



## The Element of the Kachagh Movement in the Popular Resistance Against Collectivization in Karabakh (1930)


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**Abstract:** In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Karabakh, like other regions of Azerbaijan, actively participated in the popular resistance movement against the collectivization carried out by the Soviet government. Nevertheless, the characteristics of each region provided ample opportunity to differentiate the self-defense taking place in the regions. In particular, the Kachagh Movement, which was widespread in Karabakh, Zangezur, and Western Azerbaijan, which belonged to the western part of Azerbaijan and was included in the territory of Soviet Armenia, also entered a new active period against the backdrop of collectivization measures. Karabakh Kachagh Movement, which was closely related to those regions, although it had been operating in a supported manner with the national resistance in the early 1920s, gained its own identity by being considered the main element of resistance during the collectivization stage. The Kachagh Movement, which had a large mass and covered many territories in a short period of time, became the main obstacle to political power. The Karabakh Kachaghs, which had become the main defense factor in the region, fought against collectivization using various methods and showed disruptive activity in their expansion. The article will highlight such nuances of the collectivization stage of the Karabakh Kachagh Movement, and will try to approach the events from an objective perspective. At the same time, many of the facts presented confirm that in Karabakh, as one of the historical territories familiar with the Kachagh method of popular resistance since the end of the 19th century, completely favorable conditions were created for the movement to manifest itself in a specialized form in the 20s-30s of the 20th century.

**Keywords:** Kolchomak, Partisan groups, Self-defense, Soviet power

### 1. Introduction

The 1920s and 1930s are considered to be one of the most important periods in the history of the Azerbaijani people. Despite being approached from various aspects, it is possible to encounter issues of the events that took place during this period that have not yet been fully covered. One of these is the approach to the social measures implemented during the years of collectivization<sup>1</sup> from the perspective of the people, and the assessment of the discontent that occurred from a local perspective. The fact that the newly established Soviet government resorted to socio-economic measures that were alien to the Azerbaijani peasant<sup>2</sup> undoubtedly caused numerous local panics. It can be said that assessing those events

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<sup>1</sup>The process of organizing something, often industries or agriculture, according to the principles of collectivism, where ownership and control are shared or centralized.

<sup>2</sup>The Azerbaijani peasant was accustomed to living on a personal farm, had a yard, and at least to a small extent, a personal farm.

that took place in many parts of the country solely from the perspective of the people, the Azerbaijani peasant, can lead to great dilemmas. The desire of the people—faced with numerous questions such as how to escape from Dashnak oppression, how to adapt to the new social system the newly established Soviet government was trying to create, and so on—to find salvation by turning to the Kachagh Movement, whose roots date back to the end of the 19th century, ultimately paved the way for tragedies in their fate.

It is clear that the collectivization measures announced throughout the Soviet Union were an alien economic method for the Azerbaijani environment. “Was the Soviet government really unaware of any protests against it when implementing these measures?” raises a little mystery. There is no doubt that the Soviet leadership, which pursued various political goals, such as further strengthening its power base in each of the dependent nations and perpetuating subordination to the center, repeatedly raised the issue before taking this line, as collectivization it did in every step it took. But one of its greatest carelessness was that this new economic method was alien to the Caucasian environment, more precisely, to the Azerbaijani countryside. The differences experienced by the Muslim Azerbaijani peasant when entering this environment, for which he was neither psychologically nor socially prepared, from the bek and agha system, which he had previously seen as the main owner of the land and was subject to, gave rise to dissatisfaction as quickly as the decision to adopt these measures. Also, in comparison with Soviet Russia, collectivization, which was carried out in our country in a relatively short period of time, was “advancing and expanding without encountering resistance,” according to information sent to the Central Committee of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party. As for the realities, the situation was deplorable, even unbearable. At the same time, the Soviet leadership, which had taken a sharp and uncompromising position against the kolchomaks in the countryside from the very beginning, seemed to confirm the repression of that class through these socio-economic measures it adopted. It should be noted that the hatred that was artificially created in the Azerbaijani countryside against the word “kolchomak” had created deep fear and dissatisfaction among all the representatives of the village. The measures taken against them had already exceeded their previous level and reached a sharp level. Not only wealthy peasants, but also middle-class peasants who did not leave their farms during the collectivization years were declared “kolchomaks” and removed from that area (Institute of History, 2008). This naturally led to local dissatisfaction.

