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AZERBAIJAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (1918-1920) IN FRENCH ARCHIVES

The independent Azerbaijan Republic that existed in 1918-1920 has left the most significant and fascinating remarkable trace in numerous archival documents of the French Republic. In particular, detailed information concerning the emergence, development and tragic demise of the Azerbaijani state of that period has been preserved in the archives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Armed Forces, i.e. the government agencies that have their representatives on the ground witnessing first hand the developments ongoing in the Caucasus. Great significance deserved the fact that the Paris Peace Conference was held in the French capital from January 1919 to January

1920; the issue regarding the states that emerged on the ruins of the Russian Empire was resolved at the event. During the last month of the Paris conference the Entente's Supreme Council passed a decision to recognize *de facto* Azerbaijan and Georgia, the most resolutely steadfast states of the South Caucasus region. Azerbaijan's recognition was directly facilitated by the efforts of the Azerbaijani diplomatic delegation, sent by the government of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic to the capital of France in early 1919 in order to achieve this recognition by the Entente Council.

Since the Peace Conference was being held in Paris, the French government had considerable power to

Entrance to the library of the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris, which stores personal archives of Ali Mardan Bay Topchubashov





influence representatives of both the Azerbaijani delegation and those from other Caucasus republics, who were in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, by early 1919, and could leave for Paris only upon consent of the French government.

The paramount number of sources has been kept in the archives of the French Foreign Ministry. These documents describe the tough struggle waged by the Azerbaijani diplomatic delegation headed by Ali Mardan Bey Topchibashi for the right to join the Peace Conference that had already been launched in Paris.

Archival records indicate that initially, the Georges Clemenceau administration, which supported the Russian White Army, seeking to restore "a united and indivisible Russia", was initially reluctant to grant French entrance visas to Azerbaijani delegation. However, under the pressure of objective circumstances they eventually had to agree to the arrival of Azerbaijani representatives.

The documents stored in one of the special folders dedicated to Azerbaijan explain the reason for this move taken by the Clemenceau government.

In an effort to ensure reliable blockade of the Bolsheviks ahead of the planned offensive upon Moscow of the Volunteer Army of General Anton Denikin, Paris had to maintain good relations with the government of independent Azerbaijan. As it is known, up to 80 percent of oil of the entire former Russian Empire was produced at the fields of the Baku region prior to the Bolshevik coup of October 1917. In 1919, the Bolsheviks refusing to admit defying Azerbaijan's independence, attempted to transport oil products in small shipments to Astrakhan after negotiating this arrangement with individual industrialists, which were certainly undermining the effort to blockade the Soviets.

The Clemenceau government, which was seeking a deal with the Azerbaijani government on a more effective policy of blockade against the Bolsheviks and was also interested in gaining access to the country's oil resources, had to approve the Azerbaijani delegation's arrival to Paris. Though the latter was not allowed to directly participate in the conference, just like other delegations of the Caucasus nations, it gained the right to submit memoranda and notes to its secretariat, as well

as answer questions from representatives of the Entente Supreme Council. Upon arriving to Paris on May 9, the delegation started hard work, securing a meeting on May 28 with US President Woodrow Wilson, the author of the distinguished and outstanding well-known "14 points". In this regard, one of the most interesting documents found in the French archives is a recording of the conversation that occurred at this meeting, compiled by Francois Menod, an official at the French Commissariat for French-American military issues. In response to Topchibashi's request on recognizing Azerbaijan's independence and authorizing the Caucasus representatives to take part in the Paris conference, US economic assistance to the Caucasus nations, and support in establishing the Caucasus Confederation and its accession to the League of Nations, President Wilson replied directly, "We do not want to divide the world into too many small states. Establishing Caucasus unity enrolls the interests of the Caucasus nations. Put forward your demands at the Peace Conference. Will the Caucasus be inclined to accept a mandate?" (1).

The last line underlined by the document compiler indicates that the US President thought to check up on the opinion of the Azerbaijanis in case consent was to be provided by the US Senate on Washington's mandate for "Turkish Armenia" and further the whole Caucasus. Though the US Senate did not endorse Wilson's project, the latter's stance, which was recorded only in the French archives and concerned the need for very close cooperation and regional interaction among the Caucasus republics, an idea that Topchibashi supported from the very outset, provides us with the unique information on this issue. From that time until late 1919, the "Azerbaijan" folders of the French Foreign Ministry contained a number of memoranda and notes sent by Topchibashi - very frequently with the chairmen of the Georgian and North Caucasus delegations - to the Entente Supreme Council.

Most of these were notes protesting the actions of the Volunteer Army of General A. Denikin, whose troops occupied the territory of the Mountain Republic by late May 1919, posing a direct threat to both Azerbaijan and Georgia.

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good relations with the government of independent Azerbaijan. As is known, up to 90 percent of oil of the entire former Russian Empire was produced at the fields of the Baku region prior to the Bolshevik coup of October 1917. In 1919, the Bolsheviks, defying Azerbaijan's independence, attempted to transport oil products in small shipments to Astrakhan after negotiating this arrangement with individual industrialists, which were certainly undermining the effort to blockade the Soviets.

