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ADR'S FOREIGN POLICY IN 1918-1919

The Transcaucasian Seim and Azerbaijan's diplomacy. In the history of any state, diplomacy always played a special role in protecting national interests on the world political stage. Diplomacy assumes a particularly significant role as a foreign policy tool during a nation's struggle for national independence and statehood. Successful development of the state system hinges on the ability of the diplomatic corps to assert the interests of the people and their country in a fierce struggle for territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The developments relating to the emergence of national republics in the North and South Caucasus after the fall of the Tsarist autocracy have always drawn particular interest of the scientific community. The great quest for freedom of the Caucasus nations and their aspiration toward establishing independent states at the historical "crossroads" of the 20th century led some of them to a successful accomplishment of their coveted goal, while the others faced a complete failure and collapse of the idea of independence and statehood.

"In the 20th century the people of Azerbaijan, its political figures and emerging diplomacy succeeded twice in raising the banner of independence and fought hard amid complicated conditions in the region and internationally for the establishment and strengthening of national statehood, namely, in 1918-1920 and in the 90s of the last century." (1)

A remarkable achievement of Azerbaijani diplomacy dwells upon the fact that it managed to ensure the inclusion of its people in the ranks of the global political community. Thanks to the efforts of progressive Azerbaijani intelligentsia, the Azerbaijan Democratic

Republic (ADR) was established on May 28, 1918 (2). The geopolitical standing of Azerbaijan has always been of great importance for the world economy and politics. Ancient states emerged here in the past, along with the development of trade and industrial relations, and this was a starting point for a network of routes that linked the countries of the Middle East, Europe, India, China and the entire Asia through commerce and economic relations. Rivalry for control over strategic trade routes along the shores of the Caspian Sea has sparked clashes among different nations and powers from time immemorial. Diverse military and political forces superseded one another for many centuries, exerting erratic geopolitical pressure on the Caspian region. The Caspian region and Azerbaijan undoubtedly had a tremendous role to play and impact on the North Caucasus nations, as was the case in world politics and culture overall. The Caspian region and the nations that lived in these territories have been historically associated with the North Caucasus since the ancient times. During the Russian Empire's conquest of Transcaucasia "the dignified replies of Javad Khan of Ganja to the insulting letters of General Tsitsianov, supplemented by his heroism on the battlefield, wrote down glorious pages in the history of Azerbaijani diplomacy."

Following the collapse of the Russian Empire's monarchical system and the ensuing coup of October 1917, the nations of the Caucasus, thrown by the authorities into the whirlpool of civil war, embarked on efforts to restore order and peace, as well as establish a political system in their historical territories. The nations of Transcaucasia sought to institute the Transcaucasian

Members of the Azerbaijani delegation at the Paris Peace Conference



Democratic Republic, while the peoples of the North Caucasus proclaimed the Mountain Republic. The interference of Russia and the Quadruple Alliance with these developments triggered a collapse of peace in the Caucasus. Following the dissolution of the Transcaucasian Democratic Republic, the peoples of Transcaucasia launched a program aimed at building their national republics.

The Azerbaijani faction in the Transcaucasian Seim. Diplomatic strides on the path to Azerbaijan's independence were made on the eve of the Trabzon Conference, which started on February 26, 1918. The Azerbaijani faction held a session two days before the conference to mull the issue of a return of Armenian units from the frontline and their accommodation in Baku. Moreover, information was available that the German army planned to "take control over Baku oil" and that "the national Azerbaijani faction sought to conclude a peace treaty with Turkey" (3) in order to establish peace and stabilize the situation in Transcaucasia.

Shortly before the Trabzon Conference peacemaking and related issues were discussed in numerous caucuses of the Transcaucasian Seim and the positions of the parties were clarified. During the Seim's session significant differences emerged between F. K. Khoyski and Y. Gegechkori on a host of issues pertaining to peace talks. The Seim participants had divergent views regarding further peacemaking with Russia and the countries of the Quadruple Alliance. The Georgian faction was leaning toward Germany, while the Azerbaijani faction was focused on Turkey, and the Armenians were seeking to gain territory by any means to build their own state.

