

NORTHERN PERSIA (AZERBAIJAN) ON THE EVE AND DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Abstract

In recent decades, researchers have also started to address the military operations that took place in Northern Persia, in Atropatene (Azerbaijan), during the First World War. If the Caucasian Front¹ was considered a secondary front in the history of the world war, then the Persian direction was a tertiary one and was completely outside the attention of the Russian Supreme Command.

The memoirs² of Colonel, and later General, Vladimir Nikolay Poltavtsev, who served in various positions including Chief of Staff of the Azerbaijani Detachment and the 2nd Caucasian Rifle Brigade, and commander of the 66th Rifle Division, pertain to the events of 1913–1915 and 1917–1918.

In the previous issue, we presented the colonel's biography and his memoirs about the Armenian volunteer movement, particularly the 1st Druzhina.³ The current memoirs cover two phases: from October 1913 until June 10, 1915, when military operations were taking place in Northern Persia, after which the brigade was transferred to the Russian-Turkish front in Western Armenia. Poltavtsev returned to Atropatene after receiving a new appointment, where he served from June 3, 1917, until April 17, 1918.⁴

In the preface, he warns the future reader that he wrote solely from memory, and therefore, some errors are possible.⁵

The “disorders” that began in Tabriz in 1909, which were actually the Persian Revolution⁶, served as an opportunity for the Russians to intervene, and Russian troops were sent into Persia.⁷

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¹ The operational-strategic concept of the Caucasian Front came into circulation only in March 1917.

² The memoirs are titled: «Оккупация русскими войсками Азербайджана (Северной Персии) пред Великой войной и во время этой войны» (“The Occupation of Northern Persia (Azerbaijan) by Russian Troops on the Eve and During the Great War”). The memoirs were written on May 4, 1928, in Belgrade. Stamped: Русский Заграничный Исторический Архив. ПРАГА. PRAGUE. No. 7355. Ruský. Zahraniční historický Archiv”. The memoirs are preserved in the State Archives of the Russian Federation (SARF), fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5.

³ Sahakyan 2025: 22-36.

⁴ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 17 back.

⁵ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 1 back.

The Russians appointed their loyal officials to key positions, including the General-Governor of Azerbaijan, Shuja-ud-Daulah, whose residence was in Tabriz. He was accompanied by a representative of the Persian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the *karguzar*, and the mayor.⁸ Shuja-ud-Daulah presented himself as a loyal friend of the Russian Empire and even at the end of 1914, he appealed to the commander of the Azerbaijani Detachment, asking him to intercede with the Tsar so that Northern Azerbaijan would accept Russian citizenship. The Russian side rejected the request, considering it untimely.⁹ Using Russian patronage, the General-Governor did not submit to the central authority and resorted to various machinations and embezzlements¹⁰. Poltavtsev admits that the General-Governor carried out the will and instructions of the Russians without any objection but did not believe in his loyalty to Russia.¹¹

Keywords: First World War, Caucasian front, Northern Persia, (Azerbaijan) V. N. Poltavtsev, Genocide, Armenians, Assyrians, Tatars, Russian Revolutions, Disintegration of the Army, Bolsheviks.



Armenian Monastery of Saint Thaddeus. 1st century AD (Modern photo)

⁶ A revolution took place in Persia from 1905–1911, during which a *majlis* (parliament) was created and a constitution was adopted. In December 1911, the Shah's power was restored. For the participation of Armenians, see: Seyyed Said Jalali. 2008. Simonyan 2017.

⁷ According to the Anglo-Russian agreement signed on August 18, 1907, the north of Persia came under Russian influence, the south came under British influence, and the center became a neutral zone. Strelyanov 2007: 9–46.

⁸ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 5 back.

⁹ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 10.

¹⁰ International relations in the era of imperialism. 1931: 100.

¹¹ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 2.



Archbishop Nerses Melik-Tangyan:
Spiritual leader of the Armenians of
Atropatene

In order to organize Poltavtsev's memoirs, we have divided them into sub-sections.

The geographical location, natural and climatic conditions, economy, national and social composition, religion, occupations, and so on of Northern Persia

Poltavtsev briefly presents the geographical location of Northern Persia, noting that the population is primarily situated in river valleys. They use an irrigation system to engage in horticulture and agriculture. The main source of irrigation is the Kotur River, a right tributary of the Aras.¹² The peasants rent the land from the beys. The rent could be changed arbitrarily by the owner.



Local Iranian officials, 1912-1914.

The Germans were active in Northern Persia. To this end, the "German Oriental Bank" was founded in Berlin in 1906. In 1909, the German supernumerary consular agent in Tabriz, W. Schoenemann, who was likely an intelligence officer, established commercial firms. The Germans and Austrians also founded a carpet factory here that machine-produced Persian-style carpets that were considerably cheaper than handmade ones.¹³

¹² SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 2 back.

¹³ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 5.



I. Y. Korostovets (Korostovtsev)



Shah Zeli Sultan's son in Austrian military uniform

Before the First World War, Russian businessmen began to exploit natural resources and land in the Gorgan¹⁴ region, where Turkmen tribes lived. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed to the Russian envoy in Tehran, Korostovets¹⁵, to assist these businessmen. It was noted that “from a political point of view, the penetration of the Russian element, especially into this region, which will have great significance for us, is important”.¹⁶ By 1914, the number of Russian settlers had reached around 20,000.¹⁷



Persian Cossack Brigade in Mahabad, postcard from a photograph by Alexander Iyas, labeled “Sauj-Bulak (Mahabad), March 31, 1913.”

¹⁴ Gorgan is a city in the Central District of Gorgan County, Golestan province, Iran, serving as the capital of the province, the county, and the district.

¹⁵ Korostovets (Korostovtsev) Ivan Yakovlevich (1862-1933), Russian diplomat and orientalist. Russian envoy to Persia (1913-1915).

¹⁶ International relations in the era of imperialism 1934: 321-323.

¹⁷ Red Archive. Historical journal. 1934. Volumes four-five: 87.



Mahabad (Modern photo)

In contrast to the valleys, where there is almost no snow, the mountains are snowy. For transportation, they use various pack animals, especially camels. The Urmia Lake is located almost in the center of the province, where two small steamboats belonging to the “Budaghyants Trading House” operate.¹⁸

The main administrative center is Tabriz, which is the residence of the general-governor. He had a Persian Cossack regiment, and from 1916, a division¹⁹, as well as *sarbaz* (Persian soldiers) who mainly performed police functions. The Germans, with the help of Swedish instructors, organized the Persian police.²⁰



Dervish

The governor, who was appointed by the Shah, had almost unlimited power. However, this power did not extend over the Maku Khanate, whose Khan, Murtaza Kuli-Khan, was sympathetic to the Turks and had even secretly visited Germany to receive weapons and ammunition.²¹ Considering the Khan’s pro-Turkish views, the Russians arrested him in late July 1914.²²

¹⁸ Kornilovskiy 2016: 72.

¹⁹ See more details: Gokov 2014: 48-60; Gokov 2020: 83-93; Ter-Oganov 2012.; Gokov 2018.

²⁰ Yemelyanov 1923: 5.

²¹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 5 back.

²² SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 10 back.



Mamed Amin Agha Piran (seated left), head of the Kurdish Piran tribe, August 11, 1913.

The population of Northern Persia primarily consisted of Tatars, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Shahsevans, a few smaller tribes, and a small number of Persians.²³ The Russians were mainly officials and military personnel. There was also a small number of Europeans.



Armenian girls and women

The Tatar population was Shiite, and they were dependent on the beys, who were protected by the local authorities. The Tatars were not friendly towards either the Russians or any non-Muslims.²⁴

²³ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 5.

²⁴ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 3 back.

This attitude was understandable. They and other peoples considered the Russians to be occupiers, which was natural, since the Russians were the de facto rulers of the province. However, a “small detail” should be noted: unlike other nationalities, Poltavtsev presents the Tatars only in a positive light, on the one hand noting their extreme poverty, and on the other hand, their exceptional industriousness, which allows them to survive.²⁵

According to Poltavtsev, the Tatars of the province were not particularly friendly towards the Turks due to religious differences. They showed sympathy towards the Russians, which Poltavtsev believed was not entirely sincere.



