



Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi

Academic Journal of History and Idea

ISSN: 2148-2292

12 (2) 2025

Araştırma Makalesi | Research Article

Geliş tarihi | Received: 25.11.2024

Kabul tarihi | Accepted: 20.03.2025

Yayın tarihi | Published: 25.04.2025

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Atıf Künyesi | Citation Info

Mehdiyeva, N. (2025). Territorial and Border Issues in Azerbaijan-Georgia Relations During the Soviet Era. *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi*, 12 (2), 329-339.

Territorial and Border Issues in Azerbaijan-Georgia Relations During the Soviet Era

Abstract

Territorial and border issues between Azerbaijan and Georgia became one of the main topics of dispute after both states declared independence in 1918. Between 1918 and 1920, disagreements arose over strategic areas such as Batumi and surrounding regions, with border issues becoming increasingly complex due to mutual interests and ethnic divisions. After the Sovietization of Azerbaijan and Georgia, territorial matters were redefined within the political structure of the Soviet Union. During this period, the borders between Azerbaijan and Georgia were largely determined by Moscow's decisions. The Soviet government, while establishing borders, did not take into account the settlement of local ethnic groups, geographical conditions, or economic interests. During the Soviet era, territorial and border issues between Azerbaijan and Georgia had a multi-layered and complex history. The article provides information on disputes over the affiliation of the Zaqatala region during 1918–1920 and their historical-political context, territorial and border issues between Azerbaijan and Georgia during the Soviet era, Georgia's unfounded territorial



<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/atdd>

claims against Azerbaijan, the issue of "disputed lands," and incidents that intensified at various stages due to international and domestic political changes in the region.

Keywords: *South Caucasus, Soviet Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Territorial-Border Disputes*

Sovyet Dönemi Azerbaycan-Gürcistan İlişkilerinde Toprak ve Sınır Sorunları

Öz

Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan arasındaki toprak ve sınır sorunları, her iki devletin de 1918 yılında bağımsızlıklarını ilan etmelerinin ardından başlıca anlaşmazlık konularından biri haline gelmiştir. 1918 ve 1920 yılları arasında Batum ve çevresindeki bölgeler gibi stratejik alanlar üzerinde anlaşmazlıklar ortaya çıkmış, karşılıklı çıkarlar ve etnik bölünmeler nedeniyle sınır sorunları giderek daha karmaşık hale gelmiştir. Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan'ın Sovyetleştirilmesinden sonra, toprak meseleleri Sovyetler Birliği'nin siyasi yapısı içinde yeniden tanımlandı. Bu dönemde Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan arasındaki sınırlar büyük ölçüde Moskova'nın kararlarıyla belirlendi. Sovyet hükümeti sınırları belirlerken yerel etnik grupların yerleşimini, coğrafi koşulları ya da ekonomik çıkarları dikkate almamıştır. Sovyet döneminde Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan arasındaki toprak ve sınır sorunları çok katmanlı ve karmaşık bir geçmişe sahiptir. Makalede, 1918-1920 yılları arasında Zaqatala bölgesinin aidiyetine ilişkin anlaşmazlıklar ve bunların tarihsel-siyasi bağlamı, Sovyet döneminde Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan arasındaki toprak ve sınır sorunları, Gürcistan'ın Azerbaycan'a yönelik asılsız toprak iddiaları, "tartışmalı topraklar" meselesi ve bölgedeki uluslararası ve iç siyasi değişimler nedeniyle çeşitli aşamalarda yoğunlaşan olaylar hakkında bilgi verilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Güney Kafkasya, Sovyet Rusya, Azerbaycan, Gürcistan, Toprak-Sınır Anlaşmazlıkları*

Introduction

The roots of the territorial disputes between Azerbaijan and Georgia stemmed from the administrative division rules established during the Russian Empire era. Between 1918 and 1920, the progressive independent Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) and the Democratic Republic of Georgia had unresolved territorial-border issues, with discussions held over the Borçalı, Zagatala, and Qazakh regions. In 1920, with Azerbaijan and in 1921, Georgia coming under Soviet rule, these problems entered a new phase. Although the Soviet government formally worked to resolve the territorial disputes, the main goal was to establish an administrative system loyal to Moscow in the Caucasus region.

