

Great War in Transcaucasia: From Ottoman Occupation to the Treaty of Kars

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Abstract: *In October 1914 the Ottoman Empire declared war on the Entente joining the Central Powers. Now the Turks threatened Russia's Caucasian provinces and the communications within the British Empire via the Suez Canal but the main campaign of the Ottoman army would extend from southern Caucasus to eastern Asia Minor. Between 1914 and 1917 the situation on this front was quite difficult for the Turks, only the collapse of the Russian forces would change this situation. In November 1917, a first government of an independent Transcaucasia was created in Tbilisi while the Ottomans aiming at creating their own rule on southern Caucasus launched a new offensive toward Baku. The Russian Revolution and the capitulation of the Central Powers, however, open the way to the rivalry between Caucasian nationalities which will be solved only with the arrival of the Soviet forces. Notwithstanding, the conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijani can not find a definitive solution even if the Treaty of Kars restored at list a stable border between Kemalist Turkey and Bolshevik Russia.*

Keywords: *Great War, Transcaucasia, Ottoman Empire, Azerbaijan, Russia*

1. Background

As a consequence of the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, in the summer of 1914 Europe was involved in a conflict of immense proportions. On 28 July, the war opened with the Austro-Hungarian invasion of Serbia, followed by Russian intervention and the chain of general mobilization. German invasion of Belgium, Luxembourg and northern France followed soon after (Liddell Hart, 1934). Meanwhile, Russians launched an attack against Germany on the Eastern Front. In mid-September, after the German march on Paris was brought to a halt, the Western Front settled into a static battle of attrition over along trench line that changed little until 1917.

On the Eastern Front, the Russian army successfully fought against the Austro-Hungarian forces but was forced back by the Germans while additional fronts opened after the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers in October 1914; a secret Ottoman-German Alliance having been signed already on August 2, one day after the German Empire declared war on Russia. It was this binding alliance that ultimately led the Empire to enter the War on the side of Germany even if some important figures still favored an alliance with France and Great Britain. The Sultan Mehmed V wanted the Empire to remain neutral; however, pressure from Germany and the Young Turks led the Empire to align with the Central Powers. As a matter of fact, Germany had invested heavily in Turkey in previous years and now needed the Ottoman Empire on its side. The alliance was sustained by many high ranking officials, including Grand Vizier, the Minister of War Enver Pasha, the Interior Minister Talat, and Head of Parliament Halil Bey (Biagini, 2002; Aksakal, 2008; McMeekin, 2010).

The Ottoman army threatened Russia's Caucasian provinces and the communications within the British Empire via the Suez Canal. For this reason, the Allies sought to defeat the Turkish forces as soon as possible and opened overseas fronts with the Gallipoli and Mesopotamian campaigns. In Gallipoli Peninsula (Eastern Thrace), where Anzac and French forces had landed in February 1915, after harsh fighting the Ottomans successfully repelled the enemies. In Mesopotamia, by contrast, after the disastrous siege of Kut (1915–16), British Imperial forces were able to reorganize and later captured Baghdad in March 1917. In the

west, the Suez Canal was successfully defended from Ottoman attacks in 1915 and 1916 and a British offensive eventually brought to the fall of Palestine in 1917. The Caucasus, however, remained the main theater of operations for Ottoman forces.¹

2. The Caucasus Campaign

The main campaign of the Ottoman army extended from the southern Caucasus to the eastern Asia Minor. The land warfare was accompanied by small operation of the Russian and Turkish navy in the Black Sea. At the beginning of the war, the Turks had their Third Army based in the region, while the Russians lined up their Caucasus Army under the nominal command of the Governor General of the Caucasus with his chief of staff, General Nikolai Yudenich, as real commander.

On land, Enver Pasha, supreme commander of the Ottoman armed forces, aimed to conquer the Russian Caucasus and eventually extend Turkish control over the whole central Asia. He launched an offensive in the region in December 1914 with an army of a strength of about 100,000; however, insisting on a frontal attack against mountainous Russian positions in winter season, the Turks suffered heavy losses at the battle of Sarıkamış in December, 1914 (Erickson, 2001, pp. 55-60). After this almost suicidal attack in winter snow, the Turks who were not already dead, many of them frozen and typhus-ridden, retreated to Erzurum (Allen and Muratoff, 1953, pp. 249-285).

