

## INTERSECTING INTERESTS: THE NAKHCHIVAN QUESTION AND THE POLITICAL GEOMETRY OF THE CAUCASUS (1920–1921)

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### SUMMARY

The article analyzes how the Nakhchivan issue influenced Soviet–Turkish relations during a decisive period in the early 1920s. After the collapse of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, both Soviet Russia and the emerging Republic of Turkiye sought to expand their influence in the South Caucasus. Nakhchivan, located at a strategic crossroads, became central to their competing yet overlapping interests. Using a comparative-historical approach and drawing on archival documents, diplomatic correspondence, and Turkish officers' memoirs, the study investigates how the Nakhchivan question shaped the regional balance of power. It shows that while the Soviet leadership aimed to maintain control over the Caucasus through the sovietization of Armenia and political leverage over Turkiye, Ankara sought cooperation with the Bolsheviks to strengthen its national independence struggle and secure its eastern borders. The article also highlights the decisive role of the Nakhchivan population, whose consistent support for remaining within Azerbaijan influenced international negotiations and outcomes. In this context, Nakhchivan became both a field of rivalry and a platform for temporary cooperation between Moscow and Ankara. The study concludes that the Nakhchivan issue was not only a territorial or diplomatic dispute but also a key factor shaping the early phase of Soviet–Turkish political interaction.

## INTRODUCTION

The 1920-1921 years were marked by complex and contradictory developments in the history of South Caucasus. After the collapse of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the political gap in the region brought the interests of both Soviet Russia and the newly emerging Turkiye Republic into conflict. During this period, the Nakhchivan region had a special significance for its strategic position: on the one hand, the issue of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan was on the agenda, on the other, the outcomes of the Turkish-Armenian war and the Sovietization process were reshaping the political map of the region. The aim of the article is to investigate the role of the Nakhchivan issue in the policies of Turkiye, Soviet Russia and Armenia during that period and to comparatively analyze the positions of both international and regional actors. In this context the local resistance movement in Nakhchivan, the activity of the Turkish military forces, Soviet-Bolshevik policy and the course of international diplomatic negotiations emerge as central subjects of study.

## MAIN PART

In April 1920, the significant changes took place in both South Caucasus and Turkiye. On April 11 of that year, the Ottoman Empire's parliament operating in Istanbul- Meclis-i Mabusan was dissolved by allied states invading the city (Armaoğlu, 2020). Following the dissolution of the Ottoman parliament, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey was established in Ankara on April 23, 1920. This marked the transfer of actual leadership of the country to the control of Mustafa Kemal Pasha. On April 25, a provisional government called the Temporary Executive Committee (Encümen) was established under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha within the framework of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM). The Committee remained active until May 3, when it was replaced by the Council of Ministers (Armaoğlu, 2020). At the very moment a new Turkish republic was emerging in Anatolia, another independent Turkic republic in the Caucasus was collapsing. Under the pretext of supporting the Turkish national liberation movement in Anatolia, the 11th Red Army of Soviet Russia entered Azerbaijani territory and effectively occupied Baku and the surrounding regions. Under the threat of invasion by the 11th Red Army, the Azerbaijan Democratic

Republic agreed to transfer power to the Bolsheviks. Soviet Russia considered it appropriate to formally announce the establishment of an independent Azerbaijan SSR, in order to conceal its occupation of Azerbaijan. Certainly, this was of a temporary nature, and as is well known, by December 1922-until the dissolution of the Soviet Union-the Azerbaijan SSR had already lost much of its independent statehood attributes. However, it should be noted that the Sovietisation process did not begin simultaneously across all regions of Azerbaijan. On April 28, a telephonogram was sent to the representative of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in Nakhchivan by the Military Council of the Red Army and the Azerbaijan Revolutionary Committee. It was stated that power should be handed over to the Bolsheviks in the region. A Revolutionary Committee consisting of seven members was established. Under such circumstances, Turkish military units were deployed to the region before the arrival of the 11th Red Army divisions. Naturally, the population was not fully aware of the sudden developments. Researcher S. Sadiqov has claimed that, during that period, under the influence of Turkish propaganda, the population of Nakhchivan adopted a more loyal stance toward the Bolshevik revolution unfolding in Azerbaijan (Sadiqov, 1995, pp. 28-29). Their studies reveal that on July 14, 1920, Kazım Karabekir Pasha sent a declaration to the people of Nakhchivan, calling on them to unite with the Bolsheviks. On July 20, he demanded that Veysel Bey, the leader of the Turkish forces in Nakhchivan, establish contact with the Soviet divisions in Goris (Hacıyev, 2024, p. 143).

However, resistance among the local population was strong. They opposed any foreign force invading Nakhchivan. Turkish soldiers reported that, under the current circumstances, it was impossible to achieve anything through ideas or propaganda. For instance, in a letter sent from Nakhchivan to Kazım Karabekir Pasha on June 21, 1920, Khalil Bey noted that in the Nakhchivan region, sticks and clubs were used more than ideas. Indeed, he regarded the refusal of local leaders to obey any foreign power-including Turkish officers cooperating with the Bolsheviks-as signs of disorder, injustice, and even criminality. He claimed that the people remained silent out of fear of these alleged injustices (Hacıyev, 2024, p. 143). Nevertheless, this resistance essentially stemmed from the desire of local leaders and forces loyal to the national government to defend Nakhchivan.