Realizing the complexity of the situation ahead of the Trabzon Conference, M. Mehdiyev suggested at the Seim session to declare Transcaucasia's independence. "As long as there is no real independence, the negotiations will be fruitless," he said. History showed further that these words were true. (4)

On March 3, 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed between Soviet Russia and the Quadruple

Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey). This move meant Russia's formally rejecting the decree "On Turkish Armenia" drawn up by Lenin and Stalin two months ago. The agreement said that Russia would do its utmost to clear Eastern Anatolia and return it to Turkey. The Russian army was to be evacuated from the Ardahan, Kars and Batum provinces. Russia was also obliged to refrain from interfering with the forging of new state legal relations in those provinces. In addition, the borders that existed shortly before the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878) were to be restored in the Kars, Ardahan and Batum sanjaks (Turkish administrative divisions) (5).

In accordance with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Russia not only confirmed the transfer of Kars, Ardahan and Batum to Turkey, but also pledged to disarm the Armenian volunteer detachments in the territories of Turkey and Russia, in keeping with the additional protocol concluded between the RSFSR and Turkey (6).

Despite Turkey's insistent requests and the pledge of assistance, the Transcaucasian government refused to take part in the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. The Transcaucasian Seim ruled that any agreement pertaining to Transcaucasia and its borders concluded unbeknownst to it and without its approval was not binding. (7)

On the one hand, without proclaiming independence the government and parliament of Transcaucasia had not acquired the status of an international entity and furthermore recognition by the neighboring states as a player on the world political stage. On the other hand, they did not recognize the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed by the Bolshevik government of Russia as they did not consider themselves to be an entity of Soviet law or the Russian geographical space. This illogical approach in policymaking became the main obstacle faced by the delegation of Transcaucasia at the Trabzon conference in March 1918.

"During the conference Transcaucasian representatives protested the clauses of the Brest Treaty relating to the Caucasus. The insistent grievances of the Transcaucasian delegates regarding the provinces of Batum and Kars, their refusal to recognize the terms of the Brest peace accord and a number of other issues aggravated the discrepancies between the parties. The delay in proclaiming independence was diminishing Turkey's interest in these negotiations. Referring to this issue, A. Chkhenkeli said, "Frankly, Turkey is interested in Transcaucasia's independence. This independence would guarantee Turkey's security from the north." (8)

Turkish representatives stated that if Transcaucasia was interested in the outcome of the Brest negotia-

tions, it should formalize its rights based on the norms of international law and ensure its own recognition by other states. (9) "Therefore, even if Transcaucasia is recognized now, it still cannot voice protest over the missed opportunities." (10)

A. Chkhenkeli noted bitterly, "The tragedy of our situation is that Transcaucasia has not yet managed to become organized and our delegation was not persistent in putting forth its demands. We came here unprepared. And the Seim itself was not united enough so that we could vigorously assert our stance." (11)

The Trabzon conference showed the unpreparedness of the Caucasus nations to unite under one flag into a single state system. The only feasible solution was to empower each of these nations to address their problems independently. Peace talks were suspended by mutual agreement to enable the parties to hold consultations with their statesmen.

The heated debate that kicked off in the Transcaucasian Seim after the Trabzon conference reflected the deep-rooted differences among the peoples of Transcaucasia. The Armenians and Georgians, who rejected Turkey's demands regarding a number of territorial claims, stipulated by the Brest-Litovsk agreement, called for launching war against this country. In contrast, the Azerbaijani faction urged reaching agreement with the Ottoman Empire on the basis of mutual concessions.

