CHAPTER TEN

AZERBAIJAN BETWEEN 1918 AND 1921

Introduction

The borders of Azerbaijan at the moment of the Russian Revolution were similar to those of 1878. The First World War had not much effect on Azerbaijan, since Muslims did not have to fight in the Imperial Army, and the First World War had not spread to the territory of Azerbaijan until around 1918. After the Russian Revolution part of the Azeri political elite hoped that they could gain more autonomy from Russia. They favored a policy in which nationalism and religion played a role. Another faction however preferred the creation of a Soviet government.

From the declaration of independence of Azerbaijan on 27 May 1918 there were two governments in Azerbaijan: a Musavat government in Ganja, which held tight relations with the Ottoman authorities, and a Bolshevik government in Baku, headed by Stepan Shaumian, which favored a good relationship with the central government in Moscow. From 25 April until July 1918 the Baku Commune was a fact. In May elections took place, after which the government constituted 8 Bolshevik Ministers, 3 left Socialist Revolutionary Ministers and 1 Hummet Minister. The Dashnaks and Right Socialist Revolutionaries refused to accept positions in the government. Shaumian on the other hand wanted these parties to recognize the central Soviet government. Ronald Suny provides the composition of the Baku Soviet during mid-April. The most important political groups were represented as follows: Bolsheviks 58, Left Socialist Revolutionaries 46, Right Socialist Revolutionaries 47, Mensheviks 28, Dashnaks 36, and Musavatists 23.

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1 The rulers of the Russian Empire found their Muslim nationals not trustworthy enough, which, in the case of a war between Russia and Turkey, would have been a reasonable argument, since Azeri were pro-Turkish.
3 Suny, *The Baku Commune* 231.
The Russian Sovnarkom issued a Declaration of the Rights of Peoples of Russia on 15 November 1917, which was the Council of People’s Commissars. The equality of peoples, their right to self-determination, secession, and the right to the formation of independent states were underlined. The document thus created possibilities for the free development of national minorities and ethnic groups in Russia. Azerbaijan did not (immediately) use the opportunity provided by this declaration to secede and create an independent state.

On 26 October 1917, after the fall of the Provisional Government and a few days after the Bolshevik coup, the first Congress of the Musavat (nationalist) party met in Baku. The party’s main aim was to strive for autonomy and was formulated as follows:

1. The unity of all Muslim peoples without regard to nationality or sect.
2. Restoration of the independence of all Muslim nations.
3. Extension of material and moral aid to all Muslim nations which fight for their independence.
4. Help to all Muslim peoples and states in offence and in defense.
5. The destruction of the barriers which prevent the spread of the above-mentioned ideas.
6. The establishment of contact with parties striving for the progress of the Muslims.
7. The establishment, as need might arise, of contact and exchange of opinion with foreign parties which have the well-being of humanity as their aim.
8. The intensification of the struggle for the existence of the Muslims and the development of their commerce, trade, and economic life in general.

The Musavat party enjoyed large support among the Azeri population. The Azeri Bolshevik party, whose membership mostly consisted of Armenians and Russians, were strong in Baku; it was orientated towards the Bolshevik government in Russia.

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4 USSR: Sixty Years of the Union, 1922–1982, 1982, p. 34.
5 The Kerenskii government had come to power after the February Revolution in 1917 in which the Czar had been forced to abdicate.
6 Kazemzadeh, 21.