At the same time, the local population was also aware that it would be impossible to resist the attacks of Dashnak Armenia without Turkish support. Taking advantage of the collapse of the Republic, the military forces of Dashnak Armenia launched successive attacks on Nakhchivan. In May 1920, a petition signed by representatives of the local population and sent to the command of the 15th Army stated that, until then, the people of Nakhchivan had defended their rights, honor, and dignity with their blood and property, relying solely on God's help and without any external support. The letter reveals that the local population was aware that the increasing pressure from Dashnak Armenia was, in fact, the result of a broader political agenda-namely, the regional policy of Great Britain. They reported that significant obstacles prevented the forces of Soviet Russia and Soviet Azerbaijan from coming to Nakhchivan's aid. The Turkish forces stationed in Bayazid, however, could come to Nakhchivan's aid (Atnur, 1999, p. 287).

Armenian attacks intensified particularly in the month of June (Sadiqov, 1995, p. 31). As our analysis above clearly shows, Dashnak Armenia was merely the visible tip of the iceberg. Britain had a vested interest in the intensification of Armenian attacks. The support that the Turkish national liberation movement was expected to receive from the Bolsheviks – via Nakhchivan – ran counter to British interests in Anatolia. At that time, Dashnak forces, having seized part of the Sharur district, carried out horrific massacres against the local population. Meanwhile, Soviet Russia—which had effectively occupied other parts of Azerbaijan – was undergoing certain shifts in its political strategy.

They did not want Dashnak Armenia to be defeated by Turkey alone. They believed that such a development could shift the regional balance against Soviet Russia. To prevent this, they resorted to various pretexts. For example, in one of the letters sent to Ankara by Georgy Chicherin, the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, it was stated that war with the Armenians should be avoided. In return, Soviet Russia would assist in normalizing relations between the parties (Atnur, 1999, p. 290). He presented this as one of the key conditions for joint cooperation between the Turkish Grand National Assembly and Soviet Russia. The leadership of the Assembly believed that failing to reach

agreement with Soviet Russia on such matters would diminish the prospects for signing a bilateral treaty. Therefore, on June 20, an order was sent to Kazım Karabekir Pasha, commander of the Eastern Front, to halt military operations against the Armenians. Kazım Karabekir Pasha, who had a more accurate understanding of the situation in the region – including Nakhchivan – than Ankara, held a different view from the new Turkish government on this matter. However, for the sake of political decisions, the army was compelled to halt its operations. The Bolsheviks knew that, in such dire circumstances, the population-unable to receive help from the Turks – would turn toward them. For the Bolsheviks, the most important thing was to prevent Nakhchivan from falling under the control of Dashnak Armenia, no matter the cost. The appeal made by the people of Nakhchivan to Soviet Russia and the Bolshevik leadership, which had already taken power in Azerbaijan, in early June can be explained precisely by this context. According to Soviet-era Azerbaijani historian Qarash Madatov, in early June the population of Nakhchivan addressed a petition to Soviet Russia and the leadership of the Azerbaijan SSR, requesting assistance against the forces of the Entente and the Armenians.

On July 11, the Armenian offensive toward Vedi and the occupation of several villages in Sharur prompted the Turkish military forces in Nakhchivan to take action. The Turkish units led by Veysel Ünüvar joined forces with the local police under the command of Habib Bey Salimov. However, the Dashnak forces had superior manpower, weapons, and ammunition. During the clashes in Sharur and the intensified Dashnak attacks in Shahtakhti, Turkish detachments commanded by Veysel Bey, Ali Demir (Teymur), and Javid Bey demonstrated remarkable bravery. However, the imbalance of forces led to their withdrawal (Əliyev, 2015, p. 312). The 1st Battalion of the 34th Regiment of the 11th Division of the 15th Army, along with a machine gun company and a cavalry detachment, played a significant role in the fight against the Armenians. On July 14, 1920, Halil Pasha handed over command of the Turkish military forces in the region to Ali Teymur Bey (Atnur, 1999, p. 287). However, the full establishment of Soviet power in Nakhchivan took place in July 1920. The order for the Bolshevik army to advance toward Nakhchivan was issued on July 19. A 30-man cavalry unit from the 1st Caucasian Regiment of the Red Army arrived in Nakhchivan during the night of July 27. The following day, a cavalry detachment of the 106th Regiment, named after Trotsky and part of the 11th Red Army, entered the city. Their number was close to 300 (Sadıqov, 1995, p. 32). On July 28, the establishment of Soviet power was officially declared in Nakhchivan.

On July 29 in the city of Nakhchivan, on October 19 in Ordubad, and on December 2 in Sharur, it became possible to establish revolutionary committees and local governing bodies. On July 30, 1920, Turkish military detachments operating in the region entered Nakhchivan, which was under Bolshevik control. Since the Bolsheviks had not yet consolidated their position in the area, they treated the Turkish forces with caution and cordiality. In fact, when the Turkish units arrived in the city, Bolshevik cavalry welcomed them with the 'Internationale' march (Ünüvar, 2014, p. 42).

