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HISTORY OF THE RECOGNITION OF AZERBAIJAN'S DE FACTO STATE INDEPENDENCE AT THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

The *de facto* recognition of the state independence of Azerbaijan by the Supreme Council of the Entente was the main aim of the Azerbaijani diplomatic delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, which arrived in the capital of France on 9 May 1919 headed by A. M. Topchibashi.

The process of the recognition of the Azerbaijani state proved time-consuming and difficult, demanding a lot of effort on the part of members of the Azerbaijani diplomatic delegation in Paris.

From mid-June 1919, the main focus of the efforts of the Azerbaijani as well as Georgian and North Caucasus delegations was to combat the claims of the White government of Admiral A. Kolchak formed in Omsk in order to win recognition as the official government of the territories that were formerly part of the defunct empire of the Romanovs. The leaders of the Russian White movement were adamant supporters of a "united and indivisible Russia" and they refused to recognize the right of the

non-Russian peoples of the former Russian Empire to independence, making an exception only for the Poles.

It should be noted that the issue of Kolchak led to sharp differences in the British government, the main ally of the Whites in the supply of assistance in weapons, equipment and uniforms. Winston Churchill, the Secretary of State for War of the British Empire, was a strong supporter of Kolchak, Denikin and other White generals, having an indifferent and often hostile attitude to the national aspirations of the non-Russian peoples. In his view the Caucasus should return to Russia after the overthrow of Bolshevism; he believed that British troops should remain there only in order to support Denikin, not allowing the local governments to take any action against him.

The opposite view was held by Lord George Curzon, who worked as acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs from the summer of 1919 and officially took this position in October of the same year. The former Viceroy of India Curzon was well aware that the aim of any Russian



*Participants in a ceremony to mark de facto recognition of Azerbaijan by the Entente countries.
January 1920*

imperial government will inevitably be expansion into the South and the Middle East, which threatened British interests in these regions, argued for the creation of independent states not only in the Caucasus but also in Central Asia, to build a reliable barrier to the further expansion of Russian imperialism. For the same reason, British officers who were in the Caucasus were also divided into two categories. The officer corps of the 27th British Division, which was stationed on the Baku-Batumi line from the end of 1918 and consisted of officers of the so-called "Indian Service", had a generally negative attitude to both White and Red Russian imperialism. On the contrary, officers who served in British units on the Western front during the First World War had a sympathetic attitude to the White movement, seeing them as yesterday's allies.

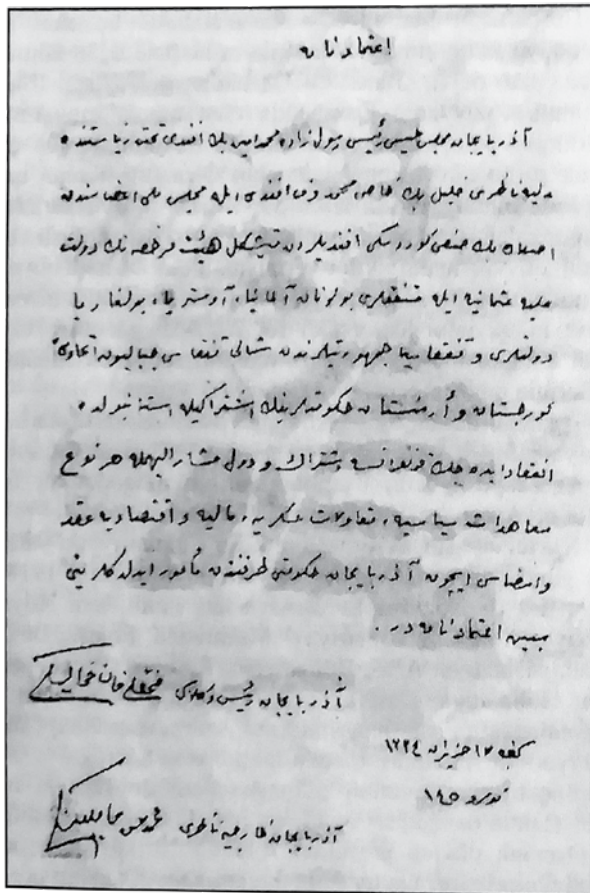
Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who had little trust and sympathy with the Russian White movement, served as a kind of regulator of relations between Churchill and Curzon, and in principle, was favorably inclined toward the small nations of the former empire of the Romanovs. Nonetheless, the main priority for him was to grapple with the debt crushing British finances after the First World War (1). It is from this perspective that Lloyd George considered the matter of military aid to the Volunteer Army of General Anton Denikin operat-

ing in southern Russia and the presence of British troops in the Caucasus.