Alexander Iyas and his escort of Cossacks, Turbete-Heyderi, 1901

Poltavtsev estimates that the Kurds are the second largest population group in Atropatene. They are freedom-loving people who do not accept the oppression of authority and dislike work. Although they are subjects of Persia, they have a unique relationship with the authorities. They live in the mountains and are mainly engaged in animal husbandry and banditry. “They rob caravans, and sometimes, in large bandit groups, they attack villages and even cities, demanding ransom”.²⁶

The Kurds live in tribes, submit to their beys, and often fight among themselves. The authorities’ efforts to subdue the Kurds were in vain; they even appealed to the Russians but achieved no results.²⁷

It was widely believed that only the Russian vice-consul in Souj-Bulagh²⁸ had managed to communicate with the Kurds. Unfortunately, his trust was repaid with death, as he was killed by the Kurds²⁹, which prompted a Russian punitive action.³⁰ Poltavtsev notes that the Kurds were Sunni Muslims but did not have mosques in their villages.³¹

²⁵ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 3 back.

²⁶ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 3 back.

²⁷ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 4.

²⁸ Ijas Alexander Ivanovich (1869-1914/1915), military orientalist, colonel (06.12.1912).

²⁹ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 5.

³⁰ Strelyanov 2007: 74.

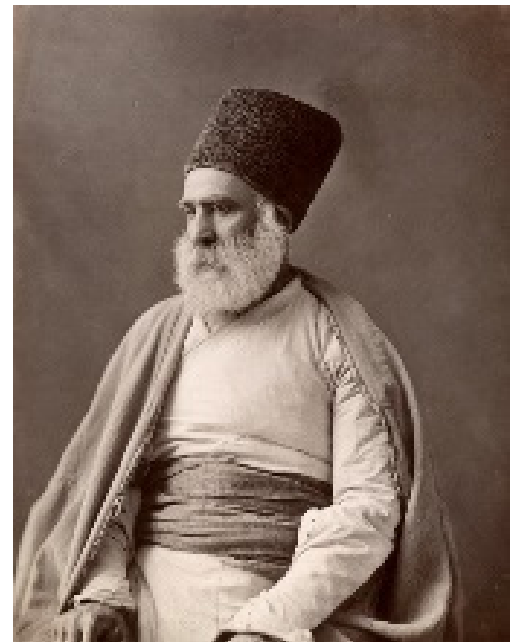
³¹ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 4.



Alexander Iyas with two Iranian officials, November 1902.

Poltavtsev, to put it mildly, was not very friendly towards Armenians, as evidenced in the first part of his memoirs, which we referenced in our previous article. He showed a similar attitude towards the Assyrians. In general, the colonel was sympathetic to the Tatars. One can conclude that there were certain motives for this, which General F. G. Chernozubov, the commander of the Azerbaijani Detachment, had already revealed to General T. Nazarbekyan on April 24, 1915.³²

Just like the Kurds, the semi-savage, bandit-like, and warlike Shahsevan Turkish tribe lives in a similar way in the northeastern part of Northern Persia. The latter frequently launched attacks on Russian border regions as well.³³ In 1912, General A. P. Fidarov³⁴ resolved the issue with them by “explaining” that Russian settlements should not be attacked. The Shahsevan swore that they would never raise arms against Russia and kept their oath, even during the First World War, despite the provocations and promises of Turkish emissaries.³⁵



Persian mullah. The 1870s

³² Sahakyan 2025: 16-17.

³³ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 4.

³⁴ Fidarov Afko Patsievich (1859-1930), Lieutenant General (22.07.1916). Ossetian by nationality. He carried out diplomatic missions in Persia and Afghanistan. Head of the 2nd Brigade of the 2nd Caucasian Cossack Division (from 23.07.1910).

³⁵ Maslovsky 1934: 65-66.

**A. P. Fidarov****Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (1831-1896)**

According to Poltavtsev's account, Armenians primarily lived in cities and the villages near them. Their main occupations were trade and agriculture. They had strained relations with the Tatars and therefore sought support from Russians and foreigners.³⁶

**Azadi Tower, Teheran (Modern photo)**

The colonel mentions the Assyrians, who were primarily Nestorian Christians³⁷, and whose spiritual leader was Mar Shimun, who resided in Julamerk.³⁸ He notes that

³⁶ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 4.

³⁷ The founder is Nestor, Archbishop of Constantinople (428-431).

³⁸ Mar Shimun XIX Benjamin (1885/1887-1918), Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, and a civil and military leader of the Nestorians.

the title of spiritual leader was hereditary. Both Russian and foreign missionaries were particularly interested in the Assyrians, seeking to convert them to their religious denomination by offering them financial resources and their patronage.³⁹

The De Facto Authority

In Northern Persia, all de facto power was in the hands of the Russians—consuls, military officials, and missionaries. The most important of these were the representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: the Consul General in Tabriz, the consul in Urmia, and the vice-consuls in Khoy, Souj-Bulagh, and Maku.⁴⁰

In Poltavtsev's observation, the diplomats, unlike representatives of other powers, behaved arrogantly towards the local population, surrounded themselves with luxury, and were pedantic. They considered themselves to be in control of the situation. As an example, he cites the visit of the military deputy of the Caucasian Viceroy, Lieutenant General A. Z. Mishlayevsky, to Khoy. He did not visit the local vice-consul, G. V. Chirkov⁴¹, on the same day, which the diplomat was quick to report to the ministry, which then demanded an explanation from the viceroy. A similar incident had occurred with the commander of the Azerbaijani Detachment, General N. N. Voropanov.⁴² Shuja-ud-Daulah submitted only to the Russian General Consulate, following its instructions and wishes while ignoring the central government.⁴³

Poltavtsev notes that the consuls often interfered in the internal conflicts of the Kurdish tribes. They would provide money to one tribe or another, and sometimes even use the Russian military to protect them. Occasionally, a tribe patronized by the consuls would make peace with its enemy and become its ally⁴⁴. In Poltavtsev's opinion, it was difficult to deal with the Kurds. "It is necessary to take into account that they are all bandits by nature, insidious and flattering when it is necessary for them, and then, when they get what they want, they cut off ties. They only respect force, and probably the Turkish authorities deal with them correctly".⁴⁵ The Kurdish tribes were united when it was necessary to take revenge on Christians.⁴⁶

The military authority was represented by the commander of the Azerbaijani Detachment and the 2nd Caucasian Rifle Brigade, General Voropanov.⁴⁷ Poltavtsev

³⁹ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 4 back.

⁴⁰ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 5 back.

⁴¹ Chirkov Georgy Vasilievich (1881-after 1929), diplomat. Consul General of Tabriz. Victim of Stalinist violence.

⁴² SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 6.

⁴³ International relations in the era of imperialism 1931. Volume 4: 207.

⁴⁴ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 8 and 8 back.

⁴⁵ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 8 back.

⁴⁶ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 8 back.

⁴⁷ Voropanov Nikolay Nikolayevich (1854-1918), Lieutenant General (08.05.1915). Commander of the 2nd Caucasian Rifle Brigade (19.07.1911-25.03.1915). Commander of the Azerbaijani detachment (1911-1913). Commander of the 66th Infantry Division (25.03-08.05.1915).

describes his commander with contempt, stating that he was not at all interested in military affairs, surrounded himself with luxury, was overly strict, and was preoccupied with military drills (mushtra), but knew people very well. He accuses the general of dispersing the troops throughout various parts of the governorship and overburdening them with assignments, which made it impossible to conduct training exercises with the servicemen.⁴⁸ The headquarters of the occupation forces was located in Khoy.⁴⁹



Khoy city (modern photo)

Poltavtsev does not mention the passive attitude of the military towards the locals. He describes two minor incidents, one of which ended with the death of a Persian police officer, but he prefers to remain silent about larger clashes.

For example, on January 25, 1914, the vice-consul of Ardabil, V. M. Pisarev, reported that a conflict had occurred with locals, after which the commander of the Russian detachment threatened to shell the neighborhood from which the attack came. On January 27, Foreign Minister S. D. Sazonov⁵⁰ telegraphed the Viceroy of the Caucasus, I. I. Vorontsov-Dashkov⁵¹, suggesting that in such cases, fines should be used instead of bombardment.⁵² In a telegram on January 31, the viceroy reported that the commander of the Ardabil detachment had been instructed to use artillery only in extreme cases and with his permission.⁵³

⁴⁸ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 6 back and 7.