One of the numerous territorial disputes that arose in the South Caucasus between 1918 and 1920 was the Zagatala issue. The roots of this problem date back to earlier decades. According to the "historical concept" created by Georgian historians, which aimed to promote the ethnocultural

revival of their people, the Zagatala district was portrayed as part of Georgia's historical-geographical, political, and cultural space in Northwestern Azerbaijan. This concept was formulated in the works of the well-known Georgian historian and geographer Vakhushti and is not based on any historical sources. One of the disputed issues between the two young republics was the "Zagatala problem," or more precisely, Georgia's claims to this historically Azerbaijani region. The Zagatala district, under Russian administrative control, was located in the northwest of Azerbaijan and had been established in the lands of the Car-Balakhan community and the Ilisu Sultanate. Before the revolution, in 1909 and 1916, there had been attempts to include this area in the Tiflis Governorate when the issue of implementing the zemstvo institution in the South Caucasus was discussed. However, thanks to the efforts of figures such as A. Gardaşov, I. Qebulov, N. Gazıyev, B. N. Kiçikxhanov, B. Galacov, Muslum Effendi, and other influential figures of the Zagatala region, these attempts were unsuccessful (Materialy i materialy Zakavkaz'ye, 1910). With the establishment of independent republics in the South Caucasus in 1918, the unfounded claims of Georgian politicians turned the issue of the region's political affiliation into a subject of dispute. Unlike other similar conflicts, this dispute continued in secrecy. This situation can also be explained by the influence of the international political environment that formed in the region and its surroundings between 1917 and 1920. The existing international situation made political rapprochement between Azerbaijan and Georgia necessary, which created conditions for the existing disputes to fade into the background. On June 26, 1918, the local Muslim political activists of the Zagatala district made the decision to support Azerbaijan based on historical, political, and cultural reasons and joined the ranks of the Caucasus Islamic Army, completely rejecting the possibility of joining Georgia. This situation led the Georgian political circles to refrain from taking radical steps regarding this issue. Moreover, there had been no bloody conflicts or contradictions between the Georgian and Azerbaijani peoples in the past. However, the Georgian side had only accepted the Zagatala district's inclusion in the Azerbaijan Republic de facto, while de jure, it was trying to assert the status of this area in its favor. Georgian official circles, by all means, presented the Zagatala district as part of their territory in various diplomatic documents, showed this region within their borders in the maps they published, and formally tried to appoint their representatives to the area. A new dispute regarding the Zagatala region was observed starting from 1918. During the administrative-territorial division implemented by the Tsarist government in the 19th century in the South Caucasus, the historical, ethnographic, and economic characteristics of the region were

not taken into account. This issue was one of the main reasons for the emergence of numerous land disputes between 1918 and 1920. The main goal of the Russian government was to weaken the influence of the Muslim peoples, particularly Azerbaijanis, in the Caucasus region, while simultaneously increasing the Christian population to strengthen their position. Through this policy, Russia sought to further consolidate its influence in the region.

1. The issue of Zagatala district's affiliation

For centuries, the right bank of the Alazan River and the vast areas of plowed land, pastures, meadows, and forests in the Shirek plain were used by the village communities of the Car-Balakhan tribes and the Ilisu Sultanate in Northwestern Azerbaijan. However, after the establishment of Russian rule in the 19th century, for political and military reasons, these areas, which had no Georgian population at the time, were included in the territory of the Sıgnakh district or placed under the administration of the Tiflis Governorate. However, during the period of Russian rule in the Caucasus, the borders defined were internal state borders and did not cause conflicts. Therefore, until 1917, the local inhabitants of the Zagatala district did not face significant problems while using these lands. However, from the 19th century onward, the central government periodically allocated parts of the lands used by the Zagatala village communities to various Georgian nobles, Georgian highlanders (Tushins), and later to Russian settlers.