In March 1919, the presence of British troops in the Caucasus was a big subject of discussion in the cabinet, where Lloyd George, Churchill and Curzon expressed their views on this issue. Aware that Britain would have to withdraw its troops from the South Caucasus for financial reasons, as well as that in this case, Azerbaijan and Georgia would remain one on one with the Volunteer Army, Curzon put forward his own scheme for the settlement of the problem, which minimized, at least in the near future, the risk of the Transcaucasia republics being occupied by the Whites.

On 6 March, the Inter-Departmental Committee, which met under the chairmanship of Lord Curzon, decided to recommend the following tripartite policy to the government: 1. Start preparations for the evacuation of the Caucasus. 2. To compensate for this, to supply General Denikin with arms and military equipment, as well as to send a British military mission to Yekaterinodar. 3. To make such support conditional on the fact that General Denikin should not interfere in the affairs of the independent states in the Caucasus (2).

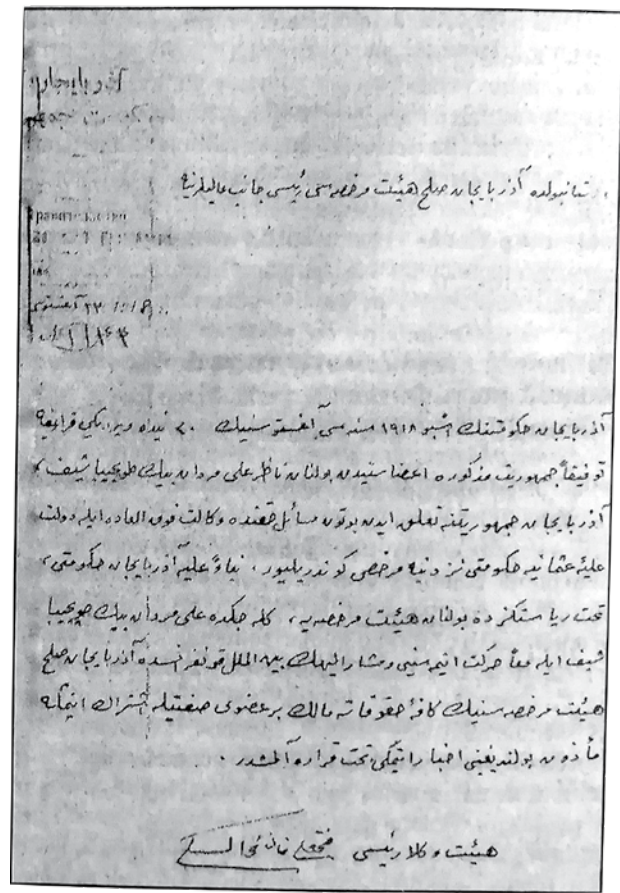
Thus, Curzon considered the supply of arms to General Denikin as a means of giving him the opportunity



Letter delegating Mammad Amin Rasulzade and the accompanying negotiators to Istanbul to hold talks. May 1918

to fight against Bolshevism on the one hand and on the other, to prevent the possible aggression of the Volunteer Army against the Transcaucasian states. According to Curzon, it was necessary to delay supplies to the Volunteer Army for several months, giving the weapons in stages in order to maintain control over Denikin (3).

Although Churchill did not feel sympathy for Azerbaijan and Georgia, he was also against drawing Denikin into a conflict with these republics, rightly considering that it would lead to the scattering of the White forces, whose main aim was to fight the Russian Bolsheviks. As a result, the aforesaid scheme of relations with Denikin was adopted, which allowed London to gain the necessary leverage over the Volunteer Army, despite the fact that by September 1919, British troops were withdrawn from Azerbaijan (4). Although in the second half of July 1919 the Volunteer Army managed to temporarily occupy the North Caucasus, creating a direct threat to



Letter delegating Alimardan Bay Topchibashi (Topchubashov) and the accompanying negotiators to Istanbul to hold talks. 23 August 1918

Azerbaijan from Dagestan and the Caspian Sea, Denikin, who depended on military assistance from the Entente, did not dare to invade the Transcaucasia.

