

Giorgi MAMULIA
Doctor of History

Ramiz ABUTALIBOV

AZERBAIJANI EMIGRATION AND CAUCASUS PROJECT OF WESTERN POWERS DURING “PHONEY WAR” (1939-1940)

Miryagub Mirmehdiyev

The Caucasus issue unexpectedly took center stage in the agenda of the French and British governments in the second half of 1939 and the first half of 1940. Wehrmacht's crushing victory over Poland in September 1939 and the ensuing division of the country between Germany and the Soviet Union in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which was concluded on August 23, had a shock effect in Paris and London. Faced with the threat of an imminent German attack, both the French and the Britons began anxiously developing strategic plans, in a move to deal a blow upon Germany's military and economic capabilities. Given that up to 80 percent of Soviet oil was extracted in the Caucasus in that period, this region immediately drew the attention of both Paris and London. Interestingly, the USSR's supplies accounted for one-third of the Third Reich's oil imports, which totaled 617,000 tons in 1940.

Differences between Western powers. Fearing the Wehrmacht's incursion into its territory, France, which was geographically more vulnerable than its British ally, sought to distance the prospect of war from its eastern borders as much as possible. For this reason, Paris was more irreconcilable toward the USSR, the Third Reich's



Jean Giraud



ally, which began supplying Germany with oil after the conclusion of the non-aggression pact. The oil was of strategic importance for the Wehrmacht's further warfare. As a result, as early as in September 1939, the French ruling circles started internal discussions at the level of politicians and then military officials on ways of rendering the oil fields in Baku, Grozny и Maikop inoperative. Addressing the Senate committee on foreign affairs on September 22, French Socialist MP Paul-Boncour mentioned the possibility of intercepting and taking control over the vessels transporting Soviet oil to Germany from the Black Sea (1).

Unlike France, which had a rather hardline stance toward the Kremlin in that period due to the country's overall vulnerability, most of the British leaders treated the French projects in the Caucasus with more restraint. Britain's location on islands gave the country an advantage over its continental ally, making it less prone to a German invasion. In addition, Britain believed a bombing of the oil fields in the Caucasus would definitely trigger retaliation from the Soviet Union, which would put Britain's strategic interests in the Middle East at risk. In particular, Iran's oil fields, which had been in the sphere of Britain's special interests, could come under the threat



Wehrmacht soldiers break the barrier at a border checkpoint in Sopot (border between Poland and the Free City of Danzig), 1 September 1939

of a Bolshevik attack. Therefore, London was increasingly hesitant. A part of the British political and military leadership was in favor of potential bomb strikes upon Baku, Grozny and Maikop, while the other part, which was wary of bitter ramifications of such a move, supported a diplomatic solution of the problem and hoped that the USSR would eventually pull out of its alliance with the Third Reich.

Turkey's position. The Turkish stance also played an extremely important role in the implementation of the Caucasus plans of the Western powers. Turkey's territory could be a starting point for bombing oil production facilities in the Caucasus; it would at least be traversed in the event of such a strike.

Following Italy's annexation of Albania in April 1939 and in particular, the German-Soviet Treaty of Non-Aggression signed on August 23, 1939, Ankara began to increasingly lean toward an alliance with Western powers. A British-French-Turkish mutual assistance pact was concluded on October 19 that same year. Although the signatories undertook a commitment to provide each other

with political and military assistance, the focal point of the agreement was countering Germany and Italy, since the obligations enshrined in it would have been in effect only in case Britain, France or Turkey faced aggression from a European country. Ankara, which was wary of the Soviet Union, insisted upon supplementing the agreement with Clause No.2. The clause stipulated that the commitments under this deal could not prompt Turkey to take action potentially resulting in its involvement in an armed conflict with the USSR (2). Nevertheless, the Western allies, and France in particular, still bound hope with drawing Turkey to the anti-Bolshevik struggle; even if the country's formal participation was impossible, at least, they sought to use its territory for this purpose. A convention on military issues, signed simultaneously with the mentioned treaty, did not preclude such a possibility either. In particular, it envisaged the allies' use of roads, airports, seaports and other facilities, as well as the construction of bases in the Turkish territory. Turkey was also expected to ensure transit traffic of soldiers and weaponry of the allies through its territory.

*Meeting of Soviet and German troops
in Poland. September 1939*

Azerbaijani emigration: the establishment and launching new entities in France. Azerbaijani emigrants did not stay away from these developments, but sought to use the rapidly changing political situation of that period for their ends to the greatest possible extent. The defeat of Poland in September 1939 obviously led to a temporary disruption of the ties within the framework of the "Promethean Front" among Azerbaijani political organizations based in Iran, Turkey, Poland and France.

