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Azerbaijan and the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic: historical reality and possibility*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the origins, negotiations and considerations surrounding the formation and then rapid dissolution of the independent Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) in 1918 from the perspective of Azerbaijani statesmen. Left with few alternatives in the rapidly changing geopolitical situation to accomplish their goals and assure their interests – primarily the economic and physical security of the Azerbaijani Muslim population, and also the recovery of Baku from Bolshevik control – other than to seek the backing of Ottoman Turkey, the Azerbaijani faction in the Transcaucasian *Seim* nevertheless advocated for the principle of federation, stood up against Turkish intentions regarding the status of Batumi, and did not support the incorporation of their country into the Ottoman Empire. In order to properly evaluate the role of the Azerbaijanis in the creation of the ephemeral TDFR, it is essential to examine the fundamentals of the history of Transcaucasia from the Bolshevik October coup in 1917 until the creation of the TDFR on 22 April 1918 and its dissolution into independent states on 26–28 May 1918.

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Background to the creation of the TDFR (November-December 1917)

Despite the “Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia” proclaimed by the Bolsheviks during their first days in power, recognizing the rights of peoples to self-determination, the political elite of the peoples of Transcaucasia, including the Azerbaijanis, saw in the Bolsheviks most of all a thread of widespread chaos, and for a long time they did not lose hope in the resurrection of democracy in Russia. On 15 (28) November 1917 the Transcaucasian Commissariat was created in Tiflis, in essence a temporary administration of Transcaucasia that was to function until the restoration of a legal authority in Petrograd and the convening of the Constituent Assembly. Several Azerbaijanis held portfolios in this Commissariat government chaired by the Georgian Social-Democrat Evgeni Gegechkori, including F. Kh. Khoisky (the Commissar for Education), Kh. Melikaslanov (Commissar for Trade and Industry), and Kh. Khasmamedov (Commissar for State Inspection) (*Dokumenty* 1919, 7–8).

Since all three of the primary nationalities of Transcaucasia were represented in the Commissariat government, national factions were created in parallel with the formation

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of the government in which all governmental decisions were preliminarily examined before they went into force. Two weeks after the creation of the Commissariat elections were held to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, as the result of which the Georgian Social-Democrats received 11 seats, the Azerbaijani Musavatists 10, the Armenian Dashnaksutyun (Dashnaks) 9, the Muslim Socialist Bloc 2, and the Bolsheviks, Social Revolutionaries (SRs) and Ittihad Party one seat each. The course of the elections in the Turkic regions of Transcaucasia affirmed that the majority of the population supported the idea of territorial autonomy that the Musavat Party had stood for.

Ottoman initiatives in Transcaucasia (January–February 1918)

The creation of the Transcaucasian Commissariat coincided with a period of complex foreign policy challenges. As later events would demonstrate, the leaders of the Commissariat often lacked the willpower, the experience in state administration, and the swift decision-making skills necessary to deal with such challenges in rapidly changing circumstances. By 5 (18) December 1917 a temporary ceasefire was reached in Erzincan between the Turkish command and the Russian Army, which had already started to rapidly disintegrate as a result of Bolshevik propaganda (*Dokumenty* 1919, 15–16). In the text of this armistice agreement it was pointed out that it would be binding “until the conclusion of a final peace”. It was particularly emphasized in the document that the Turkish command was not to make use of the ceasefire in order to relocate its forces from the Caucasus to the Mesopotamian-Syrian front (*Dokumenty* 1919, 18–21). It should be noted that the Muslim faction in the Commissariat was categorically opposed to a continuation of the war with Turkey, with whom it was linked by shared ethnic origins and religion. With this in mind, the Azerbaijanis stood for the passing of a declaration affirming the absolute independence of the government in questions of establishing relations with foreign states. The proposal, which in the logic of things should have resulted in a declaration of independence for the region, was not met with understanding on the part of the Georgian and Armenian factions of the Transcaucasian government, which continued to hold out for the restoration of democracy in Russia and maintained a pro-Entente orientation in general (Hasanly 2011, 62). Nevertheless, the creation on 10 (23) February 1918 of the Transcaucasian *Seim* (parliament) was one more clear, though perhaps belated, step towards independence. It is worth observing that the issue of the creation of the *Seim* was decided as the result of an agreement between the Georgian and the Azerbaijani (Muslim) factions. Seeing in this initiative a step towards separation from Russia, the Armenians and the Russian SRs voted against it.

