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FROM IMPERIAL PROVINCE TO PARLIAMENTARY REPUBLIC (February 1917-May 1918)

DURING THE LAST YEARS THE HISTORY OF OUR INDEPENDENT FIRST REPUBLIC – THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN (DRA) BECAME A SUBJECT OF ATTENTION OF HISTORIANS AND POLITICAL SCIENTISTS, NOT ONLY FROM OUR COUNTRY BUT ALSO BEYOND ITS BORDERS.

With regards to this, it should be noted that the contribution to the work of comprehensive study of the DRA heritage of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and national leader Heydar Aliyev is important from a scientific and political point of view. The order on the *Celebration of 80 Years of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan*, signed by him on 30 January 1998, became an important step on the road to a truly scientific approach, free from political and

ideological bias, to research into the history of our country in general and of the DRA in particular. The significance of this order is not limited only to providing access for scientists to unpublished material and allowing the classification of already known archive documents. This order also has important political significance. For the first time the history of the First (1918-1920), Second (1920-1991) and current, Third (from 1991) Republics of Azerbaijan, with their continuous historical connection

and succession, is considered as different stages of a complicated and contradictory, but at the same time unified, evolution of the Azerbaijani statehood which appeared in the 9th century BC. The next display of interest in and respectful treatment of the history of the DRA is the law *On the 90th Anniversary of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan* by the current President of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, from 15 February 2008.

The victory of the February Bour-



Session of the Council of Ministers of the DRA

geois Democratic Revolution of 1917 in the Russian Empire significantly hastened the process of development of national movements and political construction in the South Caucasus. The Special Transcaucasian Committee (Ozakom) was established in Tbilisi on 22 March 1917. The Baku Provisional Executive Committee, which included representatives of city self-government, the Council of Workers' Deputies and trade unions, was established at the same time in Baku. A National Bureau of Provisional Committee of the Board of the Baku Muslim Public Organisations was elected on 9 April 1917 in a meeting of the Baku Muslim intelligentsia, chaired by Fatali Khan Khoyski. In the beginning of September of the same year it was transformed into the Central Transcaucasian National Board of Muslims, which brought together the leading political powers of the Muslims of the South Caucasus.

The founding congress of the Turkic Party of Federalists, which later, on 3 July, joined with the Musavat Party, took place on 15 April 1917 in Ganja. The goal of the federalists was the attainment of a territorially autonomous Azerbaijan within the frame of a democratic and federal Russian republic. This principle was upheld by the leaders of the Azerbaijani movement – Mammed Amin Rasulzade, Alimardan-bey Topchubashev and Fatali Khan Khoyski – not only on a regional but also an All-Russian level.

On the whole, during the summer and autumn of 1917 the process of consolidation of the All-national political powers of the Azerbaijanis of the South Caucasus was completed under the leadership of the Musavats. This party won election to the Baku Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in the autumn.

The first congress of the Musavat Party, which took place in November 1917, confirmed the orientation of the Azerbaijani political leaders for the creation of national territorial autonomy within the Federative Russian Republic and their support for the idea of calling for an All-Russian Founding Congress, during which the main issues of the political system were supposed to be resolved.

After the Bolshevik October Military Revolution in 1917 in Petrograd, the leading national powers of the South Caucasus (the Mensheviks, Musavatists and the Dashnaks) felt the treat to their principal desires and their representatives came together on 24 November of the same year in Tbilisi and declared their refusal to recognise the government of the Petrograd Soviet of People's Commissar, headed by V. I. Lenin, and they decided to establish an independent territorial



character of sharp political rivalry between representatives of the three main ethnic groups of the region – Azerbaijanis, Armenians and Georgians. Despite the different programmes and political platforms, the Azerbaijani political groups stood up together in the majority issues for the interest of the people they represented.

The diverging political interests of the leading factions resulted in insurmountable difficulties for the activities of the Seim and led to the South Caucasian Government, formed in March and April, becoming unable to function. Nonetheless, the Seim managed to provide a smooth and relatively bloodless transition from post-imperial chaos, anarchy and civil war to a two-year period of independent existence of the South Caucasian Republics. The main factor which stimulated the growth of conflict between the leading national political powers of the South Caucasus was the peace agreement between Soviet Russia and Germany, Austro-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire signed in Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918. Its fourth article had direct relation to the South Caucasus – in accordance with which the Russian-Ottoman border in the sub-region, which had existed until the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877-1878, was re-established. Together with it, in the beginning of February 1918, the Third Ottoman Army commanded by Wehib Pasha begun offensives in a few directions simultaneously, the main aim of which was the rescue of thousands of Muslims from destruction on the territory occupied by Armenians. The frontline in Erzinjan-Van was held by an Armenian corps formed in December 1917 – January 1918. The Armenian historian

