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Why Autonomy? The Making of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region 1918-1925

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Why Autonomy? The Making of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region 1918–1925

ARSÈNE SAPAROV

Abstract

Mountainous Karabakh—an Armenian-populated area within Elizavetpol' *guberniya* with a Turkic majority—became a source of dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the collapse of the Russian Empire. During the Soviet conquest of the region, the Bolshevik Party used the issue of Karabakh to promote its agenda by supporting at times the claims of its ally Azerbaijan, or those of Armenia when it needed to facilitate the capture of Zangezur. By 1921, when the Sovietisation of the region was complete, the Karabakh issue was still unresolved. The solution adopted was to leave Karabakh under Azerbaijani control on condition that it had autonomous status, but this was a solution that satisfied neither side.

THE ARMENIAN–AZERBAIJANI CONFLICT OVER Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the oldest in the post-Soviet space—dating from 1988. As with many of the post-communist conflicts, it started with popular demands to transfer from one sovereignty to another: in this case to transfer the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Azerbaijan to Armenia. It almost immediately turned violent and, with the dissolution of the USSR, a full-scale war erupted between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The ceasefire agreement signed in 1994 ended the active war and left the Armenians in control of most of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region as well as several adjacent districts. Ever since then the line of contact between Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan has been reminiscent of the entrenched positions of the First World War.

The Karabakh conflict has received wide academic attention. The Western literature addressing it has mainly concentrated on recent events as most works dealing with the conflict tend to focus mainly on the events of the post-Stalinist period, rarely venturing as far back as the period of the civil war of 1918–1921. Therefore, the reason behind the Bolsheviks' decision to grant the autonomous status to Nagorno-Karabakh is left

Dedicated to the memory of my father, Karen Sergeevich Saparov 1936–2010.

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aside. It has become almost a cliché to blame the creation of the ethnic Armenian autonomy within Azerbaijan on Stalin, who by doing this created leverage against both republics. It seems that the absence of any Russian-language works on the subject is partially responsible for such lack of historical insight.

Indeed, Karabakh occupies an unusual place within the Soviet historiography of the civil war. Practically every autonomous formation in the USSR published its own history of the Bolshevik struggle during the civil war as a mandatory exercise in Soviet propaganda; but not so in Karabakh, where not a single volume in the Russian language dealing with these events appeared before the onset of the conflict in 1988. In fact, were a Russian-speaking reader to have been interested in the civil war in Karabakh, it would have been next to impossible for him or her to find out about these events.¹ It should be mentioned that several works in the Armenian language appeared in Erevan (Hovhannisian 1971) and Baku (Shakhnazarov 1960; Avagyan 1962; Lernain 1963; Hovhannisian 1963; Barse 1963). Some glimpses of information could also be found in Russian-language works on the history of the region (Mil'man 1971; Kharmandaryan 1969). Nevertheless, it has remained an impossible task to understand the course of the civil war in Karabakh from the Russian-language sources. This perhaps explains the lack of historical analysis in Western works on the subject.

Towards the end of the Soviet Union the number of works addressing the Karabakh issue increased dramatically as both sides tried to back their political struggle with historical evidence. At the core of their debate lay the question of fairness and legitimacy. Armenian scholars saw the granting of Karabakh to Azerbaijan as unfair and illegitimate while their Azerbaijani colleagues quite naturally maintained the opposite view (Galoyan & Khudaverdyan 1988; Khurshudyan 1989; Kocharli 1989; Guliev 1989b). Several important collections of documents were published by both sides to prove their position (Libaridian 1988; Guliev 1989a; Mikaelyan 1992). After the dissolution of the USSR the debate continued along the same lines. In my opinion, the debate framed in terms of fairness compared to unfairness of the Bolshevik decision concerning Karabakh lacks an important element—the very logic informing that decision remains unclear.

The historiography of this issue poses yet another methodological problem. The history of the region is traditionally studied within two distinct periods—one covering the Revolution and civil war until the establishment of Soviet rule (Kazemzadeh 1951; Kadishev 1960; Swietochowski 1985; Hovannisian 1996b); and the other focusing primarily on Soviet economic and state construction in the early 1920s and 1930s (Kilbourn Matossian 1962). There are very few studies that link these two periods together (Altstadt 1992). The result of such periodisation is that the reasons for the granting of autonomy are usually studied within the second period after the Sovietisation of the region and the possible impact of the civil war on the Bolshevik decision-making is neglected.

The goal of this article is to understand the reasons that led the Bolshevik leadership to grant Karabakh to Azerbaijan and at the same time award it an autonomous status.

¹Even the five-volume *Soviet History of the Civil War* had no details on the subject (Budennyi *et al.* 1960).

My intention is to use the specific case of Karabakh to contribute to the evaluation of the general Bolshevik nationality policy in the early 1920s, particularly the principles that were used when shaping the Soviet administrative structure. During the last decade a number of insightful studies have appeared that address the question of Soviet boundary-making and nation-making, focusing mainly on Central Asia or the western borderlands of the USSR (Simon 1991; Roy 2000; Haugen 2003; Hirsch 2005). The South Caucasus is, however, notably absent from these works. One of the problems faced by anyone writing on the subject is that a number of strands must be analysed simultaneously. This includes the policy of the central Bolshevik administration towards the Caucasus and its relations with Kemalist Turkey as well as local communist activities both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The existence of numerous anti-communist groups further complicates matters. Meanwhile, the case of the South Caucasus is particularly important since its territorial delimitation was realised earlier than elsewhere—most territorial decisions were taken in 1921 and implemented at the latest by 1923–1924 thereby potentially providing an early example of the principles used in the Caucasus and how they differed from the later territorial delimitations.²

The civil war: 1918–1920

The South Caucasus and the international political situation in 1917–1918

After the Bolshevik coup of October 1917 the war-weary Russian Army started to collapse. The soldiers deserted *en masse* and hurried back to Russia to participate in

²In this work I use the names that were in official use at the time of the events as they appeared on the Russian official and military maps. In cases where two names were used concurrently they are separated by a slash (/). Since then the Armenians and Azerbaijanis have engaged in renaming campaigns that have dramatically altered the topographic landscape (Saparov 2003; Foster 2009). I deemed it necessary to provide the modern names currently used in Armenia and Azerbaijan in brackets for the convenience of the reader. The category of ‘modern names’ also poses a problem. After the conflict of the 1990s both sides renamed the ‘enemy’ toponyms in the disputed area (the self-proclaimed Republic of Mountainous Karabakh) and as a result it became almost impossible to understand the location of towns and villages. We now have four layers of place-names in the disputed territory: those of the Tsarist era were replaced by Soviet toponyms and two layers of post-conflict Armenian and Azerbaijani place-names. Therefore, to designate the modern place-names in the disputed territory I will use place-names as they were before the outset of the conflict in 1988.

Ethnonyms pose yet another problem. Tsarist sources used the term *Kavkazkie Tatary* to describe the Turkic population of the Caucasus; during the civil war the leaders of Azerbaijan, for political reasons, preferred the term Muslims, which encompassed the entire Muslim population of the South Caucasus—from Muslim Ajarians in Georgia to Kurds, Avars and Lezgins in the Elizavetpol’ and Baku *gubernii*. At that time the term Azerbaijani served as an adjective (Azerbaijani army) rather than as an ethnonym. In the early Soviet period the Bolsheviks abandoned the Tsarist term *Tatary* and used instead *Tyurki*. In the late 1930s, the ethnonym Azerbaijani was coined to include all the Turkic population of the Caucasus (both Shi’a and Sunni) as well as several small ethnographic groups of Muslims. My approach is to use ethnonyms that were in use at the time of events under review; I will, however, avoid using the terms Muslims or Tatars unless they appeared in the official documents, preferring the term *Tyurki* or *Turkic*.

the Bolshevik-promised land redistribution. By the end of January 1918 practically no Russian troops remained on the Caucasian Front, which was now defended by a hastily composed contingent of Armenian and Georgian corps and some volunteers. In these new favourable circumstances the Turkish Army had the opportunity not only to reclaim the territories occupied by the Russian Army during the war but also to recapture the strategic towns of Batum (ceded to the Russian Empire in 1878) and Baku, and to establish a link with Central Asia (Ludshuveit 1966, p. 168).

The menacing state of military affairs of Transcaucasia was exacerbated by the political turmoil in Petrograd. The local leaders were ill-prepared to deal with the situation arising from the collapse of the Empire—the very notion of independence was absolutely foreign to them (Kazemzadeh 1951, p. 80). Until then they had at most envisaged some form of limited self-rule firmly within the Russian state (Burdett 1996, p. 480).

When the Provisional Government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks in Petrograd, the *Zakavkazskii Komissariat* (Transcaucasian Commissariat)³ was established to act as a local government until the All-Russian Constituent Assembly could decide the future of the Empire. After the Bolsheviks dispersed the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 the last hopes of preserving any connection with non-Bolshevik Russia disappeared. After some deliberations a local Caucasian parliament, *Seim* (Diet), was created on 23 February 1918 by re-using the votes cast in elections for the Constituent Assembly.⁴ The three main parties of the *Seim*, the Mensheviks, Dashnaks and Musavatists, each represented a local ethnic group—respectively the Georgians, Armenians and *Tyurks* (known at the time as Caucasian Tatars). The *Seim* refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Bolshevik regime but, at the same time, it recognised that acknowledging reality and declaring independence would be going one step too far. In the midst of this political chaos the Turkish army started its offensive on 12 February.⁵

At the same time, on the Western front, the Germans started a virtually unopposed offensive on 18 February. The very existence of the Bolshevik regime was now at stake. To avert catastrophe the Bolshevik leadership in Russia desperately sought peace with Germany. The Brest-Litovsk peace treaty, signed on 3 March, came at the price of huge territorial losses which affected Transcaucasia as well—the provinces of Kars and Batum were ceded to the Turks (Wheeler-Bennett 1939).

The newly created Transcaucasian *Seim* was shocked by the conditions of the Brest-Litovsk treaty and refused to recognise it: 'In accordance with the decision of the *Seim*, the Transcaucasian Government considers any treaty affecting Transcaucasia

³The Transcaucasian Commissariat existed in the period from 28 November 1917 until 22 February 1918 when it was replaced by *Zakavkazskii Seim* (Transcaucasian Diet). See: 'Prikaz ob obrazovanii Zakavkazskogo Komissariata 15 (28) noyabrya 1917 g.', in *Dokumenty* (1919, pp. 7–8).

⁴Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 13, pp. 118 back, 119. Transcaucasia received 35 places in the Constituent Assembly, this number was proportionally increased and the Transcaucasian *Seim* had 122 delegates.

⁵See: 'Telegramma Vekhiba-pashi o perekhode turetskikh voisk v nastuplenie, 30 yanvarya (12 fevralya) 1334 g. (1918 g.)' in *Dokumenty* (1919, pp. 47–49).

and its boundaries concluded without its knowledge and approval, devoid of any international significance and non-obligatory for itself.⁶ Instead, the Transcaucasian leaders decided to conclude their own peace with Turkey, which was rather urgent in view of the unfolding Turkish offensive. The delegation of the *Seim* departed to Trebizond on 7 March. As soon as the negotiations opened the Turks demanded either the recognition of the Brest-Litovsk treaty or a declaration of independence:

The Imperial Ottoman Delegation . . . insists that the [clauses of the] Brest-Litovsk treaty are valid and binding contrary to the opinion of the Transcaucasian delegation. The Imperial Ottoman Delegation expresses a wish that the Transcaucasus resolves to declare its independence and [declares its] form of government before the current negotiations take their final character leading to the favourable results so much desired by both sides.⁷

All this was taking place while the Turkish armies were already crossing the Russian–Turkish frontier of 1914. Eventually, on 10 April, the delegation in Trebizond, realising how desperate the situation was, accepted the Brest-Litovsk treaty.⁸ However, in Tiflis the belligerent mood prevailed and the *Seim* rejected the Brest-Litovsk treaty,⁹ recalled its delegation from Trebizond,¹⁰ and declared war on Turkey on 13 April.¹¹ The next day, however, the Turks captured the fortress of Batum without much difficulty. This military loss had a sobering effect on the political leaders of Transcaucasia.

Having no luck on the battlefield the *Seim* opted once again for peace. In order to resume negotiations the *Seim* complied with the Turkish demands and proclaimed the independence of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic on 22 April,¹² and three days later the fortress of Kars was surrendered. As a result, the Turks practically gained the territories awarded to them by Brest-Litovsk (Ludshuveit 1966, p. 180). Once the negotiations resumed in Batum on 11 May the Turks presented new territorial demands claiming parts of Erevan and Tiflis *gubernii* on the grounds that a war had taken place, which invalidated the conditions of the Brest-Litovsk treaty.¹³ With the negotiations underway in Batum the Turks continued their advance.

⁶‘Protest Zakavkazskogo Pravitel’stva protiv deistvii bol’shevikov v Brest-Litovske, Tiflis 17 fevralya (2 marta) 1918 g.’, in *Dokumenty* (1919, pp. 85–86).

⁷‘Otvét Ottomanskoi delegatsii, Trapezund, 7 (20) marta 1918 g.’, in *Dokumenty* (1919, p. 136).

⁸‘Otvét Zakavkazskoi delegatsii na turetskii ul’timatum’, in *Dokumenty* (1919, p. 160).

⁹‘Zhurnal soedinennogo zasedaniya prezidiuma Zakavkazskogo Seima, Zakavkazskogo Pravitel’stva i predstavitelei fraktsii Seima 31 marta (13 aprelya) 1918 g.’ and ‘Iz stenograficheskogo otcheta o zasedanii Zakavkazskogo Seima, 31 marta (13 aprelya) 1918 g.’, in *Dokumenty* (1919, pp. 163–66, 166–84).

¹⁰‘Telegramma Zakavkazskogo pravitel’stva ob otozvanii delegatsii, Tiflis 1 (14) aprelya 1918 g.’, in *Dokumenty* (1919, p. 184).

¹¹‘Obrashchenie Zakavkazskogo Seima ko vsem narodan Zakavkaz’ya, Tiflis 31 marta (13 aprelya) 1918 g.’, in *Dokumenty* (1919, pp. 185–86).

¹²‘Provozglashenie Zakavkaz’ya nezavisimoi Respublikoi, 9 (22) aprelya 1918 g.’, in *Dokumenty* (1919, pp. 200–22); Kazemzadeh (1951, p. 105) incorrectly mentions 28 April as the date of this announcement.

¹³‘Iz protokola pervogo zasedaniya Batumskoi mirnoi konferentsii. 11 maya 1918 g.’, in *Dokumenty* (1919, pp. 314–15).

Eventually, on 26 May, the Turks presented the Transcaucasian delegation with an ultimatum to accept their demands.¹⁴ Under this final pressure the Transcaucasian Federation collapsed; the Georgians, having already secured the protection of the Germans, withdrew from the Federation and declared their independence on 26 May.¹⁵ They were followed by the Azerbaijanis and finally, reluctantly, by the Armenians on 28 May. Thus the political entity that united the South Caucasus faded away after barely three months of existence. The Turks nevertheless imposed the new territorial losses on the now independent states of Georgia and Armenia, annexing parts of Tiflis and Erevan *gubernii* in the treaty of Batum on 4 June 1918,¹⁶ and were able to continue their advance towards Baku.

