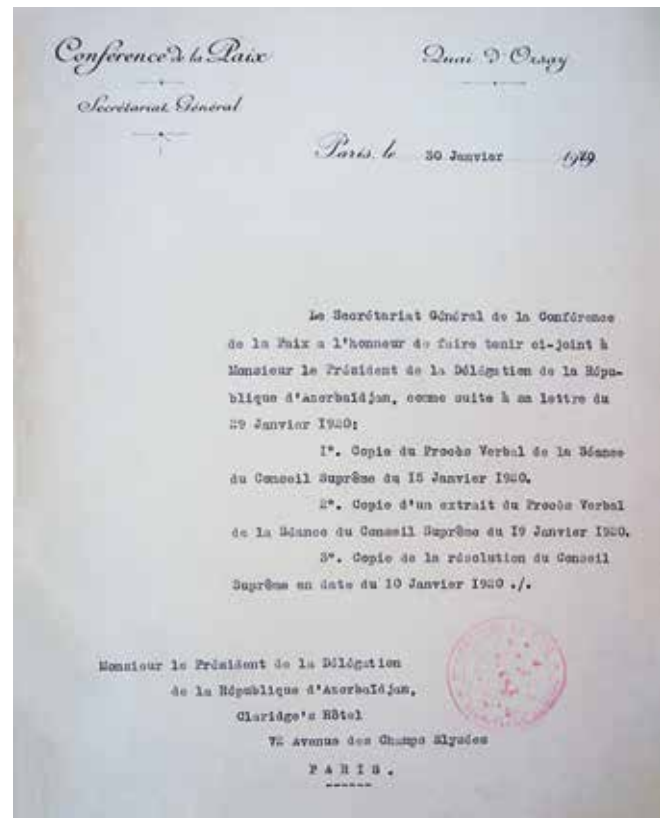
A comparative analysis of the available sources suggests that the French authorities sought to exert such pressure in order to prompt three members of the delegation to start a visit to Paris without Topchibashi, leaving him in Istanbul. On 28 March, Topchibashi paid a personal visit to general Franchet d'Esperey and asked him for assistance. On the following day, the French general sent in a packet notifying the Azerbaijani side that only two members of the delegation could go to Paris. Topchibashi wrote in a report on the same day addressed to Azerbaijani Prime Minister F. K. Khoyski, "At this point it is being clarified who will visit Paris, i.e. whether two or three members of the delegation will go there. As for me, a decision has been apparently made to keep me here for a while" (30).

Realizing that it would be better to achieve a modest result than to achieve nothing at all, the delegation members decided to divide it into three parts. One of the groups, including M. H. Hajinski, M. Maharramov and J. Hajibayov, would go to Paris; another group, comprised of M. Y. Mehdiyev and A. A. Sheikhulislamov, was supposed to leave for London, while Topchibashi, himself, was to stay in Constantinople (31).

This situation was extensively described in a telegram sent by French consul DeFrance to Paris from Constantinople and addressed to S. Pichon. The document said that “at the insistence of the commanding general to whom numerous demarches were made by Azerbaijani representatives, who agreed to break away from their chairman (i.e. Topchibashi - G. M., R. A.), I deem it necessary to allow the departure for France of two of them, namely, Mahammad Hasan Hajinski, the deputy chairman, and Mammad Maharramov (mistakenly referred to as Mugaremov - G. M., R. A.), whose trip there, by the way, has already been approved by the High Commissioners of England and Italy. Under these circumstances and upon consent of Your Excellency, the two above-mentioned delegates, accompanied by the secretary, Jeyhun Bay Hajibayov with his wife, will leave within the next week.” (32).

