Right after World War I, in November 1918, the Allied forces entered the South Caucasus. As a result, Azerbaijan fell under the supervision of the British, who took the Mousavat government under their protection, thus giving the Azeris an extra incentive to carry on their assertive policy towards the historical Armenian provinces of Karabakh (Artsakh), Zangezur, and Nakhichevan. Prior to the independence of the South Caucasus, these provinces were known to have belonged to the Elizavetopol and Erivan gubernias of the Russian Empire.

As the World War I was drawing to a close, the Turkish troops invading the South Caucasus together with the army of Musavat Azerbaijan posed a serious threat to two frontier districts of Armenia, Artsakh and Zangezur. It was during those fateful days that General Andranik with his battalion moved to Zangezur to organise local self-defense, and managed to defend the land against relentless attacks by the Turks and the Musavatists.

For Zangezur and Artsakh, 1919 started off with another crisis as Anglo-Azeri cooperation had grown to menacing proportions. On December 30, 1918, Commander-in-Chief of the British troops in Azerbaijan, Major General William Montgomery Thomson officially stated that on the issue of Karabakh and Zangezur, his government completely supports the position of Azerbaijan. Such statements had, in effect, given a go-ahead for the Azeris to launch a new offensive against the two Armenian districts. On January 1, 1919, the several thousand-strong Azeri infantry complete with artillery units began approaching the borders of Zangezur and Nagorno-Karabakh. Incorporated into the approaching Azeri army were Turkish troops, of whose presence there the British military command was perfectly aware.

While the troops were moving in to impose the Azeri rule over these regions, in France the first sessions of the Paris Conference had just commenced. On January 1, the Azeris delivered their first strike against the Armenian border in Kapan. Having amassed formidable force near the village of Uzhanis, they made an attempt of breaking through the defense lines and advance towards the Hanker village.

Although this offensive failed, and the attackers fled the battlefield, on the same day, the Musavatists launched a new raid against the village of Davit Bek, but this time again were driven back.²

On January 9, 1919 Chairman of the Kapan National Council Smbat Melik-Stepanian wrote in his memo that the people of Kapan would never let Azeris impose their rule over their homeland, and until the just and final verdict on the issue of the borderline had been reached at the Paris Conference, they would remain in charge of their own destiny.³

Irritated by the disastrous start of their offensive campaign, the Musavatists set out to take their ruthless revenge on the Armenian population in various regions of Azerbaijan. Among dozens of eyewitness reports to the above, the Kavkazskoe Slovo printed one: “Another heinous crime was committed at the Alyat railway station on January 18, when armed Tatars stormed the train and slaughtered six Armenian passengers, raped three females, including a six year old girl and then butchered her along with the others right in front of the crowd of onlookers”.⁴

The Mshak had also reported crimes by the Musavatists against Armenians in the province of Zakatala. One of the reports reads: “Christians, especially the Armenians, in our region are in a very difficult situation. ... Instances where Armenian homes are entered and searched, their belongings taken, people beaten, arrested, kept in jail for days without water or food, and after all that released only after signing papers stating that Armenians are happy with how they are treated by the local authorities, are commonplace. Out of 60-70 Armenian families in the village of Belakan none remained, they all fled here leaving all they had behind”.⁵

On January 10, several thousand-strong Azeri troops combined with local gangs under the command of Turkish officers marched towards Armenian villages of the Jebrail region, while the local Azer-

² Simonyan, op. cit.: 484-485.
³ Armenian National Archive, (hereinafter–ANA), Section 198, list 1, file 212, folio1.
⁴ Kavkazskoe slovo, (Tiflis), N 12, 1 February 1919.
⁵ Mshak, issue 32, 11 February 1919.