The Turks eventually captured Baku on 15 September, but their victory was short-lived—on 30 October Turkey signed the Mudros Armistice which ended their participation in the First World War (Karsh & Karsh 2001, p. 327). The Turks were required to evacuate the Caucasus and were replaced by the British. It was against this complicated international political situation that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan acquired its shape.

The Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Karabakh in 1918–1920

The key to understanding the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan lies in the administrative division of the South Caucasus. The geography of this rugged terrain had largely dictated the location of frontiers. From the middle ages the frontiers of local principalities followed the mountain ranges and watershed lines. Impassable roads made access across the mountains difficult and, as a result, economic and political activities were centred on the river basins. With the Russian conquest in the early nineteenth century the local principalities were absorbed into the Tsarist administrative system and the region was divided into large provinces—*gubernii*. Nevertheless, at the lower administrative level the ancient frontiers dictated by geography remained intact.

This administrative system offered convenience of governance and preserved the economic unity of the provinces but it also created an extreme ethnic mix of people, especially in the *gubernii* of Erevan and Elizavetpol which were populated by Armenians and Muslims. With the progress of ideas of nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century ethnic tensions became apparent and manifested themselves in a violent Armenian–Tatar war in 1905. When detailed population data became available at the end of the nineteenth century,¹⁷ a number of proposals to change the administrative divisions were made so that they would reflect the ethnographic composition of the population; however, they were never implemented (Evangulov 1914; Shakhatunyan 1918).

¹⁴Ul'timaturn Turtsii, Batum 26 maya 1918 g.', in *Dokumenty* (1919, pp. 309–10).

¹⁵'Akt nezavisimosti Gruzii', in *Dokumenty* (1919, pp. 336–38).

¹⁶'Dogovor mira i druzhby mezhdru Imperatorskim Ottomanskim Pravitel'stvom i Pravitel'stvom Gruzinskoi Respubliki', in *Dokumenty* (1919, pp. 343–49).

¹⁷In 1886 the Tsarist authorities compiled detailed 'posemeinye spiski naseleniya Zakavkaz'ya' and in 1897 the first population census of the Russian Empire took place.

This was the state of affairs on the eve of the First World War. In May 1918, when the region disintegrated into three independent states, only the external borders were clear—those imposed by Turkey in the treaty of Batum,¹⁸ and the Russo-Persian border of 1828. The frontiers between the states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were to become a matter of violent disputes that would dominate the politics of the region in the coming years.

The fact that internal borders between these new states were unclear did not mean that their leaders did not know where they wanted their frontier to be. To justify their territorial claims two principles were advanced. On the one hand, the *gubernii* presented convenient building blocks with functioning administrations and binding economic ties. Thus, the dominant group in a given province laid claim to the entire province, regardless of its often heterogeneous ethnic composition. On the other hand, the ethnographic principle was by no means forgotten either—the compactly settled ethnic groups residing in the ‘other’ province were also claimed by each side, despite the absence of economic ties and difficulties in accessing and administering them.

Thus, Armenians who predominated in Erevan *guberniya* claimed parts of Elizavetpol and Tiflis *gubernii* with compact Armenian majorities, despite the fact that these areas were difficult to access and economically separate from Erevan. Similarly, Azerbaijan, with its Turkic majorities in Baku and Elizavetpol *gubernii*, claimed hardly accessible parts of Erevan *guberniya* which had a compact Turkic population. Karabakh, with its Armenian majority in the highlands and Turkic population predominating in the plains, was one of such regions where the conflicting claims clashed. The geography of the whole region made access to the Karabakh highlands much easier from the plains that lay to the East than from the West across the impassable mountains of Zangezour. These geographic conditions favoured the inclusion of the region within the Elizavetpol *guberniya* despite the overwhelming Armenian majority in the Karabakh highlands (Figure 1).

The struggle for Karabakh: 1917–April 1920

After the fall of the Romanov dynasty the provisional authority for the South Caucasus, OZAKOM,¹⁹ ordered the creation of local executive councils made up of the local parties. In Karabakh a 40-man committee was formed on 26 March 1917 (Abrahamian 1986, p. 18). Relative peace was preserved in the region between the Armenians and Turkic and Kurdish population until the summer of 1918 when the three independent republics were proclaimed. At the end of June the Azerbaijani

¹⁸Article 3 of the Batum treaty stipulated that when the borders between the three new states were decided they would be added to the treaty of Batum. At the invitation of the Turkish government Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia sent their representatives for a conference in Constantinople/Istanbul to decide the question of borders. However, the conference never commenced.

¹⁹OZAKOM—*Osobyi Zakavkazskii Komitet* (Special Transcaucasian Committee) was created on 22 (9) March by order of the Petrograd Provisional Government to function as a local government. After the Bolshevik coup in October/November 1917, OZAKOM was replaced by a new body—The Transcaucasian Commissariat on 28 (15) November 1917.

government announced its intention to delimit its borders (Barsegov 2008, p. 234), and in early August, at the request of the Azerbaijani government seated in Ganja, the Turkish commander Nuri Pasha demanded that the Armenians of Karabakh recognise the suzerainty of Azerbaijan (Hovannisian 1971, p. 83). The Karabakh Armenians rejected the request as, at that time, the Turks were engaged in operations against Baku and could not spare troops to enforce their demand. However, after the capture of Baku at the end of September the Turkish troops marched towards Karabakh and entered Shusha on 7 October 1918 (Hovannisian 1971, p. 85; Ludshuveit 1966, p. 259). The local Armenians, hoping to avoid violence, offered no resistance. The Turks, having a small number of troops, effectively controlled the town of Shusha and the strategic road to Agdam. The Karabakh countryside, where local Armenians had organised an armed militia, remained outside their control.

The Armenian–Azerbaijani struggle over disputed territories resumed after the arrival of the British. British policy in the Caucasus was determined by two factors: their desire to maintain effective control over the region and the limited amount of troops available to enforce it. In these circumstances the British could not afford to alienate local leaders and their decisions were often informed by political needs and the actual situation on the ground.²⁰ In general the British preferred to leave things as they were without redrawing frontiers. The memorandum prepared by the Intelligence Department of the Naval Staff in April 1919 is a good illustration of the British approach to the immensely complicated problems of the South Caucasus:

... the Tatars and Armenians are hopelessly intermingled and it is impossible to draw a frontier that is even roughly ethnographic. The boundary between the former Russian provinces of Erivan and Elizavetpol is therefore suggested as being the best physical frontier and as leaving roughly equal Armenian and Tatar minorities on the wrong side, respectively, of the line. (Burdett 1996, pp. 577–78)

On 15 January 1919, with British approval, the Azerbaijani government appointed Dr Khosrov Bek Sultanov, a large landowner of Kurdish origin,²¹ as a provisional Governor-General of Karabakh and Zangezur (Barsegov 2008, p. 245).²² This was a serious blow to the Armenian claim on Karabakh and both the Armenian government and Karabakh Armenians protested. In early February Sultanov arrived in Shusha accompanied by a small British mission. However, the 4th Assembly of Armenians of Karabakh refused to recognise his authority. The attempt to extend the rule of Governor-Generalship to Zangezur failed when the local armed Armenians in Goris/Gerusy surrounded the British mission that arrived to extend Sultanov's rule to Zangezur.²³ The British in this situation decided to preserve the existing *status quo*,

²⁰On British policy in the South Caucasus see Arslanian (1980).

²¹Khosrov Bek Sultanov was a large landowner of Kurdish origin whose family was based around the village of Pichanis (Figure 1).

²²The British also instructed the Erevan government to occupy Nakhivhevan province in May 1919 despite the fact that the Turkic population had been predominant there even before the war, and in 1919, after the expulsion of the Armenians, it constituted an overwhelming majority (Barsegov 2008, pp. 339–40).

²³Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 61, pp. 1–4, 'Letter of the Government of the Mountainous Armenia to the Representatives of the Soviet Armenia'.

leaving the Armenian National Council to administer the Armenian parts of the Zangezur *uezd* (Mikaelyan 1992, pp. 208–9).

Meanwhile, in Karabakh, the situation remained tense and the Armenian council continued to defy Sultanov's administration. In April the British attempted in vain to persuade the 5th Assembly of Karabakh Armenians to accept the provisional rule of Azerbaijan. When persuasion failed an economic blockade was imposed in another fruitless effort to force the Armenians to accept the rule of Azerbaijan. On 4 June the tensions heightened when Sultanov tried to install an Azerbaijani garrison in the fortress of Shusha held by an Armenian militia. Only British intervention prevented large-scale clashes. Sultanov, however, was not going to tolerate the presence of an Armenian militia in the fortress of Shusha. The next day the nearby Armenian village of Kaibali-kend was attacked by nearly 2,000 mounted Kurdish and Turkic irregulars led by the brother of the Governor-General, Sultan Bek Sultanov. According to the report of a British officer present on the site, after a day of fighting the village was pillaged and most of its 700 inhabitants were killed (Hovannisian 1971, p. 177). The destruction of Kaibali-kend, that could be clearly seen from Shusha, had an intimidating psychological effect—it demonstrated to Armenians that their militia was insufficient to protect the population. This was followed by the news of the imminent British departure.

The massacre at Kaibali-kend soon yielded political results. The 6th Assembly of the Armenians of Karabakh that gathered at the end of June no longer defied the Azerbaijani government but discussed possible settlement with Baku. Once the British mission left on 10 August (Mikaelyan 1992, p. 323) the Armenians had little choice but to accept the provisional rule of Baku. At the 7th Assembly of the Karabakh Armenians a 26-point agreement was signed with the Baku government that outlined the division of power between the parties.²⁴

The success in Karabakh permitted Azerbaijan to start operations against the Armenian controlled part of Zangezur where the Armenian population was engaged in violent struggle with the Turkic minority and continued to reject the rule of Baku. At the end of September, the Azerbaijani army started an offensive against Zangezur. The battles continued until the end of October, but, despite heavy fighting, the Azerbaijani army had no success. During the winter of 1919–1920 military activities ceased but both Armenia and Azerbaijan were preparing for a renewed clash in the spring. Azerbaijan planned to prevail in Zangezur while Armenia intended to reclaim the Karabakh highlands.

In December 1919 the Armenian government secretly dispatched two emissaries to Karabakh to coordinate the activities of the local Armenians and prepare a rebellion. As the direct road from Armenia to Karabakh was impassable the emissaries travelled incognito via Tiflis and Ganja arriving in Karabakh at the end of December 1919 (Hovannisian 1996a, p. 135). At the same time the Governor-General of Karabakh was working towards the full integration of Karabakh within Azerbaijan. In February 1920 Sultanov decided to terminate the semi-autonomous status of Karabakh which had been established in August 1919. He requested the Armenian Council to summon

²⁴Provisional Accord between the VII Armenian Council of Karabakh with the Government of Azerbaijan—Russian text is available in Mikaelyan (1992, pp. 323–27) and an English translation is available in Hovannisian (1971, pp. 186–87).

the 8th Assembly in Shusha to discuss the full integration of Karabakh into Azerbaijan (Hovannisian 1996a, p. 143). Just before the Assembly gathered, an anti-Armenian riot in the village of Khankend [Stepanakert] claimed several hundred lives on 22 February, after a body, thought to be of an Azerbaijani soldier, was discovered (Hovannisian 1996a, p. 142). In these circumstances, some Armenian delegates travelling to the 8th Assembly gathered in the nearby village of Shosh instead of proceeding to Shusha. Those delegates who reached Shusha became trapped in the town. As a result, two absolutely different resolutions were produced—the delegates in Shusha, under pressure from Sultanov, agreed on integration into Azerbaijan while the delegates in Shosh, under the leadership of Armenian emissaries, rejected it (Hovannisian 1996a, p. 145).

At the same time Azerbaijan was preparing for the spring campaign in Zangezur. On 11–12 March 90 railway trucks with troops departed from Baku towards Zangezur (Hovannisian 1996a, pp. 147–48). This became known to the leaders of Karabakh Armenians who eventually decided to start a long-planned rebellion. On the night of 23 March the rebels attacked Azerbaijani garrisons in Karabakh (Hovannisian 1996a, p. 152). However, because of poor coordination the rebellion largely failed—only in one place did the rebels prevail and captured positions on the Askeran pass cutting the road between Agdam and Shusha (Hovannisian 1996a, pp. 156–57).

Most importantly, the rebels failed to capture the town of Shusha. The reprisal was swift—already on the morning of 23 March the Azerbaijani garrison and Turkic population of Shusha had attacked and burned down the Armenian part of the town in a three-day *pogrom*.²⁵ The remaining pockets of resistance were crushed after 10 days of fighting when the Azerbaijani army broke through the Askeran pass and marched into Shusha on 4 April (Hovannisian 1996a, p. 157).

The Armenian rebellion against Azerbaijani rule failed, but despite the disastrous outcome of the rebellion the Armenian units stationed in Zangezur, under the command of Dro,²⁶ marched to the Karabakh village of Tumi on 13 April. In order to legitimise his activities Dro called a 9th Assembly of Karabakh Armenians on 22 April that authorised his actions against the Azerbaijani army. Dro immediately started to mobilise the local Armenians, preparing for a counteroffensive. Yet the decisive clash between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces was never to happen.

The Sovietisation of the South Caucasus

In April 1920 the history of the South Caucasus was to take another dramatic turn. By that time the Red Army had already defeated the forces of General Anton Ivanovich

²⁵The town of Shusha never recovered from the destruction of March 1920. In 1886 the total population of Shusha was 26,806 (15,188 Armenians and 11,595 Tatars) and according to the 1897 census Shusha had 25,881 inhabitants (14,436 Armenians and 10,785 Tatars) (Troitskii 1904, pp. 78–79), but in 1926 the population was merely 5,104 with only 93 Armenians remaining in the town (TsSU 1929, p. 79). In 1959 the town had a population of only 6,117 (Itogi 1963, p. 15).

²⁶Dro (Drastamat Kananian) was one of the commanders of the Armenian volunteer units of the Russian Army during the First World War. In the period 1918–1920 he was a military commander of the Armenian forces. After the Sovietisation of Armenia in 1920 he briefly collaborated with the Bolsheviks but later emigrated.

Denikin and had approached the frontiers of Georgia and Azerbaijan. The Bolsheviks intended to capture oil producing Baku and wanted to establish a direct link with the emerging Turkish nationalist movement of Mustafa Kemal in the heart of Anatolia. With the forthcoming Sovietisation of Azerbaijan the shortest route linking Soviet Russia with Kemalist forces in Turkey would be passing via the strategic road Shusha–Angelaut–Nakhichevan that traversed the disputed territories of Karabakh–Zangezur and Nakhichevan.