Until the end of January 1918, the observable differences in foreign policy orientation were pushed into the background by the events connected with the demobilization of the former Russian Army, the order for which was given on 19 December 1917. At that time a mass of demobilized Russian soldiers threatened to drown Transcaucasia in waves of Bolshevik anarchy, which for its part made steps towards independence impossible, forcing the government to hold out for the moment when the flow of soldiers from the former tsarist armies finally departed Transcaucasia.

On 1 (14) January 1918 the Ottoman command addressed the Commissariat with the question of in what form contacts could be established “with the independent Caucasian government” with the goal of concluding a peace treaty (*Dokumenty* 1919, 24–25). As is

now known, from late 1917 the Ottoman Minister for War, Enver Pasha, appealed to the German command with the request that Kars, Batumi, and Ardahan, historical territories transferred from the Ottoman Empire to Russia under the conditions of the Berlin Treaty of 1878, be handed over to Constantinople. As materials from the German archives reveal, the Young Turk leadership, as supporters of the creation of an independent Transcaucasia able to serve as a buffer state between the Ottoman Empire and Russia, nevertheless set for itself the following goals: (1) to obtain in its favour the separation from Georgia of all of the latter's Muslim-populated borderlands (including those that were ethnically Georgian); (2) to restrict the territory of Armenia to the boundaries of the Yerevan *guberniya* (governorate or province); (3) in this way to maximally increase the role of the Muslim population, under the influence of Constantinople, in any future Transcaucasian state; and (4) in order to achieve this, the unification of the northern Caucasus, or Ciscaucasia, and Transcaucasia. This plan, which essentially undermined the possibility of the creation of a viable and united Transcaucasian state, could have at least been partially neutralized, had the Transcaucasian leaders been able to grasp the evolving situation more clearly.

On 2 (16) January the Ottoman command proposed to the government of Transcaucasia that they take part in the Brest-Litovsk Conference, promising that the representatives of the Central Powers were prepared to offer to devote "all of their efforts for the recognition of the independence of the Transcaucasian government" (*Dokumenty 1919*, 52). Leaving to one side the question of the sincerity of the Young Turks, this proposal undoubtedly should have been accepted. By this time the territory controlled by the Transcaucasian military units exceeded the existing 1914 Turkish-Russian border, and the fact that the representatives of all of the Central Powers were taking part in the negotiations put the Transcaucasians in a better position than if they had to face the Ottoman Empire one-on-one. Although the Muslim faction decided in favour of accepting the Turkish proposition, the Commissariat government rejected it, preferring to remain a passive observer of the brewing events (Hasanly 2011, 75). Among the reasons for this were the desire to maintain an orientation towards a mythical "Russian democracy", the promises of the Entente countries that had begun financing the formation of Armenian and Georgian national military units from the end of 1917, and finally a reluctance to take upon themselves the responsibility for the declaration of independence without sufficient guarantees from the Great Powers. The Young Turk leadership did not hesitate to make use of the Caucasians' refusal, having decided to act behind their backs.