The newspaper “Zarya Vostoka” reported on this issue that the peasants of the middle class and the peasantry did not hesitate to openly speak out in order to destroy the collective farms; they committed arson, murder, and also destroyed the farm tools and fields belonging to the collective farms (Zarya Vostoka, 1933). It was even noted that many of them entered the collective farms in order to destroy them from within (Zarya Vostoka, 1933). Of course, there was some truth in this. When we look into the

depths of the matter, it becomes clear that the peasants were not in vain. Unlike the Russian peasants, the Azerbaijani peasants, who had never been familiar with the collective farm, could not get used to this environment. For a country peasant who had not been “personally serfs” since the Middle Ages, even a small amount of his personal farm was taken away, which was tantamount to an insult to his honor. However, the way the issue was highlighted at the national level in the above-mentioned way was also due to the desire to expose only the disruptive activities of the peasant who was purposefully branded as a “murderer” and a “bandit”. However, it should not be forgotten that until that time, the main regulators in maintaining order and discipline in the regions were the beks and aghas, whom they were now trying to discredit. Similarly, during the collectivization period, the poor and middle-class peasants, who were considered “participants in the uprising”, were considered the main authors of all agricultural products obtained from the regions. This was an indication of the higher level of discrimination of the implemented political line against the Azerbaijani peasant, whom it saw as a thought that contradicted its ideology.

It should be noted that many reports indicate that even non-Dashnak Armenian villagers in the territories bordering Western Azerbaijan armed themselves and joined the uprisings together with the Azerbaijani population. Referring to the facts indicated in one of the sources, it can be noted that 70 Armenians fought in a 600-man partisan detachment in Boyuk (meaning Big) Vedibasar, and it was even reported that a 500-man Armenian detachment operating in Goycha helped the Vedibasar Turks (Odlu Yurd, 1930, June). All this gives reason to say that the popular resistance movement, with its broad character, led to discontent not only in our country but also in other nations of the South Caucasus. It should be noted that this also proves that the struggle was no longer a national issue and manifested itself in the nature of self-defense.

## **2. Popular Resistance Against Collectivization in Karabakh**

One of the most important and deep-rooted participants in the protests that spread throughout the country was the Karabakh lands. This territory, which was declared “disputed” by the Soviet government as early as the early 1920s, was the region where the national and popular movement against the newly emerging government was carried out in the most acute and violent form in the struggle with the Dashnaks. In the 1920s, Soviet Russia deliberately declared Karabakh a disputed territory, thereby opening it up to local conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the future. Here, the popular self-defense, which manifested itself in parallel with the national resistance in the early 1920s, became the main method of defense in the late 1920s and early 1930s, becoming the main obstacle to the government’s activities in the localities. In particular, the exile and oppression of local beks and aghas under the name of