This brought to a brief standstill. Later on, General Yudenich, which had been given full command of operations in 1915, launched a series of attacks that drove the Turks out of most of southern Caucasus.² Hopes of an Ottoman victorious offensive now seemed to be compromised. On February 12, the Turkish commander Hafiz Hakki Pasha died and was replaced by Mahmut Kamil Pasha in charged with the reorganization of the army.

In March strategic situation was stable while the Ottoman Third Army received reinforcements, although these supplements were no stronger than a division. As a matter of fact, the battle of Gallipoli was draining every Ottoman resource. After small skirmishes, Russians forces kept the towns of Eleşkirt, Ağrı and Doğubeyazıt in Eastern Anatolia. On April 20, 1915, fighting erupted in the city of Van between Armenians and Turkish troops until Yudenich began an offensive (Bloxham, 2005).³ The Russians advanced towards Erzurum. The Ottoman X Corps counter-attacked but they were not able to stop the enemy. On May 17, Russian forces entered the town of Van and Ottoman forces continued to be pushed back.⁴ On May 21, General Yudenich arrived to the city and supported an Armenian provisional government while fighting shifted farther west for the rest of that summer.

On June 19, the Russian army launched another offensive northwest to Lake Van. However, they underestimated the size of the Ottoman forces and were surprised by a large counter-attack. Actually, although the conditions were extremely difficult, the Turks were now ready to face the Russian attacks. On September 24, 1915, Grand Duke Nicholas was promoted to being charge of all Russian forces in the Caucasus. Actually, he was removed from being Supreme Commander of the Russian Caucasus Army and replaced by General Yudenich. The front was quiet from October till the end of the year and Yudenich used

¹ For an overall analysis of the Ottoman army in the Great War, see E. Erickson, *Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001; S. Shaw, *The Ottoman Empire in World War I*, Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2006.

² Also British-French operations at Gallipoli helped the Russian forces in the Caucasus front.

³ What happened at Van and the fear of an Armenian betrayal were among the main causes of the violent repression implemented by the Ottoman authorities against them.

⁴ Moreover, Turkish supply lines were being cut, as the Armenian rebellions were causing additional difficulties behind the Ottoman lines.

this period to reorganize.⁵ The Ottoman situation was very different. The High Command failed to make up the losses during the last months while fresh troops had been deployed to Gallipoli and Mesopotamia.

In early January, Yudenich secretly left its winter quarters and marched towards the Ottoman positions at Erzurum where he achieved total surprise and destroyed an entire Ottoman division at Köprüköy, where during further fighting both rings of the cities' defenses had been penetrated. In April, the Russian army moved from Erzurum and captured Trabzon. Soon after, Erzincan was captured too, while an Ottoman counter-offensive against Trabzon was halted. Only in August, Mustafa Kemal, asked to organize the defense in the region, recaptured Mush and Bitlis, while fighting around the east side of Lake Van continued throughout the summer. However, by the late September, the Ottoman attack ended.

The rest of the year 1916 was spent by the Ottomans with organizational and operational changes in Eastern Anatolian front. Fortunately for them, the Russians were quiet during this period. Moreover, the winter of 1916–1917 was extremely harsh, which made fighting nearly impossible. The situation did not change during the spring of 1917 and Russian plans for a renewed attack never substantiated.

In 1917, Grand Duke Nicholas assumed again command of the Caucasus Front. He appointed much importance to the logistics and tried to obtain a decisive victory.⁶ The internal situation in Russia and the Revolution brought to the collapse of the Russian Caucasus Army. The chaos in the Russian army put a stop to all military operations. As a matter of fact, the Russian army slowly disintegrated but the Turks could not take advantage of this situation. It is also true that, considering the condition of Turkish troops, until the Bolshevik Revolution, Ottoman possible operation in Caucasus could not even be imagined.