In the same month, Curzon managed to get Oliver Wardrop, one of the founders of Georgian studies in Britain, a renowned expert on the Caucasus, and in general, a staunch supporter of the independence of the Caucasian peoples, appointed as British High Commissioner in the Caucasus. On 5 August, before his departure to Tiflis, Wardrop turned to Curzon with his recommendations, and one of the main recommendations was the issue of recognition of the independence of the South Caucasus states by London. According to Wardrop, Britain should recognize the republics, as was already done in 1918 by Germany and Turkey, which recognized Georgia and Azerbaijan. If the decision could not be taken immediately, London had to give Wardrop the right "[...] to inform the three republics

Heads and members of Georgian and Azerbaijani delegations at the Paris Peace Conference

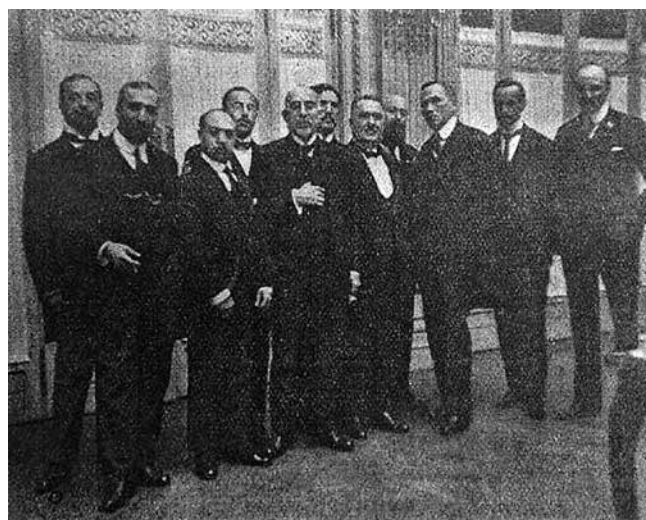
that His Majesty's Government is ready to recognize them so soon as they have given undoubted proof of their intention to live in peace and amity together and maintain a benevolent attitude towards General Denikin so far as his policy is directed to the support of a free, democratic government truly representative of a regenerated Russia" (5).

On 12 August, the day of his departure to the Caucasus, Wardrop himself visited the Azerbaijani delegation and made a "good impression" on Topchibashi. Fully understanding the importance of regional cooperation for the state independence of the peoples of the Caucasus, in his conversation Wardrop made a major emphasis on the need for a maximum rapprochement between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia (6).

Arriving on 29 August in Tiflis, where representatives of the Georgian government gave him an enthusiastic welcome (7), Wardrop immediately made arrangements for the structural organization of his commissariat. In all the important cities of the South Caucasus, officers subordinate to him were appointed, and their purpose was to inform the High Commissioner of the developments on the ground in a timely manner and accurately. In Baku, this representative of the High Commissioner was the Indian-born Colonel Claude Bayfield Stokes, a career intelligence officer, who was British military attaché in Tehran in 1907-1911 and served in the intelligence department of the General Staff of the Indian Army before the First World War. Like most other British officers of the "Indian Service" and by virtue of his posts, Stokes was well aware of Russian imperial ambitions in the Middle East (8). In the words of Stokes himself, he had an extremely good attitude to Azerbaijanis and was a staunch supporter of the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia (9).

Seeing totally eye-to-eye on this issue, Wardrop and Stokes regularly sent messages to London in an effort to persuade the British government to recognize the independence of the South Caucasus republics. Initially, these reports did not find support in the UK government, as in September and October 1919 the Volunteer Army was on the crest of a military success and its units were near Orel and in the Moscow direction.

Then, however, under the influence of the rapidly developing military failures of the Volunteer Army, which quickly fell back under the pressure of the Bolsheviks in



late October, the opinion of the Allied Supreme Council in relation to the concept of "one and indivisible Russia" became more and more critical and began to change for the better in relation to the South Caucasus states.

Although in the first week of November, those changes only began to emerge in the foreign policy of the Entente states, Topchibashi immediately noticed them.

In December, when the total defeat of Denikin became completely clear, the British government began to tend to recognize the independence of the South Caucasus republics, and to discuss with the allies how to proceed.