M.A. Rasulzade, who was in Warsaw during the German invasion of Poland, managed to leave the country, just like many Polish politicians, moving to Romania where the central bodies of the Promethean movement were temporarily relocated (3). Most of the Azerbaijani officers who were serving in the Polish army worthily fulfilled their duty to Warsaw, like the other Caucasians, and ended up in German captivity. Following the severing of the links with their fellow countrymen, members of the Azerbaijani diplomatic mission in France decided to take matters into their hands. From then onward, the Azerbaijani National Center, whose representatives were based in a number of countries and maintained no contact, actually suspended its operation. The Azerbaijani National Committee chaired by M. Y. Mehdiyev and comprised of the delegation members was established in Paris (though the Azerbaijanis continued to refer to this entity as the Azerbaijani National Center in their internal correspondence). Accordingly, each of these organizations had its own domain of competence. The Azerbaijani delegation was in charge of issues pertaining to foreign policy, relations with other countries and propaganda activities, while the Azerbaijani National Committee dealt with general political issues and maintaining covert ties with Azerbaijan (4). The founding of a body responsible for keeping illicit ties with the country was also justified due to the fact that French military intelligence representatives had contacted Caucasian emigrant organizations based in the country, which included Azerbaijanis, as early as in September 1939, according to the intelligence data of the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). This information, which could not yet be verified by the French archival data, suggested that "training of saboteurs" had started in Paris for their further immediate "transfer to Transcaucasia through the Turkish and Iranian borders" (5). Although such plans were still in the stage of initial development by September 1939, the Azerbaijan



SSR's NKVD was ordered to bolster security at the Baku oil fields as much as possible. Lubyanka (the security service headquarters) demanded that local security officers send very reliable agents to all the Azneft sites, clearing the area of random people and those deemed suspicious persons (6).

In addition to launching consultations with representatives of the French intelligence bodies, members of the Azerbaijani delegation in Paris forged ties with France's government agencies. On September 12, Mehdiyev issued a special note to French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet on behalf of the Azerbaijani delegation. Recalling briefly the history of Azerbaijan's declaration of independence and describing the circumstances that accompanied the Azerbaijani diplomatic mission's delegation to Paris, Mehdiyev noted with regard to the ongoing developments, "Currently, humanity is witnessing a new turn of history. The Polish nation, whose very existence and territorial integrity have been jeopardized, is waging a defensive and heroic struggle. France and its allies immediately threw their weight behind its fair cause."

Hinting at the Azerbaijanis' involvement in the Promethean movement, Mehdiyev wrote that "the Azerbaijani people had centuries-old friendly ties with the Polish nation and sensed utmost appreciation and sincere empathy toward France; an immortal defender of the rights of nations to free existence in accordance with human dignity".

Expressing regret that Azerbaijani immigrants in France had been called up to serve under the French flag with the "Russian refugee" status, Mehdiyev told the French government that the Azerbaijani delegation "hoped for a triumph of the sacred cause of freedom",



Warsaw in 1939. The Royal castle burns

voicing confidence that “the circumstances would facilitate an effective struggle for these ideals” (7).

In conclusion, Mehdiyev said the delegation representatives were ready “to do everything in their power to be useful for France’s cause” (8).

Following this diplomatic note, which merely indicated general willingness of the delegation members to serve France, which at the time was keen on liberating the Caucasus from the Kremlin’s dominance, the Azerbaijanis went on to draw up specific proposals. They were supposed to focus on familiarizing the general public in the country with the issue concerning the Caucasus, Azerbaijanis and other Turkic nations of the USSR. It was necessary to make it clear that only in case of liberation of the Caucasus and an overall collapse of the Red Empire, the Soviet Union, deprived of oil resources, would be unable to provide Germany with economic assistance under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Furthermore, Mehdiyev sent a diplomatic note on September 21 to France’s General Commission for Information, an agency established in July 1939 and restructured in April 1940 into a ministry, which was charged with conducting propaganda aimed at supporting the French military effort after convincing the public in the country of the need to wage war and endure relevant challenges.

According to the latest research, the General Commission for Information, which was headed by J. Giraudeau, a French diplomat and writer, and derived information from both legal and illegal sources, including intelligence data, operated more effectively in 1939-1940 than it was previously considered by researchers (9). In order to provide this institution with

unbiased information that would prove the strategic importance of the Caucasus for the Western allies and France, Mehdiyev said, “The members of the delegation are political representatives of the Muslim Turkic Azerbaijani people. Possessing an in-depth knowledge of the East, its languages and traditions, as well as the Islamic world as a whole, they believe that they are capable of maintaining useful cooperation, especially in the area of the propaganda service, which is designated to play the most significant role in the struggle waged by France and its allies. For this very reason, we are addressing you, Mr. High Commissioner, offering to be at your disposal in case you deem such collaboration interesting” (10).

In fact, the delegation members offered their assistance as experts to an institution that already included former senior diplomats and military officers specializing in certain regions and fields that represented importance for the French government. According to the available archival documents, Mehdiyev’s proposal was of interest to the French commission’s executives and they concluded that the Azerbaijani representatives’ efforts could be useful for the “Islam” department of the commission’s foreign data service. However, the foreign data service issued a query to the Council of Ministers, the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of War on December 7, seeking confirmation of the political reliability of the experts it was hiring and thereby requesting additional information about the Azerbaijani delegation in Paris and its members¹. ❀

to be continued

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Warsaw in 1939



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