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SOVIETIZATION OF AZERBAIJAN AND INCLUSION OF THE KARABAKH ISSUE INTO DIPLOMATIC AGENDA



THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOVIET RULE IN THE CAUCASUS DID NOT REMOVE THE KARABAKH PROBLEM FROM THE AGENDA. THE LOSS OF INDEPENDENCE BY ALL THREE TRANSCAUCASIAN REPUBLICS SIMPLY MADE THE ISSUE OF KARABAKH SENSELESS.


However, in the depths of Russian Soviet diplomacy, there was a return to the foreign policy of tsarist times. After Sovietization, Azerbaijan started disastrously losing its territory. The territory of the republic shrank to 86,600 sq km, while in 1918–1920, the indisputable territories of Azerbaijan totaled 97,297.67 sq km.¹ In the early years of Sovietization, true patriots, seeing the Bolshevik government hand over ancient Azerbaijani lands to Armenia, wrote to Lenin that “the land that was

considered indisputably Azerbaijani under the Musavat government was already disputed under Soviet power, causing legitimate public outrage.”²

During the April occupation, Azerbaijan was subjected to large-scale acts of aggression from Armenia, and therefore, one of the first foreign policy moves of the Soviet government in Baku was a note of April 30, 1920 to the Armenian government. Signed by Commissar of Foreign Affairs M. D. Huseynov and sent to the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Armenia, the note read: “The workers’ and peasants’ government of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, represented by the Revolutionary Committee, demands that: 1) your armed forces withdraw from the territory of Karabakh and Zangazur; 2) withdraw to their own

borders, and 3) stop the ethnic massacre. Otherwise, the Revolutionary Committee of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic will be considering itself at war with the government of the Republic of Armenia. A response to the note must be received within three days.”³ Until the middle of May 1920, the Azerbaijan SSR and the Republic of Armenia exchanged threatening notes.⁴ Reporting this “war of notes” to its homeland, the French mission in the Caucasus gave the following assessment of the ethnic composition of the population: “The disputed Karabakh district is home to many Armenians, but the majority of the population is Tatar (Azerbaijani – J. H).”⁵

An appeal from the Azerbaijani People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs to the Armenian people and the



1 Адрес-календарь Азербайджанской Республики. Под ред. А.М.Ставровского. Баку, 1920, С.50.

2 For more details see: Итоги советского строительства в Азербайджане. Отчет Н.Нариманова В.И.Ленину. 15.09.1921 // РГАСПИ, ф.5, оп.1, д.1219, л.12; Письмо Н.Нариманова В.И.Ленину // АПД УДП АР, ф.609, оп.1, д.71, л.51; Письмо Б.Шахтахтинского В.И.Ленину. 20.09.1920 // Архив Внешней Политики Российской Федерации (далее – АВП РФ), ф.1, оп.51, папка 321а, д.54859, л.6–7

3 Газета “Коммунист”, 1920, 1 мая.

4 Мусаев И. Политическое положение в Нахичеванской и Зангезурской областях Азербайджана и политика зарубежных стран (1917–1920). Баку, 1996.

5 Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales. Service des Affaires Russes. Le 4 Mai 1920 // Ministère des Affaires Etrangère de France, Archives Diplomatique, Vol.639, Folio 24



Armenian government on May 11 listed acts of violence by Armenian armed detachments in Nakhchivan, Sharur-Daralgoz, New Bayazet and Echmiadzin districts, the Kars vilayet, Karabakh, Zangazur and Gazakh from 1917 and demanded that the Dashnak government stop the policy of terror and violence.⁶ The activity of Armenians in Karabakh and other parts of the republic from the first days of Sovietization and the unpunished policy of violence against the Muslim population were explained, first of all, by the weakness of Azerbaijan and its army and the demobilization of its troops. The French commissioner in the Caucasus said in his report to the Foreign Ministry of France on May 24: "We can say that the Azerbaijani army is completely dissolved except for an insignificant sector that separates the Armenian front in the Karabakh and Zangazur direction."⁷ Taking advantage of this favorable opportunity to carry out its aggressive intentions, Armenians invaded a defenseless country, seizing land and brutally killing the Muslims living there. On June 29, 1920, Sergey Kirov informed G. Chicherin that the Dashnaks are exterminating not only Muslims, but also Russians. He wrote: "Of the thirty thousand Russians in the Kars region, there are only fifteen left, while the rest fled to Turkey or Russia or got killed."⁸

On June 19, N.Narimanov, M.Mdivani, A.Mikoyan and A.Nurijanyan sent a telegram to