⁴⁹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 7 back.

⁵⁰ Sazonov Sergey Dmitriyevich (1860-1927), Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia (1910-1916).

⁵¹ Vorontsov-Dashkov Ilarion Ivanovich (1837-1916), Russian statesman and military figure, general-adjutant (1916). Viceroy of the Caucasus and commander-in-chief of the troops of the Caucasian Military District, ataman of the Caucasian Cossack troops.

⁵² International relations in the era of imperialism 1931: 249-250.

⁵³ International relations in the era of imperialism 1931: 320.



Haft Cheshmeh Bridge (Ardabil) (modern photo)

The third group of Russian representatives in Northern Persia were the clergy, who engaged in missionary activities. The mission was headed by Archimandrite Sergey⁵⁴, who, in Poltavtsev's opinion, caused many problems. He was constantly in conflict with the Armenian clergy. Sergey also complained about the activities of French missionaries who were spreading Catholicism among the Assyrians.⁵⁵



Kurdish nomads, Mahabad, April 1913.

Military-Political Situation on the Eve of the War

After a brief presentation of the general administrative, political, and national situation in the province, Colonel Poltavtsev addresses the Russian-Turkish clash that occurred southwest of Urmia in August 1913. He tries to justify the Turks, noting that the

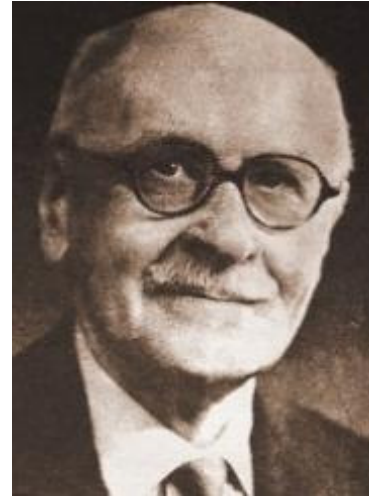
⁵⁴ Lavrov Alexei Petrovich (Sergey, 1878-1937). Graduated from the St. Petersburg Theological Academy. Ordained as a monk (1902). Head of the Urmia Mission (12.06.1904-01.07.1916). Victim of Stalinist repressions.

⁵⁵ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 7.

Persian-Turkish border had not been clearly defined.⁵⁶ It is true that the demarcation process was underway, with representatives from Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, and Persia participating. The Russian representative was Minorsky.⁵⁷



A. P. Lavrov



V. F. Minorsky

As Poltavtsev notes, the region was calm from October 1913 onwards. He points out that the operational and intelligence work was weak. The intelligence gathered by the consuls' agents was mainly related to the moods among the population.

For military intelligence, the headquarters of the Caucasian Military District had sent General Staff Colonel D. I. Andrievsky.⁵⁸ He was frequently on assignment, but the Azerbaijani detachment was unaware of the intelligence he collected. For similar purposes, Captains M. A. Kotovich and M. M. Zinkevich⁵⁹ were sent to Northern Persia. Poltavtsev's opinion is that the military intelligence officers did not succeed in gathering the necessary information.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 7 back.

⁵⁷ Minorsky Vladimir Fyodorovich (1877-1966), Russian orientalist and diplomat. First Secretary of the Russian Diplomatic Mission in Persia (1915). Professor at the University of London, then Cambridge (1939-1944).

⁵⁸ Andrievsky Mikhail Mikhailovich (1875-1951), Major General (16.01.1916). Commander of the 14th Turkestan Rifle Regiment (from 14.06.1915). Served in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia (1919-1920).

⁵⁹ Zinkevich Mikhail Mikhailovich (1883-1945), Major General (1920). Acting Chief of Staff of the Siberian Cossack Brigade (from 06.12.1915). Commander of the 12th Caucasian Border Infantry Regiment. Acting Chief of Staff of the Armenian Combined Arms Detachment (from 05.1918).

⁶⁰ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 8.

**E. V. Sablin**

In reality, the diplomats were carrying out quite extensive operational and intelligence work, and it is likely that rivalry with the military prevented them from exchanging intelligence, which, in our opinion, was a mistake.

**M. M. Zinkevich**

For example, in a telegram dated January 11, 1914, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the First Secretary of the Russian diplomatic mission in Tehran, E. V. Sablin⁶¹, considered it necessary to support the Persian authorities of Azerbaijan because a serious Turkish-German intervention was planned in the near future. He deemed it necessary to strengthen the Russian contingent stationed in Northern Persia.⁶²

After the start of the World War, it was observed that the Ottoman Empire, which had declared neutrality, was preparing frantically. The Kurds noticeably became more active, and some did not hide their hostility towards the Russians. The only “ally” was the Kurdish chieftain Simko⁶³ and a few smaller tribes.⁶⁴ It follows from Poltavtsev’s memoirs that one could not rely on Simko, who had become a chieftain illegally, since the principle of seniority had been violated in his assumption of power. On this basis, there was a serious conflict between Simko and his older brother Ahmed.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Sablin Evgeny Vasilyevich (1875-1949), Russian diplomat and politician.

⁶² International relations in the era of imperialism 1934: 104.

⁶³ Simko (Սիմկո) Shikak (1887-1930), a leader of the Kurdish Shikak tribe. The Russian commander tried to use him in the fight against the Turks, but he failed. The tribal leader joined the Turks several times, but the Russians continued to pin their hopes on him. On March 3, 1918, Simko plotted to kill Mar-Shimun Benjamin, the spiritual leader of the Nestorian Assyrians who were fighting against the Turks, his brother David, the accompanying Russian officers, and 60 bodyguards. On March 28, he attacked, robbed, and killed about 150 residents of Vaspurakan retreating to Persia. According to the official version, he was killed on June 18, 1930, during a battle against the Persian army. According to other information, he was killed by his own people.

⁶⁴ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 10 back.

⁶⁵ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 9.

In August 1914, a clash occurred between Russians and Turks in the Bayazet region. In September, a clash with the Kurds took place near Dilman. The Russians surrounded a Kurdish bey fortified in a fortress in one of the Kurdish villages. The task of besieging the fortress was assigned to Simko, but during the night, the bey broke through the siege and escaped unharmed. It is assumed that Simko's Kurds, having reached an agreement, allowed the bey to leave.⁶⁶



E. V. Sablin



**Fusil-Mitrailleur Chauchat Mle 1915 CSRG
("Machine Rifle Model 1915 CSRG")**



**S. I. Zemtsov Sergei Ivanovich.
During service in the Red Army**

It turned out that a large Turkish agent network was operating in Northern Persia. In the autumn, it spread a rumor that the Turks would soon arrive in Azerbaijan and drive out the beys along with the Russians who supported them. Believing this, the peasants refused to give their share of the harvest to their landlords, who then appealed to the consuls for help. The diplomats demanded that the commander of the Azerbaijani Detachment intervene, but the headquarters of the Caucasus Military District strictly forbade General Voropanov from having any part in solving the issue, ordering him to prepare for war and be guided by military considerations.⁶⁷

The headquarters of the Caucasian Military District, which had lost its border agent network on the eve of the war, did not have clear information about Turkish plans⁶⁸, and

⁶⁶ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 11.

⁶⁷ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 11 back.

⁶⁸ Maslovsky 1934: 47-48.

even suggested that the Azerbaijani detachment submit its considerations for a campaign to Van.⁶⁹

The Kurds, however, were acting more decisively. They began to plunder villages and in October even attacked the city of Urmia. The commander of the regiment stationed there, Zemtsov⁷⁰, who had 12 Cossack sotnyas at his disposal, immediately requested assistance. The 5th Caucasian Rifle Regiment was urgently sent from Khoy. After being forced to travel 185 versts⁷¹, it managed to repel the Kurds. Among the killed Kurds were Turkish soldiers and officers.⁷² It is worth noting here that Zemtsov played a negative role during the July 1915 retreat from Van.