The Sovietisation of Azerbaijan: 28 April 1920

While the Azerbaijani and Armenian forces were preparing for battle in Karabakh the situation was about to change dramatically. In the early hours of 27 April a Red Army armoured train crossed the Samur river and steamed virtually unopposed towards Baku. The next morning the Azerbaijani *Revkom* (*Revolyutsionnyi komitet*) proclaimed the establishment of Soviet authority in Azerbaijan, and in the following days further armoured trains of the 11th Red Army swept through Azerbaijan declaring the Soviet authority.

The mastermind of this impressive victory, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, was eager to proceed with further conquests. However, the takeover of Azerbaijan coincided with the start of the Polish offensive in Ukraine, which forced Moscow to put on hold the further Sovietisation of the South Caucasus and divert all resources to this new threat. Ordzhonikidze was categorically instructed to refrain temporarily from interfering in Georgian and Armenian affairs (Kvašonkin 1997, p. 168). Reluctantly he submitted to Moscow's orders.

However, the disputed nature of the Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan regions, and the absence of clear and recognised frontiers between Armenia and Azerbaijan, presented an opportunity for involvement without violating orders from Moscow. In this instance, the national interests of Azerbaijan coincided with the aims of Moscow. The Azerbaijani Bolsheviks had an opportunity to secure these disputed regions for Azerbaijan while attaining one of Moscow's important goals—the creation of a land corridor between Soviet Russia and Kemalist Turkey.

Sovietisation of Karabakh: May 1920

The proclamation of the Soviet authority in Karabakh came from an unusual source—the Governor-General of Karabakh, Khosrov Bek Sultanov. On 29 April he proclaimed himself the chairman of the Military Revolutionary Committee of Red Karabakh and sent a telegram with warm greetings to the chairman of Azerbaijani *Revkom*, Nariman Narimanov (Hovhannisian 1971, pp. 160–61; Guliev 1989a, pp. 42–43). Sultanov was a large landowner closely associated with the local Musavatist government, the British, and before that with the Turks—an unlikely Bolshevik. In spite of this, his services were temporarily accepted in Baku.²⁷ Meanwhile, the commander of the Caucasian front, General Ivan Smilga, issued an order to occupy

²⁷This can be seen from the fact that the *Kommunist* newspaper published in Baku was publishing his telegrams and reports.

the strategic Shusha–Ordubad–Nakhichevan region on the pretext of ending the mutual Armenian Tatar massacres. On 12 May the Red Army units arrived in Shusha (Hovhannisian 1996a, p. 195).

Once the Soviet units arrived in Shusha and the local Azerbaijani army garrison metamorphosed into a Red Army unit, the head of the Azerbaijani *Revkom*, Nariman Narimanov, issued a decree liquidating the self-proclaimed *Revkom* of Sultanov whose services were no longer needed.²⁸ Instead Dadash Buniatzade was appointed as Extraordinary Commissar for Karabakh on 14 May (Hovhannisian 1971, p. 162). However, on 18 May, while the 25 members of the newly created Karabakh *Revkom*, made up of Armenian and Azerbaijani Bolsheviks, were preparing to depart for Karabakh, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, accompanied by the 11th Army commander Levandovski and the Armenian Bolshevik Sahak Ter-Gabrielian, appeared in Shusha (Hovhannisian 1996a, p. 196; Hovhannisian 1971, pp. 164–65; Abrahamian 1991b, p. 43). This visit shows the importance that the Bolsheviks attributed to establishing a contact with the Kemalists between Karabakh and Nakhichevan via Zangezur. Almost immediately after their arrival, Sahak Ter-Gabrielian was sent to Dro's headquarters in Karabulag village just 10 kilometres away to negotiate the withdrawal of Armenian units from Karabakh to Zangezur (Hovhannisian 1971, p. 164).

The arrival of the Red Army dramatically changed the mood of the local Armenian population, who had been expecting the restoration of Russian rule and the end of violence. The failed rebellion and destruction of the Armenian quarters of Shusha were now blamed on the emissaries from Erevan. In these circumstances, clearly lacking popular support, Dro decided to comply with the Bolshevik demands of withdrawal (Hovhannisian 1971, p. 166) and on 25 May his units retreated to Zangezur (Hovhannisian 1971, p. 166; Abrahamian 1991b, p. 44). With the Armenian nationalist forces withdrawing from Karabakh, the local Armenian Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Sako Hambartsumian, appealed to the Armenian population to summon the 10th Congress of Karabakh Armenians (Hovhannisian 1971, p. 166). On 26 May, in the village of Tahavard, the 10th Congress of Karabakh Armenians took place under Bolshevik leadership. At the congress the establishment of Soviet authority in Karabakh was proclaimed for the third time. Congratulations were sent to Lenin and Narimanov (Hovhannisian 1971, p. 167). With the Sovietisation of Karabakh and the departure of the national Armenian forces, Bolshevik involvement in Zangezur was just a matter of time.

The unsuccessful Bolshevik attempt to Sovietise Zangezur: July–November 1920

The unopposed takeover of Karabakh seemed to indicate that Zangezur could also be easily captured. However, several anti-Soviet rebellions in Azerbaijan forced the Bolsheviks to postpone the offensive against Zangezur.²⁹ Once the last rebellion was

²⁸Sultanov was initially arrested and taken to Baku, but eventually was released and allowed to emigrate to Persia.

²⁹The anti-Bolshevik revolt started in Ganja on the night of 24–25 May. The Red Army units stationed in Shusha were sent to suppress it, leaving behind the former Musavatist regiment that had

suppressed at the end of June, the Red Army chief of staff, Sergei Kamenev, ordered the Red Army to occupy the disputed regions of Karabakh, Zangezur, Nakhichevan, Julfa and Ordubad (Hovannisian 1996b, p. 67). Following his orders the Red Army crossed the river Akera/Hakaru and advanced towards Goris/Gerusy. The Armenian units offered little resistance and retreated: Dro and his men moved towards Daralagiaz while Nzhdeh³⁰ moved towards his stronghold in Southern Zangezur. The strategic road between Goris, Angelaut and Nakhichevan now lay open to the Bolsheviks (Hovannisian 1996b, p. 67).

Despite this set-back, however, the Armenian forces tried to retake Zangezur. On 31 July Dro counterattacked from Daralagiaz. During his swift advance he intercepted a Red Army unit transporting some of the gold the Bolsheviks gave in support of the Kemalist struggle. On 3 August Armenian forces entered Goris/Gerusy. The Bolsheviks retreated towards Karabakh having executed a number of imprisoned hostages.³¹ On 7 August the Red Army started a counteroffensive from Karabakh, and by 10 August they had regained control over the road pushing units under Dro's command into Daralagiaz and forcing Nzhdeh to retreat towards Katar Mines/Kapan once again (Hovannisian 1996b, pp. 88–89). Thus ended the first round of the standoff between the Armenian forces and the Red Army in Zangezur. On 10 August the Armenian government signed an agreement in Tiflis with the Bolshevik mission headed by Boris Legran which acknowledged the existing *status quo* (see Figure 2). According to the agreement the Armenian troops were to retreat from Zangezur and the disputed districts of Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan were to be occupied by the Red Army; their future was to be decided later (Balikyan & Evoyan 1989, pp. 122–23; Mikaelyan 1992, pp. 574–75).

Meanwhile Nzhdeh was cut off in the southern part of Zangezur and neither wanted nor was able to retreat towards Armenia. With the Red Army now in control of most of Zangezur, General Nikifor Nesterovskii prepared to liquidate Nzhdeh's remaining Armenian forces. On 31 August the Red Army advanced from Goris/Gerusy and by 6–7 September it captured Katar Mines. The loss of Katar Mines/Kapan pushed Nzhdeh into a remote mountainous district in the south of Zangezur. The Red Army, together with their Turkish allies in Nakhichevan, were now preparing for the final assault against Nzhdeh. The offensive started on 21 September from three

recently changed sides. However, on 4 June the officers and soldiers of this regiment started a rebellion which lasted for about a week until the Red Army, after suppressing rebellion in Ganja, once again entered Shusha on 13 June. The leaders of the Shusha rebellion escaped to Persia. A further rebellion in Zakatala on 9 June was suppressed by 20 June (Kharmandaryan 1969, pp. 42–43).

³⁰Nzhdeh (Garegin Ter-Harutiunian) was a Bulgarian officer who had participated in the Balkan Wars. During the First World War he was commander of the Volunteer Armenian Battalion of the Russian Army. In 1919 he was sent to Zangezur by the Armenian government to oversee the military preparations. After Sovietisation he emigrated and settled in Bulgaria where he was arrested by the NKVD in 1944. He died in a Soviet prison in 1955.

³¹Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 61, pp. 5–16, 'Zangezure ev Horhrdain Haiastane' ['Protocols [of] the Meetings [between] Government of Mountainous Armenia and Soviet Armenian Government Official Representatives'], p. 6 mentions 87 hostages executed by machine guns by the retreating Red Army.

directions—Ordubad, Nuvadi and Katar Mines/Kapan. Five days of fierce battle yielded no results and in the early days of October the Red Army renewed its offensive (see Figure 2) (Hovannisian 1996b, p. 113).

However, the situation was beginning to change for the Red Army. If, in August, the local Armenian population was favourably disposed towards them, expecting the return of Russians would re-establish law and order, after two months of Soviet rule the mood had changed. The Red Army commanders largely alienated the Armenian population, not only by the usual practices of food and livestock requisitions, but also by employing a large number of Azerbaijani and Turkish troops in their operations against Nzhdeh.³²

On 10 October Nzhdeh started a surprising rebellion behind enemy lines in Katar Mines/Kapan capturing two infantry and one cavalry regiments of the Red Army. The rebellion quickly spread, finding supporters among the Armenian population. The desperate attempt of General Nesterovskii to save the situation by sending in the 28th rifle division, reinforced by Azerbaijani infantry regiments, Muslim irregulars and Armenian Bolsheviks, also failed and he was pushed towards Goris/Gerusy. By that time Dro, stationed in Daralagiaz, had joined the rebellion and was advancing towards Angelaut.

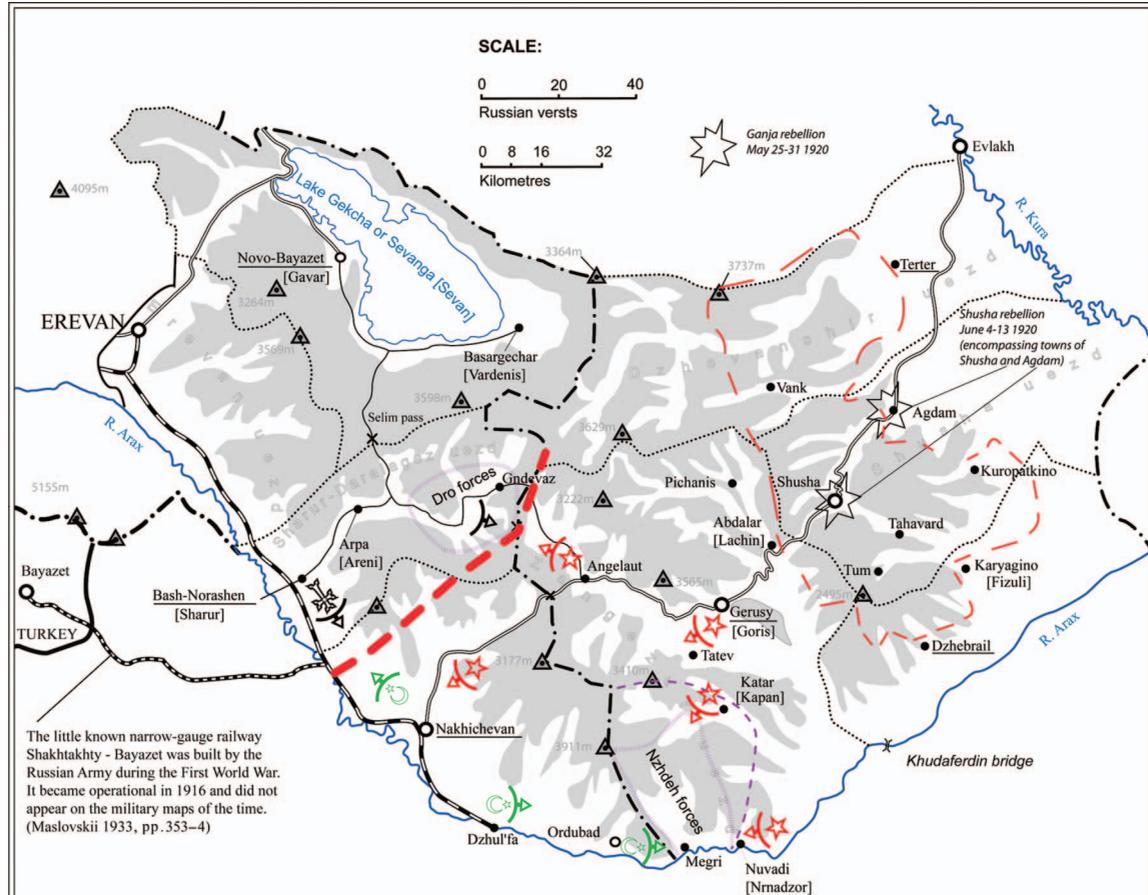
The commander of the 11th Army urgently created a new striking force under General Petr Kuryshko to deal with the rebels. The new Red Army offensive started with the capture of several villages but on 6 November Kuryshko's force fell into an ambush and suffered heavy losses (Hovannisian 1996b, pp. 115–22). Towards the end of November the Red Army ceased its attempts to capture Zangezur and withdrew to Karabakh.

The Sovietisation of Armenia: April–December 1920

The Bolshevik takeover of Azerbaijan presented a serious dilemma for the Armenian government. On the one hand, the Armenians were allied with anti-Bolshevik forces—the *Entente* powers and the Volunteer Army of General Denikin (Arslanian & Nichols 1979). On the other hand, the spread of the Soviet power into the South Caucasus prompted the Armenian government to seek the establishment of a relationship with Moscow—the sworn enemy of its allies.

Reaching an agreement with Moscow was becoming paramount in view of the fact that the new Bolshevik government of Azerbaijan, now backed by the 11th Red Army, demanded the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the contested regions of Karabakh and Zangezur. Hardly two days had passed after the declaration of Sovietisation of Azerbaijan when, on 30 April, the Azerbaijani Commissar of Foreign Affairs, Mirza Guseinov, sent an ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of Armenian forces from Karabakh and Zangezur (Guliev 1989a, p. 41). The following day, on

³²See *Kommunist* (Baku, Armenian language version), No. 160, 29 November 1920, report on the operations of a Turkish Red Regiment in Zangezur since October 1920; Armenian National Archive, Fund 114, Register 2, file 70, p. 21, 'To the Commander of Syunik. Complaint of Armenian Women from Goris and Surrounding Districts'.