Chicherin and informed him about the advance of the Dashnak army and its successes in Gazakh and Gadabay. A copy of this telegram was sent to Ordzhonikidze in Vladikavkaz and contained such notable lines: "The Armenians are actually at war with Azerbaijan. As for allegedly disputable Zangazur and Karabakh, which are already part of Soviet Azerbaijan, we categorically state that these places should undoubtedly continue to be part of Azerbaijan."⁹ It was precisely from this point of view that one of the first decrees of the Azerbaijani Revolutionary Committee - the decree of May 12 - was issued in order to strengthen Soviet rule, i.e. establish the position of extraordinary commissioner for Karabakh and Zangazur. By the same decree, D. Bunyadzadeh was appointed to this position. His assistant on the Armenian part of Karabakh was A. Karakozov.¹⁰ N. Narimanov, who arrived in Baku in mid-May, signed the decree as chairman of the Azerbaijani Revolutionary Committee on May 18.¹¹ D. Bunyadzadeh served as extraordinary commissioner until the end of August 1920.

In his response to the Azerbaijani Revolutionary Committee dated May 1, Armenian Foreign

Minister A. Ohanjanyan claimed that Musavat and bays' government of Azerbaijan had been carrying out atrocities in "Armenian Karabakh", allegedly setting fire to towns and villages, which was why "at congresses of peasants' deputies, the

population of Karabakh had repeatedly refused to join Azerbaijan by free will". The Azerbaijani army was deployed in this region only with a view to preventing the possibility of self-determination by the Armenian people who did not have their own army within Azerbaijan. The Armenian government proposed that the new Azerbaijani government withdraw its troops from Armenian Karabakh. Ohanjanyan added that in the present situation, there is no reason for threatening notes and expressed confidence that the workers' and peasants' government of Soviet Russia had long recognized the independence and sovereignty of Armenia on the basis of a decision by the 4th All-Russian Congress of Soviets and Lenin's decree.¹² A copy of the note was sent to Lenin, Chicherin and Ordzhonikidze. On May 9, Ordzhonikidze received another telegram, asking him to forward it to Lenin. The telegram was signed by Pirumov and Erzinjan, who introduced themselves as representatives of compatriots from Karabakh. They wrote that from the April 30 ultimatum announced by the Azerbaijani Soviet government, it follows that two regions - Zangazur and Karabakh, which were populated by Armenians without exception, were incorporated into the Azerbaijan Republic despite the fact that at peasant congresses, the population of these regions categorically refused to join Azerbaijan.¹³ Without stopping here, this group of Karabakh

6 Коммунист, 1920, 12 мая

7 Monsiuer de Martel Commissaire francais au Caucase a Son Excellence Monsieur Millerand President du Conseil Ministre des Affaires Etrangeres. Le 24 Mai 1920 // Ministère des Affaires Etrangère de France, Archives Diplomatique, Vol.639, Folio 78

8 Телеграмма С.Кирова Г.Чичерину. 29.06.1920 // РГАСПИ, ф.5, оп.1, д.2178, л.1

9 Телеграмма Н. Нариманова, М. Мдивани, А. Микояна, А. Нуриджаняна Г. Чичерину. 19.06.1920 // ГА АР, ф.28, оп.1, д.211, л.115

10 Протокол заседания Азревкома. 12.05.1920 // ГА АР, ф.410, оп.1, д.78, л.6

11 Декрет Азревкома о назначении Д.Бунятзаде чрезвычайным комиссаром Карабаха и Зангезура. 18.05.1920 // ГА АР, ф.420, оп.1, д.5, л.2

12 Нота армянского правительства АзРевКому. 01.05.1920 // АПД УДП АР, ф.1, оп.169, д.249/II, л.2-3



Armenians led by Pirumov planned to go to Moscow in the summer of 1920. Speaking to Kvirkelia by a direct line, G. K. Ordzhonikidze spoke out on this issue in his usual manner: "Why are Comrade Perumov (Pirumov – J. H.) and the others going to Moscow? There is no point in going to Moscow for this foolishness. In Zangazur and Karabakh, the population is not totally Armenian, but half-and-half according to the census of 1917, if not more. In any case, Moscow is not going to deal with the Karabakh issue ... Nonsense, nonsense."¹⁴ At the same time, it should be noted that in a letter to Lenin, Armenian communists Aykuni and Katanyan supported the appeal of the "fellow countrymen in Tiflis" about Zangazur and Karabakh.¹⁵