On March 25, representatives of all Muslim factions of the Seim and the North Caucasus highlanders met at the Tiflis palace. The meeting was chaired by M.Y. Jafarov and Rahim Bay Vakilov acted as the secretary. The North Caucasus was represented by Zubair Temirkhanov, Muhammad-Ghazi Dibirov, Heydar Bammатов, Tapa Chermoyev and Ingushetia's Liyanov. The broad public discourse centered on the issue of unification of the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia. The Azerbaijani delegation supported the initiative of the North Caucasus nations. In his remarks, N. Usubbayov said the highlanders of the Caucasus and the Turks of Transcaucasia belonged to a single Muslim family, welcoming their aspiration to form a single state in the South Caucasus.

The news about the March 1918 developments in Baku further heightened tension at the peace negotiations in the Seim itself. The March coup jointly staged by the Bolsheviks and Dashnaks in order to seize power in Baku and the genocide of the Muslim population in the Baku province that they orchestrated in April clearly demonstrated the attitude of Soviet Russia toward Azerbaijan's attempt to enforce the principle of self-

Copy of the “Azerbaijan” bulletin released by the Azerbaijani delegation at the Paris Peace Conference to promote awareness about the realities of Azerbaijan. Edition dated 13 October 1919 focused on the Nakhchivan issue

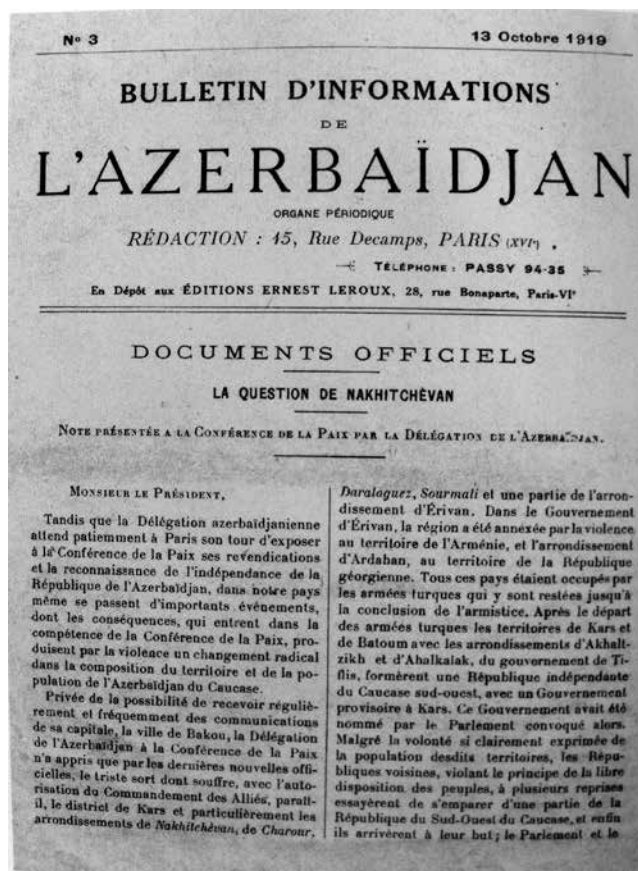
determination of nations that had been proclaimed by Russia from the outset. S. Shaumyan was quite upfront when he wrote about the true goal of that coup, saying “if they could get the upper hand in Baku, the city would have been declared the capital of Azerbaijan...” (12)

The tragic events that took place in Baku and the ambiguous attitude of different factions of the Transcaucasian Seim toward this matter showed the inability of the Seim to find common ground. Soviet Russia was using the conventional principle of the difference of nations and religions in the post-imperial space, in Baku and Azerbaijani provinces, to assert its authority.

“The ethnic genocide perpetrated in the Baku province not only exacerbated the relations among the Seim members, but also had a significant impact on the course of the negotiations with Turkey. In addition, the Armenians committed similar actions in Turkey in mid-March 1918... Turkey, which was weary of ruminating the same issues at the negotiating table, put forth an ultimatum to Transcaucasia on April 6, calling for a clear answer within the following 48 hours whether or not it recognized the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. At the same time, Turkey said that if Transcaucasia sought to enter into contractual relations with this country, it had to declare sovereignty, which was a prerequisite for launching diplomatic negotiations.” (13)

On April 13, the Transcaucasian Seim passed an erroneous decision to declare war on Turkey. “K. Mammadbayov said in his speech that in doing so, the government and the Seim trampled on the rights of Muslims and in this case it was impossible to work together with the Armenians and Georgians. He suggested seceding from the Seim and further discussing the future fate of the Caucasus Muslims with Ingush and Chechen representatives (14). Transcaucasia’s short war with Turkey lasted only eight days. The takeover of Batum was officially announced in Istanbul on April 15.