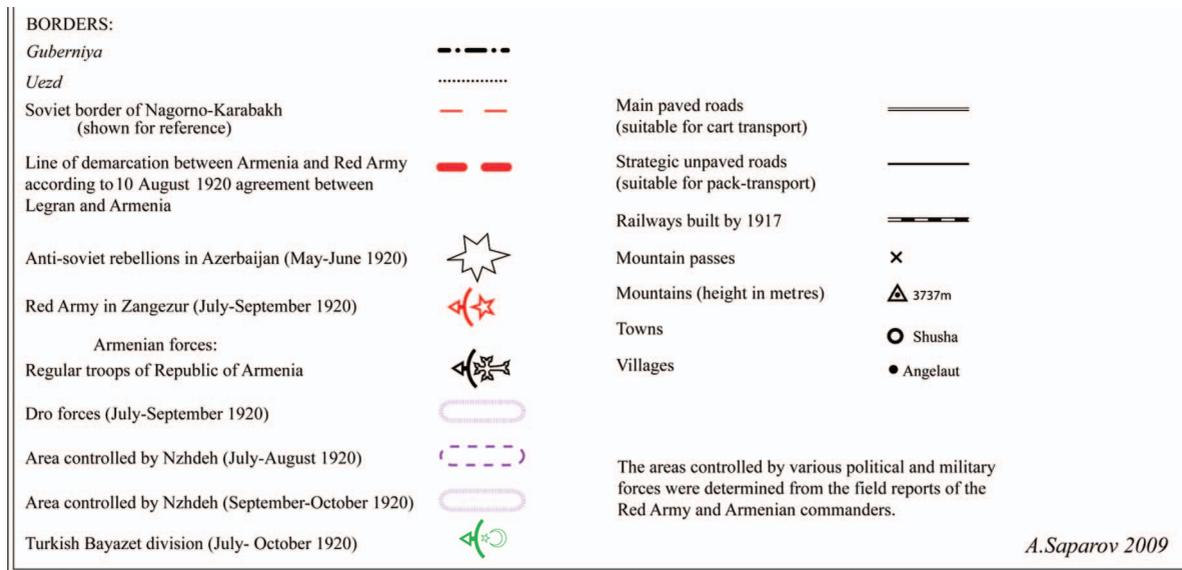


FIGURE 2. SOVIETISATION OF KARABAKH AND ZANGEZUR MAY–OCTOBER 1920: MILITARY AND POLITICAL SITUATION.

1 May, this was backed by a telegram signed by Ordzhonikidze, Sergei Mironovich Kirov, Konstantin Mekhonoshin and the 11th Army Commander Mikhail Levandovski demanding that the Armenian government withdraw its troops from Azerbaijan (Guliev 1989a, p. 41). It was in this situation that an Armenian diplomatic mission was sent to Moscow at the end of April charged with the difficult task of securing Moscow's recognition of the Armenian borders—both in the Caucasus and in the Ottoman Empire (Armenian National Academy 2000, p. 198). Before the Armenian delegation reached Moscow the local Bolsheviks in Armenia, encouraged by the earlier Sovietisation of Azerbaijan, attempted an ill-prepared *coup d'état* counting on the intervention of the 11th Red Army. The latter offered no meaningful support, constrained as it was by orders from Moscow forbidding intervention between Armenia and Georgia. The Armenian government meanwhile suppressed the rebellion of the local Bolsheviks, with its leader, Avis Nurijanian, escaping to Azerbaijan.

The Armenian delegation had barely started the negotiations in Moscow on 28 May when the delegation of the Turkish nationalist movement also appeared in Moscow hoping to find an ally in their struggle against the *Entente* (Hovannisian 1996b, pp. 45–62). In these circumstances Moscow decided to delay signing a peace agreement with Armenia without breaking off the negotiations. To gain time Moscow dispatched a diplomatic mission headed by Boris Legran to Armenia to establish diplomatic relations. A few weeks later Legran's mission arrived in Tiflis where it finally met with an Armenian delegation in early August. Eventually, on 10 August, an agreement was reached that specified a line of delimitation between the Red Army and Armenia (see Figure 2) (Mikaelyan 1992, pp. 574–75).

Meanwhile, the treaty of Sevres was signed in France on the same day as an agreement with the Bolsheviks. According to the Sevres treaty Armenia received large territories in the former Ottoman Empire, although they were devoid of the Armenian population which had perished in the genocide of 1915. The emerging Turkish nationalist movement had no intention of submitting to the terms of the treaty and planned to defy the Allies. The best place to start an attack against the Allies was to strike at the weakest link—the Republic of Armenia (Gökay 1996). Such an operation promised to boost the morale of the movement and establish vital communication with Soviet Russia as a potential ally.

At the end of September Turkish troops, under the leadership of Kazim Karabekir Pasha, started an offensive against Armenia. The Armenian army, demoralised by the Bolshevik propaganda and poor government, offered little resistance. By 30 October the fortress of Kars fell without a fight and the Turks advanced towards Alexandropol, which they also captured without much resistance in early November. Unable to oppose the Turkish advance the Armenian government asked for peace and started negotiations. In these circumstances the Red Army, which had previously been observing the Turkish advance, intervened to prevent what was left of Armenia from falling completely into the Turkish sphere. On 29 November the Bolsheviks crossed from the village of Kazakh into Dilijan and proclaimed Soviet authority. On 2 December the Armenian government handed the authority to the newly arrived *Revkom*. Ironically the fall of the Armenian Republic coincided with the victory of Armenian forces in Zangezur.

Consolidating Bolshevik control: May 1920–July 1921

After the proclamation of Soviet order in Azerbaijan and Armenia the Bolsheviks continued to face numerous challenges on the ground. The overthrown local Musavatists and Dashnaks continued to enjoy wide grassroots support that was only magnified by the ruthless policies of war communism implemented by the Red Army. Another constant source of annoyance for the Bolsheviks was the existence of the anti-Soviet Armenian forces in the mountains of Zangezur. In this section I examine the developments in Karabakh, Armenia and Zangezur after the proclamation of the Soviet rule in Azerbaijan (April 1920) and Armenia (December 1920).

Karabakh: May 1920–May 1921

The period of about one year in Karabakh—from the proclamation of the Soviet authority until the time when the Bolsheviks consolidated their grip on the region—is very little researched. Nevertheless, it is apparent that there were political struggles between the local Armenian communists and the leadership of the Azerbaijani Bolsheviks. Both sides continued to pursue their national goals, this time within the communist ideological framework.

Meanwhile, in Karabakh where Soviet authority had been proclaimed several times by competing parties, two separate *Revkoms* were established. One, called the Karabakh *Revkom*, headed by Bahatur Kasum ogly Velibekov, was appointed from Baku and was based in the town of Shusha. The other, called the *Revkom* of the Mountainous Karabakh, under the leadership of Sako Hambartsumian, was seated in the Armenian village of Tahavard (Hovhannisian 1971, pp. 179–80). The difference in the names of these *Revkoms* is significant. The Karabakh *Revkom* aimed to represent the entire territory of Karabakh with its Armenian and Turkic populations while the Mountainous Karabakh *Revkom* represented the Armenian population that were predominant in the mountains.

The existence of two *Revkoms* in Karabakh indicates that even though Sovietisation may have ended the large-scale violence, the old animosities and conflicts were far from being resolved. The Armenians and *Tyurks* had now to act within a new ideological framework in the pursuit of their goals. If the Karabakh Armenian Bolsheviks tried to emphasise the Armenian dominated part, the Mountainous Karabakh, then the leadership of Azerbaijan preferred to deal with the entire Karabakh region to de-emphasise the compactly settled Armenian population.

After the suppression of the anti-Bolshevik rebellion in Shusha in June 1920, the Azerbaijani leadership decided to address the awkward situation in which two *Revkoms* were claiming authority over overlapping territory. On 16 June the Mountainous Karabakh *Revkom* was ordered to move to Shusha and merge with the Karabakh *Revkom*. As compensation for the merger, the head of the Mountainous Karabakh *Revkom*, Sako Hambartsumian, was appointed head of the Party Committee in the Shusha district (Hovhannisian 1971, p. 180). Thus, without much opposition, the problem of a separate Armenian *Revkom* in the mountainous part of Karabakh was resolved.

Another pressing issue was the legitimisation of Soviet authority. The Armenians were the first to secure popular approval for their *Revkom* when they held the 10th Congress of the Armenians of Karabakh immediately after the withdrawal of Dro's forces at the end of May. Lacking such a token of popular approval, and in order to secure formal support for the all-Karabakh *Revkom* and bring into political focus the entire Karabakh region rather than its Armenian dominated mountainous part, the Baku-appointed *Revkom* in Shusha organised a First All-Karabakh Villagers Congress. More than 500 representatives from the Mountainous (Armenian dominated) and Lowland (Turkic dominated) Karabakh gathered in Shusha on 26 July. The congress was opened by the Extraordinary Commissar for Karabakh, Dadash Buniatzaade (Guliev 1989a, pp. 60–61).

While the villagers' congress was assembled to demonstrate the unity of Lowland with Mountainous Karabakh, the local Armenian Bolsheviks, at the party conference in Shusha on 3 August 1920, worked in a different direction and raised the question of regrouping together the Armenian populated parts of Karabakh into one administrative unit. The pretext was that the old administrative division that divided the mountainous part of Karabakh into separate districts was hindering the political and social work among the Armenian population. After detailed discussion a resolution was passed asking the Azerbaijani Central Committee to join the Armenian districts of Karabakh into one administrative unit (Hovhannisian 1971, p. 218). This appeal apparently yielded the opposite result: not only was the all-Karabakh *Revkom* dissolved but also the old administrative units—*uezdy*—were re-established (Shadunts 1922). Thus the Azerbaijani government fully incorporated Karabakh within its administrative structures.

Another blow to the local Armenian Bolsheviks came in October 1920 at a regional conference of the Azerbaijani Communist Party in Shusha.³³ The conference discussed measures against the *Kulaks* but also saw the removal of the former leader of the Mountainous Karabakh *Revkom*, Sako Hambartsumian, from the position of party secretary 'due to moving to a new work-place'. He was replaced by the Baku appointed Surkhai Adigezalov (Hovhannisian 1971, pp. 192–93).

In these ways the Azerbaijani and Armenian communists were engaged in political struggles in Karabakh during the summer of 1920. At the same time, the Armenian population, having become alienated from the Red Army, rose in rebellion and, by November 1920, expelled the Soviet troops from Zangezur. The Red Army's misfortunes in Zangezur had echoes in Karabakh as well. The population in Karabakh had initially welcomed the Bolsheviks and the Red Army, anticipating the end of ethnic violence. However, the policies of war communism, arrests and requisitions prepared the ground for rebellion there as well.

The rebellion in Karabakh, with evident support from Zangezur (Abrahamian 1991b, pp. 57–60), was started by the former Tsarist Army *vakhtmister* Tevan Stepanian.³⁴ The rebels captured several villages in the south-western part of

³³*Kommunist* (Baku, in the Armenian language), No. 129, 22 October 1920.

³⁴After Sovietisation of Zangezur, Tevan Stepanian emigrated to Persia and settled in Tabriz. In 1941, when Soviet troops entered Iran, he was captured by the NKVD and subsequently executed in Baku.

Karabakh in mid-December. The centre of the rebellion was Tevan's native village of Tum. By the end of December the rebellion had already spread to the neighbouring districts. The local Bolshevik units, without the support of the Red Army, which was engaged in operations in Armenia and then in Georgia, were unable to offer any prolonged resistance and retreated. By February 1921 the entire southern part of Mountainous Karabakh was already in rebel hands. The Bolsheviks retreated towards the Turkic populated villages of Kariagino and Agdam and also held the strategic road between Agdam and Shusha. The situation changed only in the second half of March when two regiments of the 11th Red Army arrived to aid the local Bolsheviks. After more than a month of heavy fighting the Red Army was finally able to suppress the rebellion on 19 April 1921 (Hovhannisian 1971, pp. 201–13). The rebels then retreated towards Zangezur—the last remaining centre of anti-Soviet resistance.

The Sovietisation of Azerbaijan put the local Armenian Bolsheviks in Karabakh in a complicated situation. First, the Bolshevik movement had never been strong among local Armenians and as a result they lacked popular support. Unlike Armenian Bolsheviks from other parts of the Empire, the Armenian Bolsheviks from Karabakh were not prominent Party members and had few connections and little influence within the Bolshevik Party. In their political struggle with the Azerbaijani leadership they received no external support—the Republic of Armenia was in the hands of the anti-Bolshevik forces of the Dashnaks—while Armenian Bolsheviks in Baku were represented by those who fled Dashnak Armenia after the failed rebellion of May 1920. Most of them held a deep grudge against the Dashnaks and consequently worked against the national interests of Armenia. In this situation it was not surprising that in Karabakh the Armenian Bolsheviks largely failed to make any political gains in their political struggle with Azerbaijan.

Soviet Armenia: December 1920–May 1921

Despite the bloodless Sovietisation of Armenia in December 1920 the Bolshevik *Revkom* lacked popular support. The only reason the Bolsheviks came to power was the military defeat of the Republic of Armenia at the hands of Kemalist forces that made the Bolsheviks appear to be the lesser evil under the circumstances. At the same time their deposed political adversaries—the Dashnaks—still enjoyed grassroots support. It seems that the Bolshevik leaders in the *Kavburo* (*Kavkazskoe Byuro*), and in particular Sergo Ordzhonikidze, were aware of the precarious position of the Armenian *Revkom* and sought measures to secure some political legitimacy for the Soviet power there. It is in this context that one should evaluate the following curious exchange of declarations between Armenia and Azerbaijan that took place on the eve of the Sovietisation of Armenia.

On 30 November 1920, at the session of Azerbaijani *politburo* in the presence of Ordzhonikidze, Narimanov was commissioned to prepare a declaration of the *AzRevkom* (*Azerbaidzhanskii Revkom*) to Soviet Armenia stating that Zangezur and Nakhichevan were being ceded to Armenia and the mountainous part of Karabakh was given the right of self-determination (Kharmandaryan 1969, p. 99). The next day, on 1 December 1920, at the session of the Baku Soviet, the declaration was read and

subsequently published.³⁵ This abandonment of Azerbaijani claims on the disputed territories was most likely forced out of Narimanov by Ordzhonikidze to ensure a smooth transfer of power in Armenia. Towards the end of the month on 28 December the Armenian *Revkom* issued a similar proclamation declaring that the population of Nakhichevan was also given the right of self-determination.³⁶ The sincerity of these declarations is very doubtful as they were intended primarily as propaganda moves. There can be little doubt that Narimanov had no intention of giving up claims over these disputed territories just as the Armenians would not voluntarily renounce their claim on Nakhichevan. These declarations primarily reflected the political needs of the *Kavburo* to secure Bolshevik control rather than any genuine intention on the part of the Azerbaijani or Armenian leaders.