Though Topchibashi sought to draw the Armenian delegation to the Caucasus regional cooperation from the very beginning, he did not succeed in doing so due to the latter's non-constructive stance. In the wake of their claims to the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians believed that only a small part of the historical Armenia was located in the Caucasus; they deemed the Turks as their main enemies, favoring the Russian White movement. Therefore, the Azerbaijanis, Georgians and Armenians managed to sign a joint document only once. It was a short declaration signed in Paris on September 4, 1919, by A. M. Topchibashi, head of the Georgian delegation N. Chkheidze, as well as G. Oganjanian, a member of the Armenian diplomatic delegation. The signatories stated that "the planned evacuation of the allied forces from the Caucasus may have deplorable consequences." (2). At the same time, the Azerbaijanis and Georgians were wary of a potential incursion into Transcaucasia by the Volunteer Army, which was on a roll by September 1919, following the withdrawal of the units of the 27th British infantry division that had been stationed in the South Caucasus from late 1918. The Armenians feared the same from the Turks. Therefore, representatives of the three republics made a request at the Paris Peace Conference "to postpone the evacuation until the issue of the independence of the above-mentioned republics has been clarified and resolved." (3). The situation changed by the end of 1919, when it became clear to the Entente Supreme Council, including the French government, that their plan to overthrow Bolshevism with the aid of the Russian White army had failed. On January 10, 1920, the Entente Council made a decision to recognize *de facto* the independence of the Azerbaijan and Georgian Republics. The move had a direct impact on the documents that were being delivered to Paris from French servicemen and diplomatic representatives on the ground. From the end of 1918 until the spring of 1920, most of the reports arriving from Tiflis were sent by the French military mission in the Caucasus and French consular representatives. The reports of the chiefs of the

French military mission in the Caucasus, who regularly informed in detail the Ministry of War and the Foreign Ministry of the political, military, economic and other developments taking place in Azerbaijan and the entire Caucasus, are of paramount importance in this regard. The extent of impartiality of the provided information depended on the political situation as well as the personality and service record of the mission chief. For example, the reports issued by Colonel Pierre-Auguste Chardigny, a French officer, who served as chief of the French military mission in the Caucasus from October 1918 to February 1920, often had an obvious bias, despite containing interesting information. Following his appointment in October 1916 to the post of the French military representative under the High Command of the Russian Caucasus army, Chardigny had pro-Russian and pro-Armenian sympathies even after the proclamation of independence by the Caucasus republics. Ignoring the real situation that emerged in the Caucasus after the Bolshevik coup in October 1917, he disapproved of both Azerbaijanis and Georgians and accused them of a pro-Turkish and pro-German slant, which he believed to be the cause of the Caucasus Front collapse in 1918.

According to one of Chardigny's associates, his pro-Armenian policy, among other things, was due to corruption-related interests. In particular, abusing power, he maintained close ties with representatives of the wealthy Armenian bourgeoisie of Tiflis.

The situation took a different turn after the *de facto* recognition of the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia by the Entente Supreme Council on January 10, 1920. In February 1920, Chardigny, who had been in Paris from September 1919, though he former retained the title of the chief of the French military mission in the Caucasus, was officially succeeded by Colonel Emile-Auguste Corbel. Corbel, who sympathized with Azerbaijan and Georgia, arrived in Tiflis in April 1920. Simultaneously, the French government appointed a High Commissioner for the Caucasus, who would serve as its top-ranking diplomatic representative in the region from February 1920. Damien de Martel was appointed to this position; his reports, drawn up very professionally, provided a good analytical overview of the situation that had emerged in Azerbaijan and the whole South Caucasus region. In particular, Martel rightly linked the fall of the Azerbaijan Republic and its relatively easy invasion by the Red Army with the Armenian rebellion in Nagorno-Karabakh, which prompted the authorities in Baku to send almost the entire bulk of the



available insignificant military forces to the region in an effort to protect the country's territorial integrity. Martel also referred to the manipulation of the Bolshevik government, as a result of which the Azerbaijan Republic was eventually victimized. Very interesting information concerning the last days of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic's existence has also been preserved in the reports sent by Colonel Corbel to the Ministry of War.

It is worth mentioning in conclusion that in addition to the mentioned French state archives, the personal archive of Ali Mardan Bay Topchibashi, chairman of the diplomatic delegation of the Azerbaijan Republic, contains extensive data on the history of French-Azerbaijani relations in 1918-1920. A comparative analysis allows making a conclusion that this particular archive, stored in the library of the High School for the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris, currently contains the most comprehensive set of documents and records on the issue in question. Many of the notes and memorandums in this archive, which were once sent to the Entente Supreme Council and the French government, for unknown reasons were not included either in the French archives folders dealing with Azerbaijan or those pertaining to the general series on the Caucasus republics. 🌱

References:

- 1 Menod Fr. *Attention du commissaire-general. Reception des delegations du Caucase du Nord et de l'Azerbaïdjan par le president Wilson. Etat des affaires du Caucase.* Paris, 29. 5. 1919. AMAE. CPC 1914–1940. Serie E (Levant). Dossier Caucase-Kurdistan n°4. Fol. 231.
- 2 AMAE. CPC. 1914–1940. Serie Z (Europe). Dossier n° 832 Russie, Caucase (Azerbaïdjan). Fol. 97.
- 3 Ibidem.