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Türkiye's South Caucasus Policy and Nakhchivan in the Period From January 1920 to the Sovietization of Azerbaijan

Abstract

The period from January 1920 to the Sovietization of Azerbaijan marked a crucial phase in Turkiye's South Caucasus policy, particularly concerning Nakhchivan. This study examines Turkey's evolving policy toward Nakhchivan and the South Caucasus by analyzing the shifting priorities of the Ottoman government and the Turkish Nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha. Methodologically, the study relies on historical analysis, utilizing primary and secondary sources, including archival documents, diplomatic correspondence, and contemporary accounts. The study also applies a geopolitical lens to evaluate Turkiye's pragmatic alignment with Bolshevik Russia and its diplomatic maneuvers in the Moscow and Kars negotiations. The study contributes to a nuanced understanding of Turkey's South Caucasus policy during a transformative historical juncture. It demonstrates how Turkey balanced its regional ambitions with geopolitical pragmatism, navigating the dual imperatives of securing support from Soviet Russia while maintaining influence over Nakhchivan. The findings hold contemporary relevance in assessing Turkey's enduring strategic interests in the South Caucasus and its historical approach to regional geopolitics.

Keywords: Türkiye, South Caucasus, Nakhchivan, Sovetization, Strategic, Geopolitics

Ocak 1920'den Azerbaycan'ın Sovyetleştirilmesine Kadar Olan Dönemde Türkiye'nin Güney Kafkasya Politikası ve Nahcivan

Öz

Ocak 1920'den Azerbaycan'ın Sovyetleştirilmesine kadar geçen süre, Türkiye'nin Güney Kafkasya politikasında, özellikle de Nahçıvan konusunda önemli bir aşamaya işaret etmektedir. Bu çalışma, Osmanlı hükümetinin ve Mustafa Kemal Paşa liderliğindeki Türk Milliyetçi hareketinin



değişen önceliklerini analiz ederek Türkiye'nin Nahçıvan ve Güney Kafkasya'ya yönelik değişen politikasını incelemektedir. Metodolojik olarak, çalışma arşiv belgeleri, diplomatik yazışmalar ve çağdaş anlatılar dahil olmak üzere birincil ve ikincil kaynakları kullanarak tarihsel analize dayanmaktadır. Çalışma aynı zamanda Türkiye'nin Bolşevik Rusya ile pragmatik uyumunu ve Moskova ve Kars müzakerelerindeki diplomatik manevralarını değerlendirmek için jeopolitik bir mercek uyguluyor. Çalışma, dönüştürücü bir tarihsel kavşakta Türkiye'nin Güney Kafkasya politikasının incelikli bir şekilde anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunuyor. Türkiye'nin bölgesel hırslarını jeopolitik pragmatizmle nasıl dengelediğini, Nahçıvan üzerindeki nüfuzunu korurken Sovyet Rusya'nın desteğini sağlamanın ikili zorunluluğunu nasıl yönlendirdiğini gösteriyor. Bulgular, Türkiye'nin Güney Kafkasya'daki kalıcı stratejik çıkarlarını ve bölgesel jeopolitiğe tarihsel yaklaşımını değerlendirmek açısından güncel bir öneme sahiptir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Güney Kafkasya, Nahçıvan, Sovyetleşme, Stratejik, Jeopolitik Introduction

