

A GLIMPSE OF HISTORY: HOW THE TREATY OF KARS WAS SIGNED (MARCH THROUGH OCTOBER, 1921)

(TARİHE KISA BİR BAKIŞ:
KARS ANTLAŞMASI NASIL İMZALANDI (MART-EKİM 1921)?)

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Abstract: *The signing of the Treaty of Kars was not a simple follow-up to the signing of the Treaty of Moscow (1921). Although the Treaty of Kars took the Treaty of Moscow as a template for many of its provisions, prior to the treaties, many considerations were made both by Turkey and Soviet Russia regarding the outlook on Transcaucasia and each other's intentions. During this time, Turkey was forced to make a defining choice between choosing the support of either Western powers or Soviet Russia. It was also reluctant to let go of the gains it acquired from the Treaty of Alexandropol, which the Treaty of Kars would replace. Meanwhile, Soviet Russia viewed Turkey's hesitation on this issue with suspicion. The author indicates that in the end, both countries viewed stable and friendly relations between each other as paramount, and the signing of both the Treaties of Moscow and Kars were seen as a pledge to maintain such positive relations.*

Abstract: *Soviet Russia, Turkey, Treaty of Moscow, Treaty of Kars, Treaty of Alexandropol*

Öz: *Kars Antlaşmasının imzalanması 1921 Moskova Antlaşmasının basit bir devamı niteliğinde değildi. Kars Antlaşması pek çok maddesi için Moskova Antlaşmasını örnek almış olsa da, antlaşmaların imzalanmasının öncesinde, hem Türkiye hem de Sovyetler Birliği Transkafkasya'nın durumu ve birbirlerinin niyetleri konularında pek çok hususu dikkate almıştır. Bu zaman dilimi içerisinde Türkiye Batılı güçlerin mi yoksa Sovyetler Birliğinin mi desteğini almak konusunda dönüm noktası niteliğinde bir tercih yapmak durumunda kalmıştır. Aynı zamanda Türkiye, Kars Antlaşmasıyla geçersiz sayılacak Gümrü Antlaşmasında elde ettiği kazanımlardan feragat etmek konusunda tereddüt etmiştir. Bu zaman zarfında ise Sovyetler Birliği Türkiye'nin bu konudaki tereddüdüne*

şüpheyle yaklaşmıştır. Yazar; en sonunda iki ülkenin de birbirleri arasında istikrarlı ve dostane ilişkileri elde etmenin her şeyden daha önemli olduğu kanaatine vardıklarını ve Moskova ve Kars Antlaşmalarının imzalanmasını bu olumlu ilişkilerin muhafaza edilmesinin vaadi olarak gördüklerini belirtmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Sovyetler Birliği, Türkiye, Moskova Antlaşması, Kars Antlaşması, Gümrü Antlaşması*

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The Treaty of Kars is often regarded as a document entered into by the Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian Soviet republics and Turkey in pursuance of the earlier Treaty of Moscow, dated 16 March, 1921, in other words, as a successor treaty that embraced the tenets and extended the application of provisions set out in the Treaty of Moscow to the Transcaucasian republics. However, the signing of the Treaty of Kars was preceded by its own history that gives us a clue to assume that its significance is not reduced merely to the formal accession of the Transcaucasian republics to the Treaty of Moscow.

The Treaty of Moscow was signed on 16 March, 1921. On behalf of Soviet Russia, the signatories were G. Chicherin and J. Korkmasov, on behalf of Turkey, the signatories were Yusuf Kemal-Bey, Riza Nur-Bey, Ali Fuad-Pasha. The Treaty cemented the territorial acquisitions of Turkey established in accordance with the Treaty of Alexandropol (Gumru),¹ with the exception of Alexandropol itself (subsequently renamed Leninakan, and now again Gumru), which was deemed to be returned to Armenia. Artvin and Ardahan were ceded to Turkey. Commenting on the outcome of negotiations, Russian historian S.

1 In late May, 1920, Moscow was the venue of negotiations between the government delegations of Soviet Russia and Armenia, in which the Russian side offered to act as a mediator for the resolution of Armenian-Turkish territorial controversy. On July 19th, 1920, a delegation from Turkey headed by Foreign Minister Bekir Sami Kunduh arrived in Moscow to conclude a friendship treaty with Russia. In connection with the signing of the treaty, the Russian side advanced a request that the aspirations of the Armenians related to the resolution of its border issues should be met to some extent, albeit not fully to their satisfaction. The conditions put forward by Russia caused a painful reaction from Turkey. It refused to comply with them referring to the premise that there were no Armenian areas in Turkey as such, Armenians were residing in mixed communities with Turks, and nowhere in the East did the Armenian residents constituted the overriding majority.

