

THE 1921 RUSSIAN-TURKISH CONFERENCE IN MOSCOW: 100-YEARS AGO: A RETROSPECT

Kristine Melkonyan

PhD, Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA

Abstract

When we look back at the events that occurred 100 years ago and draw parallels to the present, we come to the conclusion that the Armenian public mind should no longer have any faith in the plans of “great” diplomats for the “salvation” of the Armenian people. Moreover, we must realize that the propaganda of historical justice is unnecessary where the solution of the national issue is in fact conditioned by the realistic interests of the world’s powerful. From this point of view the Soviet-Turkish treaty of “Friendship and Brotherhood” signed in Moscow on March 16, 1921 is remarkable. It will give an idea of how the Armenian-Turkish border was drawn at the 1921 Moscow conference.

Keywords: Soviet Russia, Soviet Armenia, Kemalist movement, Eastern Front, international imperialism, Armenian lands, treaty, negotiations

From April 1920, the Kemalists established close ties with Soviet Russia, finding a common platform under the same slogan of struggle against international imperialism and presenting themselves as the bearers of the working class revolution in the Muslim East. The Kemalist national liberation movement had inherited the ideological program of the Young Turks’ expansionist policy. M. Kemal singled out the Turkish nation as the elite of a multinational state and announced that “the Turk was endowed with great and excellent qualities”.¹ Notwithstanding this, the Bolshevik leadership of Soviet Russia, guided by the slogan “victory of the world revolution”, supported the Kemalist movement, viewing it as the standard-bearer of the struggle of the oppressed peoples of the East against international imperialism.

On April 26, 1920 the Grand National Assembly of Turkey sent a letter signed by Kemal to Vladimir Lenin, chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of Russia. The letter expressed a desire to establish permanent relations between the two countries and to fight against imperialists together.² Kemal asked Soviet Russia to provide Turkey with “first aid” in gold, weapons, ammunition, military equipment, sanitary materials and food worth 5 million Turkish liras.³ The letter also outlined the main principles of the foreign policy of the Ankara government - Turkey is independent, the Turkish state includes indisputably Turkish territories, Arabia and Syria are declared

¹ Öztürk 2010.

² Oran 2001 (ed.): 161.

³ Öztürk 2010.

independent states, the Grand National Assembly adopts a decision granting Turkish Armenia, Kurdistan, Lazistan, the Batumi province, Eastern Thrace and the territories with a mixed Turkish-Arab population the right to determine their own destiny, the rights of national minorities are recognized in the new Turkish state, the issue of the straits is handed over to the Conference of the Black Sea states, the capitulation regime and the economic control of foreign states are abolished, all spheres of foreign influence are eliminated.⁴

It is clear that all the principles mentioned in the letter were acceptable to Soviet Russia: the Kemalist government's attitude towards foreign countries in many respects brought Turkey closer to Soviet Russia, which was in severe conflict with imperialist states. Naturally, what interests us most here is the part of the letter that refers to Armenia. According to Kemal's letter, the Grand National Assembly would give Western Armenia the right to decide its own destiny. But it was a deception, because the Kemalists had already declared Western Armenia an integral part of Turkey in their "National Covenant". Seeing the "goodwill" of the Bolshevik Russia, Ankara sent a letter to Moscow a few days later containing the following lines: "If the Soviet forces intend to launch military operations against Georgia or force Georgia to join the union through diplomatic influence and to expel the English from the Caucasus, the Turkish government undertakes the military action against imperialist Armenia...".⁵

Although the Soviet government assured that the Republic of Armenia would be protected, it strongly demanded that Armenia renounce the Treaty of Sèvres. Moreover, it provided economic and military assistance to the Turkish leader, who was making belligerent statements and was preparing for war against Armenia. The leaders of Azerbaijan which was sovietized at the end of April made "fiery" Bolshevik statements against the Republic of Armenia. From the point of view of modern political science and historiography, no empirical thinker or theorist can doubt that the foundations of Soviet Russia, especially that of Eastern policy, should be sought in the false theory of securing the "victory of the world revolution", even if it was achieved at the cost of violation of the vital interests of peoples, in this case the Armenian people, at the cost of trading their homeland.

There were calls for the physical destruction of Armenia during the Congress of the peoples of the East that took place in Baku on September 1-7, 1920.⁶ Zinovyev, Kamenev and Radek, leading employees of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) Party participated in the Congress and coordinated its work. Inspired by the threats against Armenians that sounded from the rostrum of the Congress and by the calls "to destroy imperialist Armenia" and convinced that the Republic of Armenia stood before the Kemalists alone, the Kemalists who had received a large amount of weapons and ammunition, as well as huge financial means from

⁴ Oran 2001 (ed.): 161.

⁵ Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, inv. 3, folder 2, f. 1, p. 11

⁶ First congress of the peoples of the East 1920.

Soviet Russia, waged a war against the Republic of Armenia at the end of September, 1920. Attacking Armenia Kyazım Karabekir Pasha, the commander of the Eastern Front, openly stated that his goal was to deliver the last deadly blow to the Armenian people and Kemal asserted that the goal of that war was to “destroy the Armenian army and the Armenian state...”.⁷

In November-December 1920, Soviet rule was established in the territory of the Republic of Armenia which had not been occupied by Turkey. However, the representatives of the former government that had lost power in the Republic signed a treaty with the Kemalists in Alexandropol on December 2, 1920. According to that treaty Turkey annexed from Armenia Kars and Ardahan that were part of the Russian Empire in 1878, the districts of Kaghzvan, Olti, Ardivin, the province of Surmalu with the city of Igdir, including Mount Ararat, the symbol of the existence of the Armenian people. With that treaty Turkey also separated from Armenia the regions of Nakhijevan, Sharur and Shahtakht, located in its center. The internal affairs and foreign relations of the rest of Armenia were under the control of the Kemalist state.⁸ That treaty had no legal force because the power was factually in the hands of the Bolsheviks.

Moreover, the