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Nushaba Mammadova*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9351-1605>

The Caucasus Front during World War I (1914–1918): Türkiye and National-Political Mobilization in Azerbaijan**

Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Kafkas Cephesi (1914–1918): Türkiye'nin
Azerbaycan'da Ulusal-Siyasal Seferberlik Üzerindeki Etkisi

Abstract

The First World War (1914–1918), one of the most destructive conflicts in modern history, has been widely examined in historical scholarship. Despite the extensive body of research devoted to the war, several aspects of its regional dynamics remain insufficiently studied. One such area concerns the intelligence activities and propaganda networks operated by the great powers during the conflict. This article examines these processes on the Caucasus Front and their influence on the socio-political environment of Azerbaijan. After Türkiye entered the First World War in 1914, the political situation in the territories of the Russian Empire inhabited by Muslim populations, including the South Caucasus, began to change significantly. Articles supporting Türkiye appeared in the regional press, while ideas associated with Turkism and Islamism spread among sections of the local population. At the same time, imperial authorities observed the growth of anti-Russian sentiments in the region. According to official administrative reports, these developments were associated with propaganda activities carried out by Ottoman emissaries who entered Azerbaijan through frontier regions. These issues were also reflected in confidential correspondence exchanged between imperial administrative and security institutions. The study is based primarily on archival documents, published documentary collections, and materials from the press of the period. Through the analysis of these sources, the article explores the influence of wartime propaganda, intelligence activity, and political mobilization on socio-political processes in Azerbaijan during the First World War.

Keywords: First World War, Caucasus Front, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Political Mobilization

Öz

Modern tarihin en yıkıcı çatışmalarından biri olan Birinci Dünya Savaşı (1914–1918), tarih yazımında geniş ölçüde incelenmiş bir konudur. Bununla birlikte savaşın bölgesel dinamiklerine ilişkin bazı yönler hâlen yeterince araştırılmamış alanlar arasında yer almaktadır. Bu alanlardan biri, savaş yıllarında büyük güçler tarafından yürütülen istihbarat faaliyetleri ve propaganda ağlarının işleyişidir. Bu makale, söz konusu süreçleri Kafkas Cephesi bağlamında ele almakta ve bu gelişmelerin Azerbaycan'daki sosyo-politik ortam üzerindeki etkilerini incelemektedir. Türkiye'nin 1914 yılında Birinci Dünya Savaşı'na katılmasının ardından, Rus İmparatorluğu sınırları içinde yaşayan Müslüman nüfusun bulunduğu bölgelerde, özellikle Güney Kafkasya'da, siyasal atmosferde belirgin değişimler yaşanmaya başlamıştır. Bölgesel basında Türkiye'ye destek veren yazılar

*Senior Researcher, A. A. Bakikhanov Institute of History, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Baku, Azerbaijan Foreign Lecturer and Academic Researcher, Department of History, Faculty of Literature, Istanbul University, Istanbul, Türkiye, nusabamammadova@mail.ru

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yayımlanmış; Türkçülük ve İslamcılık düşünceleri yerel toplumun belirli kesimleri arasında yaygınlık kazanmıştır. Aynı dönemde imparatorluk yönetimi, bölgede Rusya karşıtı eğilimlerin güçlendiğini gözlemlemiştir. Resmî idarî raporlara göre bu gelişmeler, sınır bölgelerinden Azerbaycan'a giren Osmanlı görevlilerinin yürüttüğü propaganda faaliyetleriyle ilişkilendirilmiştir. Bu durum, dönemin idarî ve güvenlik kurumları arasında gerçekleştirilen gizli yazışmalara da yansımıştır. Çalışma, başta arşiv belgeleri olmak üzere yayımlanmış belge koleksiyonları ve dönemin basın materyallerine dayanmaktadır. Bu kaynakların analizi aracılığıyla makale, Birinci Dünya Savaşı sırasında propaganda faaliyetlerinin, istihbarat etkinliklerinin ve siyasal mobilizasyon süreçlerinin Azerbaycan'daki sosyo-politik gelişmeler üzerindeki etkilerini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kavramlar: Birinci Dünya Savaşı, Kafkas Cephesi, Azerbaycan, Türkiye, Siyasal Mobilizasyon

