

RUSSIA'S KURDISH POLICY FROM THE TSARDOM TO THE SOVIET UNION*

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Abstract

In the process of the end of the Syrian civil war, Russia's contact with some groups of Syrian Kurds necessitated the historical background of Russian-Kurdish relations. Kurds have been on the political agenda of the Russians not only in the present but also in the past. Both Tsarist Russia and the Soviets considered the ethnic groups living in the regions, where they expanded in military and political terms, as partners in order to increase their domination in those regions. Some of the Kurds have also become actors with whom Russia has partnered in certain periods in the Middle East. In this context, this study will attempt to make a historical analysis of Russia's Kurdish policy. In this way, firstly, the academic and scientific dimension of Kurdish studies, which started in Russia in the middle of the 19th century, will be discussed. Then, the Kurdish policies of Russia during these eras will be discussed through historical facts.

Keywords: Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, Red Kurdistan, Republic of Mahabad, Mullah Mustafa Barzani

Çarlık'tan Sovyetler Birliği'ne Rusya'nın Kürt Politikası

Öz

Suriye iç savaşının sonlanmaya doğru gittiği süreçte Rusya'nın Suriye Kürtlerinden bazı gruplar ile temasa geçmesi, Rus-Kürt ilişkilerinin tarihi arka planını da gündeme almayı gerektirmiştir. Kürtler sadece günümüzde değil, geçmişte de Rusların politik gündeminde olmuşlardır. Gerek Çarlık Rusya gerekse de Sovyetler, askeri ve siyasi olarak genişledikleri bölgelerde hakimiyetlerini arttırabilmek için o bölgelerde yaşayan etnik grupları bir ortak olarak değerlendirmişlerdir. Kürtler içerisinde bazı kesimler de Orta Doğu'da belli dönemlerde Rusya'nın ortaklık kurduğu aktörler olmuşlardır. Bu bağlamda bu çalışma, Rusya'nın Kürt politikasının tarihsel bir analizini yapmaya çalışacaktır. Bu doğrultuda ilk olarak, 19. yüzyılın ortalarından itibaren Rusya'da başlayan Kürt çalışmalarının akademik ve bilimsel boyutu ele alınacaktır. Daha sonra da Rusya'nın fiili anlamda ortaya koyduğu Kürt politikaları tarihsel olgular üzerinden ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Çarlık Rusyası, Sovyetler Birliği, Kızıl Kürdistan, Mahabad Cumhuriyeti, Molla Mustafa Barzani

* Makale geliş tarihi: 30.11.2020
Makale kabul tarihi: 20.05.2021
Erken görünüm tarihi: 15.10.2021

Russia's Kurdish Policy from the Tsardom to the Soviet Union

Introduction

Russia has shown intense interest in the new peoples it has met and contacted in parallel with its geographical and political expansion throughout history. The communities in the geographies that are under the control or of political, economic, military, and geopolitical interests have been closely followed by Russia. Russia has closely analyzed the peoples in these regions from historical, cultural, linguistic, folkloric, ethnic, etc. dimensions. Russia aimed to get to know the people in these regions in order to be effective in these regions in the following periods. Thus, Russia aimed to implement systematic policies and produce effective results in the geographies it was interested in, thanks to the policies it developed over the peoples of the region it analyzed.

Kurds were one of the peoples that Russia was in contact with during the imperial expansion process. In parallel with its expansion into the South Caucasus, Russia came into contact with the Kurds living in this region under Ottoman and Iranian rule. With this process, Russia developed policies over Kurds when it was necessary to make its presence in the Caucasus and the Middle East effective. However, before Russia implemented actual policies towards the Kurds, it first conducted scientific research to get to know them. Accordingly in this study, the Kurdish policy of Russia will be discussed in a historical context. From the mid-19th century, when the Russians began to have intensive contact with the Kurds, until the late Soviet Union, Russia's Kurdish policy will be placed in a historical context. To this end, a framework will be drawn for Russia's academic and scientific activities towards the Kurds. The scientific knowledge produced in Russia, which began in Tsarist Russia and lasted until the last years of the Soviet Union, provided an epistemological basis for the Kurdish policy of the Russians in the process. Enriched with scientific and academic studies, this epistemic ground provided the basis for Russia's policies when the arrow of time indicated the necessity.

After Russia's academic and scientific activities towards the Kurds, the concrete policies of Russia regarding the Kurds during the 20th century in Azerbaijan, Iran, and Iraq will be discussed in the following parts. In this context,

the main claim of this study is that Russia does not have a stable Kurdish policy in a normative sense and that stability is only for the interests of Russia. In this respect, Russia implemented policies that changed rapidly when necessary in different periods and regions. But one of the important elements that remain constant is that Russia's policies towards the Kurds were built on a long accumulated scientific and academic background.

In this study, Russia's policy towards the Kurds will be limited and examined in two ways. First, the Kurdish policy of Russia will be limited to the Kurds of Iran and Iraq, because the most remarkable Kurdish policies of the Russians took place in these regions both in the Tsarist and Soviet era. Secondly, this study will cover the period until the mid-1970s as the time frame. In the late 1970s, the Soviet Union began to engage in its own internal problems and the Afghan war. Moreover, from this period onwards, Kurdish political actors in the Middle East have begun to approach the United States. For these reasons, the post-1970s period will be excluded from the scope of this study.

1. Kurdish Studies in Russia

The geopolitical struggle between Tsarist Russia and the Kingdom of Great Britain, which took place in Central Asia and marked the 19th century and was therefore called "the Great Game", ended in 1907 with the agreement between the two states.¹ Although the geopolitical struggle in Western Asia, Central Asia, and the Mashrik part of the Middle East ended with the agreement, Tsarist Russia had the opportunity to come into contact with new cultures and peoples due to this struggle. This situation increased Tsarist Russia's interest in these regions and its desire to expand.

