

## 1920: The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and Soviet Russia

In the 1918–1919 segmentation (or deintegration) that took place as imperial Transcaucasia fragmented into uncertain nation-state territorial units, the distribution of ethnic and religious groups was used as the main criterion legitimizing the inclusion of a given area into the new republic of Azerbaijan, with a few adjustments based on prerevolutionary administrative borders. Depending on population patterns, in some cases the units under consideration were entire provinces (gubernias, oblasts), while in others they were the districts (uezds, okrugs) these provinces comprised.

Both ethnic and religious affiliations played a role in the emergence of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. The organizational core of the new state, which took shape around the Musavat (a Muslim political party) and the Transcaucasian Seim's Muslim Council, had a pronounced religion-based orientation. In designs to draw new borders in Transcaucasia, the Musavat envisioned an Azerbaijan consisting of all the territories with a significant Muslim population. In particular, this included, in addition to areas with Turkic-speaking populations, territories with Georgian (Ajaria [Batumi Province] and Meskhetia), Avar (Zakataly), and Kurdish populations, as well as a portion of Daghestan Province. In other words, the initial design for Azerbaijan was a multiethnic country uniting Transcaucasian Muslims (including "Transcaucasian Tatars," or Turkic-speaking Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Ajarians, Tats, Talysh, Ingiloi, and others) with significant Christian minorities (including Georgians, Armenians, and Russians). Within the context of this project, the category "Azerbaijani" did not yet have a narrow ethnic or linguistic connotation and an Azerbaijani nation was made possible by including not only Azerbaijani Turks and, for example, Talysh but also Georgian Ingiloi and—more problematic, but still feasible—even Azerbaijani Armenians (as a religious minority). The republic's 1918 declaration of independence began with a reference to the "peoples of Azerbaijan as the holders of sovereign rights." In this regard, the young Azerbaijani political entity had the potential to be, and to some extent was, better

suited to the incorporation of ethnic minorities than were the Georgian and Armenian nations.

Such a design for an aspiring nation that had a clear religion-based core group but would also have a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional population lacked viability for a number of reasons. Although the final ethnicization (Turkicization) of the aspiring Azerbaijani nation occurred later (in the twenties and thirties, when the term "Azerbaijani" started to be equated with "Azeri Turk" and later supplanted this term), long before these Soviet transformations the tendency toward political and cultural absorption of non-Turkic groups in eastern Transcaucasia was evident. The use of a "Muslim" category within Russian Transcaucasia also affected the course of this assimilation. During the collapse of imperial Transcaucasia, Turkic domination was already providing a strong ethnic core for the young Azerbaijani proto-nation and serving as its cultural and political guidepost.

The Ottoman Empire (Turkey), as the foreign sponsor of the Azerbaijan Republic in 1918, despite being a multi-ethnic empire, also promoted a certain ethnicization of Azerbaijan's national design. It should be noted, however, that such ethnicization was also part of the European paradigm for the self-determination of peoples, one in which ethnocultural traits and communities served as defining features. In Transcaucasia such a paradigm made sense: the platforms of Georgian and Armenian political parties had already cast national self-determination in terms that were decisively ethnic, not territorial. This is how Azerbaijan wound up being first a Turkish and Muslim force affecting Georgian and Armenian self-determination in Transcaucasia and later a "nation" forming a sovereign state out of its loyal population and discovering a history for this population.

Clearly the emergent territorial extent of the Azerbaijan Republic in 1918–1920 was being shaped both by its own military and diplomatic efforts and by the strategies of the region's primary foreign players. The entire period during which the Azerbaijan Republic was coming into being can be divided

into three stages based on which power's strategies were in the ascendant at the time: the Ottoman Turkish stage (April–November 1918), the British stage (December 1918–September 1919), and the Soviet stage (beginning in late April 1920). The makeup of territories controlled or contested by Azerbaijan (or other players) at different stages varied depending on which geopolitical player was dominant.

The defeat of the Central Powers and the withdrawal of Turkish troops from the region in 1918 deprived Azerbaijan of an important ally in its rivalry with Armenia over disputed territories. The British took a more neutral stance than had Turkey regarding this rivalry, opening up new real or imagined opportunities for Armenia. These opportunities were tied to the Entente's desire in late 1918 and early 1919 to create a sizable barrier between Turkey and the Azerbaijan Republic. When it came to the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Entente started with the assumption that it was desirable for the new boundaries to coincide with the old (administrative) ones—in other words, those of former Russian provinces: Elisabethpol for Azerbaijan and Erivan for Armenia.

In western Transcaucasia the granting of territories to the Ottoman Empire under the provisions of the treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Batumi was annulled and the Southwestern Caucasus Republic was abolished, its territory divided between Armenia and Georgia. The majority of districts densely populated by Armenians in Mountain (Nagorny) Karabakh formally remained under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan but were actually controlled by the local Armenian National Council. (*Nagorny* means "mountainous" or "highland" in Russian. Lowland Karabakh, on the other hand, was settled mostly by Turkic-speaking [Azeri] groups. The designations of "Mountain" and "Lowland" Karabakh here reflect the political fragmentation of the territory along ethnic lines during 1918–1921.) In 1919 Azerbaijan lost control of Sharur and Daralagez and, temporarily, of Nakhichevan. Zangezur had been occupied by Armenian troops in 1918. The political standoff between Armenia and Azerbaijan