Introduction

In the historiography of the subject, scientific research devoted to the period has played a significant role in shaping the analytical framework of this study. Although numerous works have examined the First World War, including military operations on the Caucasian front, the subject continues to occupy an important place in historical scholarship. The continuing scholarly interest is largely connected with the complex political and military transformations generated by the global conflict in which the great powers participated. The First World War produced profound changes in political structures, economic systems, and social relations across many regions of the world. As a result, the problems associated with the war have been widely addressed in the works of both regional and international historians, who have examined its consequences from different analytical perspectives. Nevertheless, within the broader historiography of the war, large-scale battles fought on the principal fronts have traditionally received greater scholarly attention. In comparison, a number of developments that at first glance appeared to be of secondary importance have remained less visible in historical narratives. Yet these events often had a substantial influence on the course of regional developments and on the strategic dynamics of the conflict. This article focuses on such developments in the context of the Caucasian Front. Drawing primarily on archival materials and contemporary documentary sources, the study examines events that were sometimes considered peripheral but that, in practice, significantly affected the evolution of the military and political situation in the region. The analysis aims to reassess these developments and to demonstrate their broader significance within the history of the First World War.

Political and Social Reactions in Azerbaijan to the Outbreak of the First World War

The First World War, which involved a large number of states and a substantial portion of the global population, became one of the most destructive conflicts of the twentieth century. Military operations conducted by the major powers of the period, particularly the confrontations between Russia and the Ottoman Empire on the Caucasian front, had a significant impact on the South Caucasus and influenced the socio-political life of Azerbaijan.

During the war years, articles supporting the Ottoman Empire appeared in the Baku press. At the same time, ideas associated with Turkism and Islamism became more visible among sections of the intellectual community and parts of the local population, and various forms of opposition

to Russian authority increased. Government authorities interpreted these developments as a consequence of propaganda activities conducted by Ottoman emissaries who had entered Azerbaijan from border regions. These concerns were reflected in confidential correspondence exchanged among imperial administrative institutions.

A confidential letter dated October 9, 1914, sent by the governor-general of the Special Department of the Viceroy of the Caucasus to the governor of Baku, as well as to regional and district authorities and to the head of the city administration of Baku, reported that Ottoman emissaries were being sent to the frontier areas with the task of conducting propaganda among the Muslim population of the Caucasus and recommended that strict measures be taken against their activities (Dokumenty po russkoi politike v Zakavkaz'e, 1920). Despite the tense socio-political environment that developed after the Ottoman Empire entered the war, public attitudes in Azerbaijan reflected diverse expectations regarding the course of the conflict. Materials published in contemporary newspapers indicate that some intellectual circles interpreted the war in connection with broader questions of national development and political self-determination. In this context, Mohammademin Rasulzade noted that the global conflict created expectations among the Caucasian Turks that the principle of nationality might eventually prevail (Rəsulzadə, 1990). Support for the Ottoman Empire was particularly visible among segments of the younger generation. After the Ottoman entry into the war, a number of young people from Azerbaijan attempted to cross the borders and join Ottoman military formations. Such developments caused concern among the imperial authorities and were monitored through administrative reports and correspondence.

Information on these developments appears in official documents concerning measures taken by the Baku governor's office against Ottoman emissaries. A letter dated October 9, 1914 indicates that individuals of Turkic origin were seeking contact with consulates in order to travel to Ottoman territories (Dokumenty po russkoi politike v Zakavkaz'e, 1920). Similar observations were reported in correspondence from the head of the Gendarmerie Department of the Iravan Governorate, where it was noted that young people and members of the Muslim population were traveling to the Ottoman Empire under different pretexts (Dokumenty po russkoi politike v Zakavkaz'e, 1920). Some contemporary reports suggested that a considerable number of Azerbaijanis joined Ottoman military units and participated in operations on the Caucasian front, including the Sarıkamış campaign (Dokumenty po russkoi politike v Zakavkaz'e, 1920; Qasimov, 2000). However, available archival documentation does not yet provide definitive statistical confirmation of these claims. The existing archival materials mainly contain applications submitted to consulates requesting permission to travel to the Ottoman Empire. These applications appear

both in the period before the war and during wartime, but the documents do not allow the establishment of a precise numerical estimate.

During the First World War, the socio-political situation in the territory of Azerbaijan, as well as in the wider Caucasus region, attracted close attention from imperial administrative and security institutions. Areas inhabited by Muslim populations were subject to increased surveillance, and various special control bodies were tasked with monitoring developments in these regions. Archival correspondence of the gendarmerie departments contains information about concerns regarding the circulation of weapons and ammunition among the population and the possible involvement of external actors in these processes.

In a secret letter dated April 11, 1915, sent by the head of the Gendarmerie Department of the Tbilisi Governorate to the Gendarmerie Department of the Baku Governorate, it was reported that according to information received from the Kutaisi Governorate gendarmerie authorities, a significant number of weapons were present among the population of the Yelizavetpol Governorate. The document further stated that a large quantity of weapons purchased by the Ottoman government had allegedly been distributed among the Muslim population (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheets 12–14). According to the same correspondence, imperial officials believed that strong pan-Islamic propaganda in favor of the Ottoman Empire had been conducted in the region prior to the outbreak of the war and that these efforts had produced noticeable results. The document also noted that several propagandists continued their activities among the local population (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheets 12–14).