Despite the entry of Red Army units into the city of Nakhchivan, the continued control of Ordubad and Sharur by the military forces of Dashnak Armenia further strengthened the Turkish–Bolshevik rapprochement in the region until the autumn of 1920. It was no coincidence that Khalil Bey, the commander of Turkish military forces in Nakhchivan, participated in meetings organized by the Bolsheviks. Turkish officers and units of the Bolshevik Red Army fought together against the Dashnaks. Khalil Bey was a key figure in establishing relations between the Bolsheviks in Nakhchivan and Mustafa Kemal's Turkey. The Turkish rapprochement with the Bolsheviks encouraged some officers of the Republican army to cooperate with them. One such figure was Colonel Habib Bey Salimov, who had rendered extraordinary service in the liberation of Baku as part of the Caucasian Islamic Army. After the April occupation, Habib Bey Salimov resigned from the army and was appointed military commissar to Nakhchivan by the Azerbaijani Bolshevik government in May. "After arriving in Nakhchivan, he even served for a time as deputy chairman of the Nakhchivan Revolutionary Committee (Sadıqov, 1995, p. 34). However, his service did not last long. Habib Bey Salimov was arrested on September 1, 1920, and executed by firing squad in December of the same year. Two days after the arrest of Habib Bey, Khalil Pasha was summoned from Nakhchivan to Baku (Ünüvar, 2014, p. 48). The memoirs of Turkish officer Veysel Ünüvar, who

arrived in the region, reveal that the events of those days caused discontent among Turkish military officers. On September 8, Unuvar even submitted a request to resign from his post in the region to the central army headquarters; however, the command rejected it. (Ünüvar, 2014, p. 48)”.

The Turkish officer noted that the Turkish military headquarters had turned into a center for communist activity, and an Armenian named Azaryan had begun delivering lectures there. These observations make it clear that Turkish military intelligence was aware of the growing Bolshevik–Armenian rapprochement. It was evident that the Bolsheviks were enticing the Armenians in order to facilitate the Sovietization of Armenia. While Turkish officers in the region opposed these developments, directives from the central command prevented them from taking action. This was because the Turkish government needed assistance from Bolshevik Russia. The Bolsheviks, in turn, exploited this need to strengthen their position in the region. Another incident also revealed the existence of a covert connection between the Bolsheviks and the Armenians. On September 24, 1920, Turkish military forces in Nakhchivan were instructed to receive the Bolshevik division advancing toward the Goris–Mehri direction. It was emphasized that Turkish support was essential to ensure the division’s safe arrival in Nakhchivan. However, as Turkish forces moved to welcome the Bolsheviks, Armenian units launched attacks from the Bardiz and Shahtakhti directions. In late September and early October, clashes with Armenian forces occurred near Ordubad, in the direction of Soyqu Mountain.

Following the execution of Habib Bey by the Bolsheviks, a Turkish officer named Nashid Javad was appointed to the newly formed Nakhchivan Revolutionary Committee. In accordance with directives from Soviet Russia, the Bolsheviks carried out coordinated operations with Turkish military officers. The Turkish officers made efforts to maintain control over strategic sites and transportation routes in the region. Said Sadiqov reports that they monitored developments at railway stations and stops along the line from Arazdayan to Julfa station. Turkish officer Hikmet Efendi was in charge of postal, telegraph, and communication services (Sadiqov, 1995, pp. 35, 36). In October 1920, additional units of the 11th Red Army arrived in Nakhchivan. Bahadur Velibeyov, a staunch Bolshevik known for his hostile stance toward the Turks, was appointed as the army’s extraordinary commissar. Upon his arrival in Nakhchivan, he immediately began implementing punitive measures and demanded the withdrawal of Turkish military units from the region. Public protests against Bahadur Valibayov led to his temporary removal from office. However, due to his notorious brutality in suppressing anti-Bolshevik uprisings in Tambov, Valibayov was considered an irreplaceable figure by the Bolsheviks—especially by Ordzhonikidze. For this reason, he was reinstated to his position (Mədatli, 2024, p. 9).

From November 1920 onward, the situation began to shift. While the war between Turkey and Armenia was still ongoing, Bolshevik Russia started presenting itself as the defender of Armenia. In anticipation of Turkey gaining the upper hand against the Dashnaks, Russia took steps to exert political pressure on Baku in order to prevent Turkey from establishing close relations with Azerbaijan. Within this framework, on November 4, 1920, a joint meeting was held between the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijani Communist Party (Bolshevik) and members of the Caucasus Bureau of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik). The main topic of discussion was the report by Comrade Legran on the situation in Armenia. The meeting was chaired by Grigory Kaminsky, the responsible secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party’s Central Committee, with Lozner serving as secretary. Among the participants at the meeting were Nariman Narimanov, Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the Azerbaijan SSR; Mirzadavud Huseynov, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs; Aleksandr Yegorov; as well as members of the Caucasian Bureau: Joseph Stalin, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, and Elena Stasova. Furthermore, the meeting was attended by Aron Sheynman, the RSFSR representative in Georgia; Boris Legran, the RSFSR representative in the Republic of Armenia; Saak Gabrielyan, a member of the Armenian Military Revolutionary Committee and Military Revolutionary Council; as well as Aliheydar Garayev, People's Commissar for Naval and Military Affairs of the Azerbaijan SSR (Протокол №4 заседание Политбюро ЦК АКП совместно с членами Кавбюро ЦК РКП(б). 04.11.1920, 1920, pp. 17,20). One of the main points of discussion was the proposed transfer of the Zangezur region to Armenia as

part of a planned peace treaty between Armenia and Russia. The members of the Political Bureau did not consider this option politically or strategically appropriate. According to their position, such a step could only be taken as a last resort. The task of preparing a written justification of the Political Bureau's stance on the matter was assigned to Nariman Narimanov.