However, the situation in Transcaucasia was now completely changed. During the summer, Western Armenian Administration sponsored a conference to consider emergency measures and adopted plans to form a militia while in September the Russian army in the region was about to be completely disintegrated. In November 1917, a first government of an independent Transcaucasia, the Transcaucasian Diet, was created in Tbilisi. It was headed by Nikolay Chkheidze, a Georgian Menshevik. Hope to organize a common resistance in the emergency of the moment, however, proved unworkable and indeed such a measure did not stop the degradation of forces in the region into smaller national entities. Armenia was the main problem for the stability of the region. The Transcaucasian Diet, indeed, did not stop the degradation of military in the region into smaller national forces. While sending some representatives to Transcaucasian Diet, at the same time Armenian nationalists met at Erivan and tried to establish an Armenian Army Corps. They, above all, had planned to keep their existence supporting the Allies and Russia and to establish their own national army with Russian support.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman Third Army was protecting a line from Munzur Mountains to the Black Sea. On December 5, 1917, an armistice was finally signed at Erzincan between the Russians and Ottomans. However, at the turn of 1918, Allied Powers, Cossacks, Georgians, Pontic Greeks and Armenians were still willing to build a resistance line against the Turks through gathering in the region. The fertile mind of Enver Pasha, indeed, was always at work, and he had been watching the situation in the Caucasus over the course of 1917 (Erickson, 2001, p. 182).⁷ Not satisfied with simply maintaining the status quo in the Caucasus, Enver and the Turkish General Staff began to consider the possibilities of a renewed offensive. Now Enver was seized with the idea of taking the offensive to regain not just the 1914 boundary but also what the Empire had lost in 1877. The Third Army's offensive began on February 5. The Ottoman forces moved through east of the line between Tirebölü and Bitlis. The territories previously lost were now recaptured. The Turks advanced

⁵ At the turn of 1916, Russian forces reached a level of 200,000 men and 380 pieces of artillery. On the other side, in January 1916, Ottoman forces were 126,000 men, less than half being combat, and 180 pieces of artillery.

⁶ Nicholas also planned a railway connecting Georgia to the conquered territories, so that fresh supplies could be brought up for a new offensive.

⁷ Moreover, after receiving the reports on the Caucasian situation, Enver invited the refugee leaders of the Azeri Muslims to Constantinople for discussions on eastward expansion.

fast and Kelkit was liberated already on February 7. Until February 22, Erzincan, Bayburt and Tercan were also taken back. The important Black Sea port of Trabzon fell on February 24.

The Armenian militias, the last forces still on fight, fought to keep the city of Erzurum, but it was captured by the Ottoman First Caucasian Corps on March 12.

The position of the Ottoman troops along the front had been stabilized. On March 3, the Grand vizier Talat Pasha signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (Wheeler-Bennett, 1938).⁸ It stipulated that Bolshevik Russia would cede Batumi, Kars and Ardahan. It also stipulated that Transcaucasia was to be declared independent.

The actual arrangement of the Transcaucasian front remained, however, still open. On March 14, 1918, the Trabzon peace conference opened among the Ottoman Empire and the delegation of the Transcaucasian Diet. It lasted with any result until April. Conscious of the difficulties the Empire and Central Powers, Enver Pasha offered to surrender all ambitions in the Caucasus in return for recognition of the Ottoman reacquisition of the East Anatolian provinces at Brest-Litovsk. On April 5, the Transcaucasian delegation accepted the proposal to use the treaty of Brest-Litovsk as a basis for more negotiations and wired the Diet urging it to accept this position, but the mood prevailing there was very different. Tiflis had indeed acknowledged a state of war between Transcaucasia and the Ottoman Empire.

On May 11, a fruitless German-mediated conference opened at Batumi. The Ottomans now extended their demands to include Tiflis as well as Alexandropol and Echmiadzin, as operational bases to connect Kars and Julfa with Baku. Thus Armenians and Georgians began to stall.

Beginning on 21 May, Ottoman forces, now renamed the Army of Islam, moved ahead determined to take by force what was required by diplomatic means to no avail. Enver began to think about the idea of an "Army of Islam" in July 1918. This new force, with a hard core of Ottoman divisions, would mobilize Muslims in the Trans-Caspian and Caucasian regions, and would give back the Turks the initiative in the Middle East (Erickson, 2001, p. 189). In reality, its core was not even a Corps size, numbering between 14,000 and 25,000 men and 40 pieces of artillery. It included the Ottoman 5th Caucasian and 15th divisions and an Azerbaijani Muslim Corps.⁹ Since June it was led by Nuri Pasha (Enver's brother).