The years 1920-1921 were a turbulent period in the history of not only the South Caucasus, but the Eurasian region in general. After the end of World War I, serious changes took place in the world. The 3 great empires of Eurasia fell (Ottoman, Czarist Russia and Austria-Hungary), and a confused and tense political situation arose in the territory they ruled in the past. Since the 18th century, a new situation had arisen in the South Caucasus and Azerbaijan, where the interests of both Tsarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire collided. The events that took place in the region in 1920-1921 were actually a continuation of the geopolitical processes that began with the end of World War I. The complexity and tension of the ongoing processes allow us to characterize the short time lapse covering only 1920-1921 as a semiphase. Within this sub-stage itself, separate periods are distinguished by their own characteristics. In the short period of time from January 1920 to April 1920, Turkey's Nakhchivan policy refers to the position and steps taken by two different political institutions the Ottoman state and the leaders of the Turkish national independence struggle in relation to Nakhchivan. After the fall of the People's Republic in Azerbaijan in April 1920, and the first meeting of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey under the chairmanship of Mustafa Kemal Pasha in Turkey, the direction of the processes in the region changed. Gradually, the concept of Azerbaijan policy of the Ottoman state completely faded into the background, and instead, the Azerbaijan policy of the Turkish Grand National Assembly government began to come to the fore. In the period from April 1920 to February 1921, although Bolshevik Russia and Mustafa Kemal's Turkey came closer on the issue of fighting against foreign invaders, there were still enough differences of opinion regarding Azerbaijan's policy and the issue of Nakhchivan. Bolshevik Russia tried to "gift" some Azerbaijani territories, including Nakhchivan, to Armenians for the Sovietization of Armenia, while Turkey tried to preserve the Azerbaijani-Turkish presence and identity in Nakhchivan. Even the parties did not hesitate to show military power to each other in this secret struggle. In the Moscow negotiations, which began in February 1921 and lasted until March 16, along with other disagreements between Mustafa Kemal's Turkey and Bolshevik Russia, the issue of Nakhchivan was also the subject of diplomatic negotiations. In the period from March 1921 to October of the same year, that is, until the signing of the Kars Treaty, Turkey's South Caucasus policy, including its approach to the Nakhchivan issue, took on a completely new meaning.

1. Main body

During October-November 1918, after the Ottoman troops in the South Caucasus left the region, the British military forces entered the territories of Azerbaijan. The British invaders were able to stay in the region until August 1919. On August 24, British troops first left Baku and then the entire South Caucasus. It should be noted that the process of the British leaving the territories of Nakhchivan had already started in May 1919. Back on May 3, 1919, the British occupation command made a decision to temporarily place Nakhchivan under the control of Armenia. However, the local population did not come to terms with this, and by persistently fighting, they managed to bring the region under the control of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic Həyatova, 2022, s. 24). At that time, the representatives of Nakhchivan, who fought against the attempts of the forces of the United States and Great Britain in the region to hand over Nakhchivan to Armenia, said that they would arm themselves and protect their homeland even at the cost of their lives, and that they did not recognize the authority of Armenia unequivocally. The representatives of Nakhchivan who met with the American soldiers stated that they would oppose it even if the government of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic were to hand over Nakhchivan to Armenia under some pressure (Hacıyev & Kəlbizadə, 2017). Despite its complete weakening in those years, the Ottoman state's attempts to keep the processes in the region under control are confirmed by the facts reflected in the archive documents. The information suggests that the people still hope to receive help and assistance from the Ottomans in the conditions where the power of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic has been partially restored in the region. After the army left the region, the Ottoman government could not defend Nakhchivan with military means, but it used political and diplomatic means. The representatives of the Ottoman government, who established contact with the British military forces, demanded from the representatives of Great Britain to stop the oppression of the Muslim-Turkish population in the region (Atnur, 1999). In the same period, the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, including Nakhchivan were of special importance for Mustafa Kemal Pasha and his comrades-in-arms, who continued the national liberation struggle in Anatolia. At the Erzurum Congress held on July 23 - August 7, 1919, extensive and intense discussions were held between Mustafa Kemal and Kazim Garabakir pashas about the future of Nakhchivan, and then a decision was made to send special military units to Nakhchivan. It is an indication of how much importance they attach to Nakhchivan (Medetli, 1999). In the tense situation, the people of Nakhchivan also considered it necessary to establish contact with the new forces in Turkey. The inclination of the local population to the Turkish national independence struggle was also related to another factor. Thus, Kazim Garabakir Pasha, who was appointed the second army commander on the Caucasian front of the Ottoman state during the First World War, and the commander of the XV Corps in Erzurum from March 2, 1919 (Erickson, 2004) his unequivocal support of the national independence struggle and his rapprochement with Mustafa Kemal Pasha played an important role in this issue. Because Kazim Garabakir Pasha had great services in preventing the massacres committed by Armenians against the Muslim-Turkish population in the region during the war years. This increased the public's sympathy for him. The local population's request for help from Mustafa Kemal Pasha and his comrades-in-arms was directly related to the personality of Kazim Garabakir Pasha.