On 30 January (12 February), under the pretext of halting reprisals against the Muslim population in the Erzincan-Erzurum regions at the hands of the Armenian militias that had taken up positions on the front abandoned during the collapse of the Russian Army, the Ottoman command broke the ceasefire and went on the offensive (*Dokumenty 1919*, 47–49). The seizure of Erzincan and Erzurum showed that the Armenian militias were incapable of resisting the Ottoman advance. On 10 (23) February, the Transcaucasian Commissariat and the *Seim* agreed to the proposal of the Turkish command to begin peace negotiations, the location for which was chosen as Trabzon (*Dokumenty 1919*, 66). It should be pointed out that the position of the Azerbaijani faction in the *Seim* on the whole corresponded with the interests of a united Transcaucasus. In particular, it was decided at a session of the Muslim faction on 16 February (1 March) to seek to conclude a permanent peace with the Ottoman Empire on the condition of the preservation of Transcaucasia within the borders of the former Russian Empire which had existed prior

to the start of the war in 1914. The same decision was taken by the full *Seim* on the same day (*Dokumenty* 1919).

The Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the Trabzon peace conference and Transcaucasia (March–April 1918)

Nevertheless, on 17 February (2 March), on the eve of the departure of the Transcaucasian delegation for Trabzon, an official memorandum arrived from the representatives of the Soviet delegation at Brest-Litovsk informing them that the Bolsheviks had been forced to concede Kars, Batumi and Ardahan to Turkey (*Dokumenty* 1919, 84). As a result, the Transcaucasian delegation was obliged to participate in the Trabzon negotiations with the awareness of their losing position: as the formal part of a state that had already conceded part of its territory to its opponent. Even before the opening of the Trabzon negotiations, on 25 February (10 March) the commander of the Turkish Army on the Caucasian Front, Vehib Pasha, demanded the withdrawal of the Transcaucasian military formations stationed in Kars, Batumi and Ardahan (*Dokumenty* 1919, 86).

It is worth noting that the position of the representatives of the Azerbaijani faction in the *Seim* was by no means as unquestioningly pro-Turkish on this issue as is often portrayed in the historical literature. Their position was sooner dictated by Azerbaijani state interests. While agreeing to the handing over of Kars and Ardahan to the Ottoman Empire, the Azerbaijanis, expressing their own economic concerns, demanded that Batumi remain within Transcaucasia. “Batumi is Transcaucasia’s only outlet to the sea, Transcaucasia cannot do without it”, declared F. Kh. Khoisky in this regard. N. Usubbekov, a member of the government seconded to Trabzon as a member of the Transcaucasian delegation, also stated in the *Seim* on 1 April that “Batumi under no circumstances may be given away” (Hasanly 2011, 98).

On 13 April, when the decision was taken in Tiflis to declare war on the Ottoman Empire with the goal of defending the Transcaucasian territories, opinion among the Azerbaijani faction was divided: the representatives of the Social-Democratic Hummet Party took the decision to support the government, while the Musavatists, the Ittihad members, and the non-party representatives took a joint resolution against war, pointing out that the Azerbaijanis in any case lacked the military formations to participate in a war (Hasanly 2011, 95).

The Baku events of March-April 1918 and the beginning of political divergences

The transition of the Azerbaijani faction to a more clearly expressed pro-Turkish orientation took place after Turkish troops seized Batumi on 2 (15) April, presenting the Transcaucasus with a *fait accompli*. This was enabled primarily because of the desperate situation in which the Muslims of Western Transcaucasia found themselves after the massacre unleashed by the Bolsheviks and Dashnaks against the Muslim population of the city of Baku, and then in a number of the districts of the Baku *guberniya*. As the result of this, the Bolshevik Soviet of Worker, Peasant and Soldier Deputies headed by Stepan Shaumyan, who in December 1917 had been appointed Emergency Commissar for Caucasian Affairs by the Bolshevik *Sovnarkom*, was able to seize power in Baku. Having gained

control over the Baku *guberniya*, the Bolsheviks began threatening the neighbouring Elizavetpol *guberniya*, which in turn bordered on the Tiflis *guberniya*. In the first half of April, the Muslim faction started threatening to withdraw from the Transcaucasian government unless the Commissariat took measures to defend the Muslim population and brought Baku back under its control. In the second half of April, seeing the inability of the government to alter the situation, F. Kh. Khoisky declared that the population of the Elizavetpol *guberniya* would itself appeal to the Turks for help if the government did not resolve the Baku question: “That moment may come when the popular masses will begin to act themselves, which will create a tragic situation, as the question of life and death of Baku is the question of life and death of the republic” (Hasanly 2011, 135).