On May 26, Georgia withdrew from the federation and declared itself a separate republic encouraged by the German mission and followed by Armenia and Azerbaijan (Swietochowski, 1985). Two days after, Georgia signed the treaty of Poti with Germany and welcomed a German Caucasus Expedition. With the government of Azerbaijan moving from Tiflis to Ganja, Germany was concerned about how to see guaranteed its access to Azerbaijan's oil. Meanwhile, in Batumi, the Transcaucasian delegation split up and each of the successor states began negotiating its own conditions of peace.

The Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan was in fact established on May 28, 1918. Germany had in fact tried in vain to avoid a further worsening of the crisis and facing the new Ottoman advance, now tried to safeguard its interests in Georgia. In June, the arrival of German military mission in Georgia actually coincided with a growing German-Ottoman rivalry for Caucasian influence and resources.

On 4 June 1918, Azerbaijan and the Ottoman Empire signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation, which held that the Turks would provide military assistance to Azerbaijan for maintaining peace and security in the country (Swietochowski, 1985, p. 130).

On 10 June, the Ottomans confronted a joint German-Georgian force at Vorontsovka. As a consequence of this clash, Berlin issued an official threat to withdraw troops and support from the Ottoman Empire. It was the most serious crisis in the Turco-German relations, thus the Turkish government had to concede to German pressure and to halt, for the moment, a further advance into Georgia. Meanwhile, since 6 June, the Baku Soviet issued an order to begin offensive operations against the national Azerbaijani base at Ganja. This offensive was eventually launched on 10 June (Erickson, 2001, p. 133).¹⁰ Being unable to defend its

⁸ The Treaty was signed on 3 March 1918, between the Bolsheviks and the Central Powers, marking Russia's exit from the war.

⁹ Most of the soldiers were Ottomans, the army numbered also many Azerbaijani forces and volunteers from Dagestan.

¹⁰ It involved the 13,000 man-strong First Caucasian Corps of the Red Army; it should be noted that many of its troops were Armenians.

independence, the government of Azerbaijan asked for Ottoman military support. The Bolsheviks achieved some initial success and by mid-June reached the halfway point between Ganja and Baku. Their advance was stopped by the Ottomans in the battle fought at Geokchai between June 27 and July 1. Thus the Army of Islam started advancing towards Baku.

In July, Enver Pasha made new plans ordering an offensive with the goal of taking Baku. This decision was, however, strongly opposed by the Germans. Enver thus decided to launch his offensive on the Caucasus, dividing his forces into two separate groups, one to face the British in northern Persia and the other to strike at Baku through Armenia. This strategy did mean bypassing the main stretch of the Transcaucasian railway which wound through Tiflis and fitted in well with the Young Turk idea of pan-Turanianism (McMeekin, 2010, p. 334). The success of an Ottoman offensive indeed could open new possibilities to a Turkish dominion over the southern Caucasus and eventually Central Asia.¹¹

After the armistice of Erzincan Russian troops mainly had left the front and returned to their homes. Some Russian forces, about 10,000 troops, still remained in Persian Azerbaijan and were supplanted by British liaison officers. In 1918, the British also organized a force under the command of General Lionel Dunsterville at Baghdad. Their goal was to reach Caucasus via Persia in order to organize an army with Armenians and other pro-Ally elements. As a matter of fact, since January 1918, the British had become quite concerned about Turkish inroads into the Caucasus and on 27 January, Dunsterville was ordered to keep the Caucasus-Tabriz front intact and put a stop to Enver's plans.