The borderline issue was addressed again by the parties during a meeting of the Turkish delegation with Lenin that took place on August 14th, 1920, the negotiation process resulted in Russia's consent to the resolution of the frontier problem between Turkey and Armenia through an advancement of Turkish troops eastwards. The reason behind such a drastic turn of events was the indecisiveness shown by the Armenians who hesitated over the final approval of Russia's role as a mediator for the settlement of its borderline controversy with Turkey. However, soon enough, the advancement of the Turkish troops to the east was too obvious to go well beyond the boundaries set out under the accords with Russia. Having crossed the boundary established by the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the Turks captured Kars on October 30th, and on November 7th they occupied Alexandropol (Gumru). On December 3rd, the Peace Treaty of Alexandropol was concluded with the Dashnak government of Armenia, who was living on borrowed time: earlier, on November 29th, the Soviet government was proclaimed in Armenia, and a brief period of diarchy ensued in the republic. According to the Treaty, Turkey regained control not only over territories which had been supposed to be allocated to Armenia within the framework of the Treaty of Sèvres, but also a fraction of the Armenian territory - the Kars area and contiguous land - which had been annexed to Russia under the 1878 Treaty of Berlin. The government of Soviet Russia declined to acknowledge the Treaty of Alexandropol, however it was the Treaty of Alexandropol that laid the foundation for the determination of Armenia's frontiers under the Treaty of Moscow in 1921. As it was admitted by R. Kazanjan, "...it was not under the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Moscow of March 16th, 1921, that the Armenian territories were allocated to Turkey. Russia never granted these territories to Turkey. They were captured by the latter during its invasion of Armenia in September-November, 1920, and assigned to Turkey under the notorious Treaty of Alexandropol..." (R. Kazanjan, "Ominous Treaty. Glimpses of History Highlighting the Signing of the 1921 Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Moscow [in]; *Republic of Armenia*, 25.03.1995).

I. Kuznetsova noted that “while seeking a viable solution to settling differences in its relations with Turkey, the Soviet delegation conceded that the Kars, Ardahan and Artvin areas should be ceded to Turkey.”²

The Treaty with Turkey was ratified by an extraordinary session of the VTsIK (All-Russia Central Executive Committee) RSFSR as early as on March 20th, 1921. The Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) ratified the same Treaty only on July 22nd, 1921,³ although before, at the Moscow conference it was agreed between the parties that on its way home, the Turkish delegation would make a stop in Tiflis, Georgia, and enter into agreements with all the

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three Transcaucasian republics. However, when the Turkish delegation arrived in Transcaucasia in mid-April, Yusuf Kemal, head of the Turkish delegation for the talk in Moscow, made an unexpected statement that he could only conclude the agreements with Georgia and Azerbaijan, but he was not entitled to enter into any negotiations with Armenia.⁴ As a result, the Turkish delegation left without signing the Treaty.

What are the milestones that marked the development of bilateral relations over a period spanning between the Moscow talks and ratification of the Treaty by the Turkish Meclis (Parliament) and subsequent signing of the Treaty, similar to the Moscow Treaty, with three Transcaucasian republics by Turkey?

To answer this question, it is necessary to shift the emphasis in assessing the significance and ramifications of the signing of the Treaty of Moscow which can be most frequently encountered in historiography of the Soviet epoch. It is most often observed that the Treaty is important as an instrument that set the stage for the establishment of Soviet-Turkish friendly relations and also crucial for strengthening the position of Turkey on the international arena.⁵ But it is essential not to overlook the fact that, literally, a few days prior to the beginning of talks in Moscow, on February 21st, to be precise, a conference of the

2 S. I. Kuznetsova, *The Establishment of Soviet-Turkish Relations* (Moscow, 1961), p. 47.

3 S. I. Kuznetsova, *The Establishment of Soviet-Turkish Relations: USSR and Turkey (1917-1979)* (Moscow, 1981), p. 38. A publication titled *Documents of USSR Foreign Policy* indicates another date when the Treaty was ratified by VTsIK – July 20th, 1921. See; *Documents of the USSR Foreign Policy*, Vol. 3 (Moscow, 1959), p. 604.