It is relevant here to observe that after the taking of Batumi, M. G. Gadzhinsky, a member of the Caucasian delegation who remained in Trabzon, tried in personal discussions with Enver Pasha to convince him to leave Batumi to Transcaucasia and thus to end the Turkish-Georgian War, but in vain. Drunk with success, Enver Pasha declared that not only Batumi, but the Muslim-populated regions of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki should also become part of the Ottoman Empire. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia should take the form of a federation or a confederation and be placed under a Turkish protectorate. If the creation of a Transcaucasian state should not be successful, an Azerbaijan that shares a common border with Turkey could directly enter into the latter according to a model similar to the state structure of Austria-Hungary (Hasanly 2011, 139).

The declaration of independence of Transcaucasia: A state with splintering foundations

On 9 (22) April, the Azerbaijani and Georgian factions of the *Seim* took the decision to declare an independent Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR). A number of Azerbaijanis entered the government headed by the Georgian Social-Democrat A. Chkhenkeli, who also held the post of Foreign Minister: Kh. Melikaslanov as Minister of Roads and Transport, F. Kh. Khoisky as Minister of Justice, N. Usubbekov as Minister of Education, and M. G. Gadzhinsky as Minister of Trade and Industry (*Dokumenty* 1919, 229).

The tragedy of the newly-formed republic lay in the fact that only three days after its creation, events took place which decisively split apart the already fracturing foundation upon which it was to have rested. On 25 April the Bolsheviks, headed by Shaumyan, seized complete control in Baku, establishing the Baku Soviet of Peoples Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) (Kazemzadeh 1951, 76–77). The Baku *Sovnarkom*'s declaration proclaimed that it was struggling for the implementation of Soviet power not only in Baku and the Baku *guberniya*, but also “in all of Transcaucasia and in the Dagestan oblast” (Hasanly 2011, 153). In the discussion about the relationship of the *Seim* to the Baku Soviet, the Muslim faction declared that if the government of the TDFR did not take measures to liberate Baku from the Bolsheviks, the Azerbaijanis would walk out of the *Seim*. The attempts of the Transcaucasian government to free Baku with the help of units of Georgians and Azerbaijanis ended in failure. What was more, the Baku Soviet was able to extend its power to all of the Baku *guberniya*, reaching as far as Kyurdamir. Worse still, during voting in the *Seim* about the relationship to the Baku Soviet the Armenian faction abstained, making the following proposal to the Azerbaijanis: the Armenian militias

that comprised the majority of the Baku Soviet's armed forces would overthrow the Bolsheviks in Baku and assist in the formation of an international government there which, in recognizing the authority of the TDFR, would maintain a multi-national character while allowing the Armenian militias to remain in Baku. The Azerbaijanis could not agree to such a resolution, which would have deprived them of power in Baku. On 6 May the Muslim faction in the *Seim* took a categorical decision that power in Baku should belong to the Azerbaijanis, to which end Azerbaijani militias should enter the city and the Armenian armed formations should withdraw (Hasanly 2011, 153–154). The implementation of such a plan, however, exceeded the capacity of the TDFR government. Understanding this reality, in the second half of May the Azerbaijanis decided to appeal to the Ottoman command with a request for military assistance.