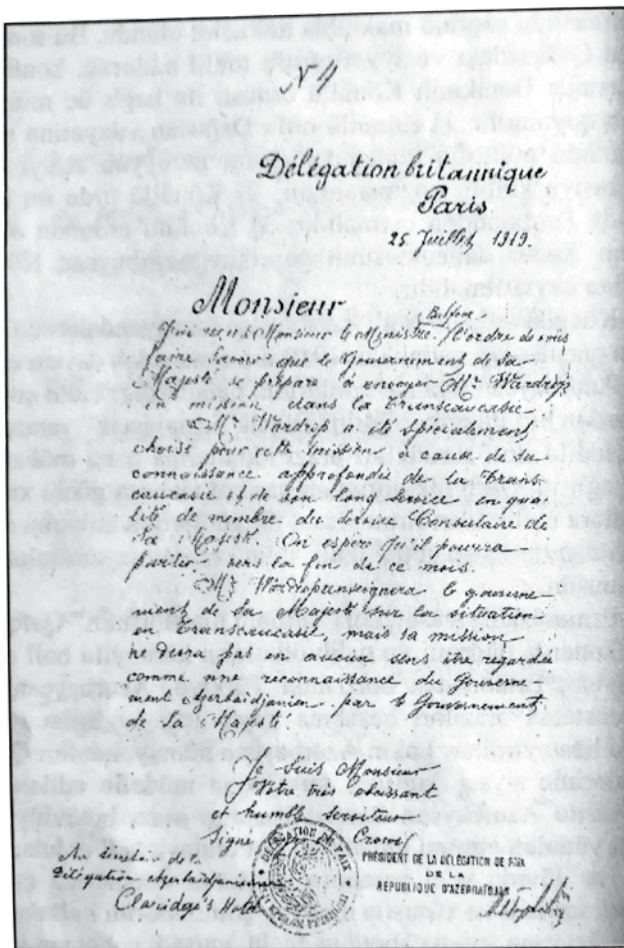
Apparently, in the early days of January 1920, steps were taken to recognize Azerbaijan and Georgia's independence. Thus, on 2 January, British foreign experts had already prepared a report on the form of recognition of Azerbaijan and Georgia. According to this document, *de facto* recognition "differs from *de jure* recognition only in the fact

1) That in the case of a state such as Azerbaijan, which has had no previous independent existence, *de facto* recognition is a necessary step to the grant of *de jure* recognition, and

2) *de facto* recognition involves a qualification to the effect that it is only granted on a specified condition such as e.g. the maintenance of stable Government or the decision of a Conference" (10).

De facto recognition will dispel suspicions in the republics about the allies supposedly waiting for the restoration of a united Russia. In the case of Azerbaijan, it is useful for dealing with Turkish influence. At the same time, only moral responsibility towards these countries falls on the Allies. London does not prevent these republics from concluding an agreement with the Bolsheviks

Letter from the head of the Azerbaijani delegation, Alimardan Bay Topchubashov, at the Paris Peace Conference



on favorable terms, it only strengthens their position and prevents the Bolsheviks from crushing and incorporating them into the Bolshevik system. For these reasons, the Foreign Office believes "that *de facto* recognition would meet the wishes of the republics for the time being. *De jure* recognition would depend on the decision, taken by the League of Nations or the Allies" (11).

On 6 January, a memorandum prepared on the orders of Churchill and dedicated to the settlement of the Turkish problem, also concerning the problem of the Caucasus, advised precautions in the event of London's recognition of the independence of the Transcaucasian republics: "Should it be decided to establish the independence of Georgia and Azerbaijan, the British Representative with general Denikin should be given timely warning to prepare the field and to make it clear to Denikin that he will lose Allied official support if he resists the policy of the Peace Conference in this respect" (12).