Soviet Russia's concerns regarding Turkey's policy in the South Caucasus are clearly reflected in certain lines of a coded telegram sent by I. Stalin-then RSFSR People's Commissar for Workers' and Peasants' Inspection and People's Commissar for Nationalities-to V. Lenin from Vladikavkaz on November 16, 1920 (Шифротелеграмма Сталина Ленину., 1920, pp. 1-2).

In order to drive a wedge between Azerbaijan and Turkey, and to prevent Turkey from gaining dominance over Armenia, the Bolsheviks pursued a rather insidious policy. In November 1920, during the battles fought by Turkish military units and local forces against the Armenians in the direction of the villages of Garabaghar and Khok, the Bolshevik military units stationed in Nakhchivan refrained from participating, citing various excuses. On November 7–8, 1920, while heavy fighting was taking place in the areas of Garabaghar, Khok, Mahmudkend, and Garatepe, the Bolsheviks and their subordinate volunteers did not join the new operations and instead remained positioned in the direction of Yengija (Ünüvar, 2014, p. 63). Nevertheless, a significant victory was achieved over the Armenians in the Shahtakhti–Mahmudkend direction. This victory was even discussed during the 96th session of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, held on November 6, 1920. Yusuf Cemil Bey, the deputy from Kütahya (later known as Cemil Altay following the adoption of the surname law), addressed a question to Chief of General Staff İsmet Bey (later İsmet İnönü, the second President of Turkey). In response, İsmet Bey joyfully informed the deputies that Shahtakhti—a strategically important location between Azerbaijan and Turkey—had been successfully liberated through military operations. This event is recorded in Volume 5 of the First Term of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey's official proceedings.

After these victories, Russian military units moved from Yengija to Mahmudkend, where Turkish forces were stationed. On November 12, Armenian reconnaissance attacks were launched in the directions of Qushchu Demirchi, Dudengya, and Zeyva. Turkish military forces and local units repelled the Armenians. Citing the violation of the ceasefire agreement previously reached with Armenia, the Turkish military command sent a formal letter to the Armenian side. In response, the Armenians stated that they would only cease fire if the Qaratepe area was handed over to them. An armored train under Armenian control was causing serious problems along the front line. Turkish forces, together with Bolshevik (Russian) units, devised a joint operation plan to capture the train. However, the operation failed due to the sudden withdrawal of the Bolsheviks. Eyewitness V. Ünüvar wrote that the Bolsheviks launched a cavalry attack from Tezekend, but the train's machine guns opened fire, forcing them to retreat. Meanwhile, the Armenians managed to repair the destroyed bridge and save the train. A Turkish officer describing the operation noted that, in reality, it was not the Armenians but the Bolsheviks who had saved the train. Despite all these developments, the blows suffered by Armenia on the Nakhchivan front—where it considered itself militarily strong—on November 14–15, and the rapid removal of obstacles on the road to Yerevan by the military units stationed there, led Armenia to send a delegation to Gyumri to request peace. After this victory, Veysel Ünüvar was informally awarded the Silver Merit Military Medal by Kazım Karabekir Pasha and Kazım Orcay (Ünüvar, 2014, pp. 74-75).

In November–December 1920, Soviet Russia's agreements with Armenia to cede a territory it did not own – Nakhchivan – provoked strong opposition from the local population, nationally-minded Bolsheviks within the Azerbaijan SSR government, and Turkey. At war with Dashnak Armenia, Turkey dealt heavy blows to it on the front. On December 2, Dashnak Armenia simultaneously signed a treaty in Gyumri (Alexandropol), acknowledging its defeat by Turkey, and began negotiations with Soviet Russia's representative to transfer power to the Bolsheviks.

The Treaty of Gyumri was signed on behalf of the Turkish government by Eastern Front Commander Ferid Kazım Karabekir Pasha, Erzurum Governor Hamid Bey, and Erzurum deputy Süleyman Necati Bey. On the Armenian side, the signatories included former Dashnak Prime Minister Aleksandr Khatisyan, Finance Minister Avram Gulkhanyan, and Deputy Minister of Internal

Affairs Stepan Gordanyan. According to the treaty, the war was officially ended and the border between the two states was defined. Starting from the source of the Lower Karasu River, the boundary followed the Aras River, then the Arpa River up to Kekaçm in the north, continuing through the Karakhan Valley, east of Tiknis, east of Büyük Kemli, Qızıldaş, and the Büyük Ağbaba Mountain line. The parties agreed that a commission would be formed two weeks after the treaty's signing to determine the precise shape of the border (Gümrü, Moskva və Qars müqavilələri, 2014, pp. 3-4). The Treaty of Gyumri recognized Nakhchivan as under Turkish protection, and proposed the formation of a special administrative regime in Nakhchivan, Sharur, and Shahtakhti through a public vote. Armenia was not to interfere in the functioning of this special administration (Hacıyev, Naxçıvanın muxtariyyət statusu və muxtar respublikanın yaradılması, 2015, p. 20). Turkey guaranteed free passage and transit between Iran, Azerbaijan, and Armenia via Sharur, Nakhchivan, Shahtakhti, and Julfa (Gümrü, Moskva və Qars müqavilələri, 2014, p. 7).