Peace talks resumed in Trabzon at the initiative of Turkey. The Muslim faction in the Seim firmly cited the need for declaring Transcaucasia’s independence. Otherwise, the faction warned, it would have to start “discussing the possibility of proclaiming the independence of Azerbaijan.” (15)

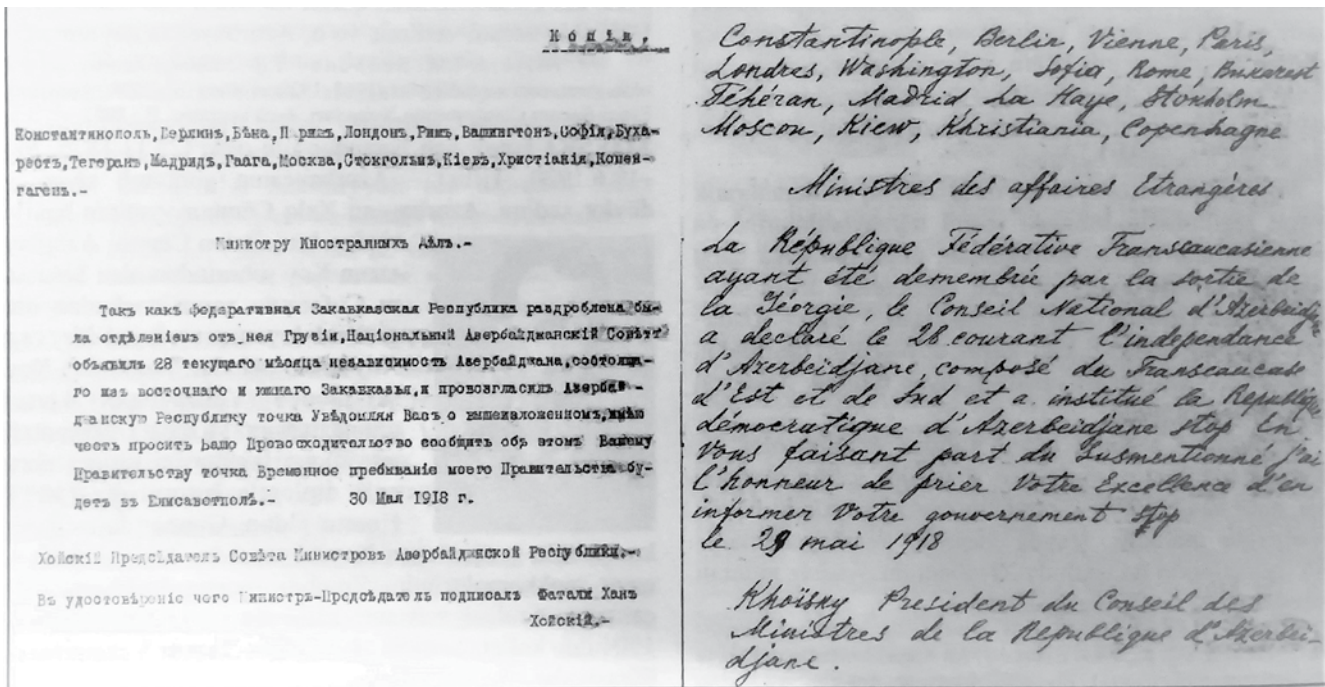


The Azerbaijani delegation led by M.G. Hajinsky played a tremendous role in the negotiations between Turkey and the Transcaucasian Seim. Peace efforts were resuscitated and the negotiating process became friendly.

