ALIMARDAN BAY TOPCHUBASHOV

ALIMARDAN BAY TOPCHUBASHOV, ONE OF THE GREATEST PERSONS NURTURED BY AZERBAIJANI HISTORY, HAD SUCH MOMENTS IN HIS LIFE AND CAREER THAT HE ACTED AS THE LEADER OF RUSSIAN TURKS, THE MUSLIM PEOPLES OF THE EMPIRE AND CAUCASIAN IMMIGRATION.

Alimardan bay Topchubashov was born on 4 May 1863 in Tiflis.1 His father Aliakbar bay was a serviceman, served in the cavalry regiment of Transcaucasian Muslims and participated in the Crimea war. His grandfather Mirza Jafar Topchubashov was a well-known orientalist in Russia and many world famous Russian orientalists learnt Arabic, Persian and Turkish, and the East’s rich literature from him. The Topchuogullars, which had settled in Tiflis, were originally from Ganja, and his great grandfather Alimardan bay Topchubashov.

1 A. b. Topchubashov’s birth certificate. 6 April 1870 // St Petersbourg Central Historical Archive (SPb. MTA), f.14, s.3, i. 24308, v.4
dan bay went by the surname of Topchubashov because he was chief of an artillery regiment in the court of the Georgian kings Irakli II and George XII.  

In 1868, Alimardan lost his father and then his mother and was brought up by his grandmother. He received his first education in a Muslim school, studied in the Russian-language first Tiflis classical gymnasium and entered the St. Petersburg Imperial University in 1884. Alimardan bay graduated from the university’s faculty of law with excellent marks and with his dissertation, he was given a degree as a candidate of sciences. Alimardan, who began his career at Tiflis County Court, moved to Baku together with his family in 1896. Muslim business circles found Alimardan bay as their real defender. Although he was new to Baku, he gained most of the vote in the first stage of the elections to the City Duma held in October 1897. Topchubashov was appointed as publisher and editor of the Russian-language newspaper Kaspi, which belonged to the prominent Azerbaijani philanthropist Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev, and was elected chairman of the Nijat enlightenment society and a member of Muslim charitable societies and cultural centers.

In 1900, Alimardan bay went on a European tour and visited Sofia, Belgrade, Budapest, Vienna, London, Liverpool, Belgium, Germany and the world exhibition in Paris. He tried to learn Europeans’ view of Russian Muslims and share his impressions about his journey with readers in Kaspi newspaper.

At a gathering of the Muslim intelligentsia and bourgeoisie held in Baku in March 1905, a decision was made to submit to the government in St Petersburg a document called “The current situation concerning the needs of Muslims”, which had been prepared by Alimardan bay. The document focused on increasing the rights of Muslims in city administrations and improving welfare and education for the people. Alimardan bay presented this document to Interior Minister A. Bulygin in St Petersburg. During his meeting with the new governor of the Caucasus, Count Vorontsov-Dashkov, he said that it was necessary to conduct administrative, court, land, tax and other reforms in the Caucasus and got permission for the publication of Hayat daily to be published in Turkic. This newspaper gave a new lease of life to Turkic public opinion and the idea of national identity.

A gathering of Azerbaijani, Kazan and Crimean Tatar intellectuals in St Petersburg in April 1905 considered it necessary to establish Ittifagi Muslimin or a Union of Russian Muslims. Topchubashov submitted a report, which said that the authorities had an indifferent attitude to the Caucasus Muslims, did not trust them because they were not Christians, Muslim representatives faced discrimination in government agencies and were sidelined from solving the problems of cities where they lived, to Governor Vorontsov-Dashkov in Tiflis.

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4 The National Archive of the Tatarstan Republic (NATR), f.199, s.1, i.722, v.13.
5 Petition de musulmans du Caucase au gouverneur general Vorontsov-Dashkov. Juin 1905. // Archives d’Ali Mardan-bey Toptchibachi, carton n° 8. CERCEC, EHESS.
At the first congress of Russian Muslims which opened on a leased ship in Nizhniy Novgorod on 15 August 1905, Topchubashov was elected chairman and made a report on the political, economic, cultural and religious problems of Russian Muslims. “This historic report by Alimardan bay had a great impact. Most of the participants could not hold back their tears.” The congress was a decisive step in the organization of Russian Turks and their formation as an independent single political force.

The second congress of the Union of Russian Muslims (January 1906) discussed the program and statute of the “Muslim Union” submitted by Topchubashov. The second congress confirmed Alimardan bay’s growing influence among Russian Muslims and his growing role in the country’s political life.