After the Ottoman Empire entered the war, the activities of various informal networks and circles that were perceived as promoting pro-Ottoman sentiments were carefully monitored by imperial security structures. One of the files opened by the Special Control Unit of the Caucasus Viceroyalty was titled “Muslim Movement – Pan-Islamism.” A secret opinion dated November 30, 1914 prepared by the head of the Gendarmerie Department of the Baku Governorate referred to the circulation of different opinions within the city of Baku following the beginning of military operations against the Ottoman Empire (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheet 71).

Similar monitoring practices were applied in other regions of the Caucasus inhabited by Muslim populations. In the Dagestan province, local authorities recorded various incidents and observations in official reports and correspondence. One such document contains information about an individual named Molla Huseyngulu Hasanov, who lived in the city of Derbend. According to the report sent to the military governor of the Dagestan province, Hasanov was engaged in activities among the local Muslim community and received printed announcements in

Turkish that were delivered through passengers arriving by railway from Baku (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheet 17). Archival documents also contain information regarding other individuals who were investigated by the authorities in connection with suspected financial or propaganda activities related to the Ottoman Empire. A letter of the police department dated September 14, 1914 referred to information provided by the Baku governor concerning an individual named Ismail Ahmed Haji Veli oglu, who had traveled to the Guba district and was accused of collecting funds that were allegedly sent to the Ottoman Empire (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 486, list 1, folder 27a). According to the report, various documents and items were found during his detention, including money, a postal receipt, notebooks, correspondence in Turkish, and two passports (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 486, list 1, folder 27a, sheet 4). On the basis of these materials, the Gendarmerie Department of the Baku Governorate initiated a criminal investigation concerning the alleged collection and transfer of funds to the Ottoman Empire (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 486, list 1, folder 27a).

The course of military operations on the Caucasian front also influenced the social and political atmosphere in Azerbaijan. Expectations regarding the possible outcomes of the conflict were reflected in the correspondence exchanged between regional administrative authorities. In a secret letter dated January 16, 1915 sent by the chief of the Borchali district to the governor of Tbilisi, it was reported that recent military developments had influenced public attitudes among the Muslim population of the region (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheet 53). At the same time, information gathered by local police and administrative agents indicated that in certain areas no organized propaganda in favor of the Ottoman Empire had been officially recorded (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheet 52). The confidential correspondence of the period suggests that imperial authorities were concerned about the potential for political mobilization within Muslim communities of the Caucasus. As a result, surveillance and monitoring activities were intensified in order to observe social developments and to respond to situations that were perceived as potentially destabilizing for the imperial administration.

After the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War, various secret Muslim committees became active in several central cities of the Caucasus. According to contemporary reports, the primary aim attributed to these committees was to support the Ottoman Empire during the war. Information dated May 1, 1915 from the Astara agency of the Russian vice-consul in Ardabil indicated that a secret committee operating in Baku was associated with political interests linked to the Ottoman Empire and Germany (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheet 56).

The same report stated that the committee consisted of individuals connected with circles involved in political movements in Persia. According to the information provided, one of the tasks attributed to this network was the dissemination of reports describing alleged actions of Russian soldiers in Tabriz. It was also claimed that rifles of German manufacture marked with a “moon and star” symbol were distributed among certain educated members of the Muslim population in different localities. The distribution reportedly involved a financial contribution to the committee in exchange for the weapons. The same source also reported that the committee spread the belief that the Ottoman Empire would eventually achieve victory in the war and that the Muslim population of the Caucasus would unite with it (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheet 56).

Because of such reports, secret Muslim committees operating in Baku and other areas were regarded by the authorities as a potential security concern. Measures were therefore taken to search for and confiscate weapons believed to be in the possession of local residents. In a top secret letter dated January 20, 1915, the head of the Zangezur district reported that steps had been taken to collect weapons and cartridges from the population and that particular attention was directed toward groups suspected of sympathizing with the Ottoman Empire (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheet 93).

Another organization mentioned in archival correspondence was the secret association known as the “Persian National Democrats.” According to official reports, this group was formed in Astara in connection with political developments in northern Persia and later became more structured after Russian forces entered Ardabil. The association was reportedly led by several individuals, including Seyyed Muhammad Khan and Farametz Khan Basharatas Sultan, and its members included various officials and employees connected with customs, postal, and administrative institutions. Correspondence from the assistant head of the Gendarmerie Department of the Baku Governorate stated that members of this association were engaged in active propaganda among segments of the Muslim population (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheet 63; State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 39, sheet 68). In response to these developments, imperial authorities adopted strict measures against individuals suspected of involvement in clandestine political organizations. Members of such networks were frequently investigated and in many cases prosecuted under accusations related to pan-Islamist activity.