government. Following this, on 28 November, Ozakom failed to manifest and was transformed into the **Transcaucasian Commissariat**, which became the supreme organ of territorial power. Four Azerbaijani commissars, F. Khoyski, M. Jafarov, K. Khasmammadov and K. Malik-Aslanov formed part of the Transcaucasian Commissariat, which was headed by the Georgian Social Democrat E. Gegechkori. This commissariat, like previous territorial structures, was considered by its members as a temporary organ in place until an All-Russian Founding Congress was called. The elections to the Founding Congress took place on 26-28 November 1917 and 15 Transcaucasian parties participated in them. The elections secured the positions of the three leading national parties, stating the populations' rejection of Bolshevism. The exception was Baku, where the Bolsheviks led by the Baku Soviet and with S. Shaymyan as head, received 20% of the votes of the population and more than 70% of the votes of the soldiers of the Baku garrison. As a result, 34

deputies from South Caucasus were elected to the congress, including 12 Muslims. However, the Founding Congress was dispersed on the day of its opening. Following it, the deputies elected from the South Caucasus came to the decision to establish a local government – the Transcaucasian Seim, before calling for a new Founding Congress. It was formed on 14 February 1918, from deputies elected to the Founding Congress and representatives of other parties of the south Caucasus (the Bolsheviks refused to participate in the Seim). 125 persons, including 32 Georgian Mensheviks, 30 Musavats and unaffiliated democrats from the attached block, 27 Dashnaks, 7 representatives from the Muslim Socialist block, 3 from Ittikhad and 4 from the Gummet Social Democratic Party were elected to the Seim, which replaced the Transcaucasian Commissariat. 44 deputies formed the Muslim faction of the Transcaucasian Seim.

Despite the Seim being formed on party principles, its activity immediately had the

A. O. Arutonian gives information in his monograph *The Caucasian Front. 1914-1917* that by October 1915 6 brigades with 5,000 members in total was formed'. In this regard it should be remembered that item 5 of the first article of the Soviet-Ottoman Supplementary Agreement to the Brest-Litovsk Peace Agreement foresaw that Soviet Russia 'is obliged to demobilise and disband Armenian forces which consisted of Turkish and Russian subjects who were both in Russia and occupied Turkish Provinces and once and for all to dismiss the aforementioned forces'. But the Bolshevik authorities did not hurry to disband the Armenian brigades. A decree by I. Stalin of the People's Commissariat for Nationalities, from 16 March 1918 to all revolutionary committees, headquarters and Soviet organisations informed that 'the Armenian revolutionary organisations have a right to free formation of Armenian voluntary brigades and taxation of the Armenian bourgeoisie for their financing.'

Tsarist and Soviet relations to the idea of arming Muslims was diametrically opposite to this – they did not want to see them as private soldiers and not in commanding positions (with the exception of an insignificant number of senior Azerbaijani officers). As noted by A. O. Ortunian, about 300,000 Armenians fought in the Russian Army against Germany, Austro-Hungary and Turkey during the years of the First World War. At the Caucasus front the relative numbers of Armenian conscripts were even higher. 'By 1 January 1917, as a result of mobilisation of local brigades through Tbilisi, 304,164 people were passed as fit for military service'. The Armenian historian admits that 'among them the Armenian component consisted of 121,921



people, Georgians – 121,113, Russian – 42,712, Tatars – 1,314, Jews – 3,221, Germans – 2,413 and other nationalities – 11,470 people.' As we see, most of those drafted and fighting on the Caucasus front were Armenians and Georgians – the ratio of those drafted was almost 100 Armenians and Georgians per Azerbaijani.

In this situation, under pressure from Transcaucasian Muslim leaders, who understood the dangerous consequences of this military imbalance, a decision was taken to form a Muslim Corps, commanded by the famous artilleryman of the Russian Army Lieutenant General Ali-Agha Shikhlinski. However, unlike the Armenian and Georgian ones, the Muslim Corps did not really exist. As the Russian military historian A. I. Deryabin admits, 'in the beginning of 1918 the corps existed only on paper – it had only a small staff of units and unions, mainly officers, the rank and file was almost absent and there was a lack of arms, ammunition and equipment. This situation remained until the declaration of independence of Azerbaijan and the establishment of the DRA, and

only Turks who entered the territory of Azerbaijan rendered assistance to local authorities in forming military forces.'

The most important factor of regional instability and as a consequence, the crisis in the activity of the Seim was Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation growing with every passing month. Oppression of Muslims by Armenian military groups and armed gangs (so called *Khumbas*), took place during this period in different regions – the Karssk oblast, Iravan Province and Baku and Yelizavetpol Provinces, which in some places was characterised by mass-slaughter of Azerbaijanis and was, in fact, genocide. The outrage which broke out in February in Iravan Province, in which 200 Azerbaijani villages, with a population of about 135,000 inhabitants in four uyezds were ruined, was especially acute. As a result of the pogroms, about 80,000 Azerbaijanis became refugees. During the conference which took place on 10 April, the Seim Member M. Seyidov came to the fair conclusion that the slaughter of Muslims by Armenians and Armenian military groups 'is a defined task



M. Razzul-zade



A. Topchubashev



F. Khoyski



N. Usubbekov

Leading Politicians of the DRA

– to clear the territory for Armenian refugees and to create a compact unit for an autonomous Armenia’.

