

1920: Partition of the Republic of Armenia

The logic governing the drawing of borders for an Armenian state between 1918 and 1921 developed within the context of two undermining factors: Turkish military and political pressures (coming from Ottoman Turkey in 1918 and Kemalist Turkey starting in 1920) and the interspersed enclaves of Armenian and Turkic (Azerbaijani) settlement throughout almost the entire area Armenia sought to incorporate. The “national principle”—the idea of basing borders on the dispersal of ethnic populations that Transcaucasia’s Armenian and Muslim political elites had pledged to follow as they traced the borders of Armenia and Azerbaijan—was bound to trigger a series of conflicts as both sides sought to force out the “alien” population. Armenian-Azerbaijani competition developed within a significantly larger-scale geopolitical game, and its outcome depended on the balance of power among the main players: the Soviets, Turkey, and the Entente. The emergence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, first as a Turkish and later as a Soviet protectorate, diminished the effectiveness of Armenia’s military and organizational advantages and foreign policy resources, and the “national principle” proved detrimental to the fate of most of the region’s Armenian population.

The composition of the Armenian state in 1921 came about as a result of a series of wars, starting with World War I. The 1915 genocide of Armenians in Turkey and western (Anatolian or Turkish) Armenia was followed by local Armenians’ active support of Russia’s military challenge to Anatolia. Hundreds of thousands of refugees settled in Transcaucasia, in eastern Armenia, which became the center of the Armenians’ struggle for national self-determination. After the collapse of the Russian Empire, while Transcaucasia was being divided into three states (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) during the spring of 1918, Armenian armed forces were themselves involved in a war with Turkey; the result, on the one hand, was the loss of a large portion of “Russian Armenia” (Kars and Ardahan, under the 1918 Batum Treaty) but, on the other, the emergence and preserva-

tion of an independent Armenian state—the “first” Republic of Armenia.

In December 1918, after the departure of German and Turkish troops from Transcaucasia, conflict developed between Armenia and Georgia over the disputed Akhalkalaki and Borchalo Districts. In January 1919 an agreement was reached with the sponsorship of the Entente regarding the disputed territory: Akhalkalaki (Georgian “Javakheti”/Armenian “Javakhk”) and the northern portion of Borchalo (Borchaly) remained part of Georgia, while the southern portion of the Borchalo District went to Armenia and its central area (containing the copper deposits that represented the area’s greatest wealth) was made into the Lori Neutral Zone, which was placed under joint English-French occupation.

During the period of the British mandate (December 1918–July 1919) in Transcaucasia a large portion of the defunct Southwestern Caucasus Republic was annexed to Armenia, specifically the territory of Kars Province, excluding a northern portion of the Ardahan (Ardagan) District, which later went to Georgia, and the western portion of the Olti District, which essentially remained in the zone controlled by Turkish militias. In the spring of 1919 Armenia was clearly disinclined to enter the pact between Georgia and Azerbaijan against White general Anton Denikin, and during the summer of 1919 and again beginning in March 1920 it waged war with the Republic of Azerbaijan over disputed areas in Nakhichevan and Mountain Karabakh. Surmalu, Sharur, and Zangezur were mostly controlled by Armenian forces but nevertheless remained in dispute. (During the summer of 1919, Surmalu and Sharur had been taken over by local Muslims demanding incorporation into Azerbaijan.) The various Transcaucasian territorial conflicts were supposed to be resolved at the Paris Peace Conference; however, by March 1920 the victory of the Red Army in the North Caucasus and the success of the Kemalists in Turkey had removed Transcaucasia from the Entente’s sphere of influence.

The Soviet takeover of Azerbaijan in April 1920 and the emergence of a Soviet-Turkish strategic partnership again left the Armenian Republic essentially surrounded. Armenia’s war with Azerbaijan in 1920 concluded in August with the signing of a peace agreement between Armenia and the RSFSR. By then the Red Army and Soviet Azerbaijan were occupying disputed areas in the Shusha, Zangezur, and Nakhichevan Districts (the last of which was occupied jointly with Turkish Kemalist forces).

The division of Ottoman Turkey in accordance with the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres presumed the annexation of significant territory in western (Anatolian) Armenia to the Armenian Republic, giving it access to the Black Sea. But the mass killing and forced displacement of Armenians in these areas in 1915 and the military successes of the Kemalists in the fall of 1920 made it impossible to realize these plans; two years later the provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres pertaining to Armenia would be annulled by the Conference of Lausanne.

In October 1920 unilateral attempts by the Armenian government (led by the Dashnaksutyun Party) to realize the provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres and the activity of Armenian troops in the Olti District triggered a new Armenian-Turkish war. A Kemalist invasion from the west and Soviet military and political pressure from the east (on 1 December, Soviet Russia demanded that power in Armenia be passed from Dashnaks to Armenian Bolsheviks) brought an end to the independent Republic of Armenia. The Armenian-Turkish War concluded on 2 December 1920 with the Treaty of Alexandropol. The treaty was signed by the Republic of Armenia, which had already essentially been deposed by the Soviets. Although the treaty never came into force, the new borders of Armenia that it delineated served as the de facto template for what was to come. In accordance with the March 1921 Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Moscow the republic’s territory was divided into Soviet and Turkish zones of control. The eastern zone, with the exception of Nakhichevan and Sharur,