With the establishment of new states in the South Caucasus, the previous administrative borders became state borders. As a result, the lands that the inhabitants of Zagatala had freely used in the past suddenly became part of another state's territory and were no longer accessible to them, leading to conflicts. There were various economic, political, and ideological reasons that led to the involvement of the Georgian government in the dispute. First, the Chiaur forest and especially the Alazan valley were areas of great agricultural value and importance. During the agrarian reforms carried out by the Menshevik government, peasants from land-scarce areas of Georgia were relocated to the eastern regions, including these areas, where there were vacant lands. On the other hand, by restricting the entry of Zagatala inhabitants to the disputed areas, the Georgian government also pursued a political propaganda objective. The inhabitants were encouraged to make a political choice in favor of Georgia.

The First Mazımçay Incident, which occurred in March 1919, was an indicator that the conflict was beginning to escalate. The Second Mazımçay Incident, which took place at the end of September 1919, further intensified the conflict. These events, which occurred between March-

April and September-October 1919, and are conditionally referred to as the "First and Second Mazımçay Incidents," can be characterized as incidents from a conflict perspective (Rəhmanzadə, 2018). These events were the first open clashes between the parties. The second incident, in particular, brought the two states to the brink of military confrontation. Taking advantage of Azerbaijan's avoidance of military conflict, the Georgian government seized strategically important positions and kept the issue of the "disputed lands" on the agenda. This situation led to local populations even resorting to armed resistance. However, overall, the development of Azerbaijan-Georgia relations and the external-political situation that formed around the Caucasus discouraged the parties from engaging in destructive behavior. As a result, during the years of the independence of the Azerbaijan and Georgia republics, the issue of land belonging to the Zagatala village communities in the Chiaur forest and the Shirek plain remained unresolved. The Azerbaijani side sought to incorporate these lands into the Azerbaijan Republic, while the Georgian side, through its policies in the conflict, aimed to gradually acquire these lands from their rightful owners and appropriate them both demographically and economically.

After the Sovietization of Azerbaijan, significant changes occurred in the dynamics of the conflict regarding the political affiliation of the Zagatala region in 1920-21. This process fragmented the South Caucasus both socially-political and geopolitically, with Georgia being aligned with the Entente — the Western camp, and Azerbaijan being included in the Soviet camp, opposite to the West. This factor led to the rapid deterioration of Azerbaijan-Georgia relations in late April and early May 1920, and even the emergence of local conflicts. The local Bolshevik leadership in the Caucasus, represented by Orconikidze and Kirov, played a significant role in the development of these conflicts. Despite Moscow's official stance, the Caucasian Bolsheviks sought to apply the Azerbaijani scenario in Georgia as well, intending to use Azerbaijan as a tool and strategic base in their plans. However, the events on the Polish front and Georgia's strong resistance led to the halt of the planned intervention against Georgia.

The Soviet-Georgian confrontation led to the escalation of the conflict regarding the Zagatala region. First, one of the main flashpoints of the clashes in May was this region. Second, the treaties and additional protocols signed in Moscow on May 7 and 12, as well as the agreement signed between Azerbaijan and Georgia in Ağstafa, created the conditions for elevating this disputed issue to a legal level. Overall, the first legal document that recognized the political affiliation of the region as a disputed matter was the Ağstafa agreement, which was acknowledged by Azerbaijan.

However, in practice, these documents did not meet the expectations of the Georgian side: the Soviet government planned to resolve the full territorial-administrative division of the South Caucasus only after the complete Sovietization of the region.