Turkey also imposed a military restriction on Armenia, emphasizing that this obligation aimed to prevent imperialist powers from provoking Armenia into a new war. The Dashnak government was permitted to maintain a lightly armed gendarmerie force to ensure internal security. For national defense purposes, Armenia was allowed to possess a military unit consisting of eight mountain or field cannons, twenty machine guns, and 1,500 mercenary soldiers. Compulsory military service was to be abolished in Armenia. For defensive purposes, Armenia was permitted to possess cannons with a barrel diameter of up to 15 centimeters. In fact, for that period, this represented the demilitarization of Armenia—a state that had previously committed massacres and acts of genocide against Azerbaijanis and Turks in the region. The treaty even granted Turkey's representative in Yerevan the right to inspect the Dashnak Armenian military system at any time. In return, if Dashnak Armenia faced foreign military intervention or internal unrest, the government of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey was obliged to provide armed assistance (Gümrü, Moskva və Qars müqavilələri, 2014, p. 5). This was, in effect, Armenia's military capitulation. The Dashnak government also undertook the obligation to declare the Treaty of Sèvres—which had effectively erased the Ottoman Empire from the stage of history—as invalid, and to recall its ambassadors from European countries who had been engaged in anti-Turkish activities.

One of the key provisions of the treaty concerned the rights of the Muslim population living in the historical territories of Western Azerbaijan—then under the control of Dashnak Armenia. The Dashnak government was obligated to protect the rights of Azerbaijani Turks and Muslims, and to ensure their religious and cultural development. To safeguard the religious rights of the Azerbaijani population, Muslim clerics were to be elected directly by the Muslim community. The elected clerics—muftis—would be overseen by a Chief Mufti. The Chief Mufti himself would be elected by local muftis, and his appointment would be confirmed by the Ministry of Sharia of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. This was a formal obligation assumed by Dashnak Armenia under the treaty. One of the noteworthy aspects of the treaty text is the frequent use of the terms “Republic of Erivan” or “Erivan Government” instead of “Republic of Armenia.” This choice of terminology subtly reflected the Turkish military-political circles' view of the limited territorial scope within which the Armenian Republic could legitimately exist. The treaty was to be ratified and exchanged within one month.

Immediately after the signing of the treaty, Turkey began implementing measures derived from the document in Nakhchivan. Turkish General Veysel Ünüvar was appointed as the temporary extraordinary commissioner of Nakhchivan. Archival records indicate that in taking this step, the Turkish side referred to the provisions of the Gyumri Agreement signed between Turkey and Armenia (Доклад уполномоченному РСФСР товарищу Леграну. Копия тов. Авису, 1920, p. 2). Under his leadership, Turkish military units ensured stability in Sharur and several other areas along the border with Armenia. He issued a declaration addressed to the members of the Revolutionary Committee and the population of Nakhchivan. The declaration stated that, according to the terms of the Treaty of Gyumri, Nakhchivan was under Turkish protection. Kazım Karabekir Pasha expressed support for Veysel Bey, affirming that neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia would interfere in the Nakhchivan issue. Soviet agents in the region reported to the central authorities that Veysel Bey had released all counter-revolutionaries who had opposed Soviet rule. They noted that the pro-Turkish propaganda carried out

by Turkish military personnel had achieved significant success among the local population (Доклад уполномоченному РСФСР товарищу Ляграну. Копия тов. Авису, 1920, р. 2).

Soviet Russia once again came to Armenia's rescue. The establishment of Bolshevik Armenia was officially declared. On the same date as the Treaty of Gyumri-December 2-the Revolutionary Committee of the Azerbaijan SSR issued a proclamation regarding the establishment of Soviet rule in Armenia, which was published in issue No. 178 of the newspaper *Kommunist* (Декларация Азревкома в связи с установлением в Армении Советской власти, р. 6). In the declaration, the *Musavat* and *Dashnak* governments (referring to the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and *Dashnak Armenia – M.S.*) were portrayed as the main instigators of territorial disputes and massacres in *Zangezur*, *Nakhchivan*, and *Karabakh*, and were labeled as traitors who had sold out to the British (Декларация Азревкома в связи с установлением в Армении Советской власти, р. 6). The declaration treacherously stated that *Zangezur* and *Nakhchivan* were inseparable parts of Soviet Armenia. It granted full self-governance rights to the working peasants living in the mountainous part of *Karabakh*. All military operations in *Zangezur* were to be halted, and the military units of Soviet Azerbaijan were to withdraw from the area.

Thus, it became evident that the situation began to shift gradually following the sovietization of Armenia. The agreement signed between Soviet Russia and Soviet Armenia on December 2, 1920, revealed Russia's duplicitous policy in its approach to Azerbaijan and its cooperation with Turkey over *Nakhchivan*. Moscow's pressure on *Nariman Narimanov*, head of the Azerbaijan SSR, to issue a statement supporting the transfer of *Nakhchivan* to Armenia was met with strong opposition from the local population. On December 3, the Soviets, having signed the agreement with Armenia, sent a proposal to Turkey-via *Polikarp Gurgenevich (Budu) Mdivani*-suggesting that *Nakhchivan* be handed over to Soviet Armenia. *Mdivani* conveyed this proposal to the Turkish delegation in *Gyumri*. However, the Turkish side firmly rejected it.

*Behbud Agha Shahtahinski's* statement during his meeting with the people of *Nakhchivan* on December 15 was a direct reflection of the unfolding situation. He declared that the only force capable of protecting them was the Turkish army (*Hacıyev, Naxçıvan Azərbaycanın dövlətçilik tarixində*, 2018, p. 173).