By mid-June 1918, the Ottoman army began a renewed advance eastward, proceeding along a twin axis of approach toward the city of Baku. The first wing pushed east along the Akstafa-Baku road, the other one along the railroad leading to Alyat on the Caspian coast south of the Azerbaijani capital (Erickson, 2001, p. 187). The Ottoman advance led to a series of battles at Sardarapat, Kara Killisse and the Bash Abaran. The defeat of the Red Army at Geokchai and Ottoman subsequent counteroffensive brought to a head the long-simmering political crisis in Baku. With Russia unable to provide any meaningful aid to the Commune, the city increasingly suffered from hunger and was ill prepared for defence (Swietochowski, 1985, pp. 136-137).¹² In Berlin, the Soviet Ambassador Joffe, was begging the Germans to stop the Turks from attacking Baku. Germany agreed so long as the Bolsheviks would guarantee them free access to Caspian oil production. Thus Moscow also negotiated a supplement to Brest-Litovsk treaty accepting Georgian independence under German protection and in exchange for keeping the Turks out of Transcaucasia, to give Germany a quarter of Baku's oil production. An agreement to that effect was eventually reached on 27 August (McMeekin, 2010, p. 336).

The Bolshevik forces around Baku had about 6,000 men of the Baku Army. The vast majority of them were Armenians and Russians. However, these few troops were not adequate to thwart a possible Turkish attack. They counterattacked the advancing Ottoman columns and attempted to establish a defensive line at Kurdamir. However, these forces were pushed onward towards Baku. By the 27 of July the Turks had advanced to the high ground overlooking the city (Erickson, 2001, p. 189). Therefore, those in Baku who were neither Bolsheviks nor Muslims began to agitate for inviting a British Expeditionary Force. On 26 July 1918, a coup overthrew the Bolsheviks in Baku establishing a Central Caspian Dictatorship (Swietochowski, 1985, pp. 137-138). Meanwhile, the avant-garde of the Army of Islam had reached the heights above Baku. With the Turks camped out of Baku, the Armenian-dominated Soviet of the city decided to vote to invite the British troops of General Dunsterville, then stationing near the Caspian coast of northern Persia, to save them.¹³ These troops were ready to move and the main body of Dunsterforce began to debark in Baku on

¹¹ In 1918, Enver himself encouraged the Ottoman media to promote pan-Turanianism, aiming to create a series of "Turkish" buffer states in which to expand the Empire's influence.

¹² Actually, since the formation of the Baku Sovnarkom in April 1918, the city and its environs had lived under the rule of a de facto Commune.

¹³ Worried by the threat to the Baku oil fields, the British General Staff began to send reinforcements to Dunsterville in June 1918.

August 20 (Erickson, 2001, p. 191). Actually, in Baku the Soviet was now cooperating with imperialists, both interested in stopping any Turkish, or German, treat to Azerbaijan and beyond, to Persia and India.

Failing their aim to close the gap to the sea and create a strongly defensible line for Baku, from one end of the Apsheron Peninsula to the other. The remnants of the British-Baku force retired to a line slightly north of Diga. Clashes continued in mid-August and September. On 26 August, the Army of Islam launched its main attack. Despite a shortage of artillery, British and Baku troops held their positions. However, faced with increased artillery fire, they retired to the railway line. Later on, the Turks shelled the city heavily and attacked the Binagadi Hill position. It was certainly very good results and the city seemed within reach of the Turkish vanguard. However, Ottoman losses were so heavy that they were not immediately able to continue the offensive. This gave the Baku Army time to reorganize but all hope of resistance seemed futile.

Faced with an ever worsening situation, Dunsterville organized a meeting with the Centro-Caspian Dictators arguing that he was not willing to risk more British lives and hinted at his withdrawal. However, the dictators protested and the British General eventually decided to stay until the very end. On the night of September 13, the Turks began their last attacks. They nearly overran the strategic Wolf's Gate west of Baku. The fighting continued for the rest of the day and the situation eventually became hopeless. By the night of the 14th, the remnants of the Baku Army and British forces left the city. Dunsterville ordered the evacuation of the city that very day after six weeks of occupation and withdrew to Iran.¹⁴ With the withdrawal of the British, chaos broke out amongst the defenders of Baku and the refugee Armenians. Throughout the night, as the Turks drove in the remaining defences, fires, pillaging and massacre broke out in the city (Erickson, 2001, p. 192). The Ottomans and their Azeri allies, led by Nuri Pasha, finally entered Baku on 15 September and slaughtered some thousands Armenians in retaliation for the March massacre of Muslims at the hands of the Soviet-Armenian bands (McMeekin, 2010, p. 336).