The uprising that occurred in June was an important factor in the escalation of the dispute over the political affiliation of the Zagatala region. Due to the Red Army command's indifference to local characteristics and plundering activities, the uprising led to its leadership signing an agreement with the Georgian government. On one hand, the new revolutionary situation contradicted the socio-political interests of the leaders of the uprising and the region's former elites, while on the other hand, it was based on the social discontent of the population. It is suggested that this decision was, to some extent, coordinated with the "Azerbaijan Liberation Committee" in Tbilisi. This agreement was merely a temporary tactical step taken by the uprising leadership. The issue of which state the Zagatala region belonged to was resolved only after the Sovietization of Georgia. On July 5, 1921, F. Makharadze and N. Narimanov signed a decision on the demarcation of the border between Azerbaijan and Georgia. This document, along with the M.Hajiyev-B.Mdivani agreement signed on November 15, 1921, led to the Georgian SSR renouncing all claims to the Zagatala region (Rəhmanzadə, 2008). The fact that the majority of the population of the Zagatala region was Muslim and expressed their desire to remain part of Azerbaijan played a significant role in the resolution of the conflict. Orconikidze and other Caucasian Bolshevik leaders took a pragmatic approach and supported this issue, making the region's retention within Azerbaijan a key determining factor. The Soviet Union, as a structure, had an imperial character and was interested in resolving ethnic-territorial conflicts. In this regard, when the issue of the affiliation of the Zagatala region was resolved, the fact that it had been part of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was taken into account.

After the decision on the affiliation of the Zagatala region was made, the issue of land belonging to the Sighnaghi district became the main subject of dispute, and this issue remained relevant until the early 1930s. In the early 1920s-1930s, the village communities of the Zagatala district were deprived of their ancestral lands in the Chiaur Forest and the Shirek Plain. In the northeastern part of the Sighnaghi district, in what is now the Lagodekhi district, an area called the "Chiaur Forest settlement" was under Russian administration, where approximately 4,500 desyatins (about 5,000 hectares) of land belonged to the Qabaqchöl village community in 1917 (Rəhmanzadə, 2018). The Russian administrative authority named the area "Chiaur Forest." This

toponym is referred to as "Cüyür" in the "Car Chronicle" (Əl-Cari, 1997). The conflict during that period can be divided into two stages. The first stage lasted until October 1924, during which the Georgian side focused on the legal resolution of the issue, aiming to have the lands recognized within Georgia's borders. On October 15, 1924, based on the protocol of the Azerbaijan-Georgian consultation held in Tbilisi and the agreements signed on October 17 by the People's Commissars of Land, Bünyadzadə and Gegeçkorini, the Chiaur Forest and Alazanyan Valley were administratively assigned to Georgia.

The next stage in the development of the conflict began after this. The agreements signed in October 1924 administratively assigned the disputed areas to Georgia, but stipulated that some of the lands in those areas would remain under the use of the Zagatala villagers. However, this condition was grossly violated by the Georgian authorities. The Georgian side explained the necessity of assigning the disputed lands to Georgia by citing the scarcity of its own lands and the large number of landless rural population. However, the presented data clearly indicated that Azerbaijani villagers were also seriously affected by this issue. As in the case of the Shirek issue, the inhabitants of Qabaqçöl were subjected to continuous pressure and harassment from Georgian authorities and population after the agreement signed in October 1924. For example, in a letter sent by the head of the Azerbaijani Forestry Trust, Y.Melikov, to the People's Commissariat of Land in September 1925, it was stated that the Georgian Forestry Administration had issued an order to the Sığnaq district police to prevent Zagatala residents from cutting trees in the disputed area in the Laqodex district (Rəhmanzadə, 2008). In the 1920s, the arguments put forward by the Georgian side were supported by Georgian and Armenian officials in the higher organs of the South Caucasus. The Georgian authorities were attempting to evict the Zagatala villagers from their native lands. However, despite this, the Presidium of the South Caucasus People's Commissariat had issued several decisions granting land to Azerbaijani villagers in the Çiaur forest and Shirek region.