Although Tsarist Russia began to recognize the East overtly during the Great Game process, her interest in the east had begun much earlier. Having successfully completed the war with Sweden in 1720, Petro I placed the east in Russia's foreign policy concept as a means of reaching the warm-sea ports.² For this purpose, after the end of the war with Sweden, a group of people working in foreign affairs to learn Eastern languages, especially Turkish, was sent to the Middle East in order to get to know the East in every aspect.³ As the process progressed, the need for a more centralized policy towards the East emerged. In

1 See Ingram, Edward, (1992), *Britain's Persian Connection, 1798-1828: Prelude to The Great Game in Asia*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

2 Baziyants, Ashot P. & Shamil, Kashaf R., (2018), "175 let Institutu Vostokovedeniya (1818-1993)", *Orientalistika* (1/2), pp. 305-310.

3 Ibid.

1797, a unit for the Asian region was established within the Collegium of Foreign Affairs by a Manifesto. In 1802, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was established. In 1820, the Asian Committee was formed within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to watch the East more closely. In 1823, an educational unit was established in order to learn regional languages so as to make diplomatic activities towards Asia more efficient.⁴ The aim was to train diplomats who knew the East better. This practice began to produce remarkable results for Tsarist Russia to get to know the East (Ottoman, Iranian-Safavid, and Central Asia) closely.

Egor Petrovich Kovalevsky (1811-1868) was the first important figure to come to the fore as a result of this process.⁵ He held diplomatic and scientific posts in the Middle East and was an active diplomat during the Crimean War of 1854-1856. Kovalevsky, who served as the Chairman of the Asian Committee from 1856 to 1862 under the Minister of Foreign Affairs Gorchakov, was one of the most important figures in the Eastern studies of Tsarist Russia.⁶ In addition to Kovalevsky; O.I.Senkovsky, H. Fren, V.V Grigoriev⁷, V.R. Rozen,⁸ V. S. Golenishchev⁹, I.P. Minaev, S. F. Oldenburg, F.I. Scherbatsky, N.Ya. Bichurin and V.P. Vasiliev scientifically studied the essential geographies of the East, such as the Ottoman Empire, Iran, Afghanistan, China, and Egypt.

It was during this period that Tsarist Russia came into contact with the Kurds in the academic and scientific studies that developed in parallel with the increase in the political agenda towards the East. In 1856, Peter Ivanovich Lerch from the University of St. Petersburg wrote a thesis entitled “Iranian Kurds and Their Ancestors the Northern Chaldeans”. Lerch’s studies focusing on the Kurds

4 MİD Rossii, “İstoriya Vneshnepoliticheskogo Vedomstva Rossii-Letopis Diplomaticeskoy Sluzhby, Retrieved”, 19.03.20, https://idd.mid.ru/letopis-diplomaticeskoy-sluzhby/-/asset_publisher/5H3VC9AbCsvL/content/istoria-vnesnepoliticheskogo-vedomstva-rossii.

5 See., Valskaya, Blyuma A., (1956), *Puteshestviya Yegora Petrovicha Kovalevskogo*, (Moskva, Geografiz).

6 Gusterin, Pavel V., (2008), “Y. P Kovalevskiy-diplomat i Vostokoved”, *Voprosy İstorii*, (8), pp. 148-150.

7 Veselovskiy, Nikolay I., (1887), *Vasilii Vasil'yevich Grigor'yev: Po Yego Pismam İ Trudam, 1816-1881*, (St. Petersburg, Tip. i khromolit. A. Transhelya).

8 See., Valeev, R. M., et al, (2019), “Yepestolyarnaya Letopis Otechestvennogo Vostokovedeniya” (*Vr Rozen, V. Bartold, P. Kokovtsov, V. Minorskiy*). *Modern Oriental Studies* (1/4), 2019.

9 See., Struve, V. V. & V. S. Znacheniyev, (1960), *Golenishcheva Dlya Yegiptologii,— “Ocherki po istorii russkogo vostokovedeniya”*, (Leningrad) p. III.

were pursued academically not only in Russia but also in Europe.¹⁰ Because Lerch's thesis had an academic basis for the "Eastern Question" strategy of Tsarist Russia and was therefore supported by the Empire. In his studies, Lerch examined the differences in language, tradition, and religion of Kurds in Iraq, Iraq, Syria, and Anatolia. Especially he pointed the role of women and men in the family structure of the Kurds, the way of economic transition, their relationship with religion, and their differences from Turks, Persians, and Arabs. Lerch's anthropological work on the Kurds "enriched" Tsarist Russia's expansionist policy in the East.¹¹ As Kulikov stated, Vladimira Vladimir fon Zimmermann, who was the Consul of Tsarist Russia in Aleppo in 1913, evaluated Germany's influence on the Kurds and rivalry with Russia, benefitting from Lerch's works on the social structure of the region.¹²

A year before Lerch's thesis, in 1855, nearly 100 prisoners of Kurdish origin seized by the Russian Army from the Ottomans during the Crimean War were brought to Smolensk. The local newspaper "Severnaya Pcela" published in Smolensk, conducted detailed interviews with Kurdish prisoners who were brought to the region.¹³ From 1856 onwards, the imperial administration commissioned Peter Ivanovich Lerch to investigate these prisoners and to study Kurdish accents. Especially Zaza and Kirmanchi dialects were wanted to be differentiated from other Kurdish dialects. The Lepsius alphabet was used during the research and then a Kurdish-Russian dictionary was created. Thus, the foundation of Kurdish language studies in Tsarist Russia was laid.¹⁴

Another expert on the Kurdish language was Alexandre (Avgust Dementevich) Jaba, who also served at the Russian Consulate in the Ottoman province of Erzurum. Jaba worked on the Kurdish language and culture, and in 1860 published the book "Short Introductions and Stories on the Kurds". Moreover, 66 of Jaba's oriental works were published, and these became the main texts in the field of Kurdish studies in Russia. In addition, Jaba prepared a

10 See., Lerch, Peter I., (1856), *Issledovaniya Ob Iranskikh Kurdakh i ikh Predkakh Severnykh Khaldeyakhvedeniye i Podrobnoye Ischisleniye Kurdsikh Plemen*, (Kn., St. Petersburg,, Imp. Akad. nauk,).