Naturally, Ohanjanyan's statement that at the congress of peasants' deputies of Karabakh, Armenians refused to remain part of Azerbaijan was not true. The truth was that the representatives of Armenian peasants of the mountainous part of Karabakh agreed to obey the Azerbaijani government in August 1919 and expressed a desire to live together with the Azerbaijani population in Azerbaijan. Some Armenian authors write that the decision was made under pressure from the British.¹⁶ They do not take into consideration that the British left Azerbaijan two weeks before the decision was taken, and the Azerbaijani government and the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh

signed a temporary agreement on August 22. Not only Bolshevik Muslims, but also communists of other nationalities - Armenians, Georgians, Russians and Jews working in the Caucasus - recognized that Karabakh, both lowland and mountainous, was entirely part of Azerbaijan under the Musavat government. A member of the Caucasian Regional Committee of the RCP (b), A. Mikoyan, openly wrote in his report to Lenin that "Dashnak agents of the Armenian government seek to incorporate Karabakh into Armenia, but for the population of Karabakh, it would be mean losing their livelihood in Baku and engaging with Erivan, with which they have never had anything in common."¹⁷

Angry that the authoritative Bolsheviks, who have been working in the Caucasus, Baku and in general, throughout Azerbaijan for many years, resist the center's policy, Chicherin sent a letter to the Politburo of the Central Committee of the RCP (b) on June 22, 1920, complaining about "indiscipline among Baku comrades and the glaring contradiction between their actions and the political line established by the Central Committee". He suggested that a respected comrade unrelated to the Caucasian group of communists be appointed a representative of the Council of Peoples Commissars in Baku. He named Sokolnikov as such a respected person.¹⁸

Chicherin explained the necessity of such a step by the fact that by their actions, the "Baku comrades" were disrupting compromises and rejecting the agreement with Armenia required by the Central Committee. Chicherin complained to Lenin about Narimanov who supports offensive moods among Azerbaijanis.¹⁹ In his view, the handover to Azerbaijan of the disputed territories now occupied by Russia would make it impossible to reach agreement with Armenia. Apparently, it was for this reason that in the summer of 1920, half of the Bolshevik army stationed in Azerbaijan at the insistence of Moscow was sent to Karabakh and Zangazur.²⁰ Chicherin's logic in this matter is quite interesting. Just two months ago, ancient Azerbaijani lands were occupied by the army of Soviet Russia and declared disputed, and now the issue was not about "leaving" these lands in Azerbaijan, but "incorporating" them into Azerbaijan. He wrote: "The whole military policy of the Baku comrades is fundamentally inconsistent with the line already established by the Central Committee."²¹ In the debate around the Karabakh problem, Chicherin did not hesitate to mislead even Lenin. In his response to his query, he admitted his "lack of awareness of the Caucasian affairs" and wrote: "Karabakh is an ancient Armenian region, but after the beating of the Armenians, Tatars settled in the valleys

13 Телеграмма Пирумова и Эрзинджана Г. Орджоникидзе. 09.05.1920 // РГАСПИ, ф.85, оп.13, д.18, л.1

14 Разговор Г. Орджоникидзе по прямому проводу с Квиркелия. 1920 // РГАСПИ, ф.85, оп.5с, д.5, л.1

15 Нифталиев И. Азербайджанская ССР в экспансионистских планах армян (20-е годы XX века). Баку, 2010. С.45

16 Правда о Нагорном Карабахе, С.26, 29

17 Из доклада члена Кавказского райкома РКП (б) А.Микояна ЦК РКП (б) и председателю Совнаркома т. В.И.Ленину. 22.05.1919 // АПД УДП АР, ф.1, оп.169, д.249/II, л.

18 Большевицкое руководство. Переписка. 1912–1927. Сборник документов. М., 1996, С.134–135

19 Ответ Г.Чичерина на запрос В.Ленина. Июнь, 1920 // РГАСПИ, ф.2, оп.1, д.1451, л.2

20 Agence Consulaire de France a Bakou "Situation actuelle de l'Azerbaïdjan". Le 27 Juillet 1920 // Ministère des Affaires Etrangère de France, Archives Diplomatique, Vol.639, Folio 150

21 Письмо Наркома иностранных дел Г.Чичерина в Политбюро ЦК РКП (б). 22.06.1920 // АПД УДП АР, ф.1, оп.1, д.2а, л.9



there and the Armenians remained in the mountains." Then Chicherin explained to Lenin that "for the time being, Russia is not giving this land to the Armenians so as not to offend the Tatars. When conditions are ripe for the Sovietization of Georgia and Armenia, all these problems will disappear on their own."²² From the many explanatory notes and telegrams from Chicherin to Lenin and Ordzhonikidze, one thing was clear to Narimanov: he kept Karabakh as a bargaining chip and bait in the negotiations with Armenia.