After the Peace of Mudros, in order to protect the rights of the Eastern Anatolian provinces and carry out scientific, intellectual, political and, if necessary, armed struggle, the National Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Eastern Provinces was established in Istanbul on December 2, 1918, and its Erzurum branch was established on March 10, 1919. A representative from Nakhchivan was also elected to the Erzurum Congress held in July-August 1919, but due to the difficult conditions in the region, the representative of Nakhchivan Haji Jabbar Bey Taghizade Beyazid came as far as Erzurum, but it was not possible to reach Erzurum.

In the telegram sent by the representative of Nakhchivan to Erzurum on June 1, 1919, it was mentioned that Haji Jabbar Bey Taghizade was elected as the representative of all the Muslim population of Nakhchivan, Sharur, Ordubad and Vedibasar regions. The content of the telegram actually allows us to claim that Haji Jabbar bey Taghizade came from Nakhchivan to Beyazid not alone, but with a delegation (Kırzıoğlu, 1993). In his telegram sent to Haji Jabbar Bey Taghizadeh on June 11 of the same year, it was mentioned that after the withdrawal of British forces from Nakhchivan, Armenian armed groups started massacres against the Turkish-

Muslim population of the region. Describing the seriousness of the situation, Haji Jabbar Bey wrote that he was waiting for instructions from Erzurum as a representative of Nakhchivan (Dayı, 2006). Although there was no representative of Nakhchivan among the 62 delegates who were in Erzurum during the congress, decisions regarding Nakhchivan were made here. The decisions taken could also be considered an indicator of Mustafa Kemal Pasha's attitude towards Nakhchivan. In his speech, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, who was elected chairman of the Erzurum Congress held on July 23, 1919, talked about the oppression of the Muslim population by the Armenians in all regions from Nakhchivan to Oltu, and in some places they committed massacres and looting. He said that the Armenians are trying to fulfill their goals regarding the Eastern provinces by forcing the Muslim population to migrate (Kırzıoğlu, 1993). The goal regarding the eastern provinces was clear. Armenians consider those territories, including Nakhchivan, to be part of the imaginary "greater Armenia", where they tried to build a greater Armenia by carrying out ethnic cleansing. From the beginning of 1920, the struggle against the occupation policy of the allied states, especially the British, necessitated the search for allies of Mustafa Kemal Pasha and his comrades-in-arms. Under such conditions, Bolshevik Russia led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin became a natural ally of Mustafa Kemal Pasha. This rapprochement had a significant impact on both Turkey's South Caucasus policy and the processes in the region. This caused Mustafa Kemal Pasha to prioritize relations with the Azerbaijani Bolsheviks more than the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, whose Turkey was on the verge of collapse.

At that time, Kazim Garabekir Pasha, who knew that attempts to stop the oppression against Azerbaijanis in Nakhchivan by political means were ineffective, sent 11 Turkish soldiers to Nakhchivan under the leadership of Khalil Bey. The force sent was not limited to that. Small military detachments led by Turkish sergeants were also sent to the surrounding areas of Nakhchivan (Atnur, 1999). Since October 1919, Haskel, the commander of the US forces in the South Caucasus, made consistent efforts to create a neutral zone in Nakhchivan or establish a general governorship here, but it was not possible to fully implement this plan. Colonel Deli, acting as the US representative in Nakhchivan, left Nakhchivan with other officers in January 1920 (Hacıyev, 1994). This process was also accompanied by successive attacks of Armenian armed terrorist groups on Nakhchivan on January 6-23.