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22, 28,31, 35-37.

12 Kulikov, Georgy I, (2018) "Khalebskogo Vilayeta Osmanskoy İmperii Po Doneseniyam Rossiyskogo Konsula. 1913 god" *Vostochnyy Arkhiv*. 2018. 2 (38). p. 5.

13 Pobedonostseva, Anzhelika O, (2010), "Kurdy V Russkikh Periodicheskikh Izdaniyakh XIX Veka", (St. Petersburg), *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, Seriya 13, Vostokovedeniye, Afrikanistika*, (3), p. 21.

14 Kurdish Ru., "Issledovaniya ob Iranskikh Kurdakh i ikh Predkakh, Sebernikh Khaldeyakh", 19.09.2010, Retrieved (26.12.2019), http://www.kurdist.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=447&Itemid=1.

dictionary of Kurdish speaking for the first time in order to help Russians carry out the activities in the regions where the Kurds lived.¹⁵ The most important assistant of Jaba during these works was his friend Mele Mahmude Bazidi of Kurdish origin from Ottoman nationality. Alexandre Jaba played an important role in the activities of the Ottomans in the border regions with Russia and Iran and in the formation of relations between Russians and Kurds. Due to Jaba's Kurdology studies, Russia had the opportunity to analyze the region better and supported the Kurdish uprisings in the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century in light of these studies.¹⁶

In Tsarist Russia, the foundation of Kurdish studies at the University of St. Petersburg was well established until the collapse of the Tsardom. After the October Revolution of 1917, the Kurdish studies which were founded by Lerch and Jaba on intellectual and academic grounds resumed on within the Soviet Union. Kurdish studies in Russia were further developed during the Soviet Union with the contributions of local Kurdish intelligentsia. As a result of the Russian-Ottoman and Russian-Iran wars in the 19th centuries, the Kurds had become massively living within the borders of Russia with the establishment of Kurdish communities in the Caucasus.¹⁷ By the time of the Soviet Union, the second and third generations of these Kurdish communities began to take part in political and academic life. The Kurdish intellectuals who came to the forefront during the transition from Tsarist Russia to the Soviet Union were those who came to Moscow and St. Petersburg from Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia for education. Kurdish people such as Arab Shamilov¹⁸, Adzhie Dzhindi,¹⁹ Amine

15 Marakhanova, S. I., "August Dementevich Jaba", Retrieved, (11.11.2018), http://www.orientalstudies.ru/rus/index.php?option=com_personalities&Itemid=74&person=705. Also see., Chikalova, I. R., (2019), *Izucheniye Persii v Imperatorskoy Rossii: Rol Diplomaticheskikh Sluzhb*, İzdaniya Vitebskiy gosudarstvennyy universitet imeni P. M. Masherova, p. 64.

16 Abak, Tibet, (2010), "«Kurdskiy Vopros» i Rossiya: istoricheskiye istoki i realii rebezha XIX – XX vv." Red.kol, O. A. Yanovskiy (otv. red.) *Rossiyskiye i slavyanskiye issledovaniya: Sb. nauch. statey. Vyp. 5*, Mn, BGU, p. 62.

17 Radikov, Ivan V., & Tozal Metin, (2015), "Kurdskiye Natsional'noye Men'shinstvo V Rossii: Dva Veka Resheniya Problemy Sokhraneniya Etnicheskoy Samobytnosti", *Politicheskaya Ekspertiza: Politeks*, (11/2), pp. 51-52.

18 See., Shamilov, Arab S., "Kratkaya Literaturnaya Entsiklopediya," (Gl. red. A. A. Surkov) (Moskova) *Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya*, 1962-1978. Retrieved (01.02.2020), <http://feb-web.ru/feb/kle/kle-abc/ke8/ke8-5834.htm>

19 Amarike, Sardar, (1968), "Dostoinyi sin Kurdsikogo Naroda, (Article for Dzhindi's 60th birthday.)" (Yerevan), *Kommunist Gazeta*, Mar. 26.

Awdal, Casime Celil and Kanat Kurdoev²⁰ took the academic and intellectual heritage from Tsarist Russia to a higher level during the Soviet Union.

A need for a centralized structure on Kurdish studies arose after the Second World War because of mass Kurdish migration to Armenia and Azerbaijan due to the collapse of the below-mentioned Mahabad project and Turkey's increased importance in the Cold War atmosphere. Accordingly, on March 1, 1959, a separate Kurdish Studies Department was established with the separation of Kurdish researchers at the Iranian Studies Center under the direction of Joseph Abgarovich Orbeli, Head of the Orientalist Institute of the Leningrad Department of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union.²¹ In this department, cultural, historical, and economic issues related to the Kurds started to be investigated in the regions where Kurds live intensively.²² Orbeli, whose mother was a Kurd from the Kutaisi region of Georgia, took over Kurdish Studies as its president. Orbeli's team on Kurdish studies consisted of academics such as I. Zuckerman, M. Rudenko, E.S. Musaelian, I. A. Dementieva (Vasiliev), Z. A. Yusupov, K.R. Ayyub, D. Dzhililov.