4 Kuznetsova (1961), *The Establishment of Soviet-Turkish Relations*, p.65.

5 See, e.g., Kuznetsova (1981), *The Establishment of Soviet-Turkish Relations*.

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European nations opened in London to review the terms of the Treaty of Sèvres for the benefit of Turkey.⁶ The delegations representing Kemalist Turkey participated in the talks both in London and in Moscow. That is why a British newspaper “Manchester Guardian” wrote on January 26th, 1921, that the government led by Mustafa Kemal was confronted with a challenging choice it had to make between the Allies (the Entente Powers) and the Bolsheviks.⁷ Notwithstanding the atmosphere filled with doubt and uncertainty surrounding the beginning of talks in Moscow, the choice was made by the Kemalists in favor of Soviet Russia, as it was found to be more in line with the Turkish national interests. As it was later acknowledged by G.V. Chicherin, People’s Commisar for Foreign Affairs in the Soviet government, “our rapprochement with nationalist Turkey at that time was an act of self-preservation both for it and for us.”⁸

However, as before and in the very course of the Moscow talks, Turkey was still in the process of making a hard choice between the West and Russia, the ultimate decision that was made by it meant a more or less final definition of its allies and adversaries rather than a settlement of the entire range of foreign policy problems facing the country. For this reason, effectively, the eventual result associated with the signing of the Treaty of Moscow was that a foreseeable possibility for Turkey to be engaged in fighting a war on two fronts was precluded, but, at the same time, it was apparent that the front where the fight was still ahead had been clearly identified by now. Therefore, having chosen Russia to be its political ally, Turkey then approached it with a persistent request of being provided with aid in finances and armaments to counteract the military pressure exerted by western nations. Immediately, upon signing the Treaty of Moscow, Russia made available to Turkey such an aid package through armaments and also provided 5 million Rubles (4 million Rubles, according to some sources) worth of gold as part of the total amount promised, equal to 10 million Rubles.⁹ Soon after the first tranche was disbursed to Turkey upon the conclusion of the Moscow talks (in April, 1921), another 1.4 million

6 The Peace Treaty of Sèvres was drafted in the course of the Paris Peace Conference, which was convened by the Allied victors with a view to drawing and concluding peace treaties with the defeated Central Powers following the end of World War I and was signed on August 10th, 1920. Turkey under the sultan’s government was bound by the Treaty to recognize Armenia as an independent state, as had been already done by the Allied Powers. The issue of determination of the mutual boundaries of the two nations was transferred for an arbitral award to be passed by the President of the United States. The arbitral award was passed on November 22nd, 1920. It stipulated for Armenia to receive a territorial augmentation roughly equal to the half of Van, Bitlis, Erzurum and Trapezund provinces. However, the Treaty was not ratified by the government of the Ottoman Empire.

7 Kuznetsova (1961), *The Establishment of Soviet-Turkish Relations*, p. 31.

8 Kazanjan, “Ominous Treaty...” [in] *Republic of Armenia*.

9 D. Avcioglu, *Milli Kurtuluş Tarihi, 1838-1995*, İkinci kitap (İstanbul, 1993), p. 822.

Rubles was received by Turkey for the purchase of armaments from Germany.¹⁰ But, afterwards, the provision of aid was suspended.

Soviet Russia was disposed to be wary about the fact that the Turkish side procrastinated with launching its troops' withdrawal from the Alexandropol area, as had been stipulated under the Treaty of Moscow. As it happened, in February, 1921, the Dashnaks succeeded in regaining its power over a substantial part of Armenia, inter alia, in capturing Yerevan, where they formed a Committee for the Liberation of the Fatherland. Thus, there was no reason for Turkey to take any rapid measures to withdraw its forces from Alexandropol, which was supposed to be annexed to Turkey. As a result, according to a Turkish historian and publicist Avcioglu, the Turks' contacts with the Dashnaks were the factors that only heightened Russia's distrust towards Turkey.¹¹ "The Turkish government," wrote a Russian Turkologist B.M. Dantsig commenting on that situation, "was firmly adhering to the view that the Treaty of Alexandropol (Gumru), which had been earlier entered into with the Dashnaks, remained in full effect and persistently declined to conclude a peace settlement with Soviet Armenia..."¹² In other words, Turkey adopted a wait-and-see approach while watching the progress of developments in Armenia and entertaining hope that if the Dashnaks could retain power, it would continue to keep Alexandropol under its control. At the same time, the Turks explained their presence of their forces in Alexandropol to the Soviet side by referring to the counterrevolutionary factors in place (the overthrow of the Soviet rule in Armenia), which induced them to maintain vigilance before resorting to military action on the Eastern front.¹³