Topchubashov was among the lawyers elected to the First State Duma from Azerbaijan in 1906. At the first session of the lawyers elected from Muslim regions, he was elected head of the Duma’s Muslim faction. The tsar issued a decree to dissolve the First State Duma, and in protest at this decision, Topchubashov and a number of other lawyers signed the Vyborg Declaration and were thus deprived of the right to be elected to the Second State Duma, prepared a program regulating the activities of the Muslim faction as chairman of the religious commission of the Muslim faction in the State Duma. At the first congress of Russian Muslims (January 1906) discussing the program and statute of Russian Muslims (January 1906), Alimardan bay had a great impact. Most of the participants could not hold back their tears. “This historic report by Alimardan bay Topchubashov and Ahmad bay Agayev and wish them strong health and good luck. At the end of his speech, the imam said: “Glory to them!” The thousands of people who participated in the ceremony said: “Let them live a long life!”

In order to promote the ideas of civil, religious and political freedoms among Russian Muslims and unite them around the Muslim Union, Alimardan bay went on a two-month tour of Muslims centers in the Volga Region, Orenburg Region, Siberia and other places together with K. M. Tevkelov, the chairman of the Muslim faction of the Third Duma. Upon return to Baku, Topchubashov was placed under stringent police surveillance. A gendarmie report on him said: “Your Topchubashov takes a prominent place among pan-Islamists in Baku. In terms of his development, he is a well-known person among local Muslims... Currently, Topchubashov continues his activities in the pan-Islamist movement...”

9 Программа Мусульманской группы во 2-ой Государственной Думе. СПб. 1907, с.1-16.
He is a very careful person and since he has gained great trust and confidence, he conducts party business only through personal meetings and negotiations.\(^\text{(1)}\)

Alimardan bay resumed his work as a lawyer, was the main initiator of the establishment of zemstvos in the Caucasus and engaged in enlightenment activities as chairman of the Ni-jat society and honorary chairman of the Saadat madrasa.\(^\text{(2)}\)

On 15-25 June 1914, the fourth congress of the Union of Russian Muslims was held in St Petersburg. In his speech at the congress, Alimardan bay described all the aspects of the government’s preconceived attitude towards Muslims. Saying that being a Muslim is not a sin, he stated that “we have been Muslims, are Muslims and will remain Muslims (these words were met with rapturous applause during the congress – J. H.). We also believe and will continue to believe that the religion we profess – the Islamic religion – is a universal religion and does not contain anything against statehood.”\(^\text{(3)}\)

The revolution that began in February 1917 resulted in the overthrow of the tsarist government. Alimardan bay spent the entire month of March in 1917 on squares. Alimardan bay took a number of organizational steps for the Muslim population of Bakı to appear on the political scene and gradually started leading political processes against the background of revolutionary events. On 27 March, the provisional executive committee of the Baku Muslim National Council was set up and Topchubashov was a member of the board of this organization. The committee promoted national-political ideas.

In April 1917, the Baku congress of Caucasus Muslims demonstrated that Turkish Adami-Markaziyyat party led by Nasib bay Yusifbayli in Ganja and the Musavat party operating in Bakı played a leading role in national democratic processes after the victory of the February Revolution. Alimardan bay, who was elected chairman at the first meeting, touched on Russia’s traditional “divide and rule” policy and noted the importance of establishing peace among Caucasian nations.\(^\text{(4)}\)

On 1 May, the congress of Russian Muslims opened in Moscow and Topchubashov was elected to its presidium.\(^\text{(5)}\) In his speech, Alimardan bay said that Muslims expected from the provisional government that their countries would become free. After the congress, Alimardan bay went to Petrograd and from there, to Bakı and then to Tiflis to continue his activities as an advisor for national affairs, and at the end of June, he returned to Bakı. In Bakı, Topchubashov was elected chairman of the Muslim National Committee. He led the political movement of Caucasus Muslims.

In order to stabilize the situation in Russia, the provisional government led by A. Kerenskiy held a state meeting in Moscow in August.

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\(^{11}\) Colonel Pastryulin’s report to the chief of the Kutaisi province’s gendarmerie department. Confidential. 22 June 1911 // The Political Documents Archive of the Office of the President of the Azerbaijan Republic (PDA OPAR), f.276, s.8, i.394, v.24-25.

\(^{12}\) The Baku Police Department’s report on A. b. Topchubashov. 1913 // The State Archive of the Russian Federation (SARF), f.102, s.276, i.609, v.48.