In fact, the situation changed dramatically in favour of Azerbaijan just a few days later. The military success of general Denikin’s Volunteer Army revived the hope in the Entente’s Supreme Council for an imminent fall of Bolshevism, simultaneously sparking debate between the Allies regarding economic measures that should be taken against the Red-controlled Moscow in addition to the Volunteer Army’s offensive. As part of these efforts, the issue concerning the oil fields of the Caucasus, which were producing about 90 percent of oil in the former Russian Empire before 1918, came to the fore. According to available sources, this question became the subject of special correspondence between French and US representatives. Since the Entente leaders were seeking to carry out an economic blockade of Bolshevik Russia, they were particularly concerned over the plans of the oil industrialists Nobels, the owners of major oil fields in the Baku province, to sell Azerbaijani oil to the Bolsheviks for economic gain. In order to counter these plans, they had to appeal to the Azerbaijani authorities.

On 14 April, the French government, which was keen on toppling Bolshevik rule in Russia, sent a letter addressed to Robert Lansing, US Secretary of State and the head of the US delegation at the Paris Peace Confer-



*Azerbaijani delegation wrote to the leadership of the Paris Peace Conference to secure recognition of the ADR*

ence. The letter said that “the lack of fuel and lubricants should shortly lead to a complete halt of the transportation service in Russia and also deal an extremely heavy blow upon the Bolshevik dictatorial regime” (33).

Since the Entente countries had repeatedly opposed maintaining any relationship with the Bolsheviks, it was believed that the Nobels should be prevented from resuming economic ties with Moscow, regardless of the amount of profit that could be made from oil trade with the Bolsheviks. Therefore, it was necessary to support the government of Azerbaijan, which owned the country’s oil reserves, adhered to an anti-Bolshevik stance and was also interested in exchanging oil for the direly needed manufactory goods, which could not be provided by civil war-ravaged Russia. In addition, the Entente countries, which were facing a crisis with the supply of petroleum products, would be interested in importing oil from the Caucasus when the conditions of their transportation by sea improved (34).

“Under such circumstances, the government of France would not favor supply of oil products to the Soviet government, which, in its opinion, may lead to an

extremely deplorable outcome," the document said in conclusion (35). Thus, the above-mentioned considerations, namely, the efforts to implement an economic blockade against the Bolsheviks and secure a part of the Baku oil for the future, fostered a shift in the French stance regarding the admission of Azerbaijani representatives to the Paris Peace Conference. Moreover, US President Woodrow Wilson was instrumental in making this happen. It was at this very time that the US government was thoroughly considering the possibility of assuming a mandate over the territory of a part of Eastern Turkey and the Caucasus if a further course of events turned out favourable (36).

During a meeting of W. Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau held on 2 May, the US President cited the Azerbaijani delegation's arrival in the French capital as a primary issue. Wilson stated that the representatives of Azerbaijan had long sought to travel to Paris. They had a delegation in Constantinople that had been awaiting an entry permit. However, the French government had been declining to grant the required permission for a long time, Wilson said.

"The Georgians and other representatives of the Caucasus republics were all in Paris, and there seemed to be no reason for this exception," he added (37).

According to the minutes of the meeting, Clemenceau and Lloyd George "undertook to look into the matter" (38). Taking into account that the Azerbaijani delegation left Constantinople for Europe as early as 28 April, a few days prior to this conversation, presumably, US representatives previously had similar discussions with the French side.

On 6 May, R. Lansing sent a letter to S. Pichon wherein he brought to the French foreign minister's attention A. M. Topchibashi's letter to President Wilson, dated 21 March, 1919, adding that "the statements made in the letter have interested President Wilson very much" (39). On behalf of Wilson, Lansing asked Pichon to authorize the Azerbaijani delegation's visit to France. Undoubtedly, that document summarized the content of the conversations on the issue that took place between the Americans and the French in April. This broke the ice in this matter. On 22 April, the entire Azerbaijani delegation left for Italy on board the "Bulgaria" steamship, en route from Constantinople to Naples through Thessaloniki, Piraeus and Messina. On 2 May, the delegation members arrived in Rome whence they headed to Paris by train on 7 May (40). ❀

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*Azerbaijani delegation conducted active correspondence with the leadership of the Paris Peace Conference to secure recognition of the ADR*

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