Atropatene During the War (1914-1915)

After the Ottoman Empire entered the World War on October 16, 1914, General F. G. Chernozubov⁷³, a military intelligence officer, was appointed commander of the Azerbaijani detachment, with Colonel Andrievsky⁷⁴ as his chief of staff. Major General T. Nazarbekyan⁷⁵ was appointed commander of the 2nd Caucasian Rifle Brigade, with Colonel Poltavtsev as his chief of staff. Some changes were made to the detachment's composition, and the combat structure of the regiments was brought up to wartime standards.⁷⁶

Since the Supreme Command considered the Caucasian front a secondary one, it began to transfer military units from the Caucasian Military District to the Western Front. The Azerbaijani detachment was primarily reinforced with mobilized reservists and militia units, which had a relatively low level of combat readiness.

⁶⁹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 12.

⁷⁰ Zemtsov Sergei Ivanovich (1872-1928), colonel (06.12.1912). Commander of the 1st Sunzhensko-Vladikavkazsky Regiment (11.02.1914-25.01.1917). According to General T. Nazarbekyan: "Colonel Zemtsov was a very indecisive person." Sahakyan 2019: 281.

⁷¹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 12.

⁷² SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 12 back.

⁷³ Chernozubov Fyodor Grigoryevich (1863-1919), Lieutenant General (18.06.1915), military intelligence officer. Commander of the Azerbaijani detachment.

⁷⁴ Andrievsky Dmitry Ivanovich (1875-1951), Major General (03.07.1916). Chief of Staff of the Azerbaijani Detachment, Regimental Commander of the 14th Turkestan Rifle Regiment (14.06.1915-03.07.1916). Representative of the Armed Forces of South Russia, member of the staff of General N. N. Baratov in Transcaucasia (1918-1919), after whose defeat he settled in Armenia. Arrested and exiled to the Ryazan concentration camp with officers of the Armenian army. Later exiled abroad.

⁷⁵ Tovmas Nazarbekyan (Nazarbekov Foma, 1855-1931), Major General of the Russian Army (1906), Lieutenant General of the Armenian Army (1919). Commander of the 2nd Caucasian Rifle Brigade, then of the division. Commander of the Armenian troops during the battles of Sardarapat, Bash Aparan, and Gharakilisa (05.1918).

⁷⁶ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 10.

Poltavtsev mentions the arrival in Khoy of a volunteer *druzhina* (militia unit)⁷⁷ under the command of Andranik. The *druzhina* was mainly made up of Western Armenians, refugees, and volunteers. Of Andranik, he writes: “Andranik is a well-known *chetnik*⁷⁸ in Turkey who caused great trouble for the Turks with his attacks and uprisings and successfully evaded them.”⁷⁹

The Russian command decided to use the Kurdish bey Abdurrezak⁸⁰ for its own purposes. He was particularly patronized by the commander of the Azerbaijani detachment, General F. G. Chernozubov, who dreamed of becoming the governor of “Kurdistan,” with Abdurrezak as the leader of this new entity. Abdurrezak received 300 rubles per month from the Russians.⁸¹



Maku (modern photo)

⁷⁷ Armenian militia units are known as groups, regiments, and armies, and in official reports as *druzhina*.

⁷⁸ Chetnik (Serbian: četa, “company”, and Turkish: çete, “gang, detachment”), the name of the Balkan liberation movement, rebels, and militias.

⁷⁹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 12 back.

⁸⁰ Abdurrezak Badrkhan (1864-1918), a politician of Kurdish origin. During World War I, he tried to organize a Kurdish uprising, but in vain.

⁸¹ NAA, fund 45, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 17 back.



Shamshadinov Ali-Ashraf-aga

It is worth noting that during the war, the Russians also tried to use the chieftain Mustafa Bey, who was given an estate in the Maku region. However, in December 1914, the bey defected to the Turkish side and fought against the Russians.⁸²

Another Kurdish bey, Major General Ashraf Shamshadinov⁸³, who was in Russian service, was given 50,000 rubles to conduct anti-Turkish propaganda and win over the Kurds. The money was wasted without any result⁸⁴. This shows that the Russian General Staff had done inadequate intelligence work in the Ottoman Empire and had a condescending attitude towards its long-time adversary.

Viceroy of the Caucasus N. N. Romanov (the younger)⁸⁵ tried again with a special order to win over the Kurds at the expense of the Armenians, but it was in vain. This indicates that the specialists and military intelligence were unable to understand that it was impossible to make the Kurds an ally of Russia.

Military operations in Atropatene began at the Khanasor Pass, after which the Russians advanced to Bashkale and Saray. As Poltavtsev notes, the enemy had small forces, mainly gendarme and border patrol units. He mentions the surrender of four Kurdish beys, whom the Russians promised personal and property security if they handed over their weapons and ammunition. The beys “kept their promise,” but mainly handed over old or useless weapons.⁸⁶

The detachments of Simko and his brother Ahmed operated alongside the Azerbaijani detachment. Their participation was motivated by a desire to loot. The Kurds were mainly interested in livestock, and after plundering them, they would disappear.⁸⁷

⁸² NAA, fund 818, inventory 1, file 553, sheet 15.

⁸³ Shamshadinov Ali-Ashraf-aga (1851-?), major general (06.12.1914), Kurd by nationality.

⁸⁴ Sahakyan 2010: 28.

⁸⁵ Romanov Nikolai Nikolaevich (the younger, 1856-1929), Grand Duke, General of Cavalry (01.01.1901). Viceroy of the Caucasus (23.08.1915-02.04.1917).

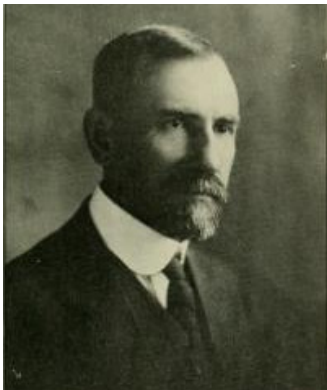
⁸⁶ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 14.

⁸⁷ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 13 and 13 back.



Assyrian Church of Mart-Maryam (Urmia) (modern photo)

In the occupied territories, only the Armenians, Assyrians, and Jews remained among the civilian population. The Muslim population had left with the Turkish army.⁸⁸ The successful operations of the Azerbaijani detachment were unexpectedly suspended due to the heavy fighting that had begun in the Sarighamish region.⁸⁹ According to the hasty order of General A. Z. Mishlayevsky, the Viceroy's military assistant, which was not confirmed by any operational intelligence, the Azerbaijani detachment began to retreat, despite having successfully captured more than 200 versts of territory.⁹⁰ Following the troops were the Christian population, the consuls, and the Persian officials. In Urmia, only the American missionary Shedd⁹¹ remained.



W. A. Shedd William

The Azerbaijani detachment's retreat was hasty. The situation of the Christians—Armenians and Assyrians—who had left their homes was particularly dire. Poltavtsev testifies: "Our columns were accompanied by a mob of half-naked, hungry Christians, which made the advance very difficult and affected our operational calculations. Many of the refugees died along the way".⁹² As we can see, what troubled the colonel was that the refugees were hindering the army's retreat, and there is no compassion or pity shown.

The Russian vice-consul in Urmia, Vvedensky⁹³, forbade

⁸⁸ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 14.

⁸⁹ The Ottoman Minister of War, Enver Pasha, initiated an operation around the city of Sarighamish, which ultimately aimed to capture the Transcaucasus (09.12.1914-05.01.1915). As a result, the Ottoman 3rd Army was almost completely destroyed.

⁹⁰ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 14 back.

⁹¹ Shedd William Ambrose (1865-1918), an American Presbyterian missionary (Presbyterian Board of Foreign Mission). U.S. Consul in Urmia (1918).

⁹² SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 14. Khosroyeva 2004: 77.