The students of Orbeli who centralized Kurdish studies in a separate structure made significant contributions to Kurdish studies in Russia. The most prominent of them was Kanat Kalashevich Kurdoev. Kurdoev, who was born in 1909, originally belonged to a family that had emigrated from Kars province of the Ottoman Empire to the Georgian region of Tsarist Russia.²³ Kurdoev teaching the Kurdish language at the University of Leningrad worked with Orbeli in 1959 to establish the Kurdish Studies Department. Kurdoev conducted several studies on Kurdish dialects within the Kurdish Studies Department. Kurdoev became one of the most prominent experts on Kurdish studies, preparing Kurdish textbooks for students, Russian-Kurdish dictionaries, Kurdish grammar books, and books on the history of Kurdish literature.

While Kurdoev was working on Kurdish research, the group included names such as Tsukerman Iosifovich, Margarita Borisovna, Karim Rakhmanovich, Vladimir Yusupov, and Rafael Vasilyevoy. Also, Kurds such as O.D. Jalil, V. Ashoo, S. Hasan, M. Hamo, and A. Mamednazarov received doctoral degrees from the Department of Kurdish Studies of the Leningrad department of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union. Moreover, Kurdoev

20 Musaelian, Zhaklina S., (2010), "Vklad K. Kurdoevyeva V İzucheniye Kurdskey Literatuy İ Folkloru", *Pismennyye Pamyatniki Vostoka*, (1), pp. 8-9.

21 Kurdoev, Kanat. K., (1973) "Academician, I.A Orbeli and Kurdoev." *Patmabanasirakanhandes*, *Պատմաբանասիրական հանդես*, (1), pp. 61-70.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

23 Musaelian, Zhaklina S., (2010), *op.cit.*, pp. 8-9.

further expanded his own studies and trained students such as M. Haznadara, K. Kaftan, M. Abdurrahman, D. Haidari from the Kurdish region of Iraq.

Kurdoev-led Kurdish studies mostly focused on sociological, philological, and historiographical aspects of the regions where Kurds lived intensively. In addition, the socio-economic problems faced by Kurds in the Cold War period were also of interest to these researchers. Thus, Kurdish studies during the Soviet Union developed further the academic and intellectual legacy of Tsarist Russia and left it to the post-Soviet period. On the other hand, the Kurdish studies carried out in Russia during the period of Tsardom and the Soviet Union were not only based on scientific motivation but followed a parallel course with the political expansion of the Russian state.

As both Tsardom and the Soviet Union expanded politically and geographically, they had to take into account the existence of Kurds in the regions they had spread or planned to spread. Therefore, in order to become an effective political actor in the new regions of interest, Russia deemed it necessary to contact the Kurds living in those regions. In order to achieve this theme, Russians conducted extensive and comprehensive academic and scientific studies on Kurds. Thanks to these studies, the knowledge gained about the Kurds brought about the possibility of Russia engaging in political maneuvers in different regions at the necessary moments in changing and transforming world politics.

2. Russia's Contact with Kurds

The first serious contact between the Russians and the Kurds was achieved by the Russian-Iranians (1804-1813) war, Russian - Ottomans (1806-12), and Russian-Iranians War (1826-28). Gulistan Agreement was signed between Iran and Russia in 1813 as a result of the war between two states in the early 19th century. With this agreement, Russia separated most of the South Caucasus from Iran and incorporated it into its borders. With the spread of Russia in the Caucasus, some Kurds in Karabakh and Yazidis in Yerevan came under Russia's rule.²⁴

24 The famous Russian poet Alexandr Pushkin, who participated in the campaign against the Ottomans in 1929, reflected this situation in his notes. Pushkin, who contacted the Yazidi detachment in the Russian Army during the campaign, wrote in his Journey to Arzrum, "There are about three hundred families [of Yazidis] who live at the foot of Mount Ararat." Shakarian, Pietro A, (2017), "Top Ten Origins: Russia's Relations with the Kurds, Retrieved" (11/01/2021), <https://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/top-ten-origins-russia-s-relations-kurds>

In the nineteenth century, Russia worked to ensure at least the neutrality of the Kurds and Yazidis in its wars with the Ottomans and Iran empire. Russia offered to accept Kurdish leaders' citizenship with the preservation of rights and privileges. Tsarist Russia planned to attract the Kurds, who settled on the borders of the Ottoman and Iranian empires, to its side and to get support from them in future wars. Likewise, during the war with the Ottomans in 1828-1829, Tsarist Russia tried to attract the Suleyman and Hasan aghas from the Bulanik branch of the Kurdish Zilanli tribe.²⁵ Besides, although the Bedirhan Bey Tribe did not support the Russians, it did not provide military aid to the Ottoman Empire and tried to prevent the Kurdish Tribes who wanted to do so. The fluctuating relations of the Ottomans with the Bedirhan Bey family in the eastern provinces have always been in Russia's curiosity, and during the Crimean War in 1853-56, Tsarist Russia persuaded some of the Kurdish tribes in the Ottoman east to remain neutral.²⁶ Later, with the Treaty of Berlin signed as a result of the Ottoman-Russian war in 1877-1878, the cities of Kars, Ardahan, Artvin, Batumi, and the southern regions of Armenia were left to Russia. With the Kurds living in these regions under the control of the Russians, the number of Kurds living within the Russian borders increased.