Germany enters the stage: the Batumi conference and the collapse of the TDFR

All of these events were taking place at the same time that the peace conference was taking place between the Ottoman Empire and the government of the TDFR in Batumi, then occupied by the Turks. In contrast to the negotiations at Trabzon, which had been held on a bilateral basis, at the Batumi conference the Germans also took part as an intermediary, represented by the Bavarian General O. von Lossov, assigned by the German High Command in Constantinople. Expressing the opinion of military circles in Berlin who, in contrast to the excessively cautious German diplomats, were in favour of a more decisive policy both towards the Bolsheviks and towards Turkey, General von Lossov opposed the Young Turks' expansionist plans for the Caucasus, considering the main task of the Turkish Army to be operations against the British in the north of Persia (Baumgart 1966, 181–182). By this time the German side, interested in making use of the rich natural resources of Transcaucasia for its war effort, decided to impose firm restraints on the Turks, beyond which they were not to stray. The instructions given to von Lossov prior to the start of the conference indicated that the interrelations between the Ottoman Empire and Transcaucasia must be based on a strict interpretation of the conditions of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty: Kars, Ardahan, Surmalin provinces and the southern part of the Batumi district would go to the Ottoman Empire. The Transcaucasian railway network and the operations of the Batumi port should be implemented under state control through a cooperative arrangement including German, Transcaucasian, and to a lesser degree, Turkish capital. The independence of Transcaucasia could be declared only upon the agreement of Bolshevik Russia, which Germany promised to facilitate. If this should be accomplished, the Germans agreed to extend to the Ottoman Empire the possibility of concluding a military alliance with the Transcaucasian state, obliging it to defend Transcaucasia against external enemies, but without the right to interfere militarily to impose order on its territory. The Germans were inclined to reserve this right for themselves, so long as it would not lead them into direct confrontation with Moscow (Zürer 1978, 56–59).

Immediately upon arriving in Batumi on 6 May, von Lossov entered into negotiations with A. Chkhenkeli, the leader of the Transcaucasian delegation. In order to reduce Ottoman pressure on Transcaucasia, Chkhenkeli broached the question of the recognition of the Transcaucasian state by all of the Central Powers and the initiation of economic

linkages with Germany, while welcoming General Ludendorff's initiative to send a German military mission to Tiflis under the command of General Kress von Kressenstein. Still hoping for the possibility of preserving the unity of Transcaucasia with German assistance, he asked for the transfer of armaments and munitions to form military units to expel the Bolsheviks from Baku and Baku *guberniya*. In the case that the Turks should continue their brutish interference, Chkhenkeli requested that German troops be dispatched to Transcaucasia. As a whole these proposals found some resonance on the part of Quartermaster-General Erich von Ludendorff, who advocated for the recognition of the Transcaucasia, providing it with weapons and ammunition, and allocating German personnel for mustering and training the future armed forces. As regards territorial arrangements, the northern part of the Batumi district should remain part of Georgia, and the Ottoman forces were categorically forbidden to advance on Tiflis. The Baku-Batumi railway and all of its terminal points should under no circumstances be yielded to Ottoman influence. As a form of compensation, the Turks received the freedom of movement in the western part of Yerevan *guberniya* and in the Talysh khanate in the south of Azerbaijan (Zürer 1978, 60–62).

This schema, however, could not satisfy the Azerbaijanis, who understood the illusory nature of plans to return Baku through the military strength of the Transcaucasians themselves. At the same time, there were significant differences in opinion within the German leadership itself over relations with the TDFR. In distinction from Generals von Lossov and von Ludendorff, who were thinking primarily from a military and strategic perspective and who took into serious consideration the importance of insuring the economic and political interests of Germany in the Caucasus, the German Foreign Ministry, headed at that time by State Secretary Richard von Kühlmann, held more cautious views and a strictly legalistic approach. In the view of the German diplomats, the question of the recognition of the independence of Transcaucasia was directly linked with German policy towards Soviet Russia, the country with which the Central Powers had recently concluded the Brest-Litovsk Treaty that had put an end to military action on the Eastern Front. The recognition of the independence of the TDFR by Berlin, as with the more general German policy aims in the Caucasus, should not cause any kind of break with Moscow that might threaten a renewal of hostilities with the Bolsheviks (Baumgart 1966, 181–182).