Meanwhile, in Erevan, the Armenian *Revkom* pursued policies that were sure to undermine whatever feeble support they might have had from the populations concerned. Among the first measures of the *Revkom* were decrees against speculation and counter-revolution followed by the creation of the *ChKa* (*Chrezvychainaya Komissiya*) which almost immediately started executions of its political opponents. With total disregard for the dire economic situation in a country ravaged by war, the Bolshevik administration started to confiscate livestock and foodstuffs from the peasants (Hovannisian 1996b, pp. 404–5). Such overzealous policies implemented with unwarranted confidence undermined popular support and alienated the population. On 18 February 1921 the population rose in rebellion under the leadership of the deposed but still omnipresent Dashnak Party. The rebels profited from the fact that most of the Russian Red Army troops had departed to impose Soviet rule on Georgia while the local Armenian Red Army units sided with the rebels. The Soviet *Revkom* escaped to the Turkic-populated part of Sharur-Daralagiaz *uezd* near Nakhichevan while the rebels captured the capital of Erevan where they created a Salvation Committee and tried to secure international support. Without external support, however, the rebellion had no chance of withstanding the Red Army. Once the Sovietisation of Georgia was accomplished the Russian troops returned and suppressed the rebellion in early April 1921. The rebels, together with numerous refugees, retreated towards Zangezur.

The difficulties and set-backs encountered by the Bolsheviks in the Caucasus, and especially the latest anti-Soviet rebellion in Armenia, demonstrated to Moscow that a policy change was required. On 23 March, by the decision of Moscow, a more moderate and experienced Bolshevik of Armenian origin, Alexander Myasnikov (Myasnikyan), was appointed to head the Armenian *Revkom* while several of the members of the old *Revkom* were recalled from Armenia (Kharmandaryan 1969, p. 80). On 14 April 1921 Lenin wrote a letter ‘To the Comrade Communists of

³⁵*Kommunist* (Baku, in Russian language), No. 178, 2 December 1920. It should be noted that at the time three newspapers called *Kommunist* were printed in the South Caucasus—two were published in Baku in Russian and Armenian languages and one was published in Erevan in the Armenian language. This often leads to confusion as most secondary sources do not specify precisely which newspaper is quoted. In this article I differentiate between the different newspapers with the same name by noting the place and language of publication.

³⁶*Kommunist* (Erevan, Armenian language), 28 December 1920.

Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Daghestan, and the Mountainous Republic' which signalled a radical change of policy. There, he called for the use of different tactics:

You will need to practice more moderation and caution, and show more readiness to make concessions to the petty bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia, and particularly the peasantry . . .

What the Republics of the Caucasus can and must do, as distinct from the R.S.F.S.R., is to effect a slower, more cautious and more systematic transition to socialism. That is what you must understand, and what you must be able to carry out, as distinct from our own tactics. (Lenin 1963, pp. 198–200)

The letter was delivered to Tiflis by Myasnikov who arrived there on his way to Armenia on 4 May 1921. On arrival he was immediately confronted by two pressing issues: the rebels in Zangezur and the question of Mountainous Karabakh.

Zangezur: December 1920–July 1921

The fall of the Armenian republic in early December 1920 created some confusion with regard to the political status of Zangezur. While the Armenians of Zangezur still aspired to be part of the Armenian Republic they had no intention of joining a Soviet Armenia. Their brief experience of Bolshevik rule in the summer of 1920, and the subsequent expulsion of the Red Army, had made them wary of Soviet Armenia.

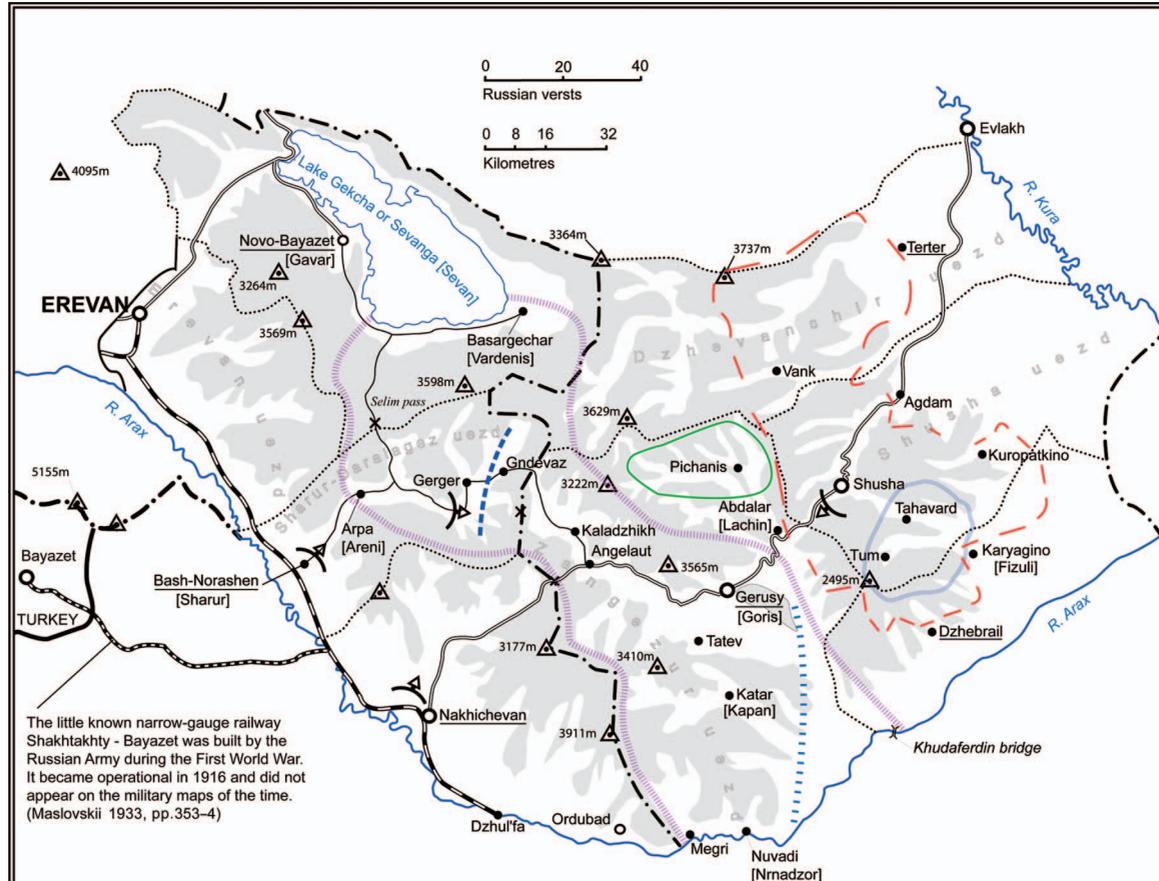
Nevertheless, the new Bolshevik rulers of Armenia tried to persuade the leaders of Zangezur to join Soviet Armenia. On 16 December 1920 a member of the Armenian *Revkom*, Avis Nurijanian, sent an appeal to Zangezur offering to submit to Soviet authority since Azerbaijan had given the disputed territories of Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan to Armenia (Abrahamian 1991a, p. 11). The Bolshevik appeals were, however, rejected and on 25 December 1920, at the monastery of Tatev, the local council proclaimed the creation of an Autonomous Syunik (*Inknavar Syunik*).³⁷

On 21 January the Bolsheviks once again attempted to convince Nzhdeh in Zangezur to accept Soviet rule. A five-member delegation from Armenia arrived in Goris/Gerusy bringing a letter from Dro and commanders of the 11th Red Army³⁸ in which it was argued that 'Zangezur's non-recognition of the Soviet Armenia is preventing the solution of the question of Nakhichevan, Sharur, and Daralagiaz' and expressed a hope that 'Zangezur and its leaders would put an end to their politics and will join their motherland—Armenia in order to prove in the negotiations with the Turks in Moscow that Soviet Russia would defend the gains of the Armenian workers'. This offer of submission was likewise rejected.

Meanwhile, the contacts with the Bolsheviks were interrupted when the anti-Soviet rebellion started in Armenia in mid-February. The rebellion was suppressed in early April and its leaders, together with refugees and the defecting Armenian Red Army troops, retreated towards Zangezur. In these new circumstances the leadership of Autonomous Syunik called another popular assembly at Tatev and proclaimed The Republic of Mountainous Armenia (*Lernahaiastan*) on 26 April 1921 (see Figure 3).

³⁷Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 61, p. 6.

³⁸Armenian National Archive, Fund 114, Register 2, File 70, pp. 35–39, 'Report of the Armenian Bolshevik Delegation to Zangezur'. Typed original.



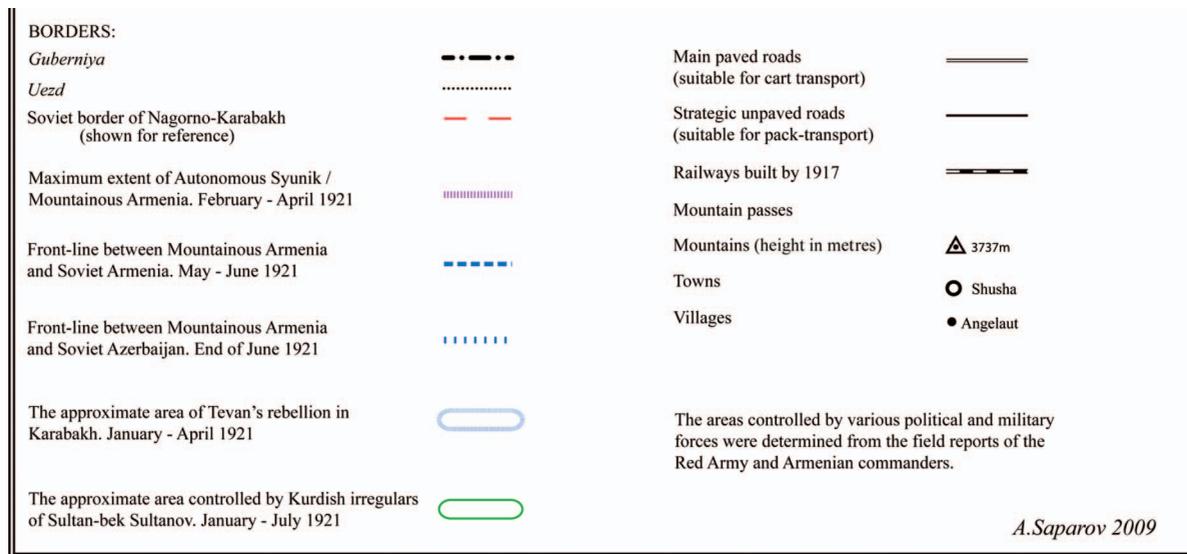


FIGURE 3. KARABAKH AND ZANGEZUR IN JANUARY–JULY 1921: MILITARY AND POLITICAL SITUATION.

The change of name is significant as the political affiliation of Autonomous Syunik was not clear, while the new name now clearly challenged the authority of the Soviet Armenian Republic.

After suppressing the rebellion in Armenia, the new and more moderate government of Soviet Armenia, under the leadership of Alexander Myasnikov, once again attempted to negotiate with the rebels in Zangezur and dispatched a two-member delegation headed by the Commissar of Internal Affairs, Artashes Karinyan.³⁹ The two delegations met on 12 May in the village of Halajukh/Kaladzhik [Spandarian] in Zangezur. After day-long exchanges the positions of each side became clear—in exchange for accepting Soviet rule the Bolsheviks offered a number of important concessions, and among them, amnesty to the rebels and promises of non-resumption of the summer Turkic nomad migrations. The Bolshevik offer was transmitted to the government of Mountainous Armenia,⁴⁰ and on 15 May their response arrived. To the main question of submitting to Soviet authority it responded that this was outside its jurisdiction and such questions ‘ought to be decided by the people for which [purpose] an assembly of Mountainous Armenia will be called where this question will be considered’.⁴¹ A two-week delay was also requested to call the popular assembly.

It was clear that the government of Mountainous Armenia was trying to win time and was not likely to surrender power to the Bolsheviks. At the same time, the continued existence of the defiant Republic of Mountainous Armenia after the establishment of Soviet rule in Armenia and Georgia was beginning to look embarrassing for the Bolshevik leadership. To address this annoying situation with Zangezur a session of *Kavburo* was called on 3 June 1921 at which a resolution was adopted calling for the suppression of the Zangezur rebellion; immediate preparations for military operations; the concurrent dispatch of a declaration in response to the announcement of the representatives of the Zangezur government and other declarations of measures for the immediate occupation of Megri and to indicate that Nagorno-Karabakh belonged to Armenia; for the Georgian and Azerbaijani governments to send their representatives for mediation; and for the liquidation of the rebellions in Zangezur and Kurdistan (Barsegov 2003, p. 504).

While the negotiations between Bolshevik Armenia and the rebel forces in Zangezur were not officially broken off, the Red Army command, in accordance with the *Kavburo* decision, started preparing for the offensive against Zangezur. Learning from their experience of summer 1920, the Bolsheviks decided that the offensive was to be conducted mostly by the Armenian units of the Red Army. The start of operations was scheduled for 25 June (Arutyunyan 1978, pp. 152, 154). As part of the operation against Zangezur, on 13 June the Soviet Armenian government prepared an appeal to

³⁹The delegation left Erevan on 1 May and arrived in the frontline village of Gerger on 3 May and on the same day it established contact with the forces of Mountainous Armenia stationed in the nearby village of Gndevaz.

⁴⁰Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 61, pp. 5–16, ‘Protocols [of] the Meetings [between] Government of Mountainous Armenia and Soviet Armenian Government Official Representatives’. Typed original, translated from Armenian.

⁴¹[From the Government of Mountainous Armenia] To the Representatives of the Government of the Soviet Armenia Comrade A. Karinian and Russian Red Army Comrade V. Mel’nikov, May 15, 1921’, Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 61, p. 3.

the ‘Authorities of Zangezur’ in which it repeated and extended the promises made by the delegation of Karinyan in May. The appeal, signed by Myasnikyan and members of the Soviet Armenian government, was printed as a leaflet to be used as propaganda for the population of Zangezur.⁴²

However, the rebels, apparently learning of the Bolshevik preparations, launched a pre-emptive attack on 15 June and quickly pushed out the Armenian Red Army troops and captured the entire Daralagiaz district (Arutyunyan 1978, p. 155). The commander of the 11th Red Army, Mikhail Velikanov, ordered the transfer of the Russian Red Army troops to suppress the rebellion (Arutyunyan 1978, p. 156). The Red Army started its counterattack at the end of June. After one week of fighting the rebels were pushed from Daralagiaz and the Red Army approached Zangezur. On 30 June the Bolshevik forces entered Sisian and started to advance towards Goris, which was captured on 2 July (Kadishev 1960, pp. 430–31). A few days later the Red Army entered the strongholds of Tatev and finally Katar/Kapan on 7 July.⁴³ As in the summer of 1921, the rebels retreated to the southernmost corner of Zangezur around Megri. Seeing the futility of further struggle, the government of Mountainous Armenia decided to leave Zangezur and crossed to Persia on 15 July 1921 (Figure 3).

The Bolsheviks solve the conflicts: May–July 1921

With the fall of Georgia—the last remaining independent republic of the South Caucasus—and the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish treaty on 16 March 1921, the Bolsheviks established the external frontier of the South Caucasian states. There remained, however, the immensely difficult task of resolving the question of frontiers between the ‘fraternal’ Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. To solve the internal boundary question the *Kavburo* decided to create a border commission made up of the representatives of all three Soviet republics under the chairmanship of Kirov on 2 May 1921 (Kharmandaryan 1969, p. 101). The commission was to start its sessions later in June. It is significant that three years after the proclamation of independence the boundaries between the three Caucasian states were still to be defined.