⁹³ Vvedensky Pavel Petrovich (1880-1938). Vice-consul of Urmia and Khoy (1914-1915).

the Assyrians from evacuating to ensure the smooth retreat of the Russian troops. As a result, a large number of civilians died.⁹⁴ In effect, the diplomat sacrificed his natural ally, the Assyrians, for state interests. As a result, 1,000 people were massacred in Urmia, 2,000 died from hunger and disease, and about 15,000 sought refuge in the American missionary mission.⁹⁵

After crushing the enemy at Sarighamish, the Azerbaijani detachment began to retake the lost territories. Poltavtsev reports that in the Dilman region, the Turks gathered about 1,000 Armenians and Assyrians for fortification work, and when the Russian Cossack units began to approach the city, they were all brutally massacred.⁹⁶

Citing Turkish eyewitnesses, the colonel reports how the Christians were dealt with. First, they were beheaded, and their bodies were thrown into a well. However, finding this method of killing “ineffective,” they “stood everyone in a line facing the wall with their hands tied and smashed their heads with pickaxes. When the Cossacks approached, fearing they couldn’t kill everyone, they gathered them all into a pile and struck them with pickaxes wherever they could. Nevertheless, a few survived”.⁹⁷

The retreat of the Azerbaijani detachment was stopped by an order from the Viceroy, who had been alerted by Hakob Zavryan (Yakov Zavriev), a doctor with the 1st Armenian Druzhina and one of the initiators of the volunteer movement.⁹⁸ Nazarbekyan received an order to return to Khoy and defend the city. During the retreat, Simko went over to the Turks. From the front line, it was reported that Simko had been seen on the Turkish side, with the Order of St. Stanislaus on his chest.⁹⁹

After a series of successful battles, the Russian army recaptured Tabriz and “dealt with the Turkish sympathizers”.¹⁰⁰ After these victories, Simko, seeing that the scales had tipped in favor of the Russians, presented himself to General Chernozubov, who sent him to Tiflis.¹⁰¹ Vvedensky came to Simko’s defense, ordering that he be treated with respect, regardless of the fact that Simko’s men had participated in the massacre of Christians in the Salmast province.¹⁰² It should be noted that Vvedensky was suspected of bribery.¹⁰³ There were also doubts about Abdurrezak, who was later sent to Yekaterinodar (now Krasnodar).

⁹⁴ Genis 2003: 38.

⁹⁵ Genis 2003: 39.

⁹⁶ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 15 back.

⁹⁷ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 16.

⁹⁸ See his biography: Sahakyan 2025: 23.

⁹⁹ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 15.

¹⁰⁰ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 15 back.

¹⁰¹ In fact, Simko was saved from the revenge of the Armenians, as well as the Assyrians. The Kurdish chieftain had been “imprisoned” in a hotel in Tbilisi; Faris 2022: 102-103.

¹⁰² Genis 2003: 43.

¹⁰³ Genis 2003: 52-54.

After recovering the lost territories, the Azerbaijani detachment did not undertake any operations until April 10. On the same day, General Chernozubov ordered an enhanced reconnaissance mission to be conducted south of Dilman and west of Khoy. On April 10, 1915, by his order, the forces in the Dilman region were reinforced with the 6th Caucasian Rifle Regiment and a battalion from the 8th Caucasian Rifle Regiment.¹⁰⁴

The reconnaissance conducted to the west of the Russians ran into a small Turkish force. To the south, however, superior Turkish forces forced the reconnaissance detachment to retreat.¹⁰⁵ It turned out that the “unexpected” opponent was the Gallipoli composite division under the command of Halil Bey.¹⁰⁶ The division’s month-long march from Constantinople had escaped the notice of Russian intelligence. In Poltavtsev’s estimation, it was one of the best Turkish divisions.¹⁰⁷



Halil Kut

As we noted in the previous article, Colonel Poltavtsev worked to underestimate not only the military talent of his direct superior, Major General T. Nazarbekyan, but also the bravery of the Russian soldiers and Armenian volunteers, which was demonstrated during the Battle of Dilman. The colonel does not even mention who commanded the battle from April 16-18, 1915, nor the role of the 1st Armenian Volunteer Druzhina. He makes no hint that, thanks to the victory, Transcaucasia was saved from a Turkish invasion. It is likely that in emigration, he considered it superfluous to mention Nazarbekyan’s role. This likely validates the suspicions that he was a Turkish agent¹⁰⁸.

Poltavtsev contents himself with only noting that the enemy suffered heavy losses but praises the Turks for their ability to skillfully evade pursuit.¹⁰⁹

The victory caused panic among the German community in Tehran. The gendarmerie, the Persian Cossack Brigade, and Armenian self-defense detachments were stationed in the capital. On April 18, the panic was so great that some of the Germans preferred to spend the night at the American diplomatic mission in Tehran. The German ambassador and envoy even asked the Shah for protection.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 15.

¹⁰⁵ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 16.

¹⁰⁶ Halil Kut (Halil Pasha, 1882-1957), Ottoman Turkish military commander and politician. One of the organizers of the Armenian Genocide. He also crossed into neighboring Persia and massacred Armenians, Assyrians, and Persians.

¹⁰⁷ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 16 back.

¹⁰⁸ Sahakyan 2016: 210-215.

¹⁰⁹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 16.

¹¹⁰ International relations in the era of imperialism. Series III. 1935: 319.



Sultan Ahmad Shah (1898 - 1930)
- the last Shah of Iran from the
Qajar dynasty (1909-1925).

After defeating Halil, T. Nazarbekyan was ordered to pursue the enemy. The brigade crossed from Atropatene into the Ottoman Empire, into the province of Vaspurakan, and encamped near the city of Van.¹¹¹

Atropatene in 1917-1918

From June 10, 1915, Colonel Poltavtsev participated in military operations in Western Armenia. On June 3, 1917, he was transferred to the 7th Caucasian Army Corps stationed in Atropatene as its senior quartermaster¹¹²¹¹³. The corps was commanded by Lieutenant General Vadbolsky¹¹⁴, who had previously headed the Persian Cossack Brigade. Its chief of staff was Major General H. Hakhverdyan¹¹⁵. The corps was composed of several units, including the Caucasian Combined Infantry Division commanded by Major General Karpov¹¹⁶, the 4th

Caucasian Cossack Division, the 4th Kuban Cossack Division, the 2nd and 3rd Trans-Baikal Cossack Brigades, the 1st Border Cavalry Regiment, a separate light artillery division, the Urmia Flotilla, the 2nd Kars Infantry Regiment, the 1st Border Infantry Regiment, the Georgian Infantry Regiment, the Armenian Brigade (3 battalions), and the 1st Assyrian Battalion.¹¹⁷

Poltavtsev reports that the formation of an Assyrian militia battalion had begun, commanded by Agha Petros.¹¹⁸ The colonel claims that Agha Petros was a criminal who had fled the United States.¹¹⁹

¹¹¹ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 16 back.

¹¹² A high-ranking officer who chooses the route of the army, the escorts, and the placement of the army in the camp.

¹¹³ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 16 back.

¹¹⁴ Vadbolsky Nikolai Petrovich (1869-1944), Lieutenant General (06.12.1915). Chief of the Persian Cossack Brigade (1909-1914). Commander of the 7th Caucasian Army Corps (from 25.04.1917).

¹¹⁵ Hakhverdyan Hovhannes (Hakhverdov Ivan, 1873-1931), Major General of the Russian Army (21.06.1916), Lieutenant General of the Armenian Army (1919). Chief of Staff of the 7th Caucasian Army Corps (renamed the 2nd Caucasian Army Corps, 20.02.-24.06.1917). Minister of War of the Republic of Armenia (15.07.1918-04.1919). Assistant to the Minister of War (Deputy, 05.1920-11.1920).

¹¹⁶ Karpov Vladimir Kirillovich (1864-after 1931), Lieutenant General (02.04.1917). Commander of the Caucasian Combined Infantry Division (02.04.-12.08.1917). Acting Commander of the 7th Caucasian Separate Corps (12.01-19.04.1918).

¹¹⁷ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 17 back.

¹¹⁸ Agha Petros (Petros Elia Bazits, 1880-1932): Commander of the Assyrian militia units. Freelance translator at the Russian Consulate in Urmia.

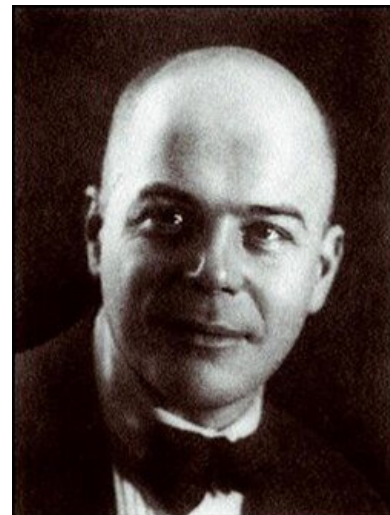
¹¹⁹ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 17.