But Chicherin's flirtations, threats and lies could not make Narimanov and his followers give up their positions. The strengthening of Armenian claims to the mountainous part of Karabakh forced famous Caucasus Bolsheviks - M. Mdivani, A. Mikoyan, B. Naneyshvili and even members of the Military Council of the 11th Army, Zh. Vesnik, M. Levandovskiy and I. Mikhailov - to sign a letter to the Central Committee of the RCP (b.), which said: "We believe that our duty is to inform the Central Committee about our consensus on the issue of Zangazur and Karabakh, which is expected to be resolved in an intermediate way in the negotiations with Armenia, which runs counter to the interests of the revolution in the Caucasus. Under the Musavat government, Karabakh was entirely part of Azerbaijan. The continuity of the cultural and economic ties of Karabakh and Zangazur with Baku, which fed on tens of thousands of workers from these provinces, and their complete isolation from Yere-

van were clearly proved in 1919 at the peasant congress of Armenian Karabakh, which, despite intolerable conditions for Armenians under the Musavat regime and the provocative work of agents from Armenia, nevertheless decisively spoke out for full unity with Azerbaijan provided a peaceful life is guaranteed for the Armenians."²³ At the end, the letter stated that the Muslim masses will take as a betrayal the inability of the Soviet government to keep Azerbaijan in its old borders, explaining this by Armenophilia or weakness on the part of the Soviet government. Signatories to the document warned the Centre against hesitations in the issue of Karabakh and Zangazur "not to turn Azerbaijan into a bastard looked after by the Red Army and handed out to Armenians and Georgians."²⁴

During the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, Karabakh's belonging to Azerbaijan was recognized even by S. Shadunts, who held various administrative positions in Karabakh for a long time. A newspaper article signed by him says: "At the insistence of the peasants of this same Nagorno-Karabakh, we had to connect this part to the low-lying part and subordinate the whole of Karabakh to the Musavat government... But as soon as the authorities "strengthened" in Armenia and the "heroic" gangs of Dro had some baptism of fire (offensive on Tiflis, Zangazur, etc.), work began in Karabakh. The Dashnak government sent its emissaries back to Nagorno-Karabakh with large cash reserves and led a campaign for the

annexation of Karabakh to Armenia with which it had nothing to do."²⁵

To formalize the recognition of Armenia by Soviet Russia, on June 29, 1920, Chicherin announced the appointment of B. Legran as a plenipotentiary representative in Erivan. In his opinion, this appointment was to serve to establish good-neighborly relations between the two countries, settle all disputes, resolve contradictions and serve to strengthen peace between Russia and Armenia. At the same time, the mission was tasked with preparing an agreement between Soviet Russia and Armenia.²⁶

A day after Legran's appointment as an authorized representative in Armenia and despite strong resistance from N. Narimanov and Caucasian Bolsheviks, the leadership of Soviet Russia, under pressure from Chicherin, decided to stop the advance of the Red Army toward Armenia. Armed with the June 30 decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the RCP (b), Chicherin increased pressure on representatives of the Centre, who controlled political processes and directed affairs in Azerbaijan. In a telegram to Ordzhonikidze on July 2, he said that in the negotiations that have begun with the Turkish national center, Russia needs a territorial contact, and to this end, it is necessary to reach an agreement with Armenia to be able to make such contact through its territory. Chicherin wrote that an agreement with Armenia is the only way to ensure Bolshevik influence on affairs in Asia Minor.²⁷

22 Ответ Г.Чичерина на запрос В.Ленина. Июнь, 1920 // РГАСПИ, ф.2, оп.1, д.1451, л.1

23 Письмо Нариманова, Мдивани, Микояна, Нанейшвили, Весника, Левандовского и Михайлова в ЦК РКП (б). 10.07.1920 // АГД УДГ АР, ф.1, оп.44, д.118, л.25

24 Ibid, л.27

25 Шадунц С. Карабах // Бакинский рабочий, 1922, 21 декабря

26 Сообщение Г. Чичерина по прямому проводу Бекзадян, Оганесяну и Кирову. 29.06.1920 // РГАСПИ, ф.64, оп.1, д.21, л.8

27 Телеграмма Г. Чичерина Г. Орджоникидзе. 02.07.1920 // РГАСПИ, ф.85, оп.3с, д.2, л.3



