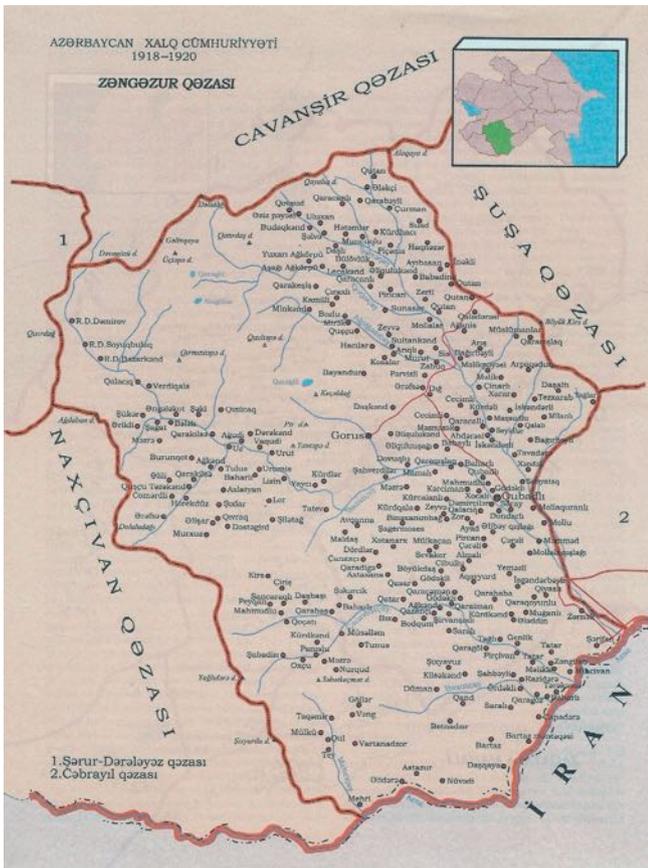


HOW AZERBAIJAN LOST ZANGEZUR

Zangezur province in 1918-1920



Karabakh and Zangezur (1). Unlike Armenia, the “threats” of the Azerbaijani communists could not have serious consequences, because, already having no armed forces of its own, Baku was forced to rely only on Soviet Russia in resolving its most important issue of restoring the integrity of the republic.

The key role in the formulation of Soviet Russia’s position on the Armenia-Azerbaijan territorial conflict was played by the secretary of the Caucasian Bureau of the RCP(b), G. Ordzhonikidze, who was leading the internal and foreign policy of Soviet Azerbaijan in June 1920 on orders of the chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of Soviet Russia, V. Lenin (2) Thus, the Azerbaijani government headed by N. Narimanov was actually removed from direct participation in the negotiations with Armenia. Moscow’s short-term strategy on the settlement of the Armenia-Azerbaijan territorial conflict was determined in the course of active correspondence between the secretary of the Caucasian Bureau of the Central Committee of the RCP(b), G. Ordzhonikidze, and the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the RSFSR, G. Chicherin, in June-July 1920. In his telegrams sent to Moscow, Ordzhonikidze expressed his firm belief in the need to maintain control of Baku over Karabakh and Zangezur, albeit in the form of Armenian autonomy (3). In his reply telegrams, Chicherin treated such persistent position of G. Ordzhonikidze with some fear and even suspected him of inflating nationalism on the part of Azerbaijani communists. Chicherin believed that it would be a fatal mistake to place a one-sided bet on the Soviet but still Muslim Azerbaijan (4).

Looking at the regional situation in the longer term and taking into consideration the fact that a whole

After the occupation of Northern Azerbaijan by the 11th Red Army in April 1920, the Azerbaijani Bolsheviks who seized power inherited from the overthrown government of the Republic of Azerbaijan the problem of the territorial conflict with the Dashnak Armenia. In late April and early May 1920, the parties exchanged several notes of ultimatum, in which they tried in every possible way to substantiate their rights to

Before the transfer of Zangezur to Armenia, all the place names in it were Turkic



range of complex territorial and political issues had to be resolved with neighboring Turkey, Chicherin did not want to let Armenia go far and advocated a compromise line. In his opinion, all disputed areas between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be occupied by Russian units subordinated to the Russian government until a time when a more favorable political situation emerges and it is possible to find a peaceful and satisfactory outcome for all (5). Chicherin's position became decisive in Moscow's further diplomatic steps on this issue, which were supplemented by military operations of the Red Army in Karabakh and Zangezur.