According to Poltavtsev's assessment, nothing out of the ordinary had occurred in Atropatene during his two-year absence.¹²⁰ Military operations were mainly confined to the southern part of the province. Most of the warlike Kurds had left, and those who remained had submitted to the Russians. From January 31, 1916, navigation was organized on Lake Urmia and Lake Van. The Urmia Flotilla consisted of 22 military and cargo ships and boats of various capacities. As of January 3, 1917, the flotilla's commander was Captain II Rank Dmitry Ivanov, with three officers and 110 sailors and senior enlisted personnel under his command.¹²¹

The colonel notes that there was a large number of Armenian and Assyrian refugees from the Ottoman Empire in Atropatene, most of whom were in an extremely poor state. Poltavtsev complains that the refugees, taking advantage of the protection of Christian representatives, were harassing the Tatars.¹²² In reality, the former refugees simply wanted to reclaim their plundered property.



A. F. Kerensky



V. B. Shklovsky

The situation changed drastically after the February Revolution of 1917.¹²³ The laws adopted by the Petrograd Soviet and later the Provisional Government undermined military discipline. Military councils—committees—were organized in the troops, which effectively controlled the commanders' actions and orders. According to Poltavtsev's testimony: "The corps committee had the right to interfere with economic operations and orders, demanded the removal of certain superiors, and made sure that superiors did not use cars for personal purposes...".¹²⁴ The collapse of discipline led to a situation in June 1917 where military masses looted shops, and it was impossible to stop them. The only positive aspect was that the banditry was not accompanied by human casualties.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 16 back.

¹²¹ Chernikov 1999: 97.

¹²² SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 17.

¹²³ Order of the Petrograd Soviet 1917: No. 1. 1917; Declaration of the Rights of a Soldier. 1917.

¹²⁴ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 18.

¹²⁵ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 18.

In his previous memoirs, Poltavtsev had spoken with praise about the military committees established in Armenian units, which, unlike the Russian ones, did not interfere with command orders.¹²⁶

On June 18, an attack along the entire front began by order of the corps commander. This coincided with the Russian offensive on the Eastern Front, known as the “Kerensky Offensive”¹²⁷ or the “Summer Offensive”.¹²⁸ As on the European front, the offensive on the Asian front ended unsuccessfully.

Initially, the attack in Atropatene was quite successful. The Assyrian battalion pushed back the Turks, but the 1st Border Infantry Regiment, which was supposed to perform the same action, did not support the Assyrians, believing the combat mission was resolved. The 2nd Trans-Baikal Cossack Brigade advanced without combat security, was fired upon by the Kurds, and suffered losses. Enraged, the soldiers destroyed several villages.¹²⁹ The 2nd Kars Infantry Regiment refused to attack, and the Georgian Infantry Regiment retreated after some actions, explaining that they were exhausted.¹³⁰

The Armenian battalions operated more effectively, capturing four enemy cannons. However, unknown forces spread false rumors that Turks had appeared in the rear, causing the Armenians to retreat in a hurry.¹³¹

On July 1, General H. Hakhverdyan received a new appointment¹³², and Poltavtsev replaced him as chief of staff.

After the failure of the June offensive, the unprecedented collapse of discipline continued. As one of many examples, Poltavtsev notes that the field service telegraph office employees switched to a two-hour workday.¹³³ Most of the soldiers were engaged in speculation. According to Viktor Shklovsky’s¹³⁴ observation, who was sent to Northern Persia by the Provisional Government, “the army was slowly rotting”.¹³⁵

¹²⁶ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 1, sheet 12.

¹²⁷ Kerensky Alexander Fyodorovich (1881-1970), Russian politician and Minister-Chairman of the Provisional Government (July-November 1917).

¹²⁸ The offensive on the Eastern Front took place from June 18 to July 19, 1917.

¹²⁹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 18 and 18 back.

¹³⁰ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 18 back.

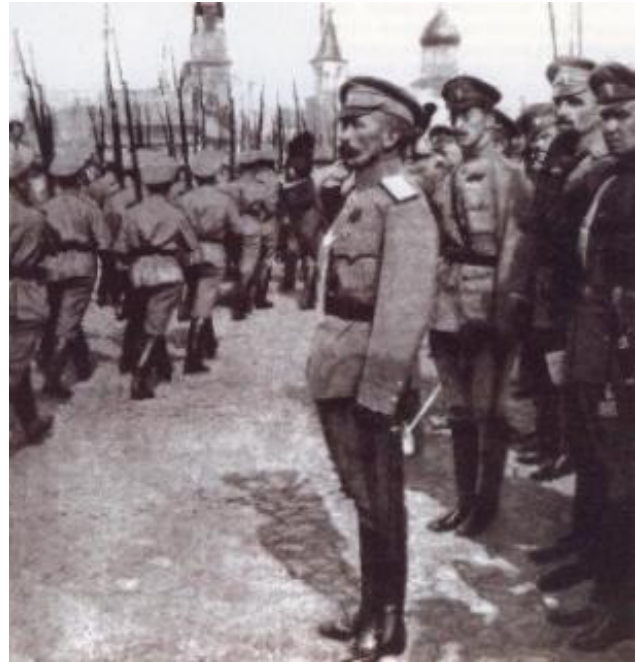
¹³¹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 18 back.

¹³² He was appointed commander of the 5th Finnish (24.06-10.10.1917) and 3rd Finnish Rifle Division (after 10.10.1917).

¹³³ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 19 back.

¹³⁴ Shklovsky Viktor Borisovich (1893-1984), Russian and Soviet writer, literary scholar, critic, and film scholar. Assistant to the Commissar of the Provisional Government.

¹³⁵ Shklovsky 1923: 125.

**N. N. Nazarov****L. G. Kornilov**

On August 20, Major General Nazarov¹³⁶ took over as chief of staff, while Poltavtsev became the quartermaster general.¹³⁷ This new appointment was likely an insult to the colonel, as he portrays the new chief of staff in his memoirs as an intriguer who disrupted the normal functioning of the staff.¹³⁸

Poltavtsev placed some hope in General Kornilov¹³⁹, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Army, who took drastic steps to restore discipline in the army. In the colonel's opinion, Kornilov succeeded to some extent in restoring discipline, but this was thwarted by Kerensky.¹⁴⁰

At the end of August, without any apparent reason, the 2nd Kars Infantry Regiment panicked and abandoned its positions overnight, leaving behind about 80 wounded, as well as its weapons, uniforms, and other equipment.¹⁴¹ It took three days to reassemble the entire regiment. The Turks did not immediately occupy the positions, suspecting a Russian trick. When they were convinced that the enemy had left for some reason, they occupied the positions on the second day.¹⁴² The troops were forced to occupy new

¹³⁶ Nazarov Nikolay Mikhailovich (1876-1918), Major General (21.10.1915). Commander of the 7th Caucasian Army Corps.

¹³⁷ Quartermaster General (German: Generalquartiermeister – chief supply officer), the highest position in the Russian and other armies.

¹³⁸ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 19 back.

¹³⁹ Kornilov Lavr Georgiyevich (1870-1918), Russian military leader, cavalry general (27.06.1917), military intelligence officer. Commander of the troops of the Petrograd Military District (02.03-29.04.1917). Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Army (19.07-08.1917).

¹⁴⁰ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 19 back.

¹⁴¹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 20.