The result of these fights was anyway inevitable. As a matter of fact, British forces were not strong enough to stop the Turks. Ottoman troops threw the British out of Azerbaijan in September 1918, when the British commander, general Dunsterville, ordered the evacuation of the city, after only six weeks of occupation, and withdrew to Persia.

By the end of the war, the Ottoman Empire, although it lost Sinai, Palestine and Mesopotamia, had recaptured all the territory which lost to the Russians in eastern Anatolia and occupied most of southern Caucasus and especially of Azerbaijan. However, the Great War drew to a close, on October 30, 1918, the Armistice of Mudros was signed and the Caucasus Campaign ended as well. As a matter of fact, the capture of Baku proved to be a meaningless victory for the Ottoman Empire.

3. Ottoman withdrawal and the Turkish National Forces

The armistice of Mudros created many doubts on the future of the Ottoman troops in Transcaucasia. The pan-Turanian dreams seemed long gone. However, in Baku, Nuri Pasha authorized his soldiers to join the Azerbaijani Army. Soon after, General Thomson, who had succeeded Dunsterville in the British North Persian Force, ordered that all Ottoman units must leave Baku in one week and Transcaucasia within a month (Swietochowski, 1985, pp. 140-141). The Turks were forced to leave all their gains in the region going back to the 1914 borders.

In fact, the retreat of the Ottoman troops from the Caucasus took place at a certain speed, but the vacuum left by the Turks was soon followed by a series of clashes between different nationalities. As a matter of fact, a border war between Georgia and Armenia broke out already in December 1918 over the parts of the then-disputed districts of Lori, Borchalo and Javakheti, previously occupied by Ottoman forces. Not surprisingly, a brief Georgian-Armenian war soon followed. The conflicts involved many civilians in the disputed areas,

¹⁴ Most of the Armenian population of the city escaped with British forces.

moreover, guerrilla operations were the main reasons for high civilian casualties. Skirmishes continued until December 31 when a British brokered ceasefire was signed. Moreover, after the Turks began to withdraw their forces, Armenians seized Nagorno-Karabakh to create a base for further expansion westward into Nakhchevan; in doing so they created the conditions for further violence.

In Anatolia the situation was even worse. After Ottoman surrender the situation in the Empire became extremely difficult, with England, France, Italy and specially Greece aiming to impose their control over the country. The Turks had now to live Transcaucasia, while a harsh Greco-Turkish war in Asia Minor would eventually follow after the organization of armed resistance by nationalist forces under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal. It lasted until autumn of 1923. As a result of the disastrous defeat of Greek army, on 15 October 1923, the last Allied troops left Constantinople with the official birth of the Turkish Republic taking place two weeks after (Vagnini, 2011).

In this period for the Turkish nationalists fighting their war of independence was essential to achieve a favorable arrangement of the Southern Caucasus too, where the presence of Armenian bands was a constant threat to the integrity of Turkey. Not surprisingly, relations between Ankara and the Government of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, as well as those with Bolshevik Russia, were especially good since both countries were interested in containing and eventually remove the Armenian threat.

4. The Conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia

By October 1918, German and Turkish troops in the Caucasus had been substituted by those of the Entente. Control of Azerbaijan was strategically important for the British and consequently, headed by General W. Thomson, who had declared himself the military governor of Baku, about 1,000 Commonwealth soldiers arrived in Baku on November 17. By General Thomson's order, martial law was implemented in the city. British involvement during this period also extended into some branches of the civilian administration and British officers occasionally intervened in the routine business of local authorities (Swietochowski, 1985, p. 144). Actually their main goal was to extend control over the oil fields.

