

AUTONOMIZATION OF NAKHCHIVAN

The announced establishment of the Soviet government in Azerbaijan on April 28, 1920 ushered in a new, but different time period in its history. A new state that began to be instituted had no links to the national identity in Azerbaijan's history of statehood and was not based on the legacy of the previous states. One of the focal points of this process was asserting the newly established rule in the Azerbaijani regions. Nakhchivan played a significant role in this policy.

The Political Bureau of the Azerbaijan Communist Party's Central Committee (ACP CC) discussed the situation in Nakhchivan on July 28, 1920 and ordered the Azerbaijan Revolutionary Committee to substantially clarify the Nakhchivan issue, determine the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan and facilitate the establishment of the Soviet rule in the Nakhchivan province. Late on the same day, military units of the 11th Red Army entered the city of Nakhchivan. The



Administrative map of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic

*People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs of the RSFSR
G. Chicherin meets the head of the delegation
of Kemalist Turkey Yusuf Kemal Tengirsek visiting Moscow
to sign a friendship agreement with the RSFSR*

establishment of the Soviet government in Nakhchivan was formally declared on July 28, 1920 (22, p.72). The proclamation of the Nakhchivan Soviet Socialist Republic (25) was followed by the founding of the Nakhchivan Revolutionary Committee, the republic's governing body. Despite the declaration of Nakhchivan as a separate Soviet Socialist Republic, it considered itself to be an integral part of Azerbaijan. A letter sent by the Nakhchivan Revolutionary Committee to Nariman Narimanov, who chaired the Azerbaijan SSR Council of People's Commissars, on August 10, said, "In accordance with the decision made by the overwhelming majority of the Nakhchivan people, the Nakhchivan province deemed itself an inseparable part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic" (9, p. 3).

Soviet Russia, which played a crucial role in establishing the Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, was once again pursuing a double standard policy, simultaneously waging war and negotiating with the Armenian Dashnak forces.

A truce was signed with the Dashnak Armenia on August 10, 1920 at the initiative of Soviet Russia (4, p. 171-172). In keeping with the agreement, the sides were obliged to halt military action; the Armenian troops were to be pulled north of Shahtakhti-Khok-Chalkhangala-Sultanli and Kuku and further be stationed at the demarcation line stretching westward from Bazarchay; the Soviet troops, on their end, were expected to be based in Karabakh, Zangazur and Nakhchivan. The Armenians were allowed to use the Gyumri-Shahtakhti-Julfa railway for non-military purposes. Thus, the issue concerning Azerbaijani land was being discussed without Azerbaijan's participation and Soviet Russia was acting on its behalf during the talks with Armenia. The issue of granting Azerbaijan's undisputed territories to Armenia was on the agenda of those negotiations. N. Narimanov, who was aware of this, wrote in a letter to V. Lenin, "The situation is aggravating. The center has recognized the independence of Georgia and Armenia, as well as that of Azerbaijan, but at the same time, that very central government is granting Azerbaijan's completely undisputed territories to Armenia..." (10, p. 1).

J. Stalin said in his speech in Baku on November 9, 1920, "If they want to know the affiliation of Zangazur and Nakhchivan, these cannot be granted to the cur-



rent Armenian government. They may be handed over to it provided that the Soviet government is established there" (5, p. 30).

It wasn't long before Stalin's idea began to be materialized. Immediately after the establishment of the Soviet rule in Armenia on November 29, 1920, specific measures started to be taken to hand over Azerbaijani territories to Armenia. The Azerbaijan Military Revolutionary Committee issued a statement on December 1, 1920 with regard to the Bolsheviks' taking control over Armenia (29, p. 6). The statement, which was undersigned by the Committee chairman, N. Narimanov and was aimed at resolving "territorial disputes between the two Soviet republics", had been written at the behest of Russia and ran counter to Azerbaijan's national interests.

"From now onward no territory may cause bloodshed between the two nations that have been neighbors throughout centuries," the statement said. The Zangazur and Nakhchivan regions are integral parts of the Soviet Armenia, while the hard-working villagers of Nagorno-Karabakh are granted the right to self-determination" (29, p. 6).

S. Ordzhonikidze informed the Russian authorities of the handover of the Azerbaijani land to Armenia on December 2. On the same day, he regarded this statement as "an unprecedented act of great importance in the history of mankind" between the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and Soviet Armenia. Thus, specific measures started to be taken to hand over Azerbaijani territories to Armenia as soon as the Soviet rule was established in Armenia. Furthermore, RSFSR and Soviet Armenia signed the Gyumri agreement comprised of eight clauses on December 2, 1920. The third clause of that agreement said that the Russian

Soviet government unconditionally approves “the territories that belonged to Armenia as of October 23, 1920, namely, the Iravan governorate, the Kars province section, the Zangazur region, the Gazakh region section and the Tiflis governorate section as part of the Soviet Armenian Republic” (36, p. 75-76).