In March, 1921, Russia signed a trade agreement with Britain. The termination of Russian aid supplies was construed by Turkey against the backdrop of prevalent conditions as a gesture of goodwill seeking to benefit their common adversary at that time - Britain. Consequently, even the fact that the Russian-Turkish Treaty was signed in Moscow failed to fully relieve the tensions stemming from mutual distrust interwoven into the fabric of mutual relations for years. As the message was expressed by D. Avcioglu, "it was not sufficient to sign a friendship treaty to create an atmosphere of mutual trust. Mutual distrust that was caused by imperialistic maneuvering has been observed until 1922."¹⁴ Then D. Avcioglu quotes the words from an address of the Turkish

10 See, e.g., M. Saray, *Atatürk'ün Sovyet Politikası* (İstanbul, 1990), p. 75.

11 Avcioglu, *Milli Kurtuluş Tarihi*, pp. 830-831.

12 B. Dantsig, *Turkey* (Moscow, 1949), p. 94.

13 See, e.g., "Response of the Turkish Ambassador to RSFSR", Ali Fuad to a diplomatic note by G.V. Chicherin, April 6th, 1921 [in]; *Documents of the USSR Foreign Policy*, Vol. 4 (Moscow, 1960), p. 49.

14 Avcioglu, *Milli Kurtuluş Tarihi*, p. 824.

Ambassador to Russia, Ali Fuad, made in April, 1921: “If you... weaken our friendship and reduce your assistance, the British imperialism will deceive each of us separately.”¹⁵

The arrival of the French Senator, Henri Franklin-Bouillon, in Ankara in June, 1921, was accompanied by enthusiastic commentaries in the West-European and Istanbul media on the reconciliation of Turkey with the Triple Entente and the deployment of Turkish troops in Kars and Ardahan. In fact, as S.I. Kuznetsova put it, “the government of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey refused to join the anti-Soviet coalition and cease the war of independence.”¹⁶ So, the Triple Entente attempted to crush the Turks with the use of weapons - it became known that the Greeks were planning an attack on Ankara. It was precisely during those days that Britain was trying hard to spread the rumors that the Bolsheviks were preparing to launch an attack against Turkey. Ali Fuad also informed the leaders of the nationalistic movement in Turkey that the public opinion in Britain was being influenced to believe that the areas in close proximity to the Aras River as well as Van and Mush would be soon allocated to Armenia.¹⁷ Under those circumstances, Mustafa Kemal did not rule out such a likelihood that the Bolsheviks would launch an attack, and he wrote to the Commander of the Eastern Front, Karabekir Pasha, about the necessity to be vigilant and prepared to deal with such developments, to be on the safe side. In his letter of response, Karabekir Pasha stressed that the propaganda of the Allied Powers commenced at the time when the Turkish forces were engaged in accomplishing their redeployment to the Western front was targeted at impeding their progress and inducing them to keep their presence in the East.¹⁸

As a matter of fact, the relentless reluctance of the Turks to withdraw their troops from Alexandropol aggravated the rumors that they were getting prepared for a war in Transcaucasia and aroused a lot of suspicion within the RSFSR government over Turkey’s intention to observe the Treaty of Moscow. The outcome of that situation was a suspension of Russian military aid to Turkey. Thus, the circle of mistrust and mutual suspicion of the parties was closed already at a new phase of relationships between the two states following the signing of the Treaty of Moscow in 1921.

In April, 1921, the Red Army launched a whirlwind attack across the territory held under the Dashnaks’ rule. On April 11th, 1921, the Turkish Ambassador to Moscow, Ali Fuad, sent an encrypted message to his government that ran as

15 Avcioglu, *Milli Kurtuluş Tarihi*, p. 837.

16 Kuznetsova (1961), *The Establishment of Soviet-Turkish Relations*, p. 62.

17 Avcioglu, *Milli Kurtuluş Tarihi*, p. 838.

18 Avcioglu, *Milli Kurtuluş Tarihi*, p. 840.

follows: “In the event that the assistance of Russia might be needed to promote our foreign policies and the supply of money promised by it, armaments and ammunition could be secured as soon as possible, it should be our top priority to begin the implementation of the provisions of the Treaty [the Treaty of Moscow - N.U.], especially those relating to the Eastern frontiers, and not to pave the way for any suspicion to be harbored by the Russians, but also to conclude a Treaty with Armenia, that has again become Soviet, Georgia and Azerbaijan... If we fail to comply with the provisions that relate to that part of the Treaty [Eastern frontiers - N.U.] now that Armenia has again come under Soviet rule, the suspicions will start to be on the rise once again.”¹⁹