At that time, the Ottoman state, which had been defeated in the war, was already living its last days. In the past, the territory of the empire, which ruled over three continents, fell under the foot of the invading armies of different countries. Turkish national liberation movement started in Anatolia under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha. Although the Ottoman rule

continued in Istanbul, it was of a formal nature. In that period, it cannot be said that neither the Ottoman Empire, which was living its last days, nor the national liberation movement led by Mustafa Kemal had the ability to influence the processes in the Caucasus or the South Caucasus. It was also absurd to expect the Ottomans, who were unable to maintain the integrity of their native borders, to conduct a special South Caucasus policy from the forces led by Mustafa Kemal, who entered into a life-and-death battle to save his native country. From this point of view, in the early 1920s, it should be taken for granted that some forces wanted help from the Khajar Empire, and some forces even wanted help from Georgia. It was not like being a supporter of any state, but it came from the desire to protect the Muslim-Turkish presence in Nakhchivan by all possible means in the difficult geopolitical conditions.

In connection with a number of other issues, in the beginning of 1920, the situation in Nakhchivan itself was quite tense and confused. There were serious disagreements between the Turkish forces led by Khalil Bey, Kalbali Khan and other nobles who had been civil judges of the region in the past, and Samad Bey Jamilinski, the representative of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in the region. Gaining strength from the fact that a large part of the population of the region unequivocally considered this place to be a part of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, Samad Bey Cemilinski opposed the excessively free behavior of the Turkish officers in the region. He was seriously trying to get help from the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. Samad Bey Jamilinski's position was that an agreement should be concluded between the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and Dashnak Armenia and issues related to the region should be resolved within this framework. Khalil Bey and other Turkish officers, who had concentrated considerable military power in their hands, did not want this. They understood that Dashnak Armenia's goal in concluding an agreement with the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic is to comfortably occupy Turkish lands in the west, ensuring security in the east. They also could not accept the behavior of Samad Bey Jamilinski. Khalil Bey thought that as the governor of the southwestern region of the Republic, Samad Bey, who could not advance from Ordubad, was called by him to Nakhchivan and declared the governor. Of course, Khalil Bey played a role in strengthening Samad Bey's position as the governor-general of the region. However, Khalil Bey's thoughts about declaring Samad Bey the governor of Nakhchivan were completely wrong. It is clear from the research of researcher Musa Guliyev that on the contrary, by the order of Samad Bey Jamilinski, who came to the region in August 1919, Khalil Bey was appointed the commander-in-chief of the local troops, and Kalbali Khan III was appointed his assistant and the commander of the Nakhchivan detachment (Quliyev, 2014).

Disagreements between Samad Bey Jamilinski and Khalil Bey, as well as Kalbali Khan III, resulted in Samad Bey's expulsion from Nakhchivan in March 1920 and his recall to Baku by the government of the Republic. In this matter, the coincidence of the opinions of Kalbali Khan, who had a high reputation in Nakhchivan, with Khalil Bey played an important role. Khalil Bey announced that an Azerbaijani named Gara Bey was appointed governor instead of him (Atnur, 1999). Deeply aware of the difficult situation of the Ottoman Empire and the national liberation movement led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the forces in the region took all possible steps to protect Nakhchivan. For example, on February 11, 1920, the Turkish-Muslim population of Nakhchivan sent a letter to the Prime Minister of Georgia, Noah Jordan, informing them about the attacks of the armed groups of Dashnak Armenia on Nakhchivan and asking for help. The request of the people of Nakhchivan for help was not addressed only to Noy Jordan, they also called on the ambassadors of foreign countries in Tbilisi to inform their countries about this, and for foreign countries to help the local Azerbaijani population (Atnur, 1999). Despite the difficult situation that Ottoman Turkey was in, the people represented in the last government cabinets of the Ottoman Empire, as well as Mustafa Kemal Pasha and other leaders of the independence struggle, had their own views on the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, which is considered the "Turkish gateway".