By the late 1920s, the second phase of the conflict was nearly completed. The Georgian government had successfully assimilated most of the disputed territories for economic use and had settled its citizens, who had been relocated from mountainous and landless areas, in these regions. As a result, the people of Zagatala were displaced from these lands. During the collectivization process carried out at the end of the 1920s and the early 1930s, the Georgian authorities began to establish large agricultural units – kolkhozes and sovkhozes – in these lands. In this context, the

Georgians, citing their need for large land areas, firmly rejected the Azerbaijani side's proposals to concede smaller land portions. By the mid-1930s, the issue of the lands of former Zagatala district villagers in the Shirek steppe and Çiaur forest gradually faded from the agenda. At the beginning of the dispute, when the lands had not yet been fully assimilated by Georgia and hopes for a just resolution remained, the issue was still a point of discussion.

The facts presented reveal that the people of Zagatala never agreed to lose their lands, and they repeatedly appealed to higher authorities, constantly fighting against the illegal actions of the Georgian side. Between 1924 and 1932, the villagers of Zagatala lost a total of 2,348 hectares of land. From the early 1920s, the Azerbaijani villagers had lost more than 16,000 hectares of land in the Alazan Valley (Rəhmanzadə, 2008). The simplest and most practical petitions of the Azerbaijani peasants were not taken into account. On one hand, there was a lack of educated Azerbaijani personnel who were familiar with the history, geography, and economic conditions of their homeland, and on the other hand, the dominance of representatives from neighboring peoples in the power structures of South Caucasus led to the resolution of disputed issues in favor of the opposing side. The resolution of the disputed territories, which was very important for Azerbaijan, was entrusted to individuals such as Kasyan, Shaverov, Onanov, Balabanov, and Chxenkeli.

2. Disputed territorial issues regarding the Chiaur forests, Alazan valley, Eldar plain, and David Gareji monastery

In the 1920s, there were ongoing territorial disputes between the two republics over areas such as the Chiaur forest, the Alazan valley, the Eldar plain, and the David Gareji monastery. In 1925, the Georgians demanded the redefinition of the borders in the area of the David Gareji monastery. According to the Georgian claim, the pasture lands of the region had been unfairly assigned to Azerbaijan. In October 1925, the South Caucasus MİK approved a plan to protect the David Gareji monastery as an archaeological heritage site. While the Azerbaijani side emphasized that the monastery should remain on their side based on the 1921 agreement, the actual administration of the site was in Georgian hands. The final decision regarding the David Gareji monastery was made between 1927 and 1929 by the South Caucasus Central Executive Committee. According to the decision, the monastery complex was to remain under Azerbaijan's jurisdiction, and its protection was to be ensured through joint efforts of both republics. Additionally, land ownership related to the monastery was to be completely abolished in accordance with the SSR legislation. Since the 1920s, the "David Gareji" complex (Keçikçidag temple) has been located in

the territories of both states. The David Gareji monastery complex is a historical and cultural monument located in the border region between Georgia and Azerbaijan. This complex is not only a religious site but also a part of the region's cultural heritage. However, due to border maps and administrative divisions from the Soviet era, disputes have arisen regarding the territorial affiliation of the complex. According to historian Lado Mirianashvili, when the borders of the Transcaucasian Soviet Republics were defined, the Bertubani monastery was included in Azerbaijan's territory, and the Georgian side did not object to this. The Udabno and Chichkhrituri monasteries, however, remained in the border area. Mirianashvili states that these monasteries are considered neutral zones because there are neutral areas in the border regions. Therefore, border guards' actions to block access to these areas cause dissatisfaction among visitors, as these places are not entirely owned by either state. According to Archimandrite Kirion, it is not possible to agree on the border running through that mountain range between the two Soviet republics. He mentions that after the dissolution of the Transcaucasian Federation in 1938, the parties signed an agreement to define the border 300 meters south of the Udabno monastery. Based on this agreement, both the Udabno and Chichkhrituri monasteries remained in Georgian territory (Qareci, 2025). Georgia's former leadership believes that the inclusion of a part of the monastery complex within Azerbaijan's territory is related to the administrative division carried out during the Soviet era. The question of which country the complex belongs to remains open until the final opinion of the bilateral demarcation commission.