“Late at night on April 22, the Seim proclaimed the formation of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic by an overwhelming majority of votes. (16) A decision was passed to set up a commission to draft the Constitution of the newly established state. The proclamation of independence was a great victory for the Azerbaijani faction, and above all, the Musavat party.

The declaration of independence of the South Caucasus completed the process of political, military and diplomatic estrangement from Soviet Russia and became a landmark event ahead of the declaration of independence of Azerbaijan and other nations of Transcaucasia. On April 28, the newly independent Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic was recognized by the Ottoman Empire.” (17)

The reluctance of Soviet Russia to recognize the government of Transcaucasia bolstered the latter’s unwillingness to witness Russia’s involvement at the Batum negotiations.



Cable dated 30 May 1918, which was sent out via telegraph communication to the capitals of world powers to notify them of the founding of the Azerbaijan Republic

The declaration of Transcaucasia’s independence did not affect its domestic and foreign policy. The Seim did not have a specific program on overcoming the stalemate and the rift between its factions showed no signs of abating. Inter-ethnic differences became an insurmountable hurdle. “The controversy at the Batumi negotiations further boosted the Azerbaijani delegates’ orientation toward Turkey.” (18)

Assessing the Azerbaijani stance at the Batumi talks, M. Mehdiyev wrote, “Germany cared about Azerbaijani oil and Turkestan cotton, seeking ways of rapprochement with these regions. The Muslim nations of the Caucasus favored the Turks more than the Germans. Therefore, the Muslim delegates in Batumi had a chilly attitude toward the Germans, while looking at the Turks with a great deal of confidence and hope.” (19)

The lack of unity was particularly evident during the negotiations with Turkey. In his speech, Tsereteli noted that the Georgian faction of the Seim was convinced that it was impossible to bring together the nations of Transcaucasia around the slogan of independence and dissolution of Transcaucasia was imminent, which necessitated proclaiming Georgia’s independence. In response, F.K. Khoyski said on behalf of the entire faction that “the proximity of the Transcaucasian nations is dictated by their interests, which could hardly be divided”.

“However, if this is the decision made by the Georgian people, the Azerbaijanis cannot hamper it and have nothing left to do but pass a relevant decision based on the logic of the situation that has emerged,” he said. (20)

The Muslim faction of the Transcaucasian Seim upheld F.K. Khoyski’s proposal.

“The last session of the Transcaucasian Seim was held on May 26. Following Georgia’s announcement on its withdrawal from the Federation, the Seim passed a decision to disband itself. On May 26, the Georgian National Council declared Georgia’s independence.” (21) The new government’s first foreign policy move was the signing of a previously drafted agreement with Germany. Thus, the latter assumed patronage over Georgia from May 28.

Despite the Azerbaijani faction’s extensive effort to maintain the union, the dissolution of the South Caucasus Seim was an inevitable outcome in the political game of the superpowers, namely, Russia, Germany and England on the one hand, and Turkey on the other.

The proclamation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. In the spring of 1918, Azerbaijani diplomacy covered a challenging road leading up to the declaration of independence. On May 28, 1918, the interim National Council of Muslims of Transcaucasia proclaimed the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in Tiflis. This histori-

*Letter from F. K. Khoyski to M. A. Rasolzade
delegating A. M. Topchubashov to Istanbul.
August 23, 1918*

cal document stated, "The Muslim National Council of Azerbaijan, elected by a popular vote, publicly declares:

1. Henceforth, the people of Azerbaijan are the holders of sovereign rights and Azerbaijan, comprised of Eastern and Southern Transcaucasia, is a full-fledged, independent state.
 2. A democratic republic is established as the form of political order of the independent Azerbaijan." (22)
- "By proclaiming its declaration dated May 28, 1918, the National Council confirmed the existence of the Azerbaijani nation. The word "Azerbaijan" is not only a geographical, ethnographic and linguistic term; it now acquires political essence." (23) ❀

to be concluded

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