The Soviet side also gave a clear indication to Turkey that it was essential to honor the Treaty of Moscow under new conditions when the Soviet power in Armenia had been restored. In its diplomatic note addressed to Ali Fuad, dated April 8th, 1921, G.V. Chicherin wrote: “In so far as the entire area of Alexandropol and Erevani are back under control of the Armenian Soviet Government again, the time has come for the Turkish troops to withdraw beyond the boundary established under the Treaty of Moscow...”²⁰ “To desire the implementation of the Treaty of Alexandropol is tantamount to the cancellation of the Treaty of Moscow”, G.V. Chicherin wrote as a concluding remark to his note.²¹

On the same day, in his telegram addressed to G.K. Ordzhonikidze (Commander of the Eastern Front of the Red Army), G.V. Chicherin wrote: “Point out what fatal consequences might be incurred in connection with a confrontation between the Turkish troops and the Red Army forces and also the fact that all of the Soviet republics are part of an inseparable and close union with Soviet Russia.”²²

To avert an imminent exacerbation of relations with Russia, the Turkish troops left the town of Alexandropol on April 23rd, 1921.

On July 5th, 1921, the Greeks waged an onslaught against Ankara. Such a turn of events, likewise a final resolution of the Russian-Turkish controversy over the borderline with Armenia by that time, had convinced the Turkish side of the expediency of making a final positive decision on the reinforcement of the Russian vector in its foreign policies: the Treaty of Moscow was urgently ratified by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) on July 31st, 1921.

19 Avcioglu, *Milli Kurtuluş Tarihi*, p. 837.

20 “Response of the Turkish Ambassador to RSFSR” [in]; *Documents of the USSR Foreign Policy*, p. 49.

21 “Response of the Turkish Ambassador to RSFSR” [in]; *Documents of the USSR Foreign Policy*, p. 54.

22 “Response of the Turkish Ambassador to RSFSR” [in]; *Documents of the USSR Foreign Policy*, p. 55.

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On July 14th, 1921, the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the RSFSR received a letter from Ali Fuad testifying to Turkey's consent to sign a Treaty with the three Transcaucasian republics. In July-August, 1921, an agreement was reached on the venue and date for the conference to be convened with the aim of signing the Treaty. The conference opened in Kars on September 26th, 1921. On October 3rd, 1921, a discussion focusing on the draft framework of the general agreement got underway. As the wording of the Treaty of Moscow was taken as a basis, no protracted discussion ensued. The Treaty was signed on October 13th, 1921. The bulk of articles of the Treaty of Kars have the same wording as the appropriate articles of the Treaty of Moscow, including the articles that set out the establishment of a new borderline with Turkey.²³

The Treaty of Kars was not only a formal, but also a factual testament to Turkey's acknowledgement of the borderline as had been established under the Treaty of Moscow, dated March 16th, 1921, as well as the result of overcoming the credibility crisis in bilateral relations. In late 1921, the provision of financial assistance to Turkey was resumed by Soviet Russia: during a historic visit of a legendary Army Commander M.V. Frunze to Turkey in December, 1921, Ankara was given 1,100,000 Rubles in gold. The last "tranche" in the amount of 3.5 million Rubles was received by the Turkish side in May, 1922.²⁴

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The Treaty of Kars and the Treaty of Moscow entered into in 1921 have provided a principal settlement of the borderline issues facing the Soviet republics and Turkey, they have also paved the way for the beginning of political rapprochement between them, which was finalized by the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality, dated December 17th, 1925, (Treaty of Non-Aggression and Neutrality).²⁵

23 See wording of the Treaty: *Documents of the USSR Foreign Policy*, Vol. 4 (Moscow, 1960), pp. 420-429.

24 Saray, *Atatürk'ün Sovyet Politikası*, p. 76.

25 See wording of the Treaty: *Documents of the USSR Foreign Policy*, Vol. 8 (Moscow, 1963), pp. 739-741.

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