Perhaps, the final push to the recognition of the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia was a telegram received in London on 9 January from the High Commis-

sioner of Britain in the Transcaucasia Wardrop, in which the latter reported that Colonel Stokes, the political representative of the High Commissariat in Baku, had sent him a letter. Stokes wrote in it that on 7 January, he met with Fatali Khoyski, the foreign minister of Azerbaijan, at the request of the latter. Showing Stokes a telegram from Chicherin, people's commissar of Bolshevik Russia for foreign affairs, dated 2 January and received in Baku on 6 January, Khoyski said that the Bolsheviks proposed that Azerbaijan and Georgia, together with the Bolsheviks, attack the Volunteer Army. The "successful advance of Bolsheviks on both sides Caspian Sea has brought Bolshevik danger to door of Transcaucasia and Azerbaijan must decide very soon her policy towards Bolsheviks" (13). According to Stokes, it is possible that the Bolsheviks will try to stage a mutiny in Baku in order to force the government to take a decision that is advantageous to them. Although the current government of the country has resolute anti-Bolshevik positions, "if Great Britain will not come to its assistance, it may be compelled to make terms with Bolsheviks", Khoyski said (14).

After a comprehensive review of this issue, the Azerbaijani government decided to appeal to the UK to protect the interests and very existence of Azerbaijan. This decision was not made for any sentimental reasons. It was dictated by the immediate interests of the country and, according to Khoyski, supporting Azerbaijan, the British will also better serve their own interests, protecting the shortest way to Persia. Since the Volunteer Army will soon cease to exist, London should take an immediate decision to support Baku if it wants to save Azerbaijan from Bolshevism.

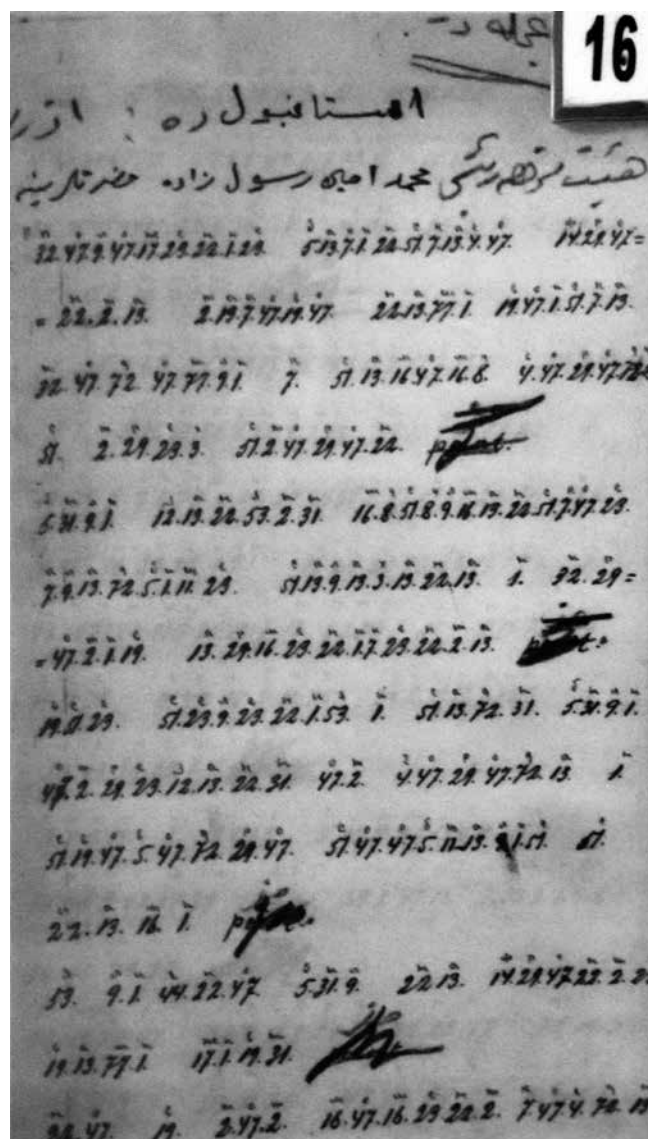
Commenting on Khoyski's words, Stokes pointed out that, in his opinion, the foreign minister of Azerbaijan was not exaggerating the danger hanging over his country. "Unless we are willing to see Bolsheviks rampant in Azerbaijan a decision to support that country cannot be taken too soon" (15). Taking into account the seriousness of the situation created by the defeat of the Volunteer Army, Stokes recommended "immediate grant of full independence and whole-hearted support to Azerbaijan, dispatch of arms and equipment including uniforms for her army and of breach blocks and ammunition for two six-inch guns at Baku" (16) and in addition, the rapid payment of the entire amount the



Passport of a member of the Azerbaijani delegation at the Paris Peace Conference

British owed Azerbaijan for their military presence in the country. "These measures would, I consider place the Government in a position to suppress Bolshevik organizations within its borders and enable it to prevent Bolsheviks obtaining control of country", Stokes said (17).