During the 19th century, as a result of various battles, a large number of Kurds came under the domination of the Russians, but in the first stage, the Russians did not tend to have close contact with the Kurds. The first reason was that Armenians lived in these regions along with the Kurds. The Russians preferred to establish relations with Armenians who shared the same religion with them, rather than Kurds, the majority of whom were Muslims. Thus, Tsarist Russia put the Armenians, not the Kurds, at the forefront of designing and controlling the region. The second reason why the Russians limited their relations with the Kurds under their rule was that some Kurds supported the uprisings initiated by Imam Shamil in the mid-19th century against Russia. Imam Shamil's rebellion against the Russian rule in the Caucasus was supported by Kurdish tribal leaders such as Sheikh Said Taha, which led to the prejudice of the Russians against the Kurds.²⁷

On the other hand, it should be noted that even though the Russians started to contact the Kurds from the beginning of the 19th century, the number of Kurds in Russia was not remarkable at the beginning of the 20th century. According to

25 Avyarov, (1995), *Osmanlı-Rus ve İran Savaşları 'nda Kürtler 1801-1900*, , (Ankara, Sipan Yayıncılık), (Çev: Muhammed Varlı) s. 36.

26 Pobedonostseva, A. O., (2010), *op. cit.*, p. 15.

27 See., Gammer, Moshe, (1991), "Imam Shamil and Shah Mohammed: Two Unpublished Letters," *Central Asian Survey*, 10/(1-2), pp. 174-175.

the 1912 census conducted in the late periods of Tsarist Russia, it was found that approximately fifty thousand Kurds, nineteen thousand of which were Yazidis, lived in the South Caucasus. The number of Kurds in this region reached sixty-six thousand in the first period of the Soviet Union in 1926. In 1989, when the Soviet Union was in the process of disintegration, it was confirmed that there were 153,000 Kurds in Soviet geography. During this period, sixty thousand Kurds lived in Armenia and thirteen thousand Kurds in Azerbaijan.²⁸

3. Kurds in the Caucasus and the Kurdish Autonomous Region

After the republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia established in the Southern Caucasus came under Soviet rule in 1920-1921, the need to reshape the borders of the region emerged. Within the framework of Lenin's "Nationalities Policy," it was planned to give various ethnic groups the right to govern themselves. Accordingly, on July 16, 1923, it was decided to establish the "Red Kurdistan Cultural Autonomous Region" (Kurdistsanskii uezd) within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan.²⁹ Gussi Gajiev, one of the leaders of the Azerbaijan Bolshevik Movement and ethnically Kurd from the Susha region, was elected as the leader of the Red Kurdistan Cultural Autonomous Region, consisting of Lachin, Kelbajar, Zengilan, Gubadli, and Gabriel.³⁰

According to a study conducted in 1925, the total population of Red Kurdistan was around 44,000. More than 35,000 of this population were Kurds (80%) and the rest were Azerbaijani Turks.³¹ But Stalin, who took over the post-Lenin leadership, believed that the autonomous administration rights granted to ethnic groups hindered the processes of nationalization in the republics. For this reason, as in the Soviet Union in general, the administrative region was arranged in Azerbaijan. Firstly, on April 8, 1929, the Sixth All-Azerbaijani Congress of Soviets adopted a resolution that eliminated all *uezds*, including Red Kurdistan. As a result of this, Red Kurdistan was connected to Karabakh Okrug. A year later, on 25 May 1930, the Central Executive Committee of Azerbaijan declared

28 Bugay N. F., Broyev T. M. & Broyev P. M., (1993), *Sovetskiye Kurdy: Vremya Peremen*, (Moskva, Karl. Pub)., p. 42.

29 Babayan, David, (2005), "Krasnyy Kurdistan: Geopoliticheskiye Aspekty Sozdaniya I Uprazhneniya", *21-y Vek*, (2), pp. 115-116.

30 Veliyev, Anar, (2005) "Kurdsкая Problema V Azerbaydzhane: Ugroza Bezopasnosti Ili Ocherednaya Igra?..", *CA&C. Press AB*, pp. 2-3, Retrieved (17/02/2020), http://www.ca-c.org/online/2001/journal_rus/cac-02/13.velievru.shtml?

31 Müller, Daniel (2000), "The Kurds of Soviet Azerbaijan 1920-1991", *Central Asian Survey*, (19/1), p.50.

the formation of the Kurdistan Okrug. The borders of Kurdistan Okrug were the same as those of the former Red Kurdistan. In fact, Lachin was determined as the center again. But the life of Kurdistan Okrug was shorter than that of Red Kurdistan. On July 23, 1930, the Council of the People's Commissars and the Central Executive Committee of the USSR took a decision that eliminated the okrugs.³² As a result of this, the Azerbaijani Soviet ended the existence of the okrugs on 8 August 1930. Thus, the political life of the Kurdistan Okrug could only last two and a half months. Thereafter, no more autonomous governmental structure was created for the Kurds within the Soviet Union.³³

Through the Second World War, strained relations between the Soviet Union and Turkey also affected the Kurds living in the Caucasus. The USSR seeing the Kurds living near the Turkish border as a security threat began to exile the Kurds in the Central Asia. The first forced Kurdish migration took place in 1937 from Armenia to Kazakhstan.³⁴ The majority of the exiled Kurds were Muslim. Thus, the Soviet Union, ridding the area from Muslim Kurds on the border with Turkey in the process leading up to the war, hoped to make the region more secure. The deportation of the Kurds in the Caucasus continued during the war. Towards the end of the war, in 1944, the Soviet Union forced various Muslim communities in the Caucasus, especially Ahiska Turks, for allegedly cooperating with the Germans. Kurds in the region were also affected from these exiles.