The Georgian authorities were systematically pursuing a policy of pressuring and expelling the residents of Zagatala from the Shirak and Alazan valleys. The residents of Zagatala were facing serious problems in using the Shirak pastures. Between 1924 and 1927, 17 villages in this region were deprived of land. In response to this policy, the Azerbaijani People's Land Commissariat prepared materials related to the complaints. Although commissions were created by the South Caucasus Central Executive Committee between 1925 and 1927 to address land issues, no significant progress was made. In February 1927, the Zagatala Executive Committee proposed specific measures for the Shirak region. While the Azerbaijani side emphasized that the region historically belonged to Zagatala, the Georgians effectively maintained control over the area. In the 1930s, no progress was made regarding land disputes. Georgian authorities continued their policies of displacing Azerbaijani residents from the Shirak and Alazan valleys. Additionally, the decisions made by the South Caucasus Central Executive Committee were not implemented in

practice, as economic considerations were given priority over political ones. The land disputes between Georgia and Azerbaijan, which had begun in the 1920s, led to political, economic, and social problems for many years. The failure to resolve these disputes contributed to the formation of an atmosphere of distrust between the two republics.

Conclusion

As a result of all this, in the mid and late 1920s, decisions made between Azerbaijan and Georgia led to more than 63,000 hectares of land being ceded to Georgia. During this period, a significant portion of the land that had previously been returned to Azerbaijan or recognized as belonging to Azerbaijan was gradually conceded to Georgia under various pretexts. During the Soviet era, the territorial and border issues between Azerbaijan and Georgia were shaped by the political strategies and administrative principles of the time, determining the political, economic, and cultural relations between the two peoples. These problems gained greater importance after the dissolution of the USSR and became one of the main topics of discussion between the two states. After World War II, territorial issues between Azerbaijan and Georgia arose in various stages. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, territorial divisions and ethnic issues within the Soviet Union caused some tensions between these two republics. These matters were primarily resolved under the administration of the Soviet Union's central government, but there were also some disputes between local authorities and populations. One of the most prominent territorial issues between Azerbaijan and Georgia was the affiliation of the Derbent and Talysh regions with Azerbaijan, as well as matters related to Azerbaijan's Kazakh district. During this period, disputes also arose regarding the rights of Azerbaijanis living in some areas of Georgia and ethnic groups living in the western parts of Georgia. Since territorial disputes during the Soviet era were mainly resolved by the decisions of the Soviet leadership, the issue remained relatively calm until the 1980s. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, both states, which gained independence, had to address their border issues from scratch. During this period, territorial disputes between the independent states were generally fewer, but at times, conflicts occurred due to ethnic and social issues. After Azerbaijan restored its state independence, one of the main issues was the formation and regulation of its foreign policy direction. The main goals, directions, and principles of independent Azerbaijan's foreign policy are outlined in the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan and in the speeches of the National Leader Heydar Aliyev. These policy principles are based on living together in peace, friendship, and security with the peoples of the world, as well as

on the development of mutual cooperation. Furthermore, the establishment of relations with other countries in accordance with international law norms is defined as an important factor. The effective establishment of these relations aims to strengthen Azerbaijan's international positions while also contributing to the country's economic, scientific, and cultural development. Particularly, establishing mutually beneficial cooperation with neighboring countries is of strategic importance. In this context, the development of relations with Georgia has been a focus of special attention and has been identified as one of the priority directions of the foreign policy strategy of National Leader Heydar Aliyev. Therefore, the in-depth study of the relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia is of great significance.

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