The mentioned statement and further decisions of the Azerbaijan Military Revolutionary Committee sparked ire of the Nakhchivan residents. Amid tensions, the Azerbaijani leadership delegated Behbud Agha Shahtakhtinsky, a member of the Military Revolutionary Committee and Commissar for Justice, to Nakhchivan on December 15. During his meetings with local residents in the city of Nakhchivan, Sharur and Ordubad, Shahtakhtinsky had to reveal the truth to the population regarding the December 1, 1920 statement.

“Azerbaijan handed you over together with your land to Armenia. If I had been in Baku at the time, I definitely would not have given my consent to this. As a member of the Azerbaijan Revolutionary Committee, I will take B. Valibayov with me to Baku, having dismissed him from office. Turkish troops are the only force capable of safeguarding your independence together with your land. The people have to unite closely and stand by those troops. They are the only ones that will protect your independence and territories and save you from a grave disaster,” Shahtakhtinsky said (30, p. 1).

Shahtakhtinsky’s meetings and conversations with local residents yielded fruit. Afterwards, the region’s population called for establishing an independent Soviet republic in Nakhchivan under the patronage of Azerbaijan. The firm stance of the Nakhchivan residents prompted a certain change in the central government’s approach to the issue. The decisive struggle and resolve of Nakhchivan’s Azerbaijani residents, who were relying on Turkey’s assistance, derailed the Armenians’ plans with regard to Nakhchivan.

The Armenians and Armenian Revolutionary Committee, who had managed to hide their actual insidious intentions until then, recognized Nakhchivan as an independent Soviet republic on December 28, 1920, abandoning claims to this territory. However, Armenia’s recognition of Nakhchivan as an independent republic rather than as Azerbaijani territory was an integral part of its deliberate and perfidious plans. Following this move, in fact, Armenia intended to annex it in the future.

In a bid to take action to appease public discontent, the Azerbaijan Bolshevik leadership delegated B. Shahtakhtinsky to Nakhchivan as the extraordinary commis-

sar with the Military Revolutionary Committee mandate on January 11, 1921 (6, p. 15).

A serious blow was dealt upon Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity by the handover of the Zangazur region, which separated the Nakhchivan territory from Azerbaijan, to Armenia. These circumstances necessitated reconsidering Nakhchivan’s territorial status, bringing the autonomy issue to the fore. National leader Heydar Aliyev once said that “if it wasn’t for the Zangazur region’s transfer to Armenia, perhaps, Nakhchivan’s autonomy would not have been necessary and Azerbaijan would be a country with unified territory” (15, p. 75).

The local population also urged granting Nakhchivan autonomy within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. According to a public opinion poll held at the initiative of Azerbaijani, Armenian and Russian representatives in January 1921, more than 90 percent of local residents supported an autonomy status within the Azerbaijan SSR (26, p. 79). The outcome of that poll was instrumental in keeping Nakhchivan within Azerbaijan.

N. Narimanov’s principled stance on the Nakhchivan issue that differed from his previous one and the talks held by B. Shahtakhtinsky in Moscow on his behalf fostered a change in Moscow’s approach to the matter and ultimately facilitated granting Nakhchivan an autonomy status within Azerbaijan.

Overall, Shahtakhtinsky worthily fulfilled his duties while holding a number of senior positions, including those of the chairman of the Nakhchivan Regional Revolutionary Committee and the Council of People’s Commissars, Azerbaijan’s Commissar for Justice, Azerbaijan SSR’s authorized representative in Russia, the Azerbaijan SSR Workers and Villagers Inspector and the Azerbaijan People’s Commissars Council deputy chairman. Shahtakhtinsky’s efforts were pivotal for Nakhchivan’s gaining the autonomy status (18). During his tenure he sent cables, letters with numerous attached references regarding various issues pertaining to the Azerbaijan SSR to V. Lenin, Chairman of the RSFSR Council of People’s Commissars (17). This correspondence included a cable dispatched on March 1, 1921 with relevant addenda, which was of particular importance (12, p. 1). In one of the telegrams sent to V. Lenin, Shahtakhtinsky voiced concern over the future fate of the Nakhchivan, Zangazur and Nagorno-Karabakh territories, attaching references to their ethnic composition and geography, and also put forward beneficial proposals regarding border-related issues in the South Caucasus, in particular, the Nakhchivan region (23, p. 314). That letter, which