At that time, the issue of *Nakhchivan* was also discussed in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. In response to a question raised by *Hüseyin Avni Ulaş*, the deputy from *Erzurum*, regarding the fate of *Nakhchivan*, the Assembly's representative for foreign affairs, *Ahmed Muhtar Mollaoğlu*, stated that *Nakhchivan* was under Turkish protection and that Turkish military forces were maintaining control over the region. At the time, *Ahmed Muhtar Mollaoğlu* sent a letter to Soviet Russia's Foreign Minister, *Georgy Chicherin*. In his letter, he emphasized that the populations of *Nakhchivan* and *Karabakh* strongly opposed the Soviet attempt to unlawfully transfer these territories to Armenia (*Atatürk'ün Milli Dış Politikası (1919-1923)*, 1981, pp. 242-244).

This fact is also confirmed by archival documents included in our research. In a report sent from *Nakhchivan* by Bolshevik agents to *Boris Legran*, the authorized representative of the RSFSR in the Armenian SSR, it was stated: "Turkish emissaries are conducting strong pro-Turkish propaganda among the local population. According to Comrade *Studnev's* report, if the local people were given the freedom to choose, they would unequivocally lean toward Turkey rather than Soviet Armenia and fall under its influence." (Доклад уполномоченному РСФСР товарищу Ляграну. Копия тов. Авису, 1920, р. 2).

Most of the reports and communications sent by the Bolsheviks to the central authorities in December 1920 regarding Turkish policies in *Nakhchivan* and surrounding regions were marked by a tone of hostility. In a report sent by *Bahadur Valibeyov*, the Extraordinary Commissioner of *Nakhchivan*, to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Military Revolutionary Council of the 11th Red Army, and the Revolutionary Committees of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the opening sentence read: "In addition to Report No. 4 concerning Turkish activities in the *Nakhchivan* region and Persia (Iran), I hereby inform you: the Turks' attitude toward us-the Soviet government-is one of absolute hostility. Whereas they previously operated covertly, they now openly display their position" (Доклад Ц.К. Партии, Революционному Совету 11 Армии, Аревком и Азревком, р. 4).

The report revealed that the Turks had set a clear goal: to protect Nakhchivan and prevent it from being handed over to the Bolsheviks, who intended to transfer it to Armenia under the terms of an agreement. On this issue, the position of the local forces coincided with that of the Turkish military officers. Bahadur Valibeyov referred to the local Nakhchivan population—who had once fought bravely to defend the region from Armenian aggression—as counter-revolutionaries. He wrote that, in the Nakhchivan region, the Turks, lacking real power, were trying to make use of the local counter-revolutionary forces. The documents clearly show that local groups, especially in Jahri, strongly supported the activities of the Turks (Доклад Ц.К. Партии, Революционному Совету 11 Армии, Арревком и Азревком, p. 4).

Another document detailing the events of late December 1920 reveals that, at that time, the Turks controlled most of the strategic points in Nakhchivan, including Arazdeyen, Sharur (Bash Norashen), Nakhchivan city, and Julfa. On December 21, a Turkish military detachment of 500 soldiers was stationed in the direction of Sharur, while several hundred Turkish soldiers and officers were present in Nakhchivan city. The commander of the city garrison was, in fact, a Turkish officer. The Bolshevik Russia's negotiations with Armenia had angered the Turks. They openly demonstrated to the Bolsheviks that they would not surrender Nakhchivan. At that time, Bahadur Valibeyov was trying to establish himself in the region as a representative of Armenia.

Such developments were undermining the Turkish government's trust in Soviet Russia. A letter dated January 8, 1921, sent from the city of Kars by Budu Mdivani to G. Chicherin, I. Stalin, and Sh. Eliava—a member of the Caucasus Bureau of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the Georgian Military Revolutionary Committee—confirms this concern. In his telegram, Mdivani wrote that the Turks remained hesitant and harbored doubts about Russia. He noted that the Turks were questioning whether Moscow was using Turkey merely for its own interests. As a result, they were closely monitoring all actions taken by Soviet Russia, especially its stance on the “Armenian question”. Mdivani emphasized that Soviet Russia's position on Caucasian affairs was causing confusion among the Turks, leading to the impression that the Bolsheviks were prioritizing Armenia's interests. He added that several factors were intensifying Turkish suspicions. First and foremost, the Turks observed that Bolshevik representatives in Yerevan were making statements—on behalf of Russia—about the annexation of Zangezur to Armenia, and were creating the impression that this move had been accepted by the Azerbaijan SSR. Mdivani noted that all of this was delivering a serious blow to the possibility of an alliance between Soviet Russia and Turkey. He believed that in order to reach real and practical agreements with the Turks, it was essential to preserve and strengthen their goodwill toward Soviet Russia.

On January 11, 1921, Behbud Shahtahtinski was appointed Extraordinary Commissioner to Nakhchivan under the mandate of the Azerbaijani Military Revolutionary Committee. He advocated for establishing close relations with Turkey and for preserving Nakhchivan as an autonomous territory (Hacıyev, Naxçıvan Azərbaycanın dövlətçilik tarixində, 2018, p. 173). Alongside Behbud Shahtahtinski, Bahadur Valibeyov also continued his activities as the Extraordinary Commissioner of the 11th Red Army.