Notwithstanding, the situation was not yet stabilized and the various nationalisms had already set in motion. The Armenians in particular wanted to ensure international recognition for their state after that already in March, ethnic and religious tensions had grown in Baku when Musavat and Committee of Union and Progress had been accused of Pan-Turkism by Bolsheviks and their allies. Therefore, between March and April 1918, southern Caucasus witnessed an inter-ethnic warfare and the massacre of up to 12,000 Azerbaijanis by the Bolsheviks and other armed Armenian units in the city of Baku and other locations in its Governorate. There were many disputed territories on which the Armenians tried to establish themselves against the Azerbaijani.¹⁵ Actually, it was question of a series of brutal conflicts that took place in 1918 and then again from 1920 to 1922. Fighting involved civilians in the disputed districts of Kazakh-Shamshadin, Zanghezur, Nakhchevan and Karabakh. As a matter of fact, beginning with 1918, a Republic of Mountainous Armenia was declared in the area of Karabakh, with its government trying several times to seize Shusha militarily but the Ottoman troops had prevented the realization of the Armenian nationalist's dream. Only after the Turkish withdrawal, Armenians seized Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, the British military command gave the assurances to Armenians that the conflict would be solved with the Paris Peace Conference.

The role of British forces stationed in Azerbaijan was still important, but whatever British greed for the wealth of Baku might have been, whatever the profits from Azerbaijani oil, they were not sufficiently strong to compel London to forego its priorities, which lay elsewhere; in Egypt and India. Actually, British government had decided as early as February 1919 to evacuate Transcaucasia as soon as possible. Thus, at the beginning of April the Supreme Allied Council proposed that Transcaucasia, or at least Georgia, be placed

¹⁵ It should be remembered that the first clashes between Armenians and Azeris had took place in Baku in February 1905 and lasted until August.

under Italian occupation. Rome initially agreed to a mandate over the region. Anyway, the involvement of Italy proved to be purely exploratory in character. Italy's interest in Transcaucasia, indeed, failed to survive the next change of cabinet in Rome (Sale, 2007).

During autumn of 1919 a dramatic turn in the Russian Civil War took place as the White Army bit off more than it could in its drive on Moscow. At this juncture, Transcaucasia again came to the attention of the statesmen in Versailles. In fact, in January 1920 Allied General Staffs were discussing the defence needs of Azerbaijan and Georgia with their delegations in Paris (Swietochowski, 1985, p. 159).¹⁶ Discussions, however, that did not lead to any concrete decision.

In winter of 1920, London had begun a definite reappraisal of its Russian policy. Rather than continue the unpopular and costly involvement in the Russian Civil War, the British government now considered moves toward coming to terms with the Bolsheviks. It was in fact the prelude to final abandonment of Transcaucasia. The situation in Southern Caucasus continued to be extremely tense and in spring 1920 major ethnic clashes took place in Shusha. In those days, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was in a very troubled situation, facing both Armenian and Bolshevik threat (Swietochowski, 1985, pp. 152-153).¹⁷ Rumors that the Red Army was about to cross the border and invade Azerbaijan were particularly alarming. In this confused situation, undoubtedly, Russia was a destabilizing factor. While allowing the possibility of a temporary compromise with Armenia and Georgia, with which the Bolshevik Russia concluded bilateral treaties in fact, Moscow refused, even in theory, any formal recognition of the independence of Azerbaijan. As a matter of fact, Russia maintained a constant political and military pressure on Azerbaijan, trying to undermine its internal stability thanks to the support of local Communist activists.

Actually, in the post-Great War Caucasus occurred three main events: fight for Karabakh, in early 1920; Sovietization of Azerbaijan, in April 1920; Soviet invasion of Georgia on 25 February 1921.

While the Azerbaijani government and its army were in chaos, the Armenian militias used the opportunity to assert their control over parts of Azerbaijani territory. The Red Army takeover in April-May 1920 resolved the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Faced with the Red Army, the Azerbaijani government officially surrendered, but local militias kept resisting the advance of Soviet troops; so it took a while for the Soviets to stabilize their newly-proclaimed Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. In the meantime, a Communist coup in Armenia failed.

While Azerbaijan was in chaos, the Armenian militias used the opportunity to assert their control over parts of disputed territory, occupying Shusha and Khankendi. Actually, by the end of April the Armenians were in control of most of western Azerbaijan including all of Karabakh, Nakhchevan and much of Kazakh-Shamshadin district.