\(^{14}\) Каспий, 1917, 18 априля.
1917. Alimardan bay was sent to this meeting by the Baku Committee of the Muslim Public Organization. The meeting was attended by 34 representatives of Muslims from the Caucasus, Crimea, Volga Region and Turkestan. They held a meeting, discussed the report prepared by Topchubashov on behalf of Muslims and came to the conclusion that Alimardan bay should speak on behalf of the Muslim organizations represented at the meeting. Alimardan bay addressed the Moscow meeting and said that in the current revolutionary period, the main weakness of Russia, which has a 30-million-strong Muslim population, is the national question. Alimardan bay specially addressed foreign representatives, particularly British and French representatives, who were sitting in the box, and said that they should also recognize the rights of their Muslim subjects to free political life and self-determination – “only in this case, will we solemnly say aloud ex oriente lux – the sun rises in the east”.

The fact that Alimardan bay was asked to speak on behalf of the Muslims of the Caucasus, Crimea, Volga Region and Turkestan at the state meeting in Moscow is graphic proof that he was known as the leader of all Russian Muslims.

The Bolshevik coup d'etat in October 1917 presaged the end of the era of liberal reforms in Russia. On 15 November, the South Caucasus Commissariat was set up at a meeting of South Caucasus political organizations attended by Alimardan bay in Tiflis. Beginning from the autumn of 1917, serious preparations started among Muslims of the South Caucasus led by Alimardan bay for elections to the Council of Founders. The Muslim National Committee and the Musavat party set up an electoral bloc and Topchubashov was included on its list. At the same time, his

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candidacy to the Council of Founders was put forward not only from the Caucasus, but also from Syrdarya Region. In the elections held on 26-28 November, Alimardan bay was elected to the Majlis-Muassissan.\(^{17}\)

The Bolshevik government abolished the Majlis-Muassissan, but the representatives elected from the South Caucasus set up the Transcaucasian Seim as a regional legislative body in Tiflis. At that time, Alimardan bay, who was bedridden for a long time due to acute heart pain, was unable to participate in the work of the Seim.

The massacre of Muslims committed in the city by Armenian-Bolshevik forces in March 1918 in order to take power in Azerbaijan was a manifestation of the attitude of Soviet Russia and Bolsheviks, who had proclaimed the self-determination of peoples, towards Azerbaijan. Alimardan bay was literally shaken by "the sudden transformation into Bolsheviks of the Dashnak Armenian National Party which had invited Muslim representatives to discussions on the joint fight against Bolsheviks ahead of the events: One day before the events, on 29 March, they invited Muslims, including Alimardan bay, to discuss a joint plan against the Bolsheviks. However, the Dashnaks' betrayal resulted in bloodshed and during the Baku tragedy, which began on 30 March and continued for three days, 12,000 Muslims were killed on the pretext that they were counter-revolutionaries. Alimardan bay, who witnessed the events, noted that "armed Armenians invaded Muslim houses and had no mercy for anyone – old people, women and even children... even Muslims who belonged to left-wing parties were killed."\(^{18}\)

Despite his illness, Alimardan bay, who saw that Muslims were in a desperate situation, and several Azerbaijani intellectuals signed a truce agreement on the recognition of Bolshevik rule in Baku and on the dissolution of Muslim military units with members of the Armenian National Council with the participation of Iranian consul Habibollah Khan at the Hotel Astoria where the Revolutionary Defense Committee of the Bolsheviks was headquartered.\(^{19}\) On 3 April, Alimardan bay was arrested by Armenian soldiers. Baku lawyer Yakov Nikolayevich Smirnov wrote: "After the March pogrom, I found out that Alimardan bay Topchubashov had been arrested. He was held in a small room in one of the schools in the city together with Colonel Baron Osten-Saken. Armenian guards had been put up in a big room. They behaved audaciously, clicked the rifle's trigger all the time and sang and even shouted all day and even in the evenings. I know this because I personally visited the place where Topchubashov was held." After one month in prison, Bolsheviks released Alimardan on parole, but several days later, he was sent to the Bayil prison again at the insistence of the Armenians. Smirnov recorded: On the first day of his imprisonment, he was not given any food, and he is still hungry. Another 30 people, who are also in prison with him, are hungry too... The prisoners are being guarded only by Armenians who behave audaciously all the time."\(^{20}\) After two and
On 28 May, the Azerbaijan Republic was established in Tiflis. After the Azerbaijani government came to Ganja, Alimardan bay was appointed minister without portfolio in the second cabinet, which was established on 17 June, as it was impossible to get in touch with him. As the Islamic Army gained a victory on the Baku front in the summer of 1918, Alimardan bay fled Baku with difficulty and managed to hide in one of Absheron dachas. As the Islamic Army reached the suburbs of Baku at the end of June, Alimardan bay came to the headquarters of Turkish troops at the Khirdalan station. In early August, he was already in Ganja. On 13 August, Prime Minister Fatali Khan Khoskski wrote to Alimardan bay in Ganja that he should replace him in the post of chairman of the Council of Ministers and temporarily lead the activities of the Foreign Ministry.