At the same time, finding themselves in a very complicated situation, the Bolsheviks were ready to agree to Germany's recognition of Georgia, although they could by no means accept German recognition of Azerbaijan and particularly of Baku, given the oil production capacity of its surrounding region, which had comprised 83 percent of the pre-war oil industry of the former Russian Empire and which continued to have strategic significance for Soviet Russia. In Moscow it was understood that the critical danger for the Baku oil came not from the Germans but from the Turks, who were striving to possess Baku and all of Azerbaijan at any cost.

For their part, the Germans reasonably assumed that with this fundamental threat hanging over the city, the Bolsheviks would be all the more inclined to offer Berlin a deal under which Germany would gain the right to acquire the oil that it needed from Baku on the condition that it would restrain the Turks from seizing the city. Jumping a bit ahead, we can observe that this compromise arrangement in the final analysis enabled the Bolsheviks to agree to the German recognition of Georgia, and also to the presence of German troops on Georgian territory (Mamulia 2013, 141). As the result of

this, a form of compromise was reached as well between the German generals and the German diplomats. This was undoubtedly facilitated by the fact that on 11 May, at the only plenary session of the Batumi conference, the Ottoman delegation chairman Halil Bey presented an ultimatum to the Transcaucasian delegation demanding the concession not only of Kars, Ardahan and Batumi, but also of the Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki districts of the Tiflis *guberniya* and the Armenian town of Alexandropol. General von Lossov's attempts to soften the Ottoman pretensions did not meet with success. On 15 May, despite the protests of the Transcaucasian delegation, Ottoman troops occupied Alexandropol. Now convinced that the Turks were unwilling to take the considerations of their allies into account and were instead determined to present them with *faits accomplis*, Berlin decided to give them some of their own medicine.

On 13 May during a meeting in the Belgian town of Spa, General von Ludendorff proposed the rapid dispatch of a German military mission under General Kress von Kressenstein to Tiflis and the recognition of the Georgian Republic, and in so doing he advocated for the dissolution of the TDFR, which had lost hope of continuing to exist. This opinion was shared by the German Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Graf von Bernstorff, who proposed handing the Adrianople-Culfa (Julfa) railway line over to the Ottomans, which would allow them to maintain a direct link to Azerbaijan and thus reduce the Turkish pressure to the north so that the Germans could "communicate with Georgia independently". As the German scholar V. Zürrer justifiably asserted, "in this way Berstorff backed the implementation of the von Ludendorff policy of a separate treaty with Georgia, and at least a temporary allocation of the rest of Transcaucasia to their ally Turkey" (1978, 66–67).

On 24 May the German Foreign Ministry approved the generals' view regarding policy towards Georgia and the temporary provision of freedom of action in the rest of the Caucasus to the Turks. Events then developed with a kaleidoscope-like rapidity, as the Ottomans, Germans and Caucasians all attempted to get ahead of one another. On 26 May the Ottomans reiterated territorial demands going far beyond the conditions of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty to the Georgians and Armenians in the form of an ultimatum. In addition to Kars, Ardahan and Batumi, which had already been occupied by Ottoman forces, the Turks demanded the handing over of Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki and Alexandropol, together with the imposition of Ottoman control over the Alexandropol-Culfa railway link (Baumgart 1966, 179; *Dokumenty* 1919, 309–310).

With these conditions Turkey assured itself, in essence, not only political control over Transcaucasia, but also with of a close territorial contiguity to Azerbaijan and to Persia (i.e. to the Persian Azerbaijan) – in other words, to countries with an ethnically Turkic and Turkic-speaking population. (Avalov 1924, 42)

On 26 May, the same day as the Turkish ultimatum, Georgia, attempting to save itself from the onslaught of Turkish forces through German intervention, declared itself an independent state. On the same day the German command took the final decision regarding the deployment of a military contingent to Georgia, the guarding of the Georgian segment of the Batumi-Baku railway line, and the provision of assistance for the formation of Georgian armed forces (Zürrer 1978, 74). On 28 May Azerbaijan and Armenia followed suit and also declared their independence (*Dokumenty* 1919, 330–338).