Strengthening of Wartime Censorship

Concerns about political mobilization and the circulation of sensitive information also led to the strengthening of censorship mechanisms. A confidential letter dated April 29, 1915 addressed to the Baku administration of the Special Department of the Caucasus Military District reported

that information received by security agencies indicated a growing spread of ideas associated with Turkism among segments of the population in Baku and Yelizavetpol (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheets 57–58). According to the report, although such propaganda had limited influence at the beginning of the war, authorities believed that its potential significance had increased during the course of the conflict.

The same document suggested that individuals in the South Caucasus suspected of supporting the Ottoman Empire were maintaining correspondence with Tehran and transmitting information concerning the activities of the Russian army. It was reported that such information circulated through postal channels and could eventually appear in publications printed in the Azerbaijani language. Authorities also expressed concern that military information was being transmitted through railway routes connecting Baku with other regions (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheets 57–58).

In order to prevent the transmission of sensitive information, the government strengthened control over postal and telegraph communications. A secret letter sent in May 1915 by the Baku Military Censorship office to the city administration stated that since August 27, 1914 all international correspondence passing through the Baku post and telegraph office had been placed under strict censorship (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheets 58–59). All international letters were examined by selected censors whose linguistic abilities and political reliability were carefully verified. According to the same report, correspondence written in Persian, Azerbaijani, and Turkish was reviewed by two military censors who possessed extensive knowledge of these languages (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheets 58–59).

Other official documents linked the existing socio-political situation in Azerbaijan with communication networks connecting the region with the Ottoman Empire and Persia. In a top secret letter dated July 1, 1915 sent by the mayor of Baku to the office of the Caucasian viceroy, it was noted that letters written in Persian, Azerbaijani, and Turkish were subject to careful examination by military censorship authorities (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 39, sheet 68).

Archival correspondence also indicates that authorities believed anti-Russian propaganda in Persia was being carried out by agents connected with the Ottoman Empire and Germany. As a result, Persian-language newspapers were also subjected to military censorship review. According to a report from the censorship office, such publications circulated among readers in Baku and were therefore included in the monitoring system (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheets 58–59). Information that appeared in international correspondence could later be reproduced in local Muslim newspapers. Consequently, newspapers

printed in the Azerbaijani language in Baku were carefully examined by military censorship authorities. These inspections were carried out by specialists selected by the censorship administration who possessed advanced knowledge of the Azerbaijani language (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 38, sheet 60).

Archival documents also refer to several intellectual figures whose activities attracted the attention of censorship institutions. One example mentioned in official correspondence is Dadash Bunyadzade, whose publications were monitored by censorship authorities because of concerns that political messages might be conveyed through the press. Reports from the period indicate that the satirical magazine “Tuti,” associated with his editorial work, was placed under close observation by military censorship authorities (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 39, sheet 68). Other administrative correspondence reported that ideas associated with Turkism were circulating among segments of the population in Yelizavetpol both before and during the war, and that certain groups expressed support for policies connected with the Ottoman Empire (State Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Fund 524, list 1, folder 39, sheet 27). The final years of the war were marked by continued uncertainty regarding the broader strategic situation. Military developments on various fronts influenced expectations within different political circles of the region, while administrative institutions continued to monitor the social and political atmosphere through correspondence and intelligence reports.

Conclusion

Thus, the participation of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War significantly influenced the socio-political processes among Turkic and Muslim populations living within the Russian Empire. Wartime propaganda—both open and clandestine—contributed to the strengthening of national consciousness and political aspirations among various groups in the Caucasus. In this context, sympathies toward the Ottoman Empire gradually transformed into broader political expectations connected with national self-determination.

During the early stages of the war, sections of the population in Azerbaijan expressed support for the Ottoman Empire despite being subjects of the Russian Empire. These attitudes were reflected in the press, intellectual debates, and various political initiatives that developed in the region during the wartime period. Over time, the political transformations caused by the collapse of imperial structures in the region created conditions that allowed new state formations to emerge. In 1918, the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic marked the creation of one of the first parliamentary republics in the Muslim world. The emergence of this state reflected the broader political changes that followed the First World War and the dissolution of imperial administrations in the region. In the contemporary period, relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan have continued to develop within a framework of close political cooperation and

partnership. These relations are frequently characterized by strong historical, cultural, and political ties that shape interactions between the two states in regional and international contexts.

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