Realizing that the Caucasus could be protected from a Bolshevik invasion only if the British took over the Caspian Sea, which, in itself, meant the return of Denikin's Caspian flotilla under British command with the replacement of its demoralized personnel by British sailors, Stokes wrote: "I have already drawn attention to Bolshevik danger on Caspian Sea and in Trans-Caspia and to situation in Dagestan which form part of same problem as safeguarding of Azerbaijan and I submit that the replacement of British Naval personnel [of Russian sailors] on armed ships in Caspian and adoption of policy towards Turks and Dagestan similar to that advocated for Azerbaijan are equally urgently required. Admiralty would doubtless demand safe line of communication before undertaking control of Caspian. Recognition of Georgia and Azerbaijan as independent States would, in my opinion, secure this" (18). The last proposal was referring to the issue of security of communications on the Baku-Batumi line, without which the British Admiralty refused to take control of the Caspian Sea. As we can see, Stokes cleverly tied this fact to the recognition of the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia. With the explicit aim of neutralizing the pro-Russian military who tried to talk only about autonomy, not independence for the Transcaucasian states at the time, Stokes pointed out that in the eyes of Baku and Tiflis "no promise of autonomy in any shape given by any existing Russian Government even if guaranteed by Allies will carry any weight.



Encrypted letter of the Azerbaijani delegation at the Paris Peace Conference

Policy advocated above may be regarded as drastic but in my opinion half measures would be of no avail and delay would mean disaster" (19). "I entirely concur", added Wardrop at the bottom of Stokes' message (20).

On 10 January 1920, Paris hosted a meeting of the foreign ministers of the Entente, which decided to recognize Azerbaijan and Georgia *de facto*. Coming up with this initiative, Curzon noted that at the meeting of the Supreme Council on the same day, Lloyd George pointed out the seriousness of the situation in South Russia and the Caucasus, which was facing the danger of a direct invasion by the Bolsheviks. The matter had not only a military but also a political aspect. Based on

this, he wanted to submit his following considerations to the heads of the Entente governments: The fate of Armenia will be resolved by the Peace Conference separately, as part of the settlement of the Turkish problem. As for Georgia and Azerbaijan, countries subjected to a triple threat from Denikin, the Bolsheviks and the Turks, he proposes granting those states *de facto* recognition. "The countries he mentioned had shown a firm desire to become real states. [...] To recognize their "de facto" governments would be equivalent to according them support" (21). The Allies acted in the same way in respect of the Baltic States.

Philippe Berthelot, Secretary General of the French Foreign Ministry, said that he had already spoken on this matter with Lord Curzon in London and reported the contents of this conversation to Clemenceau, who supports the *de facto* recognition of Azerbaijan and Georgia with the proviso that the boundaries of these states with Armenia must be established afterwards. Curzon agreed with this view. Italian Foreign Minister Vittorio Scialoja said that he was also inclined to *de facto* recognition on the same conditions as in the case of the Baltic countries. Hugh Wallace and Keishiro Matsui, US and Japanese representatives, said that they would request the views of their governments in this regard. Thus, Berthelot said that the *de facto* recognition of Azerbaijan and Georgia should be a joint act of the Entente Supreme Council.

As a result, the minutes of the meeting recorded the decision that "the Principal Allied and Associated Powers should together recognize the Governments of Georgia and Azerbaijan as "de facto" Governments, subject to the reserve that the representative of the United States and the representative of Japan would request instructions from their Governments on the question" (22).

On the same day, Lord Curzon sent a telegram to the Foreign Office in London, in which he reported that on his initiative, the Entente Supreme Council decided to recognize Azerbaijan and Georgia *de facto*; representatives of the British Foreign Office could inform the two governments (23).

At the same time, the telegram emphasized that "recognition of *de facto* independence of Georgian and Azerbaijan Governments does not of course involve any decision as to their present or future boundaries, and must not be held to prejudice that question in smallest degree" (24).