At that time, the difference in attitudes toward the Turks between Behbud Shahtahtinski and Bahadur Valibeyov was clearly observable. Behbud Agha Shahtahtinski was well aware of the hardships Nakhchivan had endured, the struggles it had faced, and the resilience of the local population. In contrast, Bahadur Valibeyov—an outsider to Nakhchivan—engaged in various maneuvers to prove his personal loyalty to the Bolsheviks.

In January 1921, armed detachments were sent from Soviet Armenia to Nakhchivan under various pretexts. Turkish military forces under the command of Veysel Bey, relying on the agreement reached between Armenia and Turkey, disarmed these units upon their entry into the region to prevent provocations and attempts to force the local population into submission to Soviet Armenia through armed pressure.

One such detachment, allegedly sent to repair the telegraph line, was disarmed in January 1921. In response to this action, Bahadur Valibeyov sent a telegram to the Turkish command, claiming that it constituted interference in the internal affairs of Soviet Nakhchivan. Veysel Bey replied that the

agreement between Dashnak Armenia and Turkey clearly stated that not a single armed soldier from Armenia was permitted to enter Nakhchivan. Therefore, the detachment had been disarmed. Their weapons would be returned when they re-entered Armenia (Доклад Ц.К. Партии, Революционному Совету 11 Армии, Арревком и Азревком, р. 4). The Turks had received intelligence indicating that, prior to the planned plebiscite in Nakhchivan, the combined forces of the Red Army and Armenian units were preparing to enter the region, carry out massacres against the Muslim population, kill a portion of them, and forcibly displace the rest. This information was also conveyed by the Turks to the local national forces who supported the preservation of Nakhchivan as part of Azerbaijan—particularly to the military detachments based in the village of Jahri (Доклад Ц.К. Партии, Революционному Совету 11 Армии, Арревком и Азревком, р. 5).

Archival documents also reveal that the Bolsheviks were concerned about Turkey's growing influence in Southern Azerbaijan, particularly in Tabriz and the surrounding areas. Bahadur Valibeyov believed that Turkey's presence in Southern Azerbaijan—or as he referred to it, Iranian Azerbaijan—needed to be curtailed, even “have one of its wings cut off.”

In January 1921, a plebiscite was held at the initiative of representatives from Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia. More than 90 percent of participants supported the preservation of Nakhchivan as an autonomous territory within the Republic of Azerbaijan. It can be stated unequivocally that this outcome represented the only common ground on which Turkey and Bolshevik Russia could agree. For Turkey, the ideal scenario was to maintain control over Nakhchivan, while for Bolshevik Russia, the preferred option was to place it under the authority of the Armenian SSR. The position of the local population, however, was clear: the people of Nakhchivan firmly considered themselves part of Azerbaijan. Archival documents also reveal that, on the eve and during the Russia–Turkey negotiations in Moscow, an intense struggle for actual dominance in the region was underway. Every advantage gained on the ground served to strengthen each side's hand at the diplomatic table.

In February 1921, the Dashnak government was re-established in Armenia. This “government” declared war against Bolshevism and communism. In response to this situation, the Turkish command proposed to the Bolshevik military units stationed in Nakhchivan that they unite their forces under Turkish command to fight the common enemy (В Нахичевань из Шахтахтов №14 Комполка №80.13 час. 30 мин. 22/II-921 г. Начгарнизона Шахтахты, копия Начгарнизона Нахичевани «Броневики», р. 29”).

In February 1921, a report was sent from Nakhchivan to the Commander of the Armenian Army, the Revolutionary Military Council of the 11th Red Army, the Central Committees of the Communist Parties of Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Executive Committee of the Armenian Revolutionary Committee, and the Azerbaijani Revolutionary Committee. The report described the efforts of Turkish forces to maintain control over Nakhchivan. It stated that developments in Armenia had significantly affected Nakhchivan. The ongoing struggle between the Dashnaks and the Bolsheviks in Armenia prevented the Armenian Bolsheviks from launching an invasion of Nakhchivan. Taking advantage of this situation, Veysel Bey strengthened Turkish influence in the region. Acting on the orders of Kazım Karabekir Pasha, Veysel Bey sent a message to the Bolshevik units in the area, stating that under the current circumstances, it was necessary for all of them to come under Turkish command. The Bolsheviks believed that the Turkish command's intention was first to bring the forces under their control and then to disarm the Bolsheviks themselves. Turkish military intelligence was conducting extensive operations in the region. Part of the propaganda being spread claimed that uprisings against Soviet rule had already broken out in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine, and that the end of Soviet power was near. Local Bolshevik units refused to subordinate themselves to Veysel Bey, stating that they would only comply after receiving orders from the central command located in Avshar (the Bolshevik military headquarters in the direction of Vedi). Documents from that period mention a figure named Mustafa Kamal as one of the key representatives of Turkish intelligence in Nakhchivan. Naturally, this was not Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the leader of the Turkish national liberation movement. It is known that this individual dealt significant blows to the Bolsheviks in Nakhchivan. Although the Bolsheviks captured him several times, Veysel Bey managed to rescue him and appointed him to a position within the Turkish military units. It is

plausible to assume that the name “Mustafa Kamal” was used as a codename for all Turkish intelligence agents during that period, and that they identified themselves as Mustafa Kamal when captured. The consolidation of Turkish influence in the region was strongly supported by the Khan of Maku. Archival documents from the time frequently mention that the Turks received assistance from the Khans of Maku.