After the Sovietization of Azerbaijan, the new authorities abolished the Karabakh General Governorship, creating the Karabakh Revolutionary Committee in May 1920. It had powers within the borders of the former governorship (6). However, the Karabakh Revolutionary Committee had no control over the Armenian part of Zangezur, where detachments of Dro (Drastamat Kanayan) and later Nzhdeh (Garegin Nzhdeh) were firmly settled. In the Muslim part of the district, power was divided between the Bolshevik Revolutionary Com-

mittee and Sultan Sultanov, the brother of Karabakh's former Governor General K. Sultanov, whose detachment was fighting against Armenian gangs. The military reports of the Red Army about Sultan Sultanov noted that "he is honored among Muslims as the leader of his people for his responsiveness to the poorest class, loyalty to his people and skillful leadership of armed detachments that prevented the invasion of the borders of Zangezur by the detachments of Andranik, Amasazp and Dro" (7).

However, from the very first days, the Bolsheviks had more of a party-class attitude to the Sultanov brothers rather than state one. By the decision of the Politburo and the Organizational bureau of the AKP(b) of 18 September 1920, the Revolutionary Military Council of the 11th Red Army was ordered to "liquidate Sultanov and his gang" (8). Both the Dashnak government and the Armenian Bolsheviks of Karabakh, who tried to discredit the Sultanov brothers in telegrams to in Baku, accusing them of "serving the Musavat" and "massacring the Armenians" (9), played a significant role in the adoption of such a decision.

Meanwhile, by the beginning of August 1920, as a result of the military operations of the Red Army, Dro's troops were squeezed out of Zangezur to Daralagez, while Nzhdeh's forces accumulated in the northern sectors of Ordubad. At the same time, the entry of the Red army units into Nakhchivan at the end of July 1920 gave Moscow the basis to consolidate these military successes with real diplomatic steps. On 10 August 1920, an agreement was concluded between Soviet Russia and Dashnak Armenia in Erivan, which legally secured the presence of Soviet troops in the disputed territories (10). From that moment on, the question of the future fate of Zangezur entered a decisive phase.

The central Soviet government, well informed about all the nuances of Armenia's foreign policy, soberly

The map of the Republic of Azerbaijan displayed at the Paris Peace Conference in 1918-1919 legitimately showed Zangezur as the territory of Azerbaijan