kolchomak caused dissatisfaction among the population as a whole. Unlike the Russian peasant, the Azerbaijani peasantry, most of whom were related to each other, acted as a single community, despite representing different social groups. Although ideological influences were used to bring them into conflict, this was not so easy. A. Garayev, in his speech at the meeting of the Central Executive Committee of Transcaucasia on Soviet construction, gave a correct, albeit negative, assessment of this issue, taking an Azerbaijani population-oriented approach (Alimirzayev, 1963). Discontent in the Karabakh region has been widespread since the beginning of collectivization. In particular, the protests of the peasants against collective farms were mainly accompanied by the killing of the heads of these farms (Mammadzadeh, 2007). The peasants even gained great advantage in the villages such as Shatyrlı, Yevlakh, Barda, Koyunlu, and Sheikhabali (Mammadzadeh, 2007). The popular resistance that began in almost all parts of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (meaning “a type of administrative division, similar to a province or region, found particularly Slavic or former Soviet Union influences”) established in the region soon spread to the surrounding areas. Throughout 1928-1930, anti-collectivist uprisings carried out in armed form in areas such as Nakhchivan, Karabakh, Guba, Nukha, Goychay, Zagatala, and Ganja took on a continuous character (Jafarov, 2012). In fact, this movement, which was mutually reinforcing, was accompanied by various methods of defense. The discontent reached such a point that the local population killed the collective farm chairmen A. Arutunyan and A. Gasimyan in the villages of Garakend and Edilli (Institute of History, 1973). The Odlu Yurd collection shows that the peasant movement that broke out in various regions caused deep unrest in the central circles:

“The Russian leader of the Azerbaijani communists and the responsible secretary of the central communist faction of Azerbaijan, Gikalo, speaking at a faction meeting about the peasant movement, noted the terror of the “class enemy” kolchomags in the Azerbaijani provinces and the murder of many responsible communists and leaders of the organization as a result of these terrors. According to Gikalo, 21 communists were killed only in the Karabakh province during the last month. In addition, many food warehouses were burned and animals were slaughtered” (Odlu Yurd, 1930, March).

The information provided suggests that the peasants opposed collectivization in every way, killing communists, destroying crop reserves, and even slaughtering their own animals to avoid giving them to the collective farm. It was known that this situation was the same in almost all regions, and in Karabakh, the most widespread form of popular resistance in the fight against collectivization was the formation of partisan detachments created by the population.

In some places, evading the measures of the central government through kachaghness was considered one of the important methods of defense. In particular, the Kachagh Resistance, which was of considerable relevance in the mountainous areas, spread throughout the country during the years of collectivization. Members of the Kachagh Movement often acted in a coordinated manner by organizing various groups. Jafar Jafarov reports on the existence of up to 400 kachagh groups only in the 4-year period during the collectivization years (Jafarov, 2008).

One of the most powerful partisan groups operating in the country during the years of collectivization was a voluntary association known as “Akhsaq Teimur”. Its sphere of activity covered a wide area, including the mountains of Karabakh, Guba, Shamakhi, Lankaran, and the surroundings of Baku, and also expanded day by day with the joining of Kachaghs from various regions (Odlu Yurd, 1930, April). This partisan association also carried the national Azerbaijani flag with slogans written on it, on which the following phrases were written:

“Our five-year plan is the destruction of communists, the expulsion of Russians from Azerbaijan, the making of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani people free and independent. Let us implement our five-year plan in two months”(Odlu Yurd, 1930, March).

So, one thing can be deduced from the slogan that the socio-economic measures implemented by the Soviet government were essentially fake. The implementation of the five-year plan in two months is nothing more than an unthinkable and unrealistic situation. This also confirms that the activity of the partisans in the popular resistance in Karabakh had entered such an urgent period that they operated independently, carried flags with slogans on them, and were eager for open struggle against the central government. So, in fact, the partisan formations formed from illegal groups had become the target of a ruthless and difficult-to-repel struggle in the way of government activity. Along with all this, the leading bodies, which had been hostile to the partisans in the places from the very first days of their formation, also took drastic measures against the Kachagh Movement.

### **3. The Role of the Kachagh Movement in the Popular Resistance**

However, despite all the measures taken, the popular resistance movement played a significant role in preventing the spread of collectivization throughout the country. Kachaghness, which is an integral part of it, served as the main support in this process. This idea can be confirmed by a number of nuances. First of all, the historical roots of Kachaghness in the Karabakh lands date back to the end of the 19th century, which ultimately turned the Kachagh Movement, which was already organized in a specialized

way in the late 1920s and early 1930s of the 20th century, into the main source of resistance. Among those who led this movement in Karabakh in the 19th century, the names of Kachagh Nabi, Kachagh Mammad (Mammad bekh Kavalər), Kanli İsmayil, Kachagh Farzali, Kachagh Safarali, etc., can be mentioned.