At a time when fighting for Baku was under way, on 18 August, the Azerbaijani government sent one of the most prominent politicians of the time and member of the Azerbaijani government, Alimardan bay Topchubashov, to Istanbul as plenipotentiary and extraordinary ambassador in order to establish diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire. Topchubashov reached Istanbul at the end of September. Topchubashov was separately received by Turkish Prime Minister Talat Pasha, Foreign Minister Ahmet Nesim and War Minister Enver Pasha. However, on 8 October, Talat Pasha’s cabinet resigned and Izzet Pasha’s cabinet was formed. Izzet Pasha, the new Foreign Minister Nabi bey, the Turkish education minister and the newly-elected sheikh ul-Islam separately received Topchubashov.

However, on 30 October, Turkey was forced to sign the difficult terms of the Armistice of Mudros. According to the terms of the treaty, British troops were to enter Baku; on 4 November, Topchubashov issued a protest note to the foreign minister of the Ottoman government in connection with the part of the agreement concerning Azerbaijan.

Based on Alimardan bay’s proposal, it was important to establish a parliamentary government system in order to establish a contact with European democracy. The Azerbaijani parliament opened on 7 December. After serious debates, the extraordinary representative to Turkey, Alimardan bay Topchubashov, who was appointed foreign minister on 6 October 1918, was elected chairman of the parliament. Alimardan bay Topchubashov, who was not a member of any political party, was a prominent politician and diplomat of the time and a democratic intellectual who had a broad world outlook. American historian F. Kazimza-
da writes: Topchubashov who was elected president of the parliament was a highly-educated lawyer, tolerant in his views and far from narrow-minded nationalism.21

In November and December 1918, Alimardon bay held a number of useful meetings with Turkish leaders and representatives of allies visiting Istanbul and discussed the situation that developed in the world after the end of the war and issues related to Azerbaijan’s situation.22

On 28 December, the Azerbaijani government endorsed the composition of the Azerbaijani delegation led by Alimardon bay Topchubashov, which would attend the Paris Peace Conference. The Azerbaijani delegation, which reached Paris on 9 May, was received by US President Woodrow Wilson on 28 May. Alimardon bay recorded: “The meeting of our delegation with President Woodrow Wilson should be regarded as a great event, because like heads of Entente states, he does not receive delegations either.”23 Events taking place in Azerbaijan were described in a memorandum prepared in the historical-political context and submitted to Wilson during the meeting, and the US president, as one of the heads of the Versailles Peace Conference, was presented with the demands of the Azerbaijani representatives. 24 During the negotiations, Wilson recommended that the demands of Azerbaijan be submitted to the secretariat of the Peace Conference. The official demands were prepared in English and French and were collected in a printed 50-page booklet.25

Azerbaijani delegation attending the Versailles peace conference.
A. b. Topchubashov seated in the center

first place in the annals of Azerbaijani history.

The Azerbaijan Republic, which was recognized only by the Versailles High Council, was occupied by Soviet Russia on 27 April 1920. There was not a single place in Europe that Alimardan bay had not appealed to in connection with Azerbaijan’s occupation. He sent notes and appeals to the High Allied Council, the representatives of great powers in Paris, the newly-founded League of Nations and a number of international organizations. But it proved impossible to change the Western powers’ silent attitude to the occupation of Azerbaijan.