Kurds without their own self-government had to live among the peoples of the local republics within the USSR. Kurds living in local communities, especially in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, did not have the opportunity to act collectively until the last period of the Soviet Union. The Glasnost and Perestroika processes initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 as the leader of the USSR influenced Kurds as well as the entire Soviet society. During this period, the Kurds attempted to reorganize in Russia and Azerbaijan. In this context, in 1989, the Kurds organized a Kurdish Congress in Moscow in order to obtain the status of the displaced people.³⁵ The Kurdish Congress, which claimed that Lenin conceived of Red Kurdistan as a republic, founded in 1923, aimed to establish an administrative structure similar to Red Kurdistan. The Congress also decided to establish a Kurdish Unity Front (Yekbun) for the Kurds to act jointly and to open

32 Veliyev, Anar, (2005), *op.,cit.*p. 1

33 Ibid.

34 Isaeva, L. T., (2010), "K Voprosy Istorii Pereseleniya Kurdov v Kazakhstan", *Noucnij Pedagogicheskiy Jurnal*, (3), p. 89.

35 Dasni Y.R., (2010) "Kurdskaia Diaspora Rossii: Proshloye I Nastoyashcheye," *Kurdish Ru*, Retrieved (19.03.2020) https://kurdistan.ru/2010/12/19/articles-8349_Dasni_YU_R_Kurdskaia_diaspora_Rossii_proshloe_i_nastoyashee.html

branches in the South Caucasus. Baku-born Kurdish Suleiman Babayev was elected President of Yekbun.³⁶ But at a time when the Soviet Union was in the process of disintegration as a whole, there was no environment to meet the expectations of the Kurds. On the contrary, while waiting for a self-governing structure within the Union, Kurds in the USSR found themselves divided between four different countries (Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) with the collapse of the Soviets at the end of 1991.

4. The First and the Last Kurdish State Supported by the Soviet Union: The Republic of Mahabad and Frustration

On July 22, 1941, the eastern front of the Second World War was opened in Europe with the attack of Nazi Germany, called Operation Barbarossa, to the Soviet Union. In this atmosphere, the Soviet Union and Britain suspected that Iran could cooperate with Nazi Germany.³⁷ Possible Iran-German cooperation would mean the opening of a new front in the Caucasus and the Nazis taking control of Iranian oil. In order to prevent this scenario from happening, Britain and the USSR preferred to occupy Iran. Accordingly, in 1941, the British invaded Iran from the south and the Soviets from the north. The Soviets, who took military control of the north of Iran, implemented a strategy of cooperation with the Azerbaijani Turks and Kurds in the region in order to increase its influence in the region. In this context, the Soviet authorities made multidimensional contacts with Turks and Kurds in order to attract local people in the region. In fact, in 1942, Kurdish tribes such as Jalali, Shikak, and Herki and some representatives of South Azerbaijan Turks were brought together for a meeting in Baku.³⁸

Moreover, the Soviet Union supported the organization of the Kurds under its control in the north of Iran which it occupied. In this context, the Soviets supported the organization called “Komala-i-Zhian-i-Kurd” (Committee of Kurdish Youth) which was founded by a group of Kurdish youth on August 16, 1943.³⁹ Under the control of the USSR, Komala and the Kurdish tribes in the

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Magomedkhanov, V. M., (2015), “Vtoraya Mirovaya Voyna: Sovetsko-Kurdskiy Svyazi V 40-Ye Gody XX Veka”, *Fundamentalnyye Issledovaniya*, (2/5), pp. 1095-1098.

³⁸ Hasanlı, Cemil, (2005), *Soğuk Savaşın İlk Çatışması İran Azerbaycan'ı*, (Çev, Ekber N. Necef), (İstanbul, Bağlam Yayınları), pp. 152-153.

³⁹ Roosevelt, Jr. A., (1947), “The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad,” *The Middle East Journal*, (1/3), p.250.

region were being trained by Soviet soldiers. Jafarov, a Soviet officer of Azerbaijani origin, was conducting this training in Kurdish traditional clothing. In April 1945, Komala which had an extreme nationalist motivation and requires Kurdish origin for membership opened a branch in Mahabad, a small city in the north of Iran. Thus, Komala, which became an effective actor in the process, completed its organization in the strategic Kurdish settlements in the north of Iran.

After a certain stage, the Soviet Union wanted to implement its strategy of maintaining its presence in Iran through satellite states in the region. But even though the Soviet-controlled Komala and Kurdish tribes were influential in the field, there was no political figure to lead the Kurds in the region on behalf of the Soviets. After a long search, the Soviets appointed Qadi Muhammad, the religious leader and the hereditary judge of Mahabad, and a member of its most influential family. Qadi Muhammad, a member of the most influential tribe of Mahabad, Debokri, founded the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in the summer of 1945⁴⁰. The KDP was apparently established with Soviet guidance.⁴¹ Established under the leadership of Qadi Muhammad, the party included Komala in its own structure. The KDP's manifesto consisting of 12 articles was signed by 105 Kurdish tribal members of the region. The KDP's founding manifesto ended in a way that evoked Soviet discourses: Long Live Kurdish Democratic Autonomy.⁴²

On the other hand, although the region's leading Kurdish actors supported Qadi Muhammad and the establishment of the KDP, many were skeptical about communism.⁴³ This was a great risk for Qadi Muhammad, who entered a political process with the support of the Soviets, because the withdrawal of the Kurds, who influenced the region, could have undermined the plans of the Soviets and Qadi Muhammad. As an important development, the Barzani factor, which will be discussed in detail below, came into play. Mullah Mustafa Barzani, who had been in contact with the Soviets for the time and had the most influential paramilitary power among the Kurdish groups in northern Iraq, came to Mahabad to support Qadi Muhammad in October 1945 with his armed 3,000 tribal members. Immediately after he arrived in Mahabad, Mullah Barzani met with the generals commanding Soviet forces in Western Azerbaijan and received instructions from them to support Qadi Muhammad.⁴⁴ The Kurds in Mahabad,

40 Güzel, Hasan T., (2018), "Soğuk Savaş Sürecinde Irak'ta Kürt Hareketi ve Molla Mustafa Barzani", *History Studies*, (10/4), p.127.