## CONCLUSION

In 1920–1921, the Nakhchivan issue held strategic significance not only for Azerbaijan and Turkey, but also for Soviet Russia and Armenia. The Soviet leadership pursued a policy of balance in the region, aiming both to keep Turkey dependent and to advance the sovietization of Armenia. Turkey, on the other hand, sought to strengthen its national struggle through cooperation with the Bolsheviks, while also securing its borders via Nakhchivan. The position of the Nakhchivan population was unequivocal: they supported the region’s continued inclusion within Azerbaijan. Although this outcome represented a compromise for both Turkey and Soviet Russia, political realities led each side to maneuver in ways that served their respective interests. Thus, the Nakhchivan question became a focal point of both confrontation and cooperation among international powers in the region.

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## XÜLASƏ

### KƏSİŞƏN MARAQLAR: NAXÇIVAN MƏSƏLƏSİ VƏ QAFQAZIN SİYASİ GEOMETRİYASI (1920–1921)

Münəvvər Süleymanova

Məqalədə XX əsrin 20-ci illərinin əvvəllərində həlledici bir dövrdə Naxçıvan məsələsinin sovet–Türkiyə münasibətlərinə necə təsir göstərdiyi təhlil olunur. Azərbaycan Xalq Cümhuriyyətinin süqutundan sonra həm Sovet Rusiyası, həm də formalaşmaqda olan Türkiyə Respublikası Cənubi Qafqazda öz təsir dairələrini genişləndirməyə çalışırdı. Strateji kəsişmə nöqtəsində yerləşən Naxçıvan onların rəqabətli, lakin qismən üst-üstə düşən maraqlarının mərkəzinə çevrildi. Müqayisəli-tarixi yanaşmadan istifadə edərək arxiv sənədləri, diplomatik yazışmalar, eləcə də türk zabitlərinin xatirələri əsasında yazdığımız məqalədə Naxçıvan məsələsinin regional güc balansını necə formalaşdırdığı araşdırılıb. Məqalədə qeyd olunur ki, sovet rəhbərliyi Ermənistanın sovetləşdirilməsi və Türkiyə üzərində siyasi təsir vasitəsilə Qafqazda nəzarəti saxlamağa çalışdığı halda, Ankara milli müstəqillik mübarizəsini gücləndirmək və şərq sərhədlərini təmin etmək məqsədilə bolşeviklərlə əməkdaşlıq edirdi. Məqalədə həmçinin Naxçıvan əhalisinin həlledici rolu vurğulanmış, onların Azərbaycanın tərkibində qalmağa yönəlmiş qətiyyətli mövqeyinin beynəlxalq danışıqlara və nəticələrə ciddi təsir göstərdiyi qeyd edilmişdir. Bu kontekstdə Naxçıvan Moskva ilə Ankara arasında həm rəqabət meydanı, həm də müvəqqəti əməkdaşlıq platforması kimi çıxış etmişdir. Tədqiqatlar belə bir nəticəyə gəlməyə imkan verir ki, Naxçıvan məsələsi yalnız ərazi və ya diplomatik mübahisə deyil, eyni zamanda sovet–Türkiyə siyasi qarşılıqlı münasibətlərinin ilkin mərhələsini formalaşdıran əsas amillərdən biri olmuşdur.

**Açar sözlər:** *Naxçıvan, sovet, Türkiyə, Cənubi Qafqaz, Azərbaycan, geosiyasi, strategiya, diplomatiya.*

## РЕЗЮМЕ

### ПЕРЕСЕКАЮЩИЕСЯ ИНТЕРЕСЫ: НАХЧЫВАНСКИЙ ВОПРОС И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ ГЕОМЕТРИЯ КAVKAZA (1920–1921 гг.)

Мюневвер Сулейманова

В статье анализируется, каким образом Нахчыванский вопрос повлиял на советско-турецкие отношения в решающий период начала 1920-х годов. После падения Азербайджанской Демократической Республики как Советская Россия, так и формирующаяся Турецкая Республика стремились расширить своё влияние на Южном Кавказе. Нахчыван, расположенный на стратегическом перекрёстке, оказался в центре их конкурирующих, но частично пересекающихся интересов. Используя сравнительно-исторический подход и опираясь на архивные документы, дипломатическую переписку и мемуары турецких офицеров, исследование рассматривает, каким образом Нахчыванский вопрос формировал региональный баланс сил. Показано, что в то время как советское руководство стремилось сохранить контроль над Кавказом посредством советизации Армении и политического давления на Турцию, Анкара искала сотрудничества с большевиками с целью укрепления своей борьбы за национальную независимость и обеспечения безопасности восточных границ. В статье также подчёркивается решающая роль населения Нахчывана, чья последовательная поддержка идеи сохранения в составе Азербайджана оказала влияние на международные переговоры и их итоги. В этом контексте Нахчыван стал одновременно и полем соперничества, и платформой для временного сотрудничества между Москвой и Анкарой. В заключение делается вывод о том, что Нахчыванский вопрос представлял собой не только территориальный или дипломатический спор, но и ключевой фактор формирования раннего этапа советско-турецкого политического взаимодействия.

**Ключевые слова:** *Нахчыван, Советский Союз, Турция, Южный Кавказ, Азербайджан, геополитика, стратегия, дипломатия.*