Even before the boundary commission assembled, the question of Karabakh had received an earlier consideration because of the difficulties the Bolshevik authorities had encountered in Zangezur. At that time Zangezur was still controlled by the Nzhdeh and Dashnak units that had escaped after the suppression of the February rebellion in Armenia. It was a source of extreme annoyance to the Bolsheviks given the heavy casualties they had sustained there in the autumn of 1920 and it made them keen to bring the region within Soviet power without having to conquer it.

On 23 May 1921 the Plenum of the Armenian *TsKa KPA* (*Tsentral’nyi Komitet Kommunisticheskoi Partii Armenii*) discussed a number of questions related to the situation in Zangezur and Karabakh, among which the interesting decision was taken

⁴²Armenian SSR, ‘Announcement of the Council of the Peoples Commissars. To the Authorities of Zangezur. June 13, 1921’, Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 61, p. 26. Original printed leaflet, translated from Armenian.

⁴³*Khorhrdayin Hayastan*, No. 125, 13 July 1921.

‘to appoint comrade Akop Ioannisyan as representative of SSRA [*Sotsialisticheskaya Sovetskaya Respublika Armenii*] in Nagorno-Karabakh and to summon him from Baku to Tiflis by telegram to receive directions and instructions from comrade Bekzadyan’.⁴⁴ This decision to appoint the Armenian representative to Karabakh is quite surprising. It does not seem likely that the Armenian *TsKa* was acting on Narimanov’s renunciation of his claim from December 1920. It is also unlikely that this was a purely local initiative taken at their own risk given that another point of the same resolution called for the urgent postponement of the publication of the notes ‘until clarification of the Nagorno-Karabakh question at the forthcoming plenum of *Kavburo*’. This shows that the Armenian *TsKa* was unlikely to act without *Kavburo* approval. It therefore seems that the Armenian leadership was receiving hints from *Kavburo* about the intended resolution of the Karabakh question.

Meanwhile, 10 days later, the Plenum of *Kavburo* took place on 3 June 1921 in the presence of Ordzhonikidze, Narimanov, Myasnikyan and others. The main subject of discussion was the situation in Zangezur. A resolution was adopted calling for a quick suppression of the Zangezur group. In point five of that resolution it was stated that the Armenian government should declare that Nagorno-Karabakh was part of Armenia (Barsegov 2003, p. 504).⁴⁵ As soon as the *Kavburo* decision became known in Armenia some members of the Armenian *TsKa* tried to dispatch a representative to Karabakh as early as 6 June but it was decided to postpone this until Myasnikov’s return.⁴⁶

Nine days later—on 12 June—in accordance with the aforementioned *Kavburo* resolution on the Zangezur question, the Soviet Armenian government adopted a short decree signed by Alexander Myasnikyan stating that, according to the agreement between the *Revkoms* of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh was now an unalienable part of Armenia.⁴⁷ It was later published as a leaflet in three languages—Armenian, Russian and Turkic.

On 15 June the Armenian *TsKa* finally decided to act on the *Kavburo* decision of 3 June. It decided ‘to publish the declaration on the joining of Nagorno Karabakh to Soviet Armenia’ and ordered the sending to Karabakh of ‘comrade Mravian together

⁴⁴Protokol No 4. Zasedanie Prezidiuma TsKa KPA ot 23 Maya 1921 g., Armenian National Archive, Fund 1, Register 1, file 39, p. 5.

⁴⁵In my opinion, the *Kavburo* resolution concerning Nagorno-Karabakh was primarily intended to smooth the process of the Sovietisation of Zangezur and had only a secondary intention of solving the territorial question. Two facts seem to corroborate this opinion. At that time the Bolsheviks were conducting negotiations with the Dashnaks in Zangezur for the peaceful transfer of the region to the Soviet authorities. The Bolshevik delegation, headed by the Commissar of Internal Affairs and representative of the 11th Army, met with representatives of Mountainous Armenia on 12 May 1921 (Abrahamian 1991a, p. 13). It seems clear that the *Kavburo*’s resolution was intended primarily as propaganda to facilitate the transfer. It should also be noted that the resolution on Karabakh was only one of the points of a larger resolution dealing with the Zangezur question. Despite that, some Armenian authors (Khurshudyan 1989, p. 31; Galoyan & Khudaverdyan 1988, p. 30) tend to view point five of the resolution outside the context of the whole resolution, and as evidence of a true granting of Karabakh to Armenia.

⁴⁶Protokol No. 8 Zasedaniya TsKa KPA ot 6-go iyunya s/g [1921], Armenian National Archive, Fund 1, Register 1, file 39, p. 9.

⁴⁷Armenian National Archive, Fund 1022, Register 2, File 197, pp. 1 and 2.

with a group of comrades—Pirumov, Akop Ioannisyan, Ter-Simonian and others'.⁴⁸ Four days later the decree was published in an Armenian newspaper *Khorhrdayin Hayastan*,⁴⁹ and a few days later the same decree was published in the Azerbaijani party organ, *Bakinskii Rabochii* (Khurshudyan 1989, p. 32).

In preparation for sending a representative to Mountainous Karabakh, the official stamp of the Armenian Extraordinary Commissar for Karabakh was ordered in Tiflis on 18 June (Kazandzhyan 1997, p. 42) and a few days later Askanaz Mravian was finally appointed as this extraordinary commissar (Kharmandaryan 1969, p. 102). Mravian's departure to Karabakh via Tiflis coincided with the beginning of the *Kavburo*-sponsored conference between the three republics to solve the question of boundaries between them. The Red Army's operation against Zangezur also began during those days. During his stay in Tiflis, Mravian had a meeting with Ordzhonikidze and some members of the Azerbaijani *Revkom*—Mukhtar Gadzhiev (chairman of *TsIK*), Guseinov (Commissar of Foreign Affairs) and Aligeidar Karaev (Military Commissar)—after which he departed for Karabakh accompanied by Karaev on the morning of 25 June (Kharmandaryan 1969, p. 102).

Meanwhile, the Border Commission under Kirov's chairmanship eventually convened in Tiflis on 25 June. The representatives of Georgia (Svanidze and Silvestr Todriya), Azerbaijan (Guseinov, Gadzhinskii, Rasulzade) and Armenia (Aleksander Bekzadyan) met to solve the question of internal boundaries between the three republics. However, it immediately became clear that the representatives of the republics were unable to find a solution due to their uncompromising positions. Already at the first meeting the Armenian representative required territorial adjustments in the districts with an Armenian majority—the Akhalkalak *uezd* of Georgia and the mountainous part of Karabakh—while the representatives of Georgia and Azerbaijan categorically rejected that proposal because of their need to combat their own internal nationalist opposition, and they also could not agree on the border in the Karayaz steppe region. The inability to find a solution to the boundary question and the heated nature of discussions prompted the presence of Ordzhonikidze and other members of *Kavburo* during the next session. The uncompromising stand of the Azerbaijani delegation during the session on 25 June prompted Ordzhonikidze and Kirov to send an urgent telegram to Narimanov the next morning:

The interruption of negotiations on the establishment of a boundary with Armenia given the existing situation in Zangezur will make quite a negative impression. Therefore, the departure of [foreign commissar] Guseinov is postponed until June 27. We ask [you] to convoke at once the politburo [of *TsKa* Azerbaijani Communist Party], *Sovnarkom* and solve the question of Karabakh so that tomorrow on June 27 the negotiations can be finalised. If you want [to know] our opinion, then it is as follows: in order to resolve all the frictions and to establish truly friendly relations when solving the question of Nagorno Karabakh it is necessary to be guided by the following principle: not a single Armenian village should be attached to Azerbaijan, equally not a single Muslim village should be attached to Armenia. (Barsegov 2008, p. 635)

⁴⁸ Armenian National Archive of Political Parties, Fund 1, Register, 1, file 39, p. 10, 'Protokol No. 10 Zasedaniya TsKa KPA ot 15 / VI 21g.'

⁴⁹ *Khorhrdayin Hayastan*, 19 June 1921.

The advice given by Ordzhonikidze and Kirov to Narimanov in their telegram was a thinly veiled demand for Azerbaijan to renounce its claim to the Armenian populated parts of Karabakh so that the question of boundaries could be concluded without further delay.

At the same time, the Azerbaijani authorities in Baku were alarmed by developments affecting the question of Karabakh. The telegram from Ordzhonikidze and Kirov requiring Azerbaijan to renounce once again the claim on the mountainous part of Karabakh and the dispatch of the Armenian Extraordinary Commissar for Karabakh were extremely worrying signs. The Azerbaijani government realised that if such a commissar established himself in Karabakh then the Armenian claim on Karabakh would become much stronger and the outcome of the dispute might not be in favour of Azerbaijan. As a result, Narimanov and the Azerbaijani government immediately took energetic measures to neutralise such a possibility.

On 26 June—the same day as the telegram from Ordzhonikidze and Kirov was received in Baku and Karaev brought the news that the Armenian Commissar for Karabakh, Askanaz Mravian, was on his way to Karabakh—the Azerbaijani *Politburo* and *Sovnarkom* assembled. The Azerbaijani Bolsheviks took a bold stand and decided to ignore the ‘advice’ of Ordzhonikidze and Kirov by voting against attaching the mountainous part of Karabakh to Armenia. In order to avoid accusations of nationalism their formal justification was that economic ties and administrative efficacy should prevail over ethnic principle (Kharmandaryan 1969, p. 103). At the same time several telegrams were also sent to the *Kavburo* in Tiflis and to the Armenian government in Erevan demanding that the powers of the Armenian Extraordinary Commissar for Karabakh be cancelled and Mravian be recalled from Karabakh (Barsegov 2008, pp. 637–38).

The Azerbaijani Foreign Commissar Guseinov delivered Baku’s response on the question of Karabakh to the *Kavburo* and the Border Commission the very next day, 27 June. As a result, it became clear that the resolution of the boundary question could not be reached and the representative of Soviet Armenia Bekzadyan asked for it to be decided by *Kavburo* (Kharmandaryan 1969, p. 102). The presidium of *Kavburo* in its turn decided to call an extraordinary session of *Kavburo* and summoned Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders—Myasnikyan and Narimanov—to Tiflis (Mikaelyan 1992, p. 645).

Thus, thanks to the daring and timely actions of Narimanov, the Azerbaijani government succeeded in postponing the final resolution of the Karabakh question and preserved the existing *status quo*. Invaluable time was won which most likely decided the final outcome of this territorial dispute in favour of Azerbaijan. In order to understand why winning time was crucial for sealing the outcome of the territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan one has to turn to the events in Zangezur.

The developments in Zangezur in late June and early July were another intervening factor in deciding the question of Karabakh. As noted earlier, the two instances of Azerbaijan’s renunciation of its claim to Karabakh took place under pressure from Ordzhonikidze and the *Kavburo* to facilitate, at first, the Sovietisation of Armenia, and then the capture of Zangezur.

Zangezur was a source of constant annoyance to the Bolsheviks. They had suffered a humiliating defeat there in October–November 1920, it was there also that the

Dashnak rebels had retreated after the suppression of the February rebellion in Armenia, and finally it was there that Garegin Nzhdeh had proclaimed the Republic of Mountainous Armenia. It was in this context that the Bolsheviks were prepared to grant the Armenian-populated part of Karabakh to Armenia to ease the Sovietisation of Zangezur and avoid costly battles.

The start of the Red Army operations against the rebels in Zangezur coincided with the sessions of the Border Commission in Tiflis and the decision of the Armenian Bolsheviks to appoint a representative in Karabakh. The Red Army offensive was successful and in the early days of July it had already captured Goris/Gerusy and, a few days later, the stronghold of Nzhdeh–Katar Mines/Kapan. Thus practically all of Zangezur was now under Soviet control except for its southernmost part around Megri (Figure 3). With Zangezur rapidly becoming Sovietised and the resulting disappearance of the very reason for the Azerbaijani renunciation of its claim on Karabakh, the Azerbaijani leadership gained a window of opportunity to avoid making good its earlier decision to grant the mountainous part of Karabakh to Armenia.

Meanwhile, in Tiflis the general plenum of *Kavburo*, together with representatives of the three Caucasian republics, the military and other party functionaries, assembled to discuss the current situation in the South Caucasus on 2–3 July. Thereafter, on the evening of 4 July, the plenum of *Kavburo*, together with Stalin (who was not a member of *Kavburo* and did not vote), met to decide the disputed question of Karabakh. During the discussion two competing projects emerged and were put to the vote.

There were two alternatives, each with two possible outcomes (see Table 1). The first alternative concerned the question of a referendum and there were two possible alternatives: to conduct one in the entire Karabakh (mountainous part and the lowlands) or to conduct it only in the (Armenian populated) mountainous part of Karabakh. The second alternative was the question of allocation which also had two possible outcomes: to leave all of Karabakh within Azerbaijan or include its mountainous part in Armenia (Kazandzhyan 1997, pp. 42–43).

TABLE 1
VOTING BREAKDOWN AT KAVBURO MEETING OF JULY 4, 1921

<i>Project I</i>		<i>Project II</i>	
<i>Proposal:</i>	<i>Voting:</i>	<i>Proposal:</i>	<i>Voting:</i>
To leave [entire] Karabakh within Azerbaijan	<i>For:</i> Narimanov, Makharadze, Nazaretian <i>Against:</i> Ordzhonikidze, Myasnikov, Kirov, Figatner	To include the mountainous part of Karabakh within Armenia	<i>For:</i> Ordzhonikidze, Myasnikov, Figatner, Kirov
To conduct referendum in the entire Karabakh among all the population of Armenians and Muslims	<i>For:</i> Narimanov, Makharadze	To conduct referendum only in the mountainous Karabakh, i.e. among Armenians	<i>For:</i> Ordzhonikidze, Myasnikov, Figatner, Kirov, Nazaretian

The voting turned against Azerbaijan. Not only did the majority of *Kavburo* members vote for the inclusion of the mountainous part of Karabakh in Armenia, but they also rejected the idea of conducting the referendum in all of Karabakh, the outcome of which might have been in favour of Azerbaijan. In this desperate situation Narimanov resorted to the last remaining option—he appealed for the question to be decided by *TsKa RKP(b)* due to its importance for Azerbaijan. The *Kavburo* acceded to his request and decided to move the question to Moscow.

One of the most puzzling decisions was taken the next day. On 5 July, at another session of *Kavburo*, Ordzhonikidze and Amayak Nazaretian, the *Kavburo* secretary and a member of Georgian *Revkom*, proposed to revise the previous day's decision to solve the Karabakh question in Moscow. Without many disagreements the previous decision was revoked and a new one adopted. This called first, on the grounds of 'the need for national peace between Muslims and Armenians and [the existing] economic ties between upper and lower Karabakh, [and] its permanent link with Azerbaijan', for Nagorny Karabakh to be left 'within the Azerbaijan SSR [*Sovetskaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika*] while granting it a wide regional autonomy in the town of Shusha', which was also included in the autonomous region; and second, for the commission of the *TsKa* of the Azerbaijani Communist Party 'to determine the boundaries of the autonomous region and submit them for *Kavburo* approval' (Guliev 1989a, p. 92).