Conclusions: causes of the nonviability and dissolution of the Transcaucasian Federation

From the materials examined it follows that the direct cause of the dissolution of the Transcaucasian state was the fact of Transcaucasia's informal division into zones of influence. Georgia, whose objective interests coincided fully with German strategic goals, was already no longer interested in remaining within the Federation. To the contrary, it was in the interests of Tiflis, having received the recognition of Berlin as an independent state, to take up a German defensive shield against further territorial encroachments by the Young Turks. For the Georgians, the declaration of their country's independence meant gaining a potential, if belated, possibility to bring Germany to its side in order to offset the threat of Turkish expansion and at least partially offset the damage that this had already done.

For their part the Azerbaijanis, understanding that only the Ottoman Empire had both the power and the desire to liberate Baku from the hands of the Bolsheviks, set their course on independence, though despite their strong pro-Turkish orientation, they were not in favour of joining their country directly to the Ottoman Empire. For the Azerbaijanis, finding themselves in a desperate situation (with the Baku *guberniya* and the city of Baku itself under the control of the Bolshevik *Sovnarkom*), the only alternative was to accept Ottoman assistance in the form of the Caucasian "Army of Islam" under the command of Turkish General Nuri Pasha, which had been mustered at the end of June 1918 near Elizavetpol.

In summing up, it becomes obvious that a realistic chance for the creation of a viable Transcaucasian republic existed only in the second half of January and February 1918, when Ottoman forces were still beyond the borders of Transcaucasia and the Bolsheviks had not yet managed to impose their monopoly on power in the future Azerbaijani capital: in other words, during that brief period of political vacuum when the Ottomans had still not yet invaded Transcaucasia and the Bolsheviks had not yet consolidated themselves in Baku, the critically important industrial centre of the region. Yet both the Azerbaijanis and the Georgians, the two key potential supporters of independence, lacked the will, the objective evaluation of reality, and the decisiveness required to take the initiative to take a decision as earth-shattering as secession from Russia. After the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and the violent events in Baku that followed in March 1918, the creation of a unified republic in Transcaucasia ceased to be feasible; for the resolution of the cardinal problems facing the Azerbaijanis, Georgians and Armenians it had now become necessary to draw in the Great Powers, whose goals often contradicted one another.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that up until the TDFR's declaration of independence, the Azerbaijanis on the whole stood for a platform of close cooperation with the Georgians, seeing in this a possible means to ensure Azerbaijan's interests. This showed itself in particular with regard to the issue of Batumi, which they saw as a strategic object essential for the future of all Transcaucasia, and on which they did not at all subordinate themselves to the directives of Constantinople. The insistence on Transcaucasian integration in the interests of the strategically important Baku-Batumi line ran as a unifying thread through all of their actions all the way up to 22 April 1918. The annexation policy of the Ottoman Empire, which was attempting to tear Georgia's Muslim regions away and impose its own protectorate over Transcaucasia, made the schism in the

TDFR in the middle of May 1918 inevitable. In parallel, the Azerbaijanis' decisive crossing over to the side of Constantinople represented for them the only possibility to regain their sovereignty over Baku and the Baku *guberniya* as a whole, which they were able to accomplish in September 1918. It is not irrelevant to observe that, as German archival documents show, Enver Pasha, an advocate of declaring the Azerbaijani Republic under an Ottoman protectorate, was nevertheless not inclined to include any stipulation in the text recognizing the future state that would oblige Constantinople to defend Azerbaijan's independence should it face future aggression from the Bolsheviks.

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