



FOREIGN POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

The difficult road to Western integration, 1918–1920

JAMIL HASANLI

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Foreign Policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan

As revolution swept over Russia and empires collapsed in the final days of World War I, Azerbaijan and neighboring Georgia and Armenia proclaimed their independence in May 1918. During the ensuing two years of struggle for independence, military endgames, and treaty negotiations, the diplomatic representatives of Azerbaijan struggled to gain international recognition and favourable resolution of the territorial sovereignty of the country. This brief but eventful episode came to an end when the Red Army entered Baku in late April 1920.

Drawing on archival documents from Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, the United States, France, and Great Britain, the accomplished historian, Jamil Hasanli, has produced a comprehensive and meticulously documented account of this little-known period. He narrates the tumultuous path of the short-lived Azerbaijani state toward winning international recognition and reconstructs a vivid image of the Azeri political elite's quest for nationhood after the collapse of the Russian colonial system, with a particular focus on the liberation of Baku from Bolshevik factions, relations with regional neighbors, and the arduous road to recognition of Azerbaijan's independence by the Paris Peace Conference.

Providing a valuable insight into the past of the South Caucasus region and the dynamics of the post-World War I era, this book will be an essential addition to scholars and students of Central Asian Studies and the Caucasus, history, foreign policy, and political studies.

Jamil Hasanli is a former professor of history at Baku State University and Khazar University, Azerbaijan. In 1993, he was advisor to the president of Azerbaijan and served two terms as a member of parliament of Azerbaijan from 2000 to 2010. He was also a history and public policy scholar of Woodrow Wilson International Center in 2011 and has published numerous books and articles.

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The difficult road to Western integration, 1918–1920

Jamil Hasanli

Note on translation

Many of the personal names cited in this book existed in multiple forms and, as a result, it can be easy to lose track of individuals who lived through this especially tumultuous time for a “crossroads of empires.” One factor is the variety of alphabets and transliteration systems involved, but the greater complication is that the people in this story moved from one cultural milieu to another, borders shifted, and political regimes changed. This is manifested in the way that Russianized name endings (-ev, -ov, -ski) were changed (or changed back) to Azerbaijani (-li, -olu/-oglu, -zade); Armenian (-ian); or Georgian (-eli, -idze, -shvili) forms. Another feature of Azerbaijani names in particular is the use of Turkic and Persian honorifics (aga, bey/bek, khan, mirza, pasha) and their incorporation into surnames. Every effort has been made to use consistent identifiers for individuals named in this book, generally by adopting the preponderant version. Readers are specially alerted that Nasib bey Usubbeyov, who played a prominent role in the events recounted here, is at least equally well known as Nasib bey Yusifbeyli.

Geographic names have changed as well, the most notable examples here being Constantinople/Istanbul, Tiflis/Tbilisi, Elizavetpol/Ganja, and Alexandropol/Gyumri. In imperial Russia, Azerbaijanis were referred to as Tatars or Turks.

In recognition of the pitfalls of transliteration systems, the decision was made to cite sources listed in the chapter notes in their original published form, followed by the English translation in parentheses.

Finally, it should be noted that all quotations that appear in this work have been translated or retranslated into English from the Azerbaijani text and are not transcribed from original sources unless indicated.

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Introduction

Despite its relatively small size, Azerbaijan, one of the most ancient countries in the world, has often found itself at the center of events due to its geographical location and strategic importance. East–West trade routes pass through its borders, and the destructive marches of great emperors and world conquerors have traversed its territory at different points in time. Azerbaijanis living in the vast territory stretching from the foothills of the Caucasus mountains to the Caspian Sea have been a target for great powers since ancient times—Achaemenid rulers and Roman legionnaires, Sassanid satraps and Arab warlords. Yet over the centuries, Azerbaijanis managed to create a unity at the crossroads of swords and diplomacy.

The Azerbaijani khanates that formed in the eighteenth century after the collapse of the empire of Nadir Shah had their own administrative systems, defined borders, and regular armies as well as judicial systems regulating social relations, currencies facilitating economic relations, and governments embodying all the attributes of statehood. As separate states located between three great empires, they gradually entered into a system of international relations in the region. It was the edifying historical experience and bitter fate of the Azerbaijani khanates that led to the realization that the only solution for Azerbaijanis lay in achievement of the territorial integrity and unity of the nation.