This *Kavburo* decision put a formal end to the political part of the problem—the disputed status of the region—by eventually deciding to preserve Azerbaijani control over it. However, the reason for such a dramatic change of opinion remains unclear. Some authors explain this sudden change of mood among the *Kavburo* members by reference to the influence of Stalin who, having considered all the circumstances after the evening session on 4 July, must have expressed his opinion (Kharmandaryan 1969, p. 108). If Stalin indeed influenced the *Kavburo* decision on 5 July then what were the new circumstances that emerged during the night of 4–5 July? In my opinion the most likely development was the news that the Red Army had practically completed the conquest of Zangezour. With almost all of Zangezour in Soviet hands the very reason why the Bolsheviks were prepared to grant the mountainous part of Karabakh to Armenia had disappeared. Given the stubborn and energetic behaviour of Narimanov that sharply contrasted with the slow and half-hearted responses of the Armenian Bolsheviks, it is of little surprise that the *Kavburo* decided to leave things as they were—preserving the existing *status quo*.

Towards autonomy: 1921–1925

Soon after the *Kavburo*'s decision on the Karabakh question a telephone conversation took place between Myasnikyan and Ordzhonikidze on 21 July. The Armenian leader assured Ordzhonikidze that: 'The [*Kavburo* decision on] the Karabakh question was received with dignity and loyalty',⁵⁰ yet despite these assurances the Armenian leadership remained disgruntled. A few days earlier, on 16 July, the *TsKa KPA* had

⁵⁰Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 75, p. 1, typewritten transcript of a telephone conversation between S. Ordzhonikidze and A. Myasnikyan, 21 July 1921.

adopted a resolution stating that the question was not to be decided by Caucasian Bureau and that the *Kavburo* decision on the Karabakh question was unsatisfactory, and calling for new proposals on the issue of autonomy.⁵¹ At the same time, in Baku, Narimanov reported his personal victory to the Presidium of Azerbaijani *TsIK* on 19 July stating that Karabakh would remain an indivisible part of Azerbaijan (Mil'man 1971, p. 249).

Meanwhile, the political victory that preserved Azerbaijani control over Karabakh came at a price—the obligation to grant autonomy to the Armenians in Karabakh. Before the Sovietisation of Azerbaijan the Musavatist government came very close to forcing the local Armenians into accepting Azerbaijani rule without any provision of autonomy. Quite clearly the Soviet Azerbaijani leadership likewise would have preferred that no autonomous status was granted to the Karabakh Armenians. The creation of autonomy in Mountainous Karabakh would divide the historical province of Karabakh and create a political unit with the homogenous Armenian majority. Given the recent conflict between the two peoples this would be a highly undesirable outcome for Azerbaijan.

It is of little surprise therefore, that the Azerbaijani leadership tried to avoid granting autonomy to the Karabakh Armenians. At first, on 26 September 1921, the Azerbaijani Communist Party Politburo adopted by a majority vote (Narimanov and Buniatzade were against) a rather straightforward resolution that called on the *Kavburo* to re-consider its decision to separate Nagorno-Karabakh into an autonomous unit, not to declare autonomy in the meantime, and to create a special commission to collect material on the question (Guliev 1989a, pp. 96–97). A month later, on 21 October, the members of the 'special commission', together with Bolshevik functionaries from Karabakh (both the mountainous and the lowland parts), produced a resolution aimed at establishing peace and order in Karabakh and thus resolving the conflicting situation. A number of measures were proposed, including the summary execution of those guilty of robbery, punishments including a fine of no less than 10 million rubles for villages providing shelter to robbers, the execution of those guilty of spreading ethnic conflict, and the dismissal of all functionaries showing nationalist tendencies. The commission also noted that:

The conference of the Karabakh functionaries finds it inexpedient to separate Nagorno Karabakh into an Autonomous Region and finds that all the measures mentioned in the above resolution are in fact a solution of the Karabakh question. (Guliev 1989a, pp. 99–101)

Thus, by implementing draconian measures the Azerbaijani leadership hoped to eliminate banditry and calm the situation, which could then be presented to the *Kavburo* as a solution to ethnic conflict, rendering the creation of autonomy unnecessary.

However, there was no unity among the Azerbaijani leadership on the question of Karabakh. While some members of the Azerbaijani leadership were trying to avoid granting autonomy to Karabakh Armenians others (albeit of Russian origin) tried to

⁵¹'Protokol zasedaniya TsKa KPA. 16 iyulya 1921 g.', typewritten Armenian original. Armenian National Archive, Fund 1, Register 1, File 39, p. 18. A Russian translation is available in Virabyan and Balikyan (1989, p. 78).

implement the *Kavburo* decision. In October 1921 at the session of the Azerbaijani Communist Party *Orgburo TsKA* (*Organizatsionnoe Byuro TsKa*), under the chairmanship of Kirov, it was decided to create a special commission to determine the boundaries of the Karabakh autonomy (Mil'man 1971, p. 249). However, this attempt yielded no practical results.

By the end of the year, in December 1921, the Karabakh question had become a matter of discussion at the conference of the leadership of one of the Karabakh *uezds*. The resolution of that conference stated that:

... there is no specific, so-called 'Karabakh question'; [it] does not exist; it results [from] the general weakness of party and soviet work in Karabakh, the absence of firm, direct and consistent policy; and this question can be resolved not by some extreme and complicated reforms but only by intensified work in Karabakh. The conference believes that it is necessary to create a Karabakh *Oblast'* (Guliev 1989a, pp. 103–4)

The solution proposed by the conference was similar to previous suggestions but it also called for the creation of a Karabakh *Oblast'*, a region that would encompass both mountainous and lowland parts of Karabakh, it offered a way in which the creation of a predominantly Armenian autonomous unit in the mountainous part of the region could be avoided. During 1921 the position of the Azerbaijani leadership regarding Karabakh autonomy had been that suppression of banditry in the region would solve the ethnic conflict, and there would be no need to grant autonomy to the Armenian-populated part of Karabakh. This tactic was successful in the short term.

However, in order to understand better the political manoeuvring surrounding the question of the Karabakh autonomy one needs to consider the position of ethnic Armenian Bolsheviks working in Azerbaijan. If Armenian Bolsheviks in Baku were at best indifferent to the question of Karabakh, the local Armenian Bolsheviks in Karabakh were active supporters of the autonomy. They took steps to counter the attempts of the Azerbaijani leadership to avoid granting the autonomy. Anonymous reports outlining in detail the situation in Karabakh were sent to Erevan keeping the Armenian *TsKa* updated of the Azerbaijani steps.⁵²

The Armenian leadership was well aware of the reluctance of Azerbaijan to implement the *Kavburo* decision, and seeing that the implementation of autonomy was being delayed, it eventually petitioned a higher political body hoping to compel Azerbaijan to grant Karabakh Armenians autonomous status. On 5 June 1922 the Armenian *TsKa* appealed to the *Zakraikom*⁵³ asking it to implement the *Kavburo* decision to grant autonomy to Mountainous Karabakh (Mikaelyan 1992, p. 660). This Armenian appeal generated some results. On 27 October 1922 the Presidium of the *Zakraikom* decided that the *TsKa* AKP should implement the *Kavburo* decision. An ethnic Armenian, Armenak Karakozov was to become the chairman of the Karabakh *Ispolkom* (Guliev 1989a, p. 127; Mil'man 1971, p. 279).

⁵² 'Gornyi Karabakh. Svodka za No. 1. Sekretno', Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 7, pp. 42–45.

⁵³ From 22 February 1922 the *Kavburo* ceded its powers to the *ZKK—Zakavkazkii kraevoi komitet* (Transcaucasian Regional Committee) that was elected at the first congress of communist organisations of the South Caucasus.

Three days later, on 30 October, the Presidium of the Azerbaijani *TsKa* complied with the *Zakraikom* demands and created a three-person commission to work out the question of autonomy for Karabakh (Guliev 1989a, p. 128). This commission apparently produced no meaningful results in terms of preparing autonomy as the *Zakraikom* intervened once again at its session held in Baku on 14 December 1922. This time the *Zakraikom* adopted a 'special detailed decision' in which it outlined the steps the Azerbaijani government needed to take to implement the autonomy in Nagorny Karabakh. Among the measures suggested by the *Zakraikom* were the creation of a 'Central Commission on Nagorno-Karabakh Affairs' made up of Kirov, Mirzabekyan and Karakozov as well as another seven-member committee on Karabakh Affairs based in Shusha. The Azerbaijani *TsIK* was obliged to publish a decree on the creation of the mentioned commission within a week (Kharmandaryan 1969, p. 280; Guliev 1989a, pp. 132–33).

Following the harsh and direct intervention of the *Zakraikom*, the Azerbaijani leadership eventually published a short announcement in the newspaper *Bakinskii Rabochii* on 20 December 1922 (Shadunts 1922), and on 2 January 1923 the Azerbaijani government created a *Komitet po delam Nagornogo Karabakha* (Committee on the Affairs of Mountainous Karabakh) (Mil'man 1971, p. 249). With the creation of the named committee the movement towards autonomy apparently halted once again.

It was only half a year later that the question of Karabakh autonomy resurfaced again. On 1 June 1923 the Presidium of Azerbaijani *TsKa AKP* put the Karabakh question on its agenda and it was decided to prepare a decree on autonomy (Guliev 1989a, pp. 148–49). Meanwhile, members of the *Zakraikom* turned again to the question of autonomy for Karabakh at the end of June. After listening to the report of the Karabakh Committee (Shadunts and Karakozov) the *Zakraikom* obliged the *TsKa AKP* to create an autonomous region of Nagorny Karabakh within a month (Guliev 1989a, p. 149).

The latest intervention of the *Zakraikom* prompted the Azerbaijani leadership to make concessions on the question of autonomy. On 1 July the presidium of Azerbaijani *TsKa AKP* finally conceded the granting of autonomy to Karabakh. The announcement was to be made by the Azerbaijani *TsIK* (Guliev 1989a, pp. 149–51). On 4 July the *AzTsIK* discussed the question of autonomy and prepared guidelines for the decree on autonomy for Karabakh. The guidelines reveal that the practical aspects of autonomy (such as the governing body, legal statute and borders) had not been previously considered by the Azerbaijani leadership. It called for the creation in the mountainous part of Karabakh of an autonomous region with its centre in Khankendy [Stepanakert] headed by an Executive Committee, and until the creation of the Executive Committee, the establishment of a *Revkom* to govern Mountainous Karabakh; and for the creation of a commission to determine the borders of autonomous Karabakh and the administrative delimitation of Lowland Karabakh (Guliev 1989a, pp. 151–52).

Based on these points a decree on 'The Creation of the Autonomous Region of Nagorny Karabakh' was adopted on 7 July 1923 and published in *Bakinskii Rabochii* two days later. In addition to the points already discussed by the Azerbaijani *TsIK* it added a requirement to prepare a statute on the autonomous region and determine its

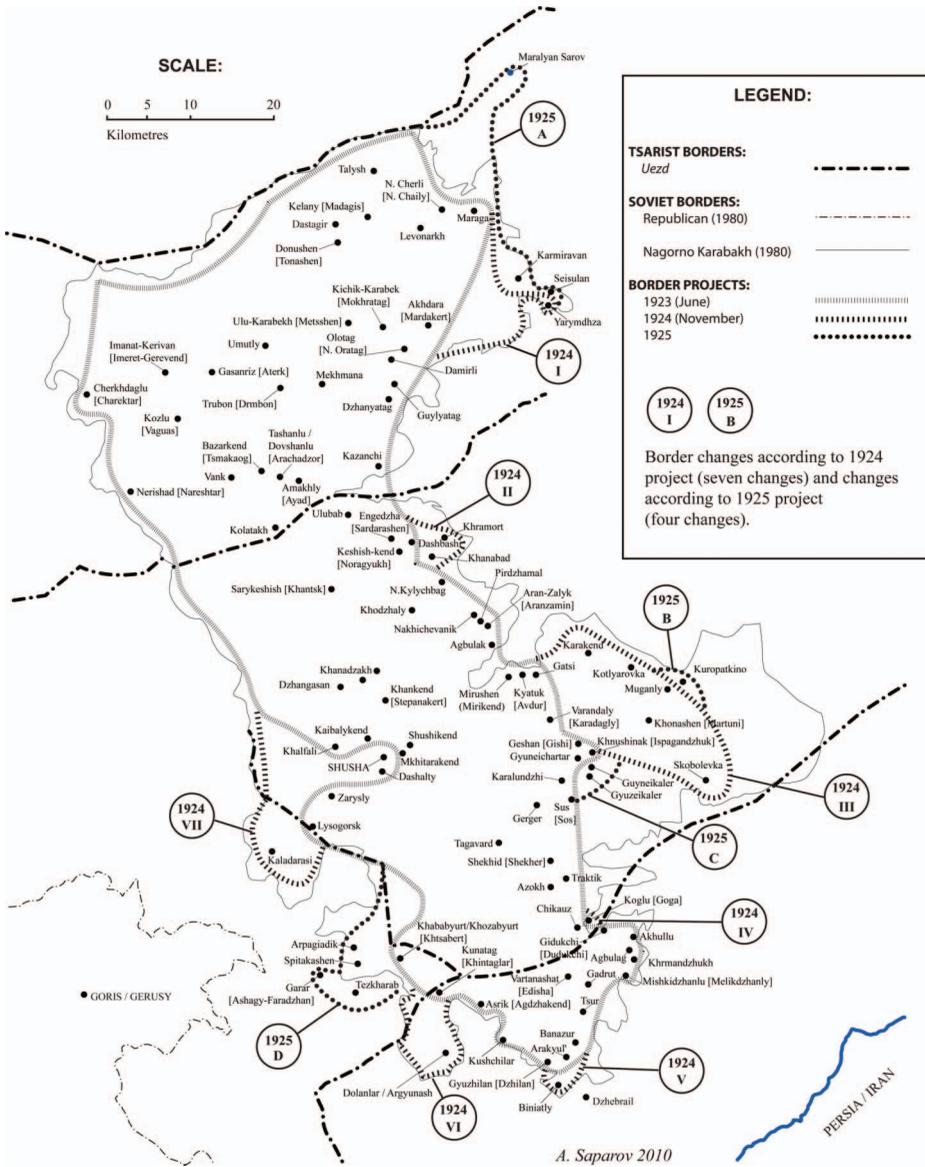


FIGURE 4. THE MAKING OF NAGORNO KARABAKH AUTONOMOUS REGION – Tsarist Administrative Divisions and Soviet Boundary Projects: 1923–1925

boundaries by 15 August 1923.⁵⁴ Two years after the *Kavburo* decision to leave Karabakh within Azerbaijan on condition that it was autonomous, the autonomy of Karabakh was eventually announced. However, this formal proclamation was hastily

⁵⁴ *Bakinskii Rabochii*, No. 151, 9 July 1923. See also Guliev (1989a, pp. 153–53).

composed under pressure from the *Zakraikom* and specified neither its boundaries nor its legal statute. These subjects were yet to be determined in the coming years.