¹⁴² SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 20.

positions 20 versts away.¹⁴³ Poltavtsev was assigned to investigate the reasons for the abandonment of the positions. He found that the temporary division commander, Major General Khilchenko¹⁴⁴, was not at fault, and the real culprit or culprits remained unknown.¹⁴⁵



I. V. Savitsky



G. G. Khilchenko

In September 1917, the Caucasian Combined Infantry Division was transferred to the North Caucasus and was replaced by the 66th Infantry Division under the command of Lieutenant General I. Savitsky.¹⁴⁶ Other units, including the Armenian brigade, were also transferred from Persia.¹⁴⁷ Soldiers who had completed their service were demobilized. As a result, there was a shortage of combat personnel, and the number of soldiers in a company fell to 40-50.¹⁴⁸

The so-called “revolutionary” battalion, which was under Bolshevik influence, caused a further decline in discipline. Poltavtsev notes that while it was possible to talk and reason with the soldiers who had been transferred or demobilized—those who were battle-hardened and understood the meaning of military discipline—it was impossible to reach any agreement with the soldiers of the new battalion. The colonel’s description: “They were real hooligans... They immediately introduced a Bolshevik mood”.¹⁴⁹ The soldiers would use threats to force doctors to send them to the rear as “sick.” A large number of them were sent on official business by the military committee, supposedly to bring literature to the division, and most never returned.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴³ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 20.

¹⁴⁴ Khilchenko Grigory Grigorievich (1867-?), Major General (December 31, 1914). Brigade commander of the Combined Caucasian Infantry Division (since March 31, 1917).

¹⁴⁵ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 20 and 20 back.

¹⁴⁶ Savitsky Ippolit Viktorovich (1863-1941), Lieutenant General (19.02.1917). Commander of the 66th Infantry Division (26.10.1915-12.10.1917).

¹⁴⁷ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 20 back.

¹⁴⁸ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 20 back.

¹⁴⁹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 20 back.

¹⁵⁰ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 21.

It was likely at the instigation of these “revolutionary” soldiers that local stalls in Urmia were looted again in September 1917. As before, the investigation produced no results.

The final blow to the combat readiness of the troops in Atropatene came at the end of October when the Cossack regiments, which were relatively disciplined units, were sent to the Caucasus for rest. Only the infantry and artillery remained on the front.¹⁵¹

In late October 1917, Poltavtsev was appointed commander of the 66th Infantry Division¹⁵², with Colonel Ern¹⁵³ as his chief of staff.

According to Poltavtsev’s testimony, the soldiers refused to engage in military exercises or even build their winter quarters. From this, one can infer that the soldiers intended to leave Persia before winter. The colonel complains that there were only 2-3 officers per company, stating, “All the best officers, who were strict and demanding, had been dismissed by the committees, or had left without waiting to be dismissed. The non-commissioned officers did the same”.¹⁵⁴ As a result, an extremely difficult moral and psychological situation had developed even between the officers and soldiers. There were constant scandals, arguments, and provocations. Poltavtsev observed that the instigators of these scandals were non-commissioned officers—former gendarmes and police officers¹⁵⁵—who, in this way, sought to ensure their physical survival, gain the favor of the soldiers, and avoid persecution.¹⁵⁶

At that time, the influence of the Bolsheviks was gradually growing in the army. However, the army corps committee and the commissar declared themselves to be Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs) and worked to control the situation and prevent Bolshevik extremes.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the Bolshevik influence grew day by day. By November, the Petrograd Bolshevik press was widespread in the trenches. The military committees did not put up any fight against the Bolshevik propaganda.¹⁵⁸

General Savitsky, whose relationship with the corps committee was deteriorating daily, was forced by the decline in discipline to send all the artillery deep into the rear to

¹⁵¹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 21.

¹⁵² SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 21.

¹⁵³ Ern Nikolai Franzcevice (1879-1972), colonel (15.06.1915). Commander of the 18th Seversky Dragoon Regiment (20.12.1916-?). Lieutenant General of the Paraguayan Army, Professor of the General Staff Academy. Participant in the war with Bolivia (1932-1935).

¹⁵⁴ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 21 back.

¹⁵⁵ On July 7, 1917, a joint meeting of the Transcaucasian workers, peasants, and military centers was convened under the chairmanship of D. Donskoy, the military and naval commissar of the Transcaucasian Special Committee, where it was decided to dismiss all gendarmerie and police officers from service, strip them of their ranks, and send them to the active army as privates. See: Sahakyan, Sargsyan 2019: 91.

¹⁵⁶ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 21 back.

¹⁵⁷ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 21 back.

¹⁵⁸ Faris 2022: 130.

Dilman and Khoy. In Poltavtsev's opinion, this was an unnecessary decision, as the artillery was not in any danger.¹⁵⁹ However, subsequent events showed that the commander's decision was appropriate.

In late December, delegates from the 261st Akhulginsky Infantry Regiment came to Poltavtsev and demanded to be pulled from their positions, arguing that their continued presence there was meaningless. Even the military committee couldn't influence their decision. Under Bolshevik influence, the 269th Groznensky Infantry Regiment chose new commanders, disregarding rank and military title. This action was called "democratization"¹⁶⁰. Poltavtsev's assessment: "The Bolshevik agents did their work".¹⁶¹

The chief of staff of the 66th Infantry Division, Colonel Ern, and the corps commissar went to Mosul to conclude an armistice with the Turks.¹⁶² The delegates negotiated with the chief of staff of the Turkish army corps, a German major, who informed them about the peace negotiations in Brest-Litovsk¹⁶³ between Soviet Russia and the countries of the Quadruple Alliance, which the troops and command stationed in Northern Persia were completely unaware of.¹⁶⁴

On December 25, the order to retreat was received. At the same time, General Lebedinsky¹⁶⁵ took command of the Caucasian Front. In Urmia, Poltavtsev took charge of forming a military detachment from Armenians and Assyrians. From the beginning, he questioned the combat qualities of these national units, calling them "gangs" that would be difficult to fight with. In these conditions, the Kurds and Tatars became more active. The latter attacked Armenian settlements, damaging telegraph lines and the railroad. At the same time, delegates, probably Bolsheviks, arrived and tried to take the 66th Division to Tiflis, supposedly to protect the "conquests" of the revolution.¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 22 back.

¹⁶⁰ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 22 back.

¹⁶¹ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 22 back.

¹⁶² The memo is misleading or was unaware that the Russian-Turkish armistice on the Caucasian front had already been signed (05.12.1917).

¹⁶³ The negotiations on the Brest-Litovsk Peace were held between Soviet Russia and the countries of the Quadruple Alliance, which resulted in the signing of a peace treaty (03.03.1918). The Soviet government undertook to strengthen the army and navy, and Western Armenia, along with Ardahan, Batum, and Kars, was given to the Ottoman Empire.

¹⁶⁴ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 23.

¹⁶⁵ Lebedinsky Evgeny Vasilevich (1879-after 1922), Major General (11.03.1916). Chief of Staff of the 7th Caucasian Army Corps (13.08.1917-?). Acting Chief of Staff of the Caucasian Front (from 05.10.1917). Commander of the Caucasian Front (28.12.1917-14.05.1918).

¹⁶⁶ SARF, fund R-6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 25 back.



Bandar Abbas (modern photo)

On December 25, 1917, Poltavtsev received an order to evacuate the division with all its depots to Urmia. He wrote in his memoirs, “I gave the appropriate order, although I knew it would not be carried out”.¹⁶⁷ On December 26, the Akhulginsky Regiment, under Bolshevik influence, moved on its own initiative to Bender-Abbas on the shore of Lake Urmia to reach the main railway station at Sharafkhaneh by boat.¹⁶⁸

The situation forced the Armenians, Georgians, and Assyrians to form their own military units. In Urmia, three Assyrian battalions were formed, which, together with the existing one, were united into an Assyrian brigade. One company of 80 Armenians was also formed¹⁶⁹, as was one officer battalion of Russians. The situation had become extremely tense, and the Kurds were becoming more active in northern Urmia.¹⁷⁰

The brigade’s chief of staff was Colonel Sinelnikov.¹⁷¹ According to Poltavtsev’s information, Sinelnikov was accused of embezzling the brigade’s funds, though this was never proven¹⁷². In Poltavtsev’s opinion, Sinelnikov and Agha Petros were demanding money and weapons from him without presenting any accountability. He was convinced that these were not for the new battalions but for “gangs.” The colonel believed that Agha Petros and Sinelnikov were working together. As noted before, Poltavtsev had a passive attitude toward the Armenians and now the Assyrians. As an example, he cites an attack on a military warehouse organized by Assyrians in February 1918.¹⁷³ One can

¹⁶⁷ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 23 back.

¹⁶⁸ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 24.