After the Bolsheviks occupied the whole of the Caucasus in 1921, Alimardan bay appealed to representatives of the Caucasus in Paris and suggested setting up a Caucasus Union. According to a declaration signed by the Caucasus republics amongst themselves under the leadership of Topchubashov, representatives of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia and the Mountain Republic in Europe set aside their differences and stated that they would cooperate closely to ensure the independence of the Caucasus peoples, restore democratic governments in these countries and ensure the prosperity of the region.27

In order to expand the propaganda about Azerbaijan, the Sociology Society in Paris held an extensive conference on the history, culture, ethnography, natural resources and economic situation of Azerbaijan on the initiative of Alimardan bay. The conference specifically noted the origin of Azerbaijan, their formation as a nation, the readiness of the republic for independent life, the occupation by Russia of the independent state, which was recognized de facto by the world community, and other issues.28

Azerbaijani immigrants in Europe demonstrated an active position at the Allies’ Cannes Conference and the Genoa and Hague conferences which focused on Baku oil. In Genoa, Alimardan bay stated that Soviet Russia had no right to sell Baku oil. As a result of serious protests by governments in exile in Europe, the Western allies rejected Soviet Russia’s attempts to sign the Treaty of Lausanne on behalf of Soviet Republics. The coming of socialists to power in France in 1924 and Laborists in Britain created conditions for improving relations with the USSR. As the head of the Azerbaijani delegation, Topchubashov sent an extensive memorandum on the occupation of the Azerbaijan Republic by the Bolsheviks to the British ambassador in Paris, Marquess of Crewe, and submitted a copy of the memorandum to the French government and 29 foreign diplomatic offices in Paris.29

Alimardan bay, who had moved to Saint-Cloud near Paris because of financial difficulties, noted that “first the Italian and British governments removed us from the diplomatic visa...

list, and the French Foreign Ministry wanted to take the same step, but it proved possible to restore the previous rules.”

Alimardan bay was trying to keep in touch with Azerbaijan in various ways. In 1927, he wrote in connection with the mass repression against national forces in Azerbaijan: “Repression in all forms: arrests, searches and exiles have taken on an unusual nature and strengthened. According to reports, many Azerbaijanis have suffered in connection with Caucasian, including Azerbaijani organizations abroad.”

In the autumn of 1920, members of Alimardan bay’s family also managed to come to Paris. There were certain problems in Alimardan bay’s health. He wrote to Ali bay Huseynzada that he was suffering from headache and heart deficiency and had signs of rheumatism in his fingers, especially right fingers all the time, because of a problem in his liver. Although the difficult surgery he had on 26 June 1922 removed him from intensive political activities, Alimardan bay gradually recovered and returned to active political struggle. Despite all these difficulties, he wrote that “no extraordinary and difficult situation can turn me off the right path I have taken to serve my people as long as I have the power to do so.”

At this moment, Alimardan bay got rid of the ending “ov” in his surname and signed his letters, press articles and official appeals as Topchubashi. Because of his intellectual potential, broad world outlook, more than 40 years of productive work experience and resolute political position, he was greatly respected everywhere. Alimardan bay was a member of the Paris International Diplomatic Academy, which was established in 1920s and where many French diplomats had studied, and of French-Caucasian, French-Asian, French Oriental Societies and other authoritative organizations.

Alimardan bay’s family lived in dire straits on the outskirts of Paris. Sometimes difficulties in paying the rent put him in a desperate situation. “It is very difficult to be old in this situation. I have been fighting this disease for more than a year. Our organization is in a bad condition and our business is not good. I am only keeping myself alive only with the hope that I might be needed to serve my nation in Azerbaijan, Idil-Ural, Turkestan and other Turkic regions.”

At his old age, Alimardan bay was trying to follow all developments in the immigrant movement and familiarize himself with press outlets published by various immigrant groups.

On 14 June 1934, the Caucasus republics signed the Pact on the Caucasus Confederation. On behalf of the Azerbaijan National Center, it was signed by Alimardan bay Topchubash and Mahammad Amin Rasulzada. Alimardan bay looked on this pact as the triumph of his idea of Caucasus solidarity. Alimardan bay was looking to the future with hope and wished to unite all Azerbaijanis and neighboring peoples under the banner of the confederation. However, the serious stroke he suffered on 5 November 1934 caused him to depart this world forever. After an imam of the Paris Muslim mosque conducted a religious ceremony on 8 November, a coffin with Alimardan bay’s body was paraded under the Arch of Triumph in the center of Paris. This was a manifestation of respect for him as a prominent politician and statesman of the Azerbaijan Republic. His funeral turned into a rally of solidarity for all Caucasus, Central Asian and Russian immigration.

Alimardan bay’s demise marked the end of an interesting stage in the political movement of Azerbaijan. With his political activities, he gave a national nature to cultural awakening and became one of the creators of a new Azerbaijan.

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30 A. M. Topchubashi: dokumenty iz lichnykh arhiivov. 1903-1934 gg., c. 188.