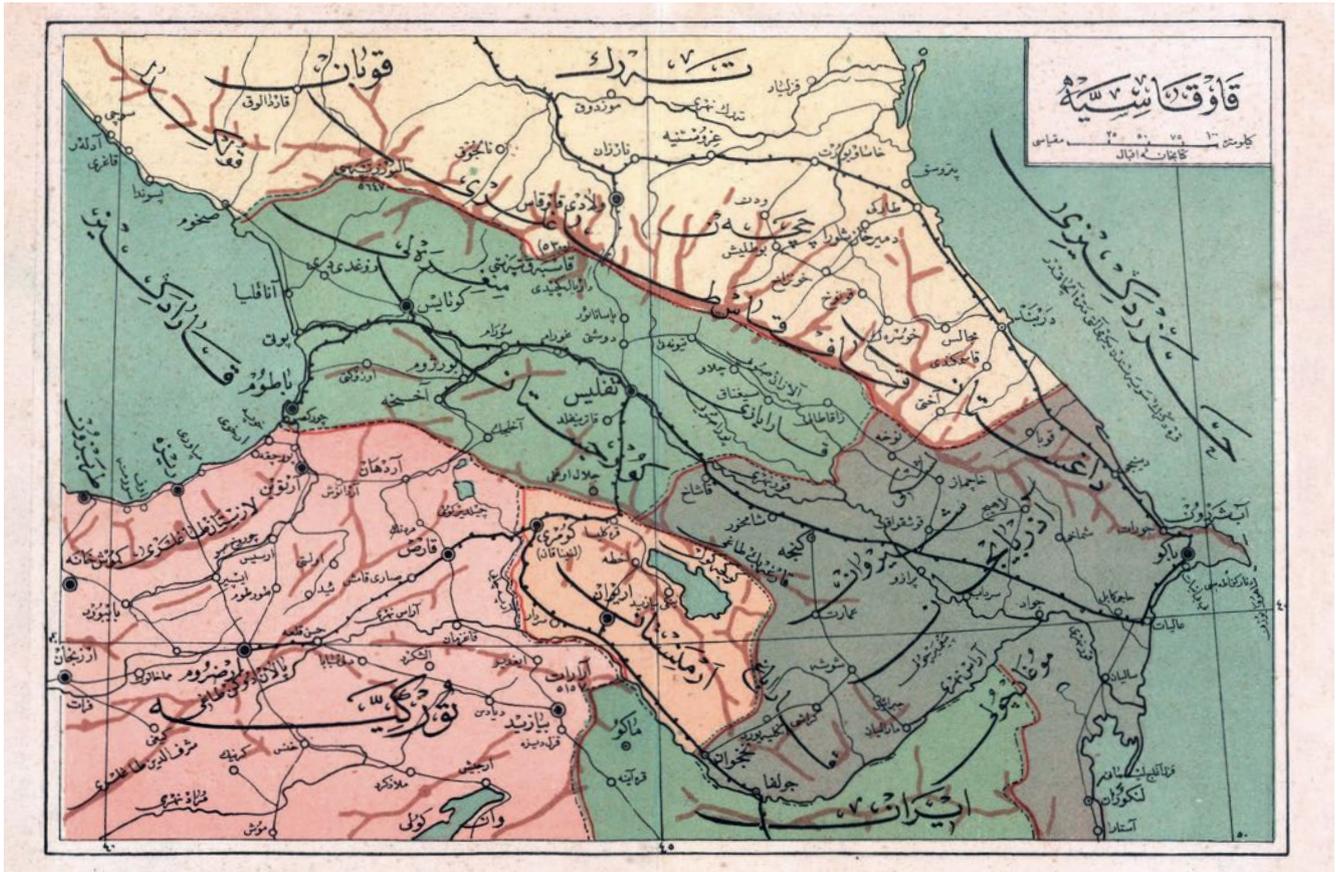
assessed the prospects for cooperation with this republic, which continued to cooperate with the Entente. Therefore, the Bolshevik leadership was more and more skeptical of any attempts to achieve a change in its strategic guidelines in favor of Moscow through territorial pacification of Armenia. At the same time, the successful offensive of the Turkish troops during the military conflict provoked by the Armenian government with the Ankara government of Turkey at the end of September 1920 caused Russian diplomacy to fear the possibility of unfavorable political implications (11).

First of all, Moscow feared that Armenia's defeat could increase Turkish influence not only in bourgeois Armenia and Georgia, but also in its politically related Azerbaijan. But the Bolshevik leadership also understood that its attempts to stop the Turkish offensive were in conflict with the interests of the strategic anti-Entente alliance with Kemalist Turkey. Therefore, Moscow embarked on a course of accelerating the process of Sovietization of Armenia. On the eve of the Sovietization of Armenia, the Bolshevik leadership, through the mouth of I. Stalin, made a number of far-reaching statements in Baku about the further fate of Zangezur and Nakhchivan. Their essence was expressed in the inten-

tion to transfer these territories to Soviet Armenia (12). Having driven a wedge and thus creating an Armenian buffer between Azerbaijan and Turkey, Moscow sought to deprive them of their direct borders in the future.