The definitive establishment of the Bolshevik regime in Azerbaijan therefore had an important ideological and strategic value. Russia thus supported the expansion of communist ideology beyond its borders and created a privileged base for propaganda in the direction of the Middle East and Central Asia. A key factor in the fate of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan was the community of interest between Bolshevik Russia and Turkey, both interested in obtaining accommodation in the Transcaucasian region favorable to their interests.

In September 1920 Armenia was also engaged in a bitter war on another front against Turkish national forces, particularly costly for the poor Armenian forces. In late November, there was a new Soviet-backed Communist uprising in Armenia. On November 28, 1920 the Red Army crossed the demarcation line between Democratic Republic of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Fighting lasted only a week and marked the final conquest of Armenia by the Soviet Union.

¹⁶ The only tangible outcome of these talks was the de facto recognition of the two republics by the Supreme Allied Council on January 12 (Georgia) and on January 19 (Armenia).

¹⁷ Actually, relationship with the White Russian forces was also quite troubled.

The subsequent Soviet invasion of Georgia in 1921 would have put an end to the brief independence of southern Caucasus.

5. The Treaty of Kars

The collaboration between Bolshevik Russia and Turkish nationalists had a decisive role in the arrangement of the southern Caucasus. This collaboration was manifested through weapons and material from Moscow, while on a political level the main result proved to be the elimination of the Armenian state. Harsh fighting against the Turks in autumn 1920 had stripped Armenia of most of its south-western territories, including Kars and Alexandropol. Armenian forces were now exhausted, even if in fact the Turks were unable to completely defeat them and agreed to sign a cease-fire. Problems for Armenia, however, were not finished. On November 28, 1920, blaming Armenia for the invasions of Sharur and Karabakh the Red Army occupied the country.

The Treaty of Kars would be the ultimate solution to the issue of Caucasians borders, confirming the Soviet control over the Transcaucasian republics and safeguarding the interests of Turkish nationalists. After an initial agreement reached in Moscow in March 1921, it was signed in Kars on October 13, 1921, and ratified in Yerevan on September 11, 1922. Signatories included representatives from the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, which in 1923 would declare the Republic of Turkey, and also from Soviet Armenia, Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet Georgia all of which formed part of the Soviet Union after December 1922.

The treaty provided for the territory of the former Russian Batumi District of the Kars Governorate to be divided. The northern half, with the port city of Batumi, was attached to Georgia, while Nakhchivan went to Armenia. The southern half would be annexed by Turkey. It was agreed that the northern half would be granted autonomy within Soviet Georgia. It eventually evolved into the Adjar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Additionally, Turkey was also guaranteed the use of the port of Batumi without special charges.

The treaty also created a new boundary between Turkey and Soviet Armenia, defined by the Akhurian and Aras rivers. Turkey obtained from Armenia most of the former Kars Governorate, with Mount Ararat and the cities of Kars, Ardahan and Oltu. Most of these areas were anyway already under Turkish military control. The treaty required also Turkish troops to withdraw from other areas under their occupation. It was also specified the partition of Nakhchivan as an autonomous territory under the protection of Azerbaijan.¹⁸ Both Turkey and Russia would become guarantors of Nakhchivan's status.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the situation in Transcaucasia during the final stages of Great War and between 1919 and 1921 seems to be extremely complex. The opposing nationalism and a long series of clashes, in which the interference of the great powers has been very strong, in fact, affected the region until the final Soviet takeover. In fact, national rivalries in Transcaucasia cannot seem to have any peaceful solution. Neither the brief Ottoman occupation, nor the weak British presence proved able to stabilize the region. The conflict between Georgia and Armenia was difficult to solve, the one between Azerbaijan and Armenia was indeed impossible. By 1920 the only possible solution of these disputes could come either by military victory or by the imposition from above of an imperial power. None of the national forces, however, was powerful enough to win a decisive victory and after the British failed miserably to impose a settlement, the arbiters of the situation turned out to be the Bolsheviks. The Red Army occupied Azerbaijan and Armenia in May and November 1920 and eventually invaded Georgia in 1921. The Treaty of Kars would officially put an end to this troubled period of Transcaucasian history.

¹⁸ In 1924, the region became the Nakhchivan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, an exclave subordinate to Azerbaijan.

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