41 Gunter, Micheal M., (2020), "Iran's Forgotten Kurds", *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, (43/2), p 59.

42 Roosevelt, Jr. A., (1947), *op., cit.* p.255.

43 *Ibid*, p. 253.

44 Hasanlı, Cemil, (2005), *op.,cit.* pp. 152-153.

strengthened by the Barzanis' joining them, gradually began to establish their own political authority in the region with the support of the Soviets.

After Azerbaijan Turks declared their independence by establishing Azerbaijan People's Government in November 1945 with the support of the Soviets in the region adjacent to Mahabad in the north of Iran, the Kurds followed the same path. Accordingly, on 22 January 1946, a national assembly was opened in Mahabad and the foundation of the Republic of Mahabad was proclaimed on Charchira Square. Qadi Muhammad was elected as the head of the new state. Mullah Mustafa Barzani was appointed as the marshal in charge of the armed forces of Mahabad which was established with Soviet support. The Mahabad military forces under Barzani were fully equipped with Soviet military uniforms, with high boots, hard epaulets, and red-lined caps.

Mahabad led by Qadi Muhammad, who received all kinds of Soviet support in the process of political organization and independence, needed more support in order to survive because Mahabad had a small population (less than a million), small geography (37,000 square kilometers), and scarce economic resources. For the survival of Mahabad against Iran, Soviet support was needed in all matters. But from the very beginning of the establishment of the state, Qadi Muhammad did not get the support he expected from the Soviets. At the beginning of 1946, after the end of the Second World War with the defeat of the Nazis, the British ended their occupation in Iran. Other actors, especially the United Nations, wanted the Soviets to evacuate Iran. Finally, in May 1946, the Soviets began to withdraw from the north of Iran.

The withdrawal of the Soviets from the north of Iran, including Mahabad, meant the death warrant of the Republic of Mahabad, which was artificially established and forced to survive with Soviet support. With the withdrawal of the Soviets, Iran took action to regain control over the northern regions, which had lost control during the occupation. The Republic of Mahabad, which did not have any national collective consciousness and history, where inter-tribal conflicts were evident and could survive with external support, naturally could not resist Tehran for a long time. Qadi Muhammad, who lost Soviet support, was also deprived of the support of local tribes who feared Tehran's violence. As a result, in December 1946, Iranian military forces had full control of the north, eliminating both the Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Mahabad.

Iranian forces arrested prominent figures of the Republic of Mahabad, especially Qadi Muhammad. As a result of the trial, Qadi Muhammad was executed by hanging with the two people accompanying him on March 31, 1947, in Charchira Square where the foundation of the Republic of Mahabad was announced. Mullah Mustafa Barzani first tried to reach an agreement with the

Iranian authorities and when he did not get results, he chose to flee with his tribe to the north of Iraq. Thus, the Republic of Mahabad, established by the Soviet Union as a satellite to keep the north of Iran under control, took its place in the pages of history before celebrating its first year because it lost its single and greatest support.

5. The Soviet Union's Kurdish Policy in Iraq

During the brief Mahabad experience, the Soviets realized the potential of Mullah Mustafa Barzani. Barzani, who returned to Iraq after the failure of the Mahabad initiative, did not stay there long and emigrated to the USSR. On May 27, 1947, Barzani left Iraq with 500 male tribesmen and re-entered the Iranian territory via Turkey. After a 3-week clash with Iranian military forces and a difficult journey of more than 200 miles, Barzani and his forces arrived in Soviet territory, crossing the Aras River on June 18, 1947.⁴⁵ Barzani, who remained in the Soviet country until 1958, had the opportunity to establish close relations with the Soviet authorities during this period. Moreover, Barzani's relationship with the Soviets became so organic that Aktas and Mikhail claimed that Mustafa Barzani was a salaried KGB agent and that his code name was "Rais" in the KGB records.⁴⁶ During this period, Barzani also had the chance to meet with Khrushchev and in this meeting, Khrushchev promised to support the movements led by Barzani.⁴⁷ With hundreds of armed men under his command, Barzani was likely to be an important partner in the policies the Soviet Union would embark on in the Middle East. In this context, Barzani and his nearly 700 men underwent guerrilla training, including explosives and radar operations, by the KGB during their stay in the Soviet Union, and were returned to Iraq fully equipped.⁴⁸ In fact, the forces affiliated with Barzani continued to receive guerrilla training by the KGB until 1961, after Barzani departed from Soviet territory.⁴⁹

During his stay in Moscow, Barzani continued a struggle against the monarchy regime in Iraq under the direction of the Soviets. Barzani, who was out of Iraq, was conducting his anti-monarchy struggle through the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party, which he founded as a branch of the Iranian

45 Ghassamlou, A. Rahman, (1993), "Kurdistan in Iran", in Gerard Chaliand (ed), *A People without a Country: the Kurds and Kurdistan*, (New York, Olive Branch), p. 109.

46 Aktaş H. & Milhail, E. H., (2018), "Former Soviet Union's Intelligence Agency KGB's Activities," *Chinese Business Review*, p. 539.

47 Güzel, H. T., (2018), *op.cit.*, p.128.

48 Aktaş, H. & Milhail, E. H., (2018), *op.cit.*, pp.539-540.

49 *Ibid.*, p.540.