The actual implementation of this plan began after the Sovietization of Armenia at the end of November 1920. By a decision of the Politburo and the Organizational bureau of the Central Committee of the AKP(b) of 30 November (13) and a declaration of the Baku Council of 1 December 1920 (14), Zangezur and Nakhchivan were to be transferred to Soviet Armenia. These decisions were enshrined in Clause 3 of the agreement between the RSFSR and the Armenian SSR of 2 December 1920, according to which all territories of the Erivan province were recognized as Armenia, including Nakhchivan and Zangezur district (15). Unlike Zangezur, in the issue of Nakhchivan, which was under the control of Turkish troops at the time, the Bolsheviks soon had to retreat on and recognize it as part of the territory of Azerbaijan under the Moscow Soviet-Turkish Treaty of 16 March 1921 (16). The issue of Zangezur had to be postponed until the summer of 1921 due to the new activation of Nzhdeh's detachments, who on 25 November 1920 proclaimed the establishment of an "Autonomous Syunik Republic"

A map published in Turkey in 1927 showed Zangezur as part of Azerbaijan

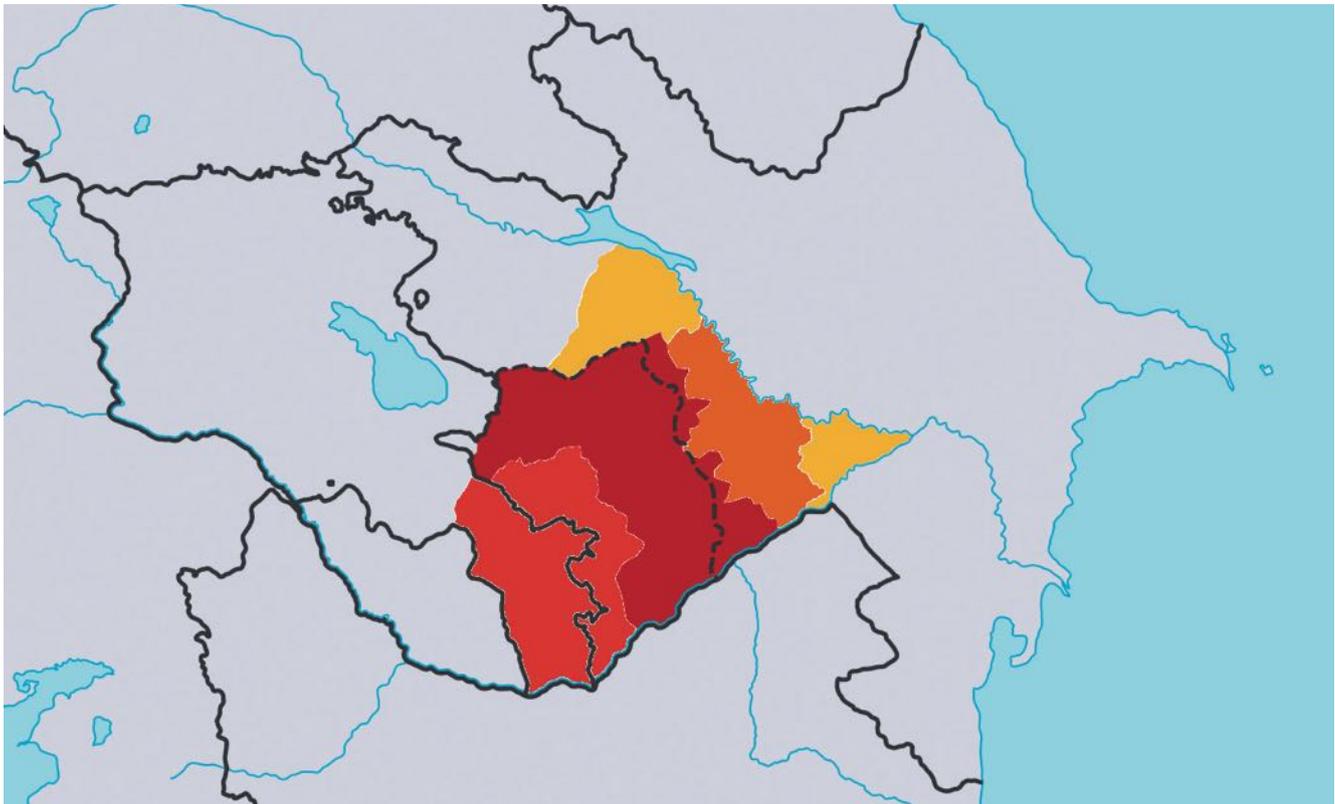


in Zangezur and renamed it the Nagorno-Armenian Republic on 27 April 1921. After the Sovietization of Georgia in late February and the restoration of Bolshevik power in Erivan in early April 1921, Zangezur essentially remained the only anti-Soviet island in the South Caucasus.