Secondly, the strategically located territory of Karabakh, being mountainous<sup>3</sup>, initially stimulated the Kachagh Movement, but at the same time had a significant positive effect on receiving support from neighboring regions. Which, through Zangezür, was closely connected with the Kachagh Movement that arose in the territories of Daralayaz, Vedi, Goycha, and other lands of Western Azerbaijan. Karabakh Kachaghness was involved in the fight against collectivization in an organized and holistic manner. The third point is that, unlike the national resistance movement, Kachaghness, which became the main patron of the people's resistance, operated in more secretive ways, like partisan groups, making it difficult for the Soviet government to suppress it. Since most of the secret defense centers were organized in mountainous areas that the Soviet government was not familiar with, both detecting them and finding their main source became a real problem for the leadership. All the above points once again give reason to say that the Kachagh Movement was considered a very relevant and widespread form of resistance in the people's resistance.

As reported in a number of sources, especially in the border regions, the elements of the resistance movement were more distinguished in their struggle (İbrahimli, 2001). As we have already noted, the strategic position of Karabakh made a serious contribution to the formation of the popular direction of the resistance movement here from the end of the 19th century. In addition to the peasants and wealthy peasants, all strata of the population, like the poor, middle class, and aghas, bekhs, actively participated in the popular resistance in Karabakh. One of the main reasons for this was that the collectivization carried out in Karabakh was carried out in the context of the struggle against religious and national customs and traditions (Mammadov, 2020). This naturally created extreme dissatisfaction with the government among all strata of the population. As a result, the Kachagh wing of the popular resistance movement became one of the only places of hope for everyone.

#### 4. Karabakh Kachaghs

Let us note that in all the resistance processes that took place, along with the partisan groups, which were the main method of popular resistance, and their organized organizational form, the people's

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<sup>3</sup>Karabakh is located in the South Caucasus and is divided into Lowland Karabakh and Mountainous Karabakh (Nagorno-Karabakh). The region lies within the Lesser Caucasus mountain system, featuring diverse terrain from plains (200–500 m) to high mountains exceeding 3,700 m. The most important mountains in Karabakh are Gamish Mountain (3,724 m), the highest peak of the Murovdag range, Mount Kirs (2,725 m) near Lachin, the Murovdag mountain range itself, and the volcanic Karabakh Plateau, which ranges between 1,500 and 2,500 meters in elevation.

Kachaghs who led those groups cannot be ignored. Thus, provided that their relations with the partisan groups that formed the main part of the popular resistance are also kept in the center of attention, it can be stated that the people's Kachaghs were at least as formidable enemies as the partisan groups in the face of collectivization. While the partisan groups that fought had manifested themselves more generally, the fugitives had become their vanguard fighters by leading the popular resistance. Determining their identity and discovering their hiding places could have been considered more convenient for government bodies compared to partisan groups. Of course, this also gives grounds to say that the assessment of the struggle of these individuals is at least as important and significant in terms of studying the history of heroism as the partisan groups.

The partisan groups organized in Karabakh under the leadership of Gulmali Khan in the mid-1920s were “draining the blood of the Soviet government” and becoming the main distracting force standing in the way of its local power (Gaffarov, 1999). These events began to manifest themselves more sharply towards the end of the 1920s, along with collectivization. In particular, the wave of uprisings that broke out in the western regions, in the direction of Gazakh and Karayazi, under the leadership of the Kachagh Isakhan, also seriously affected the resistance movement process in Karabakh. Of course, the Kachaghness that broke out in the border areas made the leadership even more worried, and one of the important reasons for this was the issue of the relations of many of the Kachaghs with neighboring countries. The intervention of neighboring regions, to which they turned for help, in the country could be further expanded in this way. Thus, according to information provided to official circles, in November 1930, 19 terrorist operations were carried out by kachaghs in the country, which mainly covered the territories of Karabakh, Ganja, and Shirvan (Amrahov, 2009). The main targets of their attacks were precisely the heads of departments and heads of collective farms, who were representatives of the official authorities (Amrahov, 2009).