In another encrypted telegram sent on the same day, Chicherin tried to convince Ordzhonikidze that Soviet Russia needs to reach a compromise with the Armenian Dashnak government. He wrote: "The Azerbaijani government pronounces not only Karabakh and Zangazur but also the Sharur-Daralayaz district disputed. The latter has never been pronounced disputed by anyone and even the Musavat government always recognized it as part of Armenia. Without it, almost nothing will remain of Armenia. After long resistance, the Armenian peace delegation agreed to recognize Karabakh and Zangazur as disputed, hoping that in the end, most of these places would be awarded to Armenia, but they absolutely refuse to recognize the Sharur-Daralayaz district as disputed. On the other hand, we must reach agreement with the government of Azerbaijan so that our agreement with Armenia is not in conflict with the demands of Azerbaijan. With the enormity of your influence in Baku, we ask you to use it to get the Azerbaijani government to recognize as disputed Karabakh and Zangazur, but not the Sharur-Daralayaz district."²⁸

Of course, Chicherin's calculations about Sharur-Daralayaz matched the historical truth. And even the French, whose entire activities in the Caucasus stood out for Armenophilia, noted in the December 1918 report on the ethnic-national structure and administrative system of the Caucasus

that the Armenians had taken over some areas where they were in the minority. For example, Nakhchivan is populated by 75,000 Azerbaijanis, Sharur-Daralayaz - 57,000, Erivan - 87,000 and Surmali - 44,000. These districts, we can say, are Muslim cantons of Armenia.²⁹ It should be noted that this document has some errors. In December 1918, with the exception of Erivan, the above lands were under the control of the Azerbaijani government, and the June 4, 1918 agreement between Armenia and Turkey clearly defined the boundaries of the Armenian Republic.

After Chicherin's encrypted telegram on July 2, 1920, and discussions with the newly-appointed authorized representative of Soviet Russia in Armenia B. Legran and A. Gabrielyan, Ordzhonikidze reported the following directly to Moscow: "Azerbaijan insists on the immediate and unconditional incorporation of Karabakh and Zangazur. In my opinion, it is necessary to do so, as both districts economically tend to Baku and are completely cut off from Erivan, especially now that the Bayazet Turkish division is wedged in. If they are left disputed, they will definitely be taken over by the Turks and the entire Armenian population will be massacred. There is nothing we can do to prevent it. Their incorporation into Azerbaijan would give the Azerbaijani communists a strong trump card and would open the way for the nomads. According to Comrade Gabrielyan, the Armenian delegation will accept

this, of course. With this solution to the issue, Azerbaijan can be forced to give up other regions. My opinion: Karabakh and Zangazur must be immediately incorporated into Azerbaijan. I will force Azerbaijan to grant autonomy to these regions, but it has to come from Azerbaijan, and in no case should it be mentioned in the agreement."³⁰ In another report to Lenin, Stalin and Chicherin by a direct line, Ordzhonikidze openly said that the Armenian government was intentionally misleading them: "Today Gabrielyan told me that if Azerbaijan gives up the Sharur-Daralayaz and Nakhchivan districts, the Armenian delegation will immediately accept the incorporation of Karabakh and Zangazur into Azerbaijan. We agreed with him that upon his arrival in Baku, we would talk to Narimanov in this spirit. As you can see, there is no ambiguity and misunderstanding here. I can assure you that we quite clearly see and implement our peace policy. I am sure, and my deep conviction is that in order to strengthen Soviet power in Azerbaijan and keep Baku, we need to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh, but there can be no talk of the low-lying bit. It has always belonged to Azerbaijan and Zangazur." Azerbaijan guarantees the security of the Armenian population of the region. Let's announce autonomy here and I will organize Armenian population without bringing in Muslim military units there." 🌱

28 Шифрованная телеграмма Г. Чичерина Г. Орджоникидзе. 02.07.1920 // РГАСПИ, ф.85, оп.3с, д.2, л.3

29 Azerbaïdjan Annexe № 1 au Rapport № 1 du 10 Decembre 1918 Considerations Generales sur l'organisation du Caucase en Cantons // Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (MAE) de France (Archives Diplomatique) Correspondance Politique et Commerciale, 1914-1940 Serie "Z" Europe 1918-1940 Sous-Serie USSR Europe - Russie Service Russe D'information et D'edudes (S.R.I.E.) XLI Caucase - Azerbaïdjan (1918-1920). Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales Caucase Republique d'Azerbaïdjan Evenements Annees 1918-1919. Vol.832, Folio 12

30 Ответ Г.К.Орджоникидзе по прямому проводу на депешу Г.Чичерина от 2 июля по вопросу о спорных территориях между Азербайджаном и Арменией. Июль, 1920 // РГАСПИ, ф.85, оп.3с, д.2, л.6