The decision on the final liquidation of the Zangezur detachment of Nzhdeh was made at a meeting of the Caucasian Bureau of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) on 3 June 1921. Interestingly, of the seven paragraphs of the top-secret appendix to the minutes of the meeting, six related to Zangezur, and one, the fifth paragraph, to Nagorno-Karabakh (17). Later it turned out that this paragraph actually became the key to solving the issue of Zangezur. In particular, the inclusion in paragraph 5 of a resolution ordering the government of Soviet Armenia to indicate in its declaration that Nagorno-Karabakh belonged to it pursued the following goals: 1. To fight the Dashnak propaganda, which accused the Armenian Bolsheviks of being unable to preserve the integrity of the Armenian lands; 2. To morally and politically support the communists who have regained power in Armenia and become a decisive factor in the liquidation of the Zangezur group of General Nzhdeh.

On 12 June 1921, the Council of People's Commissars of the Armenian SSR issued a decree on the annexation of the mountainous part of Karabakh to Armenia (18). At the end of June 1921, the Revolutionary Military Council of the Caucasian Front, with the aim of finally destroying the military units of Nzhdeh, decided to launch an offensive in four directions in Zangezur. A report by the headquarters of the Caucasian Front issued on 16 July 1921 talked about a complete liberation of Zangezur (19). This event ended the process of occupation and annexation of the western or upper Zangezur to Armenia. In this context, it might be worth noting that whereas according to the decision of the Politburo and the Organizational Bureau of the Central Committee of the ACP(b) of 30 November and declaration of the Baku Council of 1 December 1920 the entire Zangezur district was to be transferred to Soviet Armenia, only the western part of it, which was home mainly to Armenians was transferred in July 1921, so the district was divided on the basis of the ethnic principle.

Speaking about the key reasons for the transfer, or rather the occupation of the western part of Zangezur by Armenia, it is necessary to highlight the following: 1.



Map of Karabakh within modern borders

Typical definition of Karabakh:

- Highlands or Mountainous region
- Zangezur
- Lowlands or Steppe
- Maximum historical definition of Karabakh

Military aggression of Dashnak Armenia supported by local Armenian separatists in Karabakh and Zangezur; 2. Political pressure on the Azerbaijani leadership from Soviet Russia; 3. Concentration of real power in Soviet Azerbaijan in the hands of emissaries from Moscow headed by G. Ordzhonikidze.

When representatives of the Center in Baku were in Baku September-October 1921, they accused Narimanov and his supporters of nationalism under the guise of cleansing the party of national deviationists. He objected: "If the majority of Muslim communists were nationalist in Azerbaijan, then, believe me, Armenia would not have received Zangezur" (20). Similar thoughts were expressed by Narimanov in his telegrams to Lenin: "Azerbaijan has given up its territory in favor of Armenia at a time when this should not have been done for political reasons" (21).

The annexation of a part of Zangezur to Armenia and the subsequent creation of the Meghri region within it finally separated Nakhchivan from the rest of Azerbaijan. The considerable length of the railway linking Nakhchivan with Azerbaijan fell under the control of Armenia, providing it with a direct connection with Iran. The occupation of western Zangezur by Armenia significantly narrowed the borders of Azerbaijan with Turkey and also disrupted Turkey's direct connection with the rest of the Turkic world through Azerbaijan. This policy was aimed at destroying the single Turkic belt in the Eurasian region.

Finally, the severing of a part of Zangezur from Azerbaijan triggered the implementation of the Armenian plan to seize new Azerbaijani lands. During the new stage of Armenia's military aggression against Azerbaijan in 1988-1994, the occupation of Zangezur (Lachin,

Roads passing through Zangezur will have a positive impact on the development of not only the Caucasus, but also neighboring areas



Zangilan, Gubadli) was completed. Zangezur remained an unhealed wound not only on geographical maps, but also in the souls of all Azerbaijanis. ❗

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