The Russian empire ventured into the Caucasus at the beginning of the nineteenth century, once again plunging Azerbaijan into the center of conflict. The tempered replies of Javad Khan, ruler of Ganja, to the peremptory messages of General Pavel Tsitsianov demanding submission to Russia and the heroism he displayed in battle fill the glorious early pages of the history of Azerbaijani diplomacy. An examination of this period draws our attention to an important fact: Wars between the various Azerbaijani khanates and Russia took place long before the events between Russia and Iran that went down in history as the Russo-Persian wars. Russian troops faced the resistance of Javad Khan before they fought a battle with any Iranian army. The Kurekchay treaty was signed by Ibrahim Khalil Khan of Shusha in 1805, many years before the Gulistan treaty of 1813 and the Turkmenchay treaty of 1828, signed between Russia and Iran, officially determined the fate of the Azerbaijani nation to be partitioned between the two. The Kurekchay treaty, as a complete diplomatic document stipulating

that the Garabagh khanate would become a Russian protectorate, recognized the khanate as a Muslim land.¹ Both the Kurekchay treaty and the ensuing Order of the Russian Emperor mention the appointment of Mehdiqulu Agha as the ruler of Garabagh. As for Garabagh itself—its boundaries, highlands, and lowlands—Azerbaijanis were acknowledged as the ethnic group living on these lands and Islam as the local religion.² The Kurekchay treaty signed by General Tsitsianov and the order issued by Alexander I were the first tangible diplomatic documents proving that Garabagh is the property of Muslim people of the region.

In 1823, the Russian administration prepared the Description of Garabagh Province containing a population census and statistical information about the ethnic and religious structure of the region, documenting the presence of Muslims there.³ The composition of the populace of Garabagh province was confirmed in a series of works written in the nineteenth century by Russian researchers investigating Russian policy in the Caucasus as well as in other official publications describing Russian government policy.⁴

The end of the nineteenth century saw the beginning of a fundamental struggle to determine the history and fate of Azerbaijan. When armed resistance over a period of three decades did not bring about any measurable results, Azerbaijani realists decided to change the form and methods of struggle and to replace age-old concepts with a national idea. Thinkers such as Abbasgulu Agha Bakikhanov, Mirza Fatali Akhundov, and Hasan Bey Zardabi set new goals for the nation, arguing the importance of a shift from traditional, oriental, Muslim religious schools to schools with new methods of teaching. Followers of these great thinkers, men such as Ali Bey Huseynzade, Ahmad Bey Aghayev (Agaoglu), and Ali Mardan Bey Topchubashov (Topchibashi), succeeded in effecting a transition from populism to nationalism. The turning of this philosophy of “national awakening” into a fully fledged way of thinking is connected with the personality of Mammad Emin Rasolzade.

The Azerbaijan Republic, which appeared on the stage of world history in 1918, was a secular state, a logical result of the transition from Islamic populism to Turkish nationalism and a historic confirmation of the philosophy of “national awakening,” including the desire to be a distinct and unified nation. Not seeing the footprints of their nation among the nations of the world and suffering from this, the leading minds of Azerbaijan seized the first opportunity presented and succeeded in establishing the first Azerbaijan republic on May 28, 1918. This significant event was a great historical achievement for the Azerbaijani nation and their hope for a change in the political map of the world—a world where diplomatic conflicts were being resolved by cannonballs exploding on battlefields and the situation was becoming tenser from day to day.

The Azerbaijan Republic survived for only twenty-three months. This is not a very long period of time, and yet the history created during those months, the steps taken in the sphere of diplomacy, and the political ramifications of important actions and policies introduced during that period changed the path of the nation. The independence announced on May 28, 1918, and the tricolored flag with crescent and star that was raised to the sky as a symbol of this independence were not only the

logical result of a national struggle spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but served as an ideological guide for the future of a new country, a strategy encompassing national targets and goals. The Azerbaijani republic of 1991 is the moral heir of the Azerbaijan republic of 1918–1920, and its revival can be directly traced to the diplomatic struggle and steps taken during those early years.

The Azerbaijan Republic was formed at a time of intense diplomatic struggles that accompanied the end of World War I and attempts by Russia to restore the borders of its empire. This demanded from the young Azerbaijani republic great diplomatic skill and an ability to recognize turning points in world politics. Azerbaijani diplomacy managed to fulfill its duty during the two years of independence, and that duty was characterized by the combination of a love for freedom and a struggle for autonomy. Those who represented Azerbaijan in the international political arena gained acceptance in 1920 at Versailles, but postwar geopolitics prevented the Azerbaijani people from deriving the full benefit of their achievements. The Azerbaijan Republic ceased to exist in April 1920, not due to political processes or territorial conflicts within the country but due to the complicated conflicts taking place in world politics. In truth, the difficulty of integrating the new Caucasus republics, including Azerbaijan, into the international arena was related to the collapse of Russia, which was a member of the Entente, the winning bloc of countries in World War I. The victors did not anticipate the collapse of Russia, and their ruling circles were not ready to recognize the new republics that emerged from the ruins. Russia's allies viewed Bolshevism as a temporary condition and did not lose hope that the country would restore its old borders. They therefore acted with extreme caution on all issues concerning this former world power.

This was clearly demonstrated in the peace principles of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who was considered to be the architect of a new world and a friend of small nations. The fourteen independent republics that emerged after the collapse of the USSR some seven decades later were not included in the fourteen points proposed by Woodrow Wilson. In this light, the *de facto* recognition of the independence of Azerbaijan at Versailles was an important achievement of Azerbaijani diplomacy and a great victory on the part of the small group of Azerbaijani representatives at the Paris Peace Conference.