Kurdistan Democratic Party when he was in Mahabad in 1946. As a result of the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, Barzani was able to return to Iraq with the direction and intervention of the Soviets.⁵⁰ The Soviets described the regime change in Iraq as an anti-imperialist revolution and planned to establish close relations with the new Iraqi regime. The first prime minister of the Republic of Iraq, Abd al-Karim Qasim, who aimed to gain international support for the newly established regime, also responded to the hand extended by the Soviets.

Qasim, who began to establish close relations with the Soviets, allowed Barzani to return to Iraq and to operate legally. Kurds supported by the Soviets were allowed to publish Kurdish magazines and newspapers. Furthermore, in the 1958 provisional constitution, the Kurds and Arabs were counted among the founding elements of Iraq and their national rights were guaranteed. Thus, the Soviets aimed to realize a significant dimension of their relations with the newly established regime in Iraq through the Kurds around Barzani, who had long been educated and controlled.

Relying on both the promises made by Qasim and the Soviet support, Barzani demanded autonomy from Baghdad in the summer of 1961, but this demand was not answered. As a result of this, Barzani, who received strong support from the Soviets, launched a Kurdish uprising on September 11, 1961, in northern Iraq.⁵¹ In this first uprising, which continued until 1970, the Barzani forces, which suffered a great number of casualties, emerged weakened from this process. Another reason for the weakening of Barzani-led Kurdish groups against Baghdad was that the support they received from the Soviets in this process was very volatile and unstable. While the Soviets supported the Kurds, they were also worried about a possible shift of Baghdad to the West. For this reason, the support given to the Kurds was tried to be kept at a level that will not disturb Baghdad. However, the loss of political stability in Iraq caused the Soviet support for the Kurds to be fluctuating.

In 1963, Kasimi was overthrown by a coup carried out by the Iraqi branch of the Ba'ath Party and backed by the CIA, and the administration in Iraq was under Baathists' control.⁵² However, in November 1963, President Abdul Salam Arif cleared the Baathists from power and took control of the country. Both Abdul Salam Arif and his brother Abdul Rahman Arif, who became the president after him, had set up close relations with the United States. This process that

50 Tellal, Erel, (2000), *Uluslararası ve Bölgesel Gelişmeler Çerçevesinde SSCB-Türkiye İlişkileri 1953-1964*, (Ankara, Mülkiyeliler Birliği Vakfı Yayınları), pp. 172-173.

51 Qadir, Kamal S., (2007), "The Barzani Chameleon", *Middle East Quarterly*, (14/2), pp. 87-88.

52 Mosaki, Nodar Z., (2010), "Rossiya i Irakskiye Kurdy", *Islam Na Blizhnem i Srednem Vostoke*, (5), pp. 172-174.

brought Iraq closer to the United States disturbed the Soviets. For this reason, the Soviets began to support the Kurds again against Baghdad.

In 1968, after the Ba'athists in Iraq seized power with a new coup, the relations between Baghdad and Moscow were restored. This brought about a process in which the USSR supported the Kurds led by Barzani on the one hand and the Baghdad administration on the other. But as Moscow's relationship with Baghdad increased, the USSR began to turn its back on the Kurds. Although the Soviets convinced the Baath regime in Iraq to give autonomy to the Kurds in 1970,⁵³ the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the two countries made Baghdad more uncompromising to the Kurds. The 1972 Agreement led Baghdad and Moscow to a direct relationship.⁵⁴ Since that time, Soviet support for the Kurds led by Barzani steadily declined, because the USSR did not need the Kurds to be effective in Iraq anymore.

From the early 1970s, Moscow began to maintain its relations with Baghdad, mostly through the Iraqi Communist Party and Vice-President Saddam Hussein. However, the USSR continued to play the role of mediator between Barzani and Baghdad during this period. But Barzani was aware that Soviet support was gradually diminishing. In this way, it was not possible for Barzani's struggle to succeed. Aware of this, Barzani ended the second uprising he started against Iraq in 1974-1975. Although Barzani stated that he realized that there was no result with the war, the main issue that led Barzani to failure was the reduced Soviet support. Therefore, Barzani, who went to the USA in 1975, shifted the Iraqi Kurds' search for international support from the Soviets to the West. Since then, the Kurds in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq, have continued to struggle in the orbit of the US-led Western world. The Soviet Union abandoned a comprehensive policy towards the Kurds due to the internal crises and the war in Afghanistan in the process of disintegration.

Conclusion

Although Russia's policy towards the Kurds followed a fluctuating and volatile process during both the tsarist and Soviet times, there was one thing that was stable: using the Kurds as a means to pressure central governments in the interests of Russia. As Russia expanded into the geographies inhabited by Kurds and sought to gain political and economic interest in those geographies, Russia began to consider the Kurds in those regions as a means to facilitate its expansion process. The fact that the Kurds were dispersed between more than one country,

53 Aktaş, H. & Milhail, E. H., (2018), *op.cit.*, p.540.

54 Güzel, H. T., (2018), *op.cit.*, p.132.

often in conflict with the central governments, and eager to get support from the great powers facilitated the work of the Russians.

Although Russia constantly changed the policies towards the Kurds in accordance with the conditions of the period, these changes did not occur without any basis. Russia had prepared scientific and academic studies on Kurds since the middle of the 19th century, a period in which contacts with Kurds began to increase. Examining the Kurds on philological, sociological, historical, political, and cultural grounds, Russia determined the Kurdish policy on the basis of these researches and made changes in the policy of the available data when needed.

Finally, the above shows that the Kurds have never achieved their expectations in the relations between the Kurds and Russia during the Tsardom and Soviet times. The Russians had an influence especially on Iran and Iraq through their contacts with the Kurds and the policies they applied to them. But the Kurds, with great hopes, cooperated with the Russians and were frustrated each time. The Kurds, who have hoped for several benefits, particularly independence, have been left with the rage of central governments at the end of the processes.

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