¹⁶⁹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 24 back.

¹⁷⁰ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 25.

¹⁷¹ Sinelnikov Evgeny Victorovich (1875-?), Colonel (06.12.1916). Acting Chief of Staff of the 2nd Kuban Plastun Brigade (20.09.1917).

¹⁷² SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 26.

¹⁷³ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 26 back.

assume that Agha Petros had initiated the attack because Poltavtsev had constantly delayed providing weapons and supplies to the Assyrian brigade.

Poltavtsev ordered a rifle platoon to confiscate the telegraph equipment, but they did not carry out the assignment, claiming that about 50 riflemen and about 100 armed Assyrians had prevented them. According to Poltavtsev's information, in reality, there were about 15 officials and 30 Assyrians in the platoon.¹⁷⁴

According to other information, the reason for the clashes in Urmia from February 9-11 was the local Tatars, who attacked a transport carrying ammunition.¹⁷⁵ This was preceded by the Tatars' attack on Russian soldiers returning home at the Shamkhor station from January 9-12.¹⁷⁶

It is clear that all of this was led and directed by Ottoman agents. However, according to Poltavtsev's memoirs, the attack was carried out by Assyrians led by Agha Petros.¹⁷⁷

In an effort to end the fighting, a consultation was held at the home of the Russian Vice-Consul in Urmia, Nikitin.¹⁷⁸ The meeting was attended by Lieutenant General Karpov, Colonel Poltavtsev, Mar-Shimun, Agha Petros, American missionary Shedd, and the head of the French hospital. This meeting and another the next day had no significant results.¹⁷⁹ Agha Petros demanded the disarmament of the Persian Cossack Brigade. The Persian Cossack squadron and Russian instructors in Urmia were surrounded by Assyrians. The participants of the consultation decided to meet the next day.¹⁸⁰

The next meeting took place at Agha Petros's residence. Colonel Poltavtsev describes the behavior of the Tatar delegates with admiration. They were restrained and dignified, and even showed contempt, "realizing that the force was not on their side and that they had nothing left but to submit to fate".¹⁸¹ In reality, the Tatars were impatiently awaiting the Turkish army, so they did not react in any way and did not want to escalate the situation further.

The next meeting took place at the home of the American Consul, Shedd. The colonel presented Agha Petros's position with indignation and, by his own admission, tried to soften his demands. Eventually, an ultimatum was drafted, but the parties, citing various reasons, refused to sign it.

¹⁷⁴ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 25 back.

¹⁷⁵ Faris 2019: 26.

¹⁷⁶ Mukhanov 2017: 28.

¹⁷⁷ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 26.

¹⁷⁸ Nikitin Vasily Petrovich (1885-1960), Russian orientalist and historian. Vice-consul of Urmia (since 1917).

¹⁷⁹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 27 and 27 back.

¹⁸⁰ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 27.

¹⁸¹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 27.

After this and other events, Poltavtsev handed over his duties¹⁸² to Colonel Kuzmin.¹⁸³ He organized the Azerbaijani Special Detachment from Armenians, Assyrians, and Russian officers¹⁸⁴, whose chief of staff was Colonel Goretsky.¹⁸⁵

After handing over command, on February 16, 1918, Poltavtsev rushed to leave Urmia with the corps staff. Arriving at Gyulman-khane and then Terser-khane, they learned about the looting carried out by the soldiers of the 66th division. Each of them had “taken” up to 16 blankets, 2 to 3 boxes of canned meat, and so on, so that one wagon or open railway car was needed for every 8 soldiers.¹⁸⁶

The Russian depots, which contained a large quantity of various items and goods, were guarded by Turkish prisoners of war, who, according to Poltavtsev, behaved politely. The colonel was surprised that they vigilantly guarded the depots and did not allow them to be looted. Poltavtsev, no longer hiding his friendly attitude toward the Turks, concludes that the prisoners of war did this not because they were waiting for their own people, but because they were conscientious people.¹⁸⁷ Regarding the polite behavior of the prisoners of war, it was a cunning move typical of the Turks, as otherwise they would have faced a similar reaction from the Russians. Poltavtsev was not even surprised that the prisoners of war were tasked with guarding the depots.

After some difficulties, Poltavtsev and the others arrived in Julfa on February 28. There, they learned that Simko had treacherously killed Mar-Shimun and his allies.¹⁸⁸ In his later memoirs, Poltavtsev avoids describing the combat operations of the Azerbaijani Special Detachment organized by Colonel Kuzmin. He only reports that he met him in Rostov in 1919.¹⁸⁹ Kuzmin managed to reach Mesopotamia, where the British were located.¹⁹⁰ The detachment was composed of Assyrians, Armenians, and Russian officers, as well as Armenian fighters who had retreated from Van.¹⁹¹ The colonel does not mention General Andranik’s capture of Khoy, which made it possible for the Armenian and Assyrian refugees in a difficult situation in Northern Persia to be saved and reach Baquba in Iraq. Poltavtsev reports that the Azerbaijani Special Detachment

¹⁸² SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 28.

¹⁸³ Kuzmin Konstantin Nikandorovich (1869-before 1919), Colonel (21.01.1916). Commander of the Azerbaijani Special Detachment.

¹⁸⁴ For the composition of the detachment, see Sargizov 1979: 83-84; Sahakyan 2011: 351-352.

¹⁸⁵ Goretsky Franz Ivanovich (1873-?), Colonel (06.12.1915). Quartermaster of the 2nd Caucasian Rifle Brigade (06.12.1911-06.12.1915). Quartermaster of the 2nd Caucasian Rifle Corps (02.08.1917).

¹⁸⁶ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 28 and back.

¹⁸⁷ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 28 back and 29.

¹⁸⁸ The murder of Mar-Shimun XIX Benjamin and 75 of his followers took place on March 3, 1918, in the village of Korne-Shar, where they had been invited by Simko for negotiations.

¹⁸⁹ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 29 back.

¹⁹⁰ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 29.

¹⁹¹ See Sahakyan 2011: 348.

fought against the Turks until the spring of 1918, but in reality, the fighting was mainly carried out by detachments composed of Armenians, who fought until July.¹⁹²

At the end of his memoirs, Poltavtsev, faithful to his adopted style, could not help but mention the Armenians and once again portray them as bandits. Citing Colonel Kuzmin, he reports that Yessaul—in reality, senior army officer (lieutenant colonel) Nikolai Stolder, an instructor officer of the Persian Cossack Brigade and head of the Urmia detachment—was killed and looted by Armenians, along with his wife, son, and an accompanying officer.¹⁹³

Summary

Colonel V. N. Poltavtsev's memoirs are a rare source that, although brief, provides information not only about the military operations in Northern Persia—in Atropatene — but also about the population, social structure, relations with the authorities, and more. The author's information on the decay of the Russian army is especially important. V. N. Poltavtsev speaks with sorrow about these events, particularly the consequences of the army's "democratization," noting that the main culprits were Bolshevik agitators. He says not a word of regret, however, for the Christian population of Atropatene —the Assyrians and Armenians—who, after the departure of the Russian troops, were forced to fight against the Turkish regular army and Tatar and Kurdish bandit groups under the command of a handful of Russian officers.

In his memoirs, V. N. Poltavtsev continually points to the indiscipline of the Assyrian battalions in particular, yet he considers the Russian army's withdrawal—or rather, flight—from Northern Persia justified, leaving the Christian population alone and defenseless before the Turkish regular army and Tatar and Kurdish bandit groups. His sympathy for the Tatar population is clear from his memoirs, which seems to confirm General F. G. Chernozubov's suspicion that V. N. Poltavtsev was a Turkish agent. The colonel does not hide his antipathy toward the Armenians, even at the end of his memoirs, using another person's account to accuse them of banditry.

Nevertheless, we believe that despite his subjective biases and assessments, Colonel V. N. Poltavtsev's memoirs are an important source regarding the various events and incidents that took place in Northern Persia.

¹⁹² Sahakyan 2011: 358.

¹⁹³ SARF, fund R - 6120, inventory 1, file 5, sheet 29 back. Strelyanov P. N., an officer who participated in the fighting in Persia, only mentions that the Stolders, father and son, were killed, and nothing more. Strelyanov 2007: 232.

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