An even stronger blow to the unity of the Seim was caused by the bloody ethnic cleansing in Baku and the villages of the Baku uyezd which took place at the end of March-beginning of April 1918, in which Armenian *Khumbas* killed tens of thousands of civilians. It was the March slaughter of the Azerbaijani civilian population in Baku by Armenians fighters, an actual genocide of Azerbaijanis, which became the most important impulse leading Azerbaijani deputies to raise the issue of the independence of South Caucasus and its eastern part, which was declared on 28 May 1918 as the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan. During the joint meeting of all Muslim factions, which took place on 7 April, Seim Member Fatali Khan Khoyski offered ‘to bring to the notice of all responsible parties the steady desire of all Muslim factions of the same to declare the independence of Transcaucasia’, he even said that ‘in case of non-sympathy on this issue from other parties we will have to enter into discussions about the issue of a possible declaration of the inde-

pendence of Eastern Caucasus’. This was the first mention by Azerbaijani politicians of a possible declaration of independence of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijani Seim Deputies were worried, not only by the politics of the deportations and ethnic cleansing of the civilian Muslim population of this region but also by the strengthening, following the bloody revolution in Baku, of Dashnak claims on this key city of the southern Caucasus, which Azerbaijani politicians saw as their national centre. Seim Member K. Khasmammadov declared, in relation to this, that ‘all the power in Baku and in the whole eastern Transcaucasia, must belong to Muslims and if we have lost this power temporarily this is in order to reclaim it entirely and finally’. He underlined that ‘the terms offered by Dashnaktsakan are not acceptable for us because it is a shameful capitulation in front of them. The Baku issue, from the earliest days of its origin, was put point-blankly: all or nothing’.

During the session of the Central Muslim Council, which took place on 16 May, the issue of the independence of Azerbaijan was specifically considered for the first time. Seim

Member K. Khasmammadov urged the deputies ‘to prepare all formal terms in order to have the ability at the necessary moment to speak in the name of sovereign independent Azerbaijan’.

As a result, the declaration of the independence of the Caucasian republics became a matter of time. The landing of a 3,000 strong German military contingent in Poti on 25 May was a factor which hastened this process. It was one of the results of the Brest-Litovsk Peace and created a springboard for the movement of Germans deep into Georgia and for support of its anti-Russian Menshevik Government. As a result, the Georgian deputies of the Seim, encouraged by German military support, could not be maintained within the independent ‘Caucasian Republic’. Moreover, the German Military persuaded the Georgian Government that in case of Georgia leaving the Caucasian Federal Republic it would receive guarantees of security of its borders from Berlin within the frames defined by the Brest-Litovsk agreement.

In relation to this, on 25 May, during the morning meeting of the Muslim factions of the Seim, the



decision was made that in case of a declaration of independence of Georgia Azerbaijan would do the same. This decision was confirmed in the evening meeting, during which K. Khasmammadov acknowledged that 'close and friendly unity among elements composing the Transcaucasian Republic never existed' and that 'the absence of unity is especially clearly visible during meetings of Government, which look more like conferences of representatives of separate states who additionally do not trust each other, than a single unified state'. Tcheidze (Chairman of the Seim), Tsereteli and Gegechkori (leaders of the Social Democratic faction) invited from the Georgian faction of the Seim, spoke during the same meeting of the Muslim factions. Tsereteli specifically said that 'the Social Democratic faction and in general the Georgian section of the Seim came to the conclusion that the unification of the Transcaucasian peoples around the independence slogan failed and the fact of the disintegration of Transcaucasia is already obvious'. Fatali Khan Khoyski, who spoke after the Georgian deputies, noted that 'if the will of the Georgian people is such then we have no right to prevent it and of course nothing remains for

Azerbaijani Turks but to make the appropriate decision in accordance with this new event'. During the meeting it was decided: 'If Georgia will declare its independence then from our part must follow the declaration of independence of Azerbaijan'. As a result, the Seim ceased to function. During its last conference, which took place on 26 May 1918, the resolution was adopted: 'Because of radical disagreements on issues about war and peace were detected between the peoples who established the Transcaucasian Republic and because it became impossible for a single autonomous government to speak in the name of Transcaucasia the Seim states the fact of the disintegration of Transcaucasia and resigns.'

The day before 28 May, during its extraordinary meeting the Muslim deputies – Members of the Seim, declared themselves a temporary national council of the Muslims of Transcaucasia and they took on the governance of Eastern Transcaucasia themselves. The next day, on 28 May 1918, the Muslim National Council, with 24 voices voting 'for' and two voices abstaining, took the historic decision to declare the independent Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan.

The declaration of the DRA – the

first republic in the Muslim East, was the outstanding event in the 3000 year history of Azerbaijani statehood. Due to it the Azerbaijani populations of Baku and Yelizavetpol Provinces received a chance of peaceful, safe and comprehensive development within the frames of their own nation-state which was due to travel on a 23 month journey full of bright victories and achievements.

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