At the beginning of 1920, seeing that the influence and power of the national independentists led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha was increasing day by day, and the Ottoman government in Istanbul was weakening, the allied states increased their pressure every day. The allies, who were in a hurry to sign a humiliating peace with the government of Istanbul, saw the way out in this situation in occupying Istanbul. Back on February 6, 1920, Admiral de Robeck, the High Commissioner of Great Britain, wrote in a telegram sent to George Nathaniel Curzon, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Empire, that in the open sessions of the Majlis-Mabusa (Turkish Parliament), calls and open threats against the Allies were heard, and that the Ottoman government was heading towards collapse (Woodward & Butler, 1952). On March 3, 1920, the government of Ali Reza Pasha resigned. The new government was formed on March 8 by Salih Pasha, the former minister of the sea. In those days, the high commissioners of the three victors of the war - Britain, France and Italy - were discussing the future fate of the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul. Although the Supreme Allied Council decided to occupy Istanbul on March 5, this decision did not take effect immediately. At the meeting of the High Commissioners held in

Istanbul on March 9, Milne, the Supreme Commander of the Allies, announced the date of the occupation of Istanbul as March 13 and said that the occupation period would last for 6 months. But there were also disagreements about it, especially the Italian side hesitated (Armaoğlu 1998) Finally, on March 16, 1920, the forces of the allied countries occupied Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman state (Qasımlı, 2019, s. 9). After the occupation, a number of military institutions under the control of the Ottoman state came under the control of the allied countries. The invaders even stopped the activities of the newly opened military academy in Halıjıoglu (Türk Silâhli Kuvvetleri Tarihi (1908-1920), 1996). This limited the military capabilities of the Ottoman state.

The government of Salih Hulusi Pasha, which existed for only 26 days, was replaced by Damat Ferit Pasha's cabinet on April 5, 1920. On July 31 of the same year, Damat Ferit Pasha formed another government, and in fact, until October 17, this government, albeit formally, ruled the Ottoman Empire. The government of Ahmet Tevfik Pasha, which lasted from August 21, 1920 to November 4, 1922, was the last cabinet of Ottoman Turkey (İstanbul Hükûmetleri ve Millî Mücadele, 2024). As we mentioned above, the Ottoman governments, which were mainly involved in their internal affairs and often replaced each other, had neither the power nor the time to formulate a special South Caucasus policy. However, the study of archival documents shows that the army and security organizations have always received information from the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, including Nakhchivan, and tried to control the processes taking place here, and even influence them if possible. For example, on July 2, 1920, a document sent to the III Army (Division) Command mentioned the bloody massacres committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis - the Muslim-Turkish population in Nakhchivan and surrounding areas. It is clear from the document that on June 30 of the same year, the Armenians attacked in the direction of Shahbuz and North districts in the north of Nakhchivan, killed the population, ransacked and looted the villages (Ermenilerin Sarıkamış, Kağızman, Oltu, Kars ve Nahçıvan civarında yaptıkları talan, yağma ve katliyamlar. 3. Fırka Kumandanlığına, 2011). One of the interesting issues was that the Armenians, who made a serious effort to capture Nakhchivan at that time, adjusted their attacks in accordance with the processes taking place in the Ottoman state. It is clear from the archive documents that just 3 days after the official occupation of Istanbul by the allied armies - on March 19, 1920, armed groups from Dashnak Armenia attacked in the direction of Ordubad and Ahurajiva (probably Ahura - M.T.) and massacred the population (İl ocağı ismindeki Müselman Komitelerin Nahçıvan ve civarındakı Türk köylerinde ermenilerce katliam yapıldığını bildirdikleri hakkında, 20 Aralık 1920, 2011). Despite the British leaving Nakhchivan, there was a fairly close relationship and coordinated activity between the Dashnaks and Great Britain. This was not occasional. Considering the possibility that Turkish hegemony could be established in the region, the British established close relations with Armenians during the First World War. For this, it was necessary to create an Armenian barrier between Turkey and the Turkic world, this issue remained relevant even in the 20s of XX century.