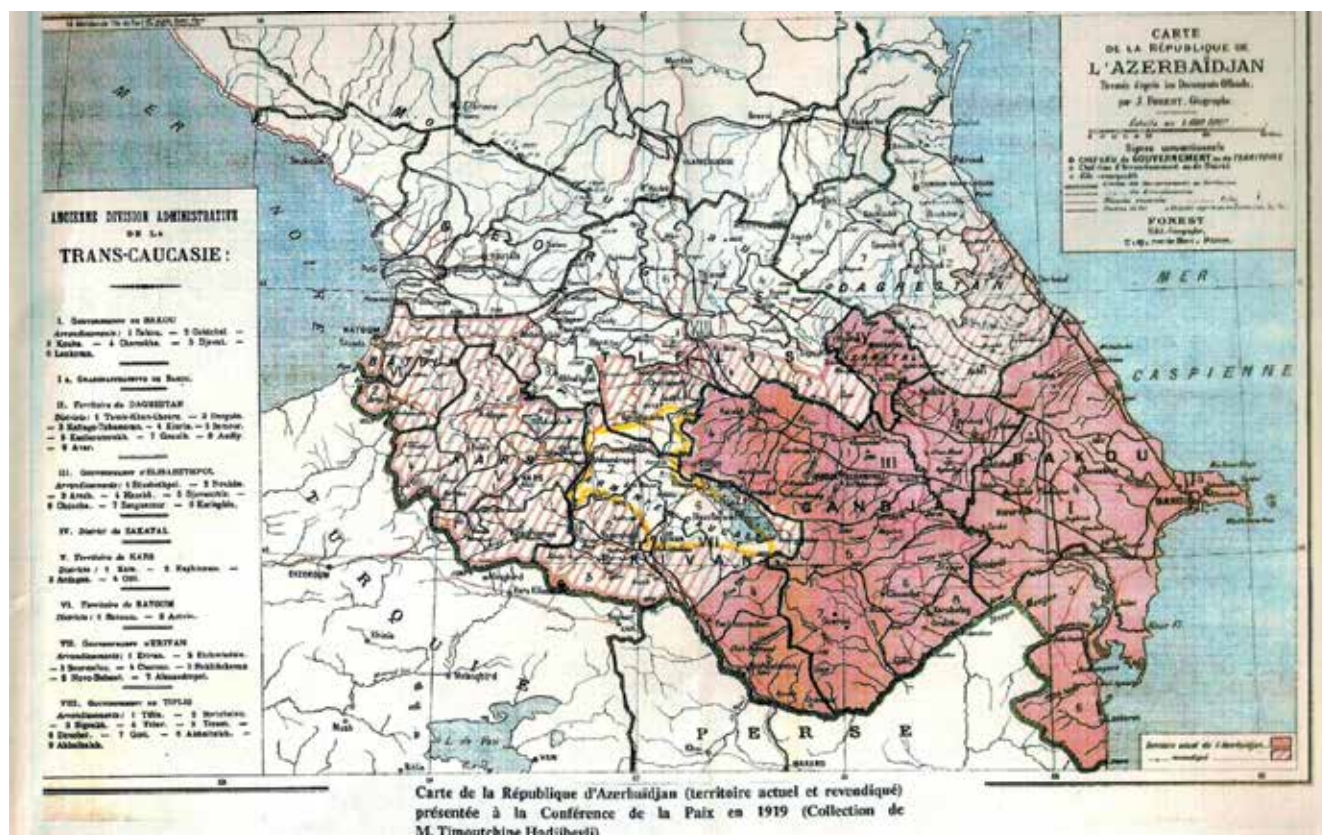
On 12 January, Wardrop informed the governments

in Tiflis and Baku of this decision (25). By this time, the representatives of the Azerbaijani delegation in Paris were aware of the decision, although the Azerbaijani delegation received the official text of the resolution on *de facto* recognition only on 30 January (26) after a special request to the General Secretariat of the Conference to send the text (27).

De facto recognition opened up new prospects for the Azerbaijani delegation in Paris. Now that the whole world is convinced of the commitment of the Azerbaijani people to the ideals of independence and their ability to establish a stable government with a positive agenda, the Western powers were ready to start new specific forms of cooperation with Baku. The fact that at the end of April 1920 the country's independence was crushed by the Bolshevik boot amounted to a temporary triumph of brute force. In an historical perspective, the commitment of the Azerbaijani people to independence was unswerving, as events have shown 70 years later. 🌟

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