In addition to all the nuances mentioned, it is important to emphasize one issue: Since the Soviet authorities intended to carry out this work more in cotton-growing regions in the early years of collectivization, it is possible to conclude that the protests against collectivization in the mountainous parts of Karabakh coincided with the years when it became more acute than in the plains (Shikhliniski, 1975). Also, the fertile environment of the mountainous areas for the development of Kachaghness allowed it to spread to a larger area. In addition, Kachagh Movement, as in many regions of the country, has significant relevance in the Karabakh region and can be assessed as a relatively safe and sustainable method of the people's resistance movement compared to open methods of struggle. Although the glorious struggle of the Karabakh Kachaghs could not prevent collectivization, it became the main intimidating factor on its path, prompting them to once again stand on every political move made by the upper circles. In

addition, the Kachagh Movement, carried out as the most national form of popular resistance, with its still unidentified aspects, continues to live in the memory of the local population as a part of folk culture.

## 5. Conclusion

The collectivization policy, which was distinguished by its sharp character in the late 1920s and early 1930s, was met by the population in various forms in the places. The most memorable method of discontent against it was, without a doubt, Kachaghness, in which the popular resistance movement found itself. The widespread of the Kachagh Movement not only in Karabakh but in all regions shows that collectivization was met with serious discontent throughout the country and was an economic policy completely alien to local characteristics. The history of struggle, whose historical roots date back to the end of the 19th century, played an important role in the formation of the popular resistance as the leading method of defense, namely the Kachagh Movement. The fact that the most characteristic method of struggle, both in terms of local characteristics and from the standpoint of the organized reflection of discontent among the population, was the Kachagh Movement, once again confirmed itself in the 1920s. Moreover, the struggle, which was carried out in a more complex and organized form than in previous years, was met with fear in the upper circles. Although various methods were used to prevent it, its suppression required great effort and struggle against the background of the local population, who wholeheartedly supported the Kachaghs in the struggle against collectivization. The only tool that could help the ruling circles in this struggle, and which they considered inexhaustible and powerful, was nothing more than ideology. However, the duration of its struggle in front of the people was also doubtful and mysterious.

It is also necessary to draw attention to one issue: According to a number of claims, the popular resistance during the years of collectivization was a form of resistance organized mostly by kolchomaks and carried out in order to protect their farms. It is by no means possible to say that these ideas are completely true. The main reason for this is that the vast majority of the leaders of the popular resistance in the late 1920s and early 1930s of the 20th century, when there was no talk of any collectivization measures at the beginning of the 1920s, were acting as the main defenders of protecting the people from the Dashnaks and strengthening the newly formed Soviet government on the ground. Thus, this gives grounds to say that the people's Kachaghs, who were true heroes, stood as a solid barrier in each region, first of all, to protect the local population, and secondly, to oppose the economic line that the Soviet government was pursuing, which was alien to the Muslim peasant, as well as the new moral environment that it was trying to create against its background. True, it may not be entirely correct to say that there were no personal interests here. But the fact that the events here simply coincided with the seizure of their

personal farms during the years of collectivization does not confirm the situation of evaluating the entire process from that position. At the same time, another fact that confirms this is that not only the peasantry, but also the middle and poor classes of the population resorted to the method of Kachagh. As a result, the understanding of the importance of Kachaghness, which is considered the main method of resistance in Azerbaijan, like one of the Caucasian peoples, as well as in the Karabakh region, has the potential to even allow this movement to be called the “Kachagh Movement”.

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