Working groups of the RSFSR and Kemalist Turkey discussing details of the agreement



was sent to the Political Bureau on March 7 for further discussions with a Lenin aide, was reviewed on March 16 with the participation of Stalin, Chicherin and others. Nakhchivan's territorial status of autonomy within the Azerbaijan SSR was reflected in the Moscow agreement "On friendship and fraternity" signed between RSFSR and Turkey on March 16, 1921. Turkey was attaching great importance to the Nakhchivan issue both ahead of the Moscow talks and during the discussions. In addition to some more crucial strategic and geo-political considerations, this interest was due to Nakhchivan's being the closest destination in terms of distance when it came to Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, as well as the region's playing the primary mediating role in Moscow-Ankara diplomatic ties (23, p. 302). Moreover, Turkey considered Nakhchivan essentially as its own territory after the country pledged to support it under the Treaty of Batum signed on June 4, 1918. Y. Kamal Bay, the head of the Turkish delegation, asked in a meeting with Mustafa Kemal Pasha on December 13 as he was planning to leave for Russia, "My Pasha, what should I do if the Russians insist on Nakhchivan?" Mustafa Kemal Pasha replied, "Nakhchivan is the Turkish gateway. Considering this in particular, do your best" (34, p. 5-6). A heated debate took place at the sessions of the conference

focusing on the Nakhchivan issue during the Moscow negotiations on March 10, March 12 and March 14. The Turkish delegation sought the country's further patronizing Nakhchivan. However, Russia decisively opposed the proposal. As a result, the discussions held with Chicherin were deadlocked, which prompted the Turkish delegation to meet with J. Stalin again to discuss the Nakhchivan issue. B. Shahtakhtinsky, who represented Azerbaijan, took part in those discussions. When Stalin enquired about Shahtakhtinsky's opinion in this regard, the latter said that "Nakhchivan's remaining an independent state patronized by Russia would be acceptable (20, p. 397). Turkish diplomats stated at a meeting held on March 10, 1921 that the Nakhchivan population's inviting and allowing the presence of Turkish troops on its soil actually indicates that the region was under Turkey's protection. It is worth mentioning that Turkey's patronizing Nakhchivan was also enshrined in the Treaty of Alexandropol (Gyumri) (2, p. 86). In case this proposal was rejected, the Turkish delegation suggested Nakhchivan's being an independent state under joint protection of Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, the Russian side dismissed this proposal as well. Therefore, the Turkish representatives stated that Turkey was ready to cede the patronage mission provided that Azerbaijan



*After the signing of the Moscow Treaty between the RSFSR and Kemalist Turkey:
on the right – RSFSR delegation headed by People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs G. Chicherin,
on the left – delegation of Kemalist Turkey headed by Y. K. Tengirsek*

undertook a commitment not to make concessions to a third state on this issue (20, p. 397). As a result, the Russian formula for resolving the issue on “the Nakhchivan province’s permanent ties with Azerbaijan and availing of autonomy under its auspices” was enforced on the condition that “Azerbaijan would not cede this protectorate to a third state”. Furthermore, military experts were tasked with delineating the region’s borders (23, p. 302-303). Controversy emerged again over the issue of border delineation between Nakhchivan and Armenia during the March 12 session of the mentioned conference. Russia stated that the way the experts determined the border line meets Azerbaijan’s demands in excess, given that it had never claimed its protectorate over any part of the Iravan region. The Russian side argued that although this issue was not of paramount importance due to the close ties among the Soviet republics, the Sharur-Daralayaz district’s border should be drawn in accordance with the ethnic composition principle. The Turkish side rightfully lambasted this approach, citing the following evidence to substantiate its stance: 1. The known bloodshed occurred in these very areas, which necessitated the entry of Turkish troops to the region. 2. This entire district is populated by Muslims, etc. Considering the above-mentioned factors, the right of patron-

age over this territory should be granted to Azerbaijan (11, p. 48-54; 23, p. 303). Finally, the parties agreed upon the Sharur-Daralayaz district’s transfer to Nakhchivan at Turkey’s proposal; the border in the disputed parts of the Iravan district would begin at Komurlu Dagh (6,930) and Saray Bulag (8,071) mountains, as well as the Ararat station. A decision was also passed that all these issues would be coordinated by a joint commission comprised of Azerbaijani, Armenian and Turkish representatives (11, p.53-54).

Nakhchivan’s status was completely defined at a session of the conference held on March 14, 1921 (11, p.59). Though tensions were high during the talks, the extensive efforts made by Turkish diplomats allowed defending Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity at the Moscow conference, albeit partially. Thus, participants concurred that Nakhchivan would continue to be part of Azerbaijan provided that no concessions would be made to other states in this regard (20, p. 399).

The third clause of that agreement said, “The Nakhchivan province is an autonomous territory under Azerbaijan’s protection with the borders indicated in the I (B) addendum of this agreement on the condition that Azerbaijan will not cede this protectorate to any third state” (3, p.11, p.93).

Addendum I (C) titled “Nakhchivan’s territory” defined the region’s borders as follows: “The Ararat station - Saray Bulag mountain – Komurludagh-Sayatdaghi (7,868) –Gurdgulag village - Hamasur mountain (8,060) – 8,022 (height) - Kuku mountain (8,282) and the former Nakhchivan district’s eastern administrative border” (33, p. 38). This delineation clarified the issue of Nakhchivan’s territorial affiliation. 🌟

to be continued

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