Taking into consideration the complicated historical conditions of the time, the builders of the Azerbaijan Republic, who originated its foreign policy and defined the place of Azerbaijanis in world politics and geography, strove to create a modern republic based on democratic principles and the values of a secular state. Not only did they manage to reshape the world outlook of their countrymen, they managed to change the opinion of the world about Azerbaijan. At the first anniversary of the creation of the republic, Uzeyir Hajibeyli wrote in the official state newspaper Azerbaijan on May 28, 1919: "In the end, all that was required was to establish contact with those who thought that our existence was dangerous for the world, in order for them to realize that their views were false and erroneous."⁵

Securing the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan was an important role to fulfill for the country's diplomatic corps. One of the main

functions of the government and its diplomacy was related to the determination of national borders in the South Caucasus. Between 1918 and 1920, the territory of Azerbaijan, not including disputed territories, comprised nearly 97.3 thousand square kilometers; with the disputed territories, it was nearly 113.9 thousand square kilometers.⁶ After the sovietization of Azerbaijan, its territories started to diminish rapidly, and the total territory decreased to 86.6 thousand square kilometers. Chairman of the Azerbaijan Revolutionary Committee Nariman Narimanov, who could not countenance the injustice that was taking place with the Bolshevik central government granting historically Azerbaijani lands to Armenia, wrote to Vladimir Ilich Lenin: "Territories that were not disputed under the rule of the Musavat government became the subject of disputes after the Soviet government came to power. Of course, the people see this and express their discontent."⁷ Not long after the April revolution, in July 1920, those Bolsheviks who were considered influential in the Caucasus, including Nariman Narimanov along with member of the Caucasus Bureau of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) party Polikarp Mdivani; members of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijani Communist (Bolshevik) party Anastas Mikoyan and Viktor Naneyshvili; and members of the Military Council of the Eleventh Army Zh. Vesnik, M. Levandovski, and B. Mikhaylov, signed and sent to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist party in Moscow a document in which they pointed out that, "During the rule of the Musavat government, the whole of Garabagh was part of Azerbaijan."⁸ These documents are still of high political importance, especially so when considering the diplomatic struggle for the restoration of violated Azerbaijani borders and for the security of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. There is a movement at work today to distort the truth about the recent history of our country, a history well depicted in these diplomatic documents.

* * *

Early attempts were made to study the history of foreign policy of the Azerbaijan Republic and to investigate the diplomatic actions that took place during those times. Ali Mardan Bey Topchubashov, Mammad Emin Rasulzade, Adilkhan Ziyadkhanli, Rahim Bey Vakilov, Jeyhun Hajibeyli, Yusif Vazir Chemenzeminli, and others printed booklets and brochures that contain valuable information about the foreign policy of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic.⁹

After its overthrow, public figures and members of the intelligentsia appealed to foreign countries and published relevant works in these countries about the diplomacy of the Republic. These works shed some light on a few dark spots in the history of Azerbaijani diplomacy from 1918 to 1920.¹⁰

The events of 1918–1920 were investigated by Soviet historians from an ideological point of view, and the foreign policy of the Azerbaijani government was presented in the light of Soviet ideology. Nevertheless, works written in the early years uncovered and brought to light many documents and materials.¹¹

The diplomatic activity of Azerbaijan was also investigated by a number of Western researchers. In various publications issued abroad, consideration

was given to the foreign policy of the Azerbaijani government during its brief independence.¹²

Turkish historians have devoted considerable attention to the diplomatic activity of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey, the policy of the Ottoman empire toward the Caucasus at the end of World War I, certain aspects of international relations connected with Azerbaijan, and international aspects of the Armenian problem in the South Caucasus and Anatolia.¹³

After Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, there was renewed interest in the earlier history of the republic and the life and work of its first leaders. This history, including the foreign policy of the first Azerbaijani republic and its diplomatic activity, has been the subject of serious scholarly works as well as doctoral and candidate dissertations. These works are contributing to the creation of a full scientific and political picture of a history that was a closed topic for many years.¹⁴

Memoirs have been widely consulted in the research for this book, particularly with reference to the policies of the great powers toward Azerbaijan, the intense conflict among those countries over Baku at the end of the World War I, and recognition of Azerbaijan's independence at the Paris Peace Conference, as recorded in the works of public figures, politicians, and diplomats and published at various times.¹⁵

For the purpose of researching the diplomatic activity of the Azerbaijan Republic and creating the fullest picture of the foreign policy it implemented in 1918–1920, the author has sought out archives in foreign countries. In order to accurately record and document the activity of the first Azerbaijani government and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its diplomatic representatives in neighboring countries and the members of the Azerbaijani delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, the author has widely and extensively made use of the following:

- Documents and materials of the State Archive of Azerbaijan;
- The Archive of Political Documents of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan;
- The Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan;
- The Russian State Archive of Social and Political History;
- The Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation;
- The Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France; and
- Archives of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of Great Britain and the U.S. Department of State.

The author thanks the employees of these various archives for their help and consideration. He is also deeply grateful to the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the members of the ministry's editorial board for their advice and practical assistance.

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