Determining the borders

The early boundaries of Nagorno-Karabakh are a matter of considerable confusion. First of all, there are very few maps showing Karabakh boundaries in the early 1920s. When the borders of Karabakh are shown on Soviet maps they are often quite different. For example, in the first Atlas of the USSR, published in 1928, the maps of the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijani SSR each showed different borders of Nagorno-Karabakh (Enukidze 1928, pp. 89–93). To add to the complexity, none of those early maps show sufficient detail to understand exactly what was added or omitted in each particular case. In preparation of the map in Figure 4, showing the different boundaries and projects for Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region, I combined several map sources—Tsarist military and administrative maps from the early twentieth century and Soviet military maps from the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁵⁵ The boundaries of border projects were drawn according to the lists of place-names included within Nagorno-Karabakh by each boundary project. They are schematic representations of the territory included within the autonomous region and not an actual boundary prepared by the commission.

Soon after the formal announcement of Karabakh autonomy, the commission that was to decide the statute and the boundaries of Karabakh proposed the first boundary project in July 1923. As shown in Figure 4 (June 1923 project) the project listed 173 villages that were to be included within the boundaries of the autonomous unit (Guliev 1989a, pp. 164–66). The project outlined a core Armenian territory in the mountainous part of Karabakh but made some important exclusions: a number of Armenian villages located on the fringes of the Armenian populated territories were not included within the borders of the autonomy, and most notably, the town of Shusha and its surrounding villages were also excluded. At the time when the boundaries project was prepared the population of Shusha was predominantly Turkic, as were the surrounding villages. Despite that, the Armenians, who before their failed rebellion and the resulting pogrom of 1920 constituted just over half of the population of the town, disagreed with this decision (Guliev 1989a, p. 165).

Another disputed area was the territory colonised by Russian settlers just before World War I in the eastern fringes of Karabakh—the Khonashen [Martuni] region and Skobolevskoe *obshchestvo*. The Russian population had fled during the civil war

⁵⁵Tsarist military map from 1904 (5 *versts* in 1 inch), administrative map of Caucasus from 1903 (20 *versts* in 1 inch) and Map of Russian General Staff from 1903 (40 *versts* in 1 inch), Soviet military maps from the late 1970s and early 1980s (1:200 000 and 1:100 000). (Karta Elisavetpol'skoi gubernii s pokazaniem granits uezdov, politseiskikh uchastkov i sel'skikh obshchestv. 1903 Sost. E. Kondratenko. Karta Kavkazskogo Kraja sostavlena i litografirovana v voenno-topograficheskom otdete kavkazskogo voennogo okruga v 1903 godu, 1914. General'nyi shtab K- 38-XXXVI 1:200,000, 1986; K-38-XXXV 1:200 000—no publication date; J-38-XI 1:200,000, 1978; J-38-XII 1:200,000, 1980; K-38-141 1:100,000, 1978; K-38-142 1:100,000, 1989; K-38-143 1:100,000, 1985; J-38-10 1:100,000, 1981; J-38-11 1:100,000, 1991; J-38-12 1:100,000, 1991; J-38-22 1:100,000, 1975; J-38-23 1:100,000, 1980. [Karta] Elisavetpol'skoi gubernii. G9, 1904.)

and the lands were claimed by both sides. Geographically the area was closer to Lowland Karabakh, but Armenians of Mountainous Karabakh claimed the land because of the shortage of arable land in the mountains. Soon some territorial amendments were introduced into the project. Following the report of the boundary commission, the Azerbaijani *TsKa* decided on 16 July 1923 to include the lands of the Skobolevskoe *obshchestvo* as well as the town of Shusha within the Karabakh autonomous unit (Guliev 1989a, pp. 154–55).

On 24 July 1923 the Committee on Mountainous Karabakh was replaced by a five-member Provisional Revolutionary Committee headed by Karakozov. The Provisional *Revkom* was to govern the autonomous region during the transition period until the convocation of the *Oblastnoi Sovet* (Mil'man 1971, p. 250; Guliev 1989a, pp. 158–59). At the end of August, the Karabakh *Obkom* asked the Azerbaijani *TsKa* to speed up the publication of the statute on the Autonomous Region of Mountainous Karabakh and its territorial composition (Guliev 1989a, pp. 180–81).

The creation of the autonomous region for Karabakh Armenians apparently generated resentment among the local Turkic and Kurdish population. The chairman of the *Uispolkom* (*Uezdnyi Iсполnitel'nyi Komitet*) of the newly created Kurdistan *uezd*, Gadzhiev, wrote an article in *Bakinskii Rabochii* suggesting that: 'The village of Abdallar [Lachin] cannot be the centre of Kurdistan. There is insufficient water. The only solution is to leave [the town of] Shusha as its [Kurdistan] centre; otherwise buildings can be erected in Lisagorsk whose climate and position are better than those of Abdallar [Lachin]'.⁵⁶ The resolution of the Azerbaijani *TsKa* of 8 October 1923, calling for the idea of popularisation among the Turkic population of the notion of Karabakh autonomy, also confirms existing tensions. The same resolution again confirmed that the town of Shusha should remain part of the Karabakh Autonomous Region (Guliev 1989a, pp. 192–94). The Karabakh boundaries were again discussed on 18 October (Guliev 1989a, pp. 207–8). A month later, on 15 November 1923, one of the members of the boundary commission, Buniatzade, reported on the question of disputed lands of Khonashen [Martuni] region, and announced that it was decided to allocate the land first of all to the '[M]uslim population . . . and the remaining lands to transfer to the peasants of Nogorno-Karabakh'.⁵⁷

By April 1924 the question of the Karabakh boundaries was still far from resolved. The presidium of the Azerbaijani *TsKa* *AKP(b)* adopted a resolution on 17 April in which it admitted that the boundary commission had failed in its task and a new six-member commission was established and charged with the task to 'finally determine the administrative boundaries of the Autonomous Region of Nagorni Karabakh' and complete it by 1 May 1924 (Guliev 1989a, pp. 236–37). Yet, in June 1924 the boundary commission was still resolving the conflicting situation that arose around the lands of the Skobolevskoe *obshchestvo*, in particular the village of Kuropatkino. The commission confirmed that the village of Kuropatkino remained part of the Karabakh region (Guliev 1989a, pp. 242–43).

In the summer of 1924 the discussion of the legal status of Karabakh was still underway. The Constitution of Karabakh was drafted and discussed at several

⁵⁶ *Bakinskii Rabochii*, No. 232, 15 September 1923, 960.

⁵⁷ *Bakinskii Rabochii*, No. 258, 15 November 1923, 986.

meetings of the Azerbaijani *TsKa* (Guliev 1989a, pp. 248–49). However, according to the Soviet administrative hierarchy, Karabakh had the lowest autonomous status which did not warrant its own constitution. Hence, the project of a Karabakh constitution was eventually dropped. Instead, on 26 November 1924 the statute on the ‘Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh’ was finally published in a supplement to *Bakinskii Rabochii*.⁵⁸ It provided detailed descriptions of the central and local authorities in the autonomous region and outlined the territory of the autonomous region, which included 201 villages. Thus for the first time an official description of Karabakh’s borders was published. The new project added a number of villages to the earlier 1923 project, and most notably the town of Shusha, the area of Kaladarasi village and Skobolevskoe *obshchestvo*. However, despite earlier decisions to include the village of Kuropatkino within Karabakh it did not appear in the published list of 201 villages, and some other Armenian villages located on the fringes of Karabakh were not included either. In 1925 a new description of Karabakh borders appeared that now included 214 villages (223 counting hamlets) (Kocharyan 1925, pp. 48–51).⁵⁹ This added several villages to the territory of Karabakh including the disputed Kuropatkino village and the remote Armenian enclave of Maralyan Sarov (see Figure 4, 1925 project). However, in the following decades the borders of Nagorno-Karabakh were to undergo further changes.

Conclusion

The Karabakh issue had emerged with the collapse of the Russian Empire and the further fragmentation of the South Caucasus. Each of the three independent states proclaimed in May 1918—Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia—claimed its territory based on two principles. On the one hand, the principle of antecedent frontier was employed. The Tsarist administrative unit of *guberniya* served as a convenient building block with the functioning administration and economic infrastructure. The predominant ethnic group residing there claimed the entire province, including all the minority groups living there. On the other hand, the ethnographic principle complemented the first mentioned principle, claiming the territories inhabited by kin minority groups living in the neighbouring *guberniya*.

Karabakh was one of the regions where overlapping claims led to a conflict. Armenia claimed the mountainous part of Karabakh on the grounds of its predominantly Armenian population while Azerbaijan considered it an inseparable part of the Elizavetpol *guberniya*.

In addition to the conflicting relations between the republics the situation was further complicated by the involvement of several great powers—the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, Soviet Russia and Kemalist Turkey. Each of these actors pursued its own goals but usually possessed insufficient resources to impose its will in an unconditional manner. This created an opportunity for the independent republics

⁵⁸ *Pravitel'stvennyi Vestnik*, supplement to *Bakinskii Rabochii*, No. 269, 26 November 1924, p. 2.

⁵⁹ A practically identical list of 214 villages is in ‘Spisok vsekh sel Avtonomnoi Oblasti Nagornogo Karabakha s ukazaniem chisla dush oboego pola 1925g’, Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 116, p. 42.

to advance their own goals by making their cooperation with the great powers conditional on support for their territorial claims.

The great powers could not have afforded to ignore the interests of the republics and had to adapt their goals to the existing realities. The British policy is a good illustration of that trend: having no resources to establish their own direct rule over the disputed areas they merely sanctioned the existing situation. In Karabakh, they allowed Azerbaijan to establish its Governor-General, and in Nakhichevan they invited the Armenians to take control. When they encountered resistance in Zangezur, they left the troublesome district under its own administration.

The arrival of the Bolsheviks in the spring of 1920 is another good example of the way a great power pursued and adapted its interests to the conditions on the ground. After Sovietisation, Azerbaijan became the main base for the further conquest of the region. However, the Bolshevik position in Azerbaijan was weak and in order to remain in power Ordzhonikidze had to support Azerbaijani territorial claims, often in violation of Moscow's political line. Thus he supported the Azerbaijani claim on the Zakataly district granted to Georgia according to the Georgian–Soviet treaty of May 1920, as well as Azerbaijani claims to the disputed regions of Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan. When the Bolsheviks needed to facilitate the Sovietisation of Armenia in December 1920 the interests of Azerbaijan were sacrificed—Narimanov was forced to renounce his claim on disputed territories. However, the Armenian Bolsheviks never managed to use this opportunity to extend their rule to Karabakh and Azerbaijan remained in control of that disputed district.

Bolshevik policy changed when the conquest of the South Caucasus was complete and the question of the border with Turkey was settled in March 1921. They inherited a region with immense territorial problems—the relationships between republics and their minorities were extremely tense and the borders were unclear. The Bolsheviks now had to solve the problems between the ‘fraternal’ republics. A somewhat naïve attempt to resolve the territorial issue at a conference of the three republics in June 1921 failed spectacularly—the heated discussions and quarrels between the representatives of the republics were quite embarrassing and the attempt was abandoned.

The Bolshevik approach to the Karabakh problem was a curious mixture of several trends: first, it was a genuine attempt to solve the conflict; second, they pursued their own political goals; and third, they had to accommodate the conflicting interests of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In May 1921 the *Kavburo* was prepared once again to grant Karabakh to Armenia. It was necessary to suppress the rebels in Zangezur and the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia would undoubtedly facilitate the conquest. At the same time, this decision also reflected an attempt to solve the conflict between the two people as can be seen from the telegram from Ordzhonikidze and Kirov stating that ‘not a single Armenian village should be attached to Azerbaijan, equally not a single Muslim village should be attached to Armenia’ (Barsegov 2008, p. 635). However, due to the slow reaction of the Armenian Bolsheviks and the fast advance of the Red Army in Zangezur the Armenian Bolsheviks failed to establish their presence firmly in Karabakh before the end of the Zangezur operation. Thus the very reason for awarding Karabakh to Armenia disappeared. In this situation Azerbaijan was still in control of the disputed

territory and Narimanov proved himself a stubborn politician and refused to renounce his claim. Under the circumstances the *Kavburo* decided to leave things as they were, leaving the disputed province under Azerbaijani control. To sweeten the pill for Armenians, Karabakh was to receive autonomy.

It is clear that what mattered in the end was control over the disputed territory at the time of the decision. This leads us to another interesting observation—the principal factor that determined the outcome of the contest for Mountainous Karabakh in the period 1918–1920 was the geography of that terrain. In the struggle for Mountainous Karabakh, Armenia had a demographic advantage—the majority of the population of the disputed region were Armenians who were prepared to defy Azerbaijani rule. However, the main Armenian disadvantage was the difficult access to the region and poor communication between parts of Mountainous Karabakh itself. First of all, there was no direct road suitable for wheeled transport connecting Armenia with Karabakh and it was faster to travel from Erevan to Karabakh via Georgia and Azerbaijan than to cross the mountains of Zangezur. Well into the mid-1920s there was not even a road connecting Armenia with Zangezur and all cart transport had to go via the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan.⁶⁰

In contrast to the Armenians, the Azerbaijani government faced the opposite situation—a homogenous and hostile population in the mountains of Karabakh, but very easy and convenient access to the mountainous part of Karabakh. The journey from Baku took just about two days by railway to Evlakh station and then along a paved main road to Shusha. This advantage of access permitted the establishment of Azerbaijani control over the region which, in the end, decided the outcome of the political struggle.

This article has sought to demonstrate that in solving the conflicts in the South Caucasus the Bolsheviks relied primarily on *ad hoc* solutions rather than on any preconceived plan. Their possibly genuine desire to solve these conflicts was constrained by the need to accommodate the national interests of the Caucasian republics. In the case of Karabakh the granting of an autonomous status was a compromise solution that did not solve the problem in the long run. On several occasions Armenians tried to attach Karabakh to the Armenian SSR, starting from the 1960s, and during the 1970s appeals were made to the Soviet authorities (Mouradian 1990, pp. 417–25; Libaridian 1988, pp. 42–52). With the democratisation campaign of Mikhail Gorbachev, the issue resurfaced once again, quickly becoming the first national conflict in the USSR.

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⁶⁰ 19 VII 1922. TsKa KPA Doklad Ekonompredstavitelya S.S.R. Armenii v Nakhkrae Sero Manutsyana', Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 26, pp. 79–83; '24 VI 1922 TsKa KPA Doklad chlena partii i Ekonom-Predstavitelya S.S.R.A. pri Nakhrespublike Sero Manutsyana', Armenian National Archive, Fund 113, Register 3, File 13, pp. 48–50.

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