Turkish historian Ibrahim Ethem Atnur provides information on the manpower, weapons and ammunition used by Armenians during their attacks in Vedibasar, Nakhchivan and Ordubad in March 1920, based on ATASE archive documents. It is clear from his research that during the attacks on Ordubad, Big Vedi regions, as well as on the villages of Jiva and Akhura, about 1850-1900 people fought on foot as part of the Armenian armed groups. Armenian armed groups used more than 10 machine guns, 8-10 desert and mountain cannons during those attacks. However, a number of Turkish officers who remained in the region played a major role in the formation of local self-defense units composed of Azerbaijanis. In March 1920, military units of Azerbaijanis formed under the leadership of Turkish officers Adib, Zab, Naji, Nuri and Khalil fought heroically to prevent the attacks of Armenian armed groups (Atnur, 1999). In the spring of 1920, the Armenian army began large-scale operations to seize the territories between Oltu and Nakhchivan near Erzurum, which aggravated the situation of Nakhchivan. The transfer of that region under the control of Dashnak Armenia overlapped with the plans of Great Britain. Taking into account the possibility of rapprochement between the Turkish national independence movement led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha and Bolshevik Russia and the possibility of establishing a connection across the Caucasus, the British wanted the Dashnaks to create a buffer zone in this area. Representatives of the Turkish national liberation movement, especially Kazim Garabakir Pasha, took this plan into account and tried to strengthen the Turkish military forces in Nakhchivan. Such a step, taken in a situation where the struggle for independence itself was in a difficult situation, was of quite serious importance and required risk. However, before the help sent to Khalil Bey, the head of the Turkish officers in Nakhchivan, he had to resign from his post. He was replaced by Ali Teymur (Ali Demir), who was sent from Bayazid to Nakhchivan.

Conclusion

In April, geopolitical processes in the South Caucasus took a different course. Relations between Mustafa Kemal Pasha and Lenin, who tried to get help from Bolshevik Russia, became tight. Realizing that the Turkish national liberation movement could not move comfortably in

the South Caucasus in its current state, Bolshevik Russia had the opportunity to implement a military occupation of the region. The Red Army headed towards the South Caucasus - the borders of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. The weakening or collapse of Dashnak Armenia served Turkey's interests. And Russia benefited from the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in the republics of the South Caucasus, including Armenia. Because Great Britain's strong influence over the countries of the South Caucasus was not in the interests of Soviet Russia. In order to defeat Dashnak Armenia, which acted as an ally of Great Britain, the Bolsheviks had to win in Azerbaijan first. Because Soviet Russia did not have a direct land border with Dashnak Armenia. This road could be provided through Azerbaijan or Georgia. The process of Sovietization of Georgia could take more time. Because it was possible for the European states to help him through the Black Sea. Digər tərəfdən The Bolsheviks, who started the sovietization of the South Caucasus from Georgia, can "surround" themselves, so to speak, in Azerbaijan, Dashnak Armenia, and the Black Sea triangle. It is for this reason that the Bolsheviks started the occupation of the South Caucasus from Azerbaijan. The leaders of the Turkish national independence struggle were forced to turn a blind eye to the process of Sovietization of Azerbaijan in order to receive help from Bolshevik Russia, to achieve the weakening of the Dashnak Armenia supported by the British, and to gain a positional advantage compared to the Ottoman government in the processes taking place inside Turkey, or they postponed the solution of this issue for the future.

On April 23, 1920, 5 days before the fall of the Azerbaijan People's Republic, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey convened in Ankara. On the 25th of the month, a government under the name of Temporary Executive Committee (Council) was formed under the chairmanship of Mustafa Kemal Pasha. The Temporary Executive Committee continued its activities until May 3, 1920. On that date, the Board of Executive Attorneys was established. On that eve, the Bolsheviks continued to sovietize Azerbaijan due to the bayonets of the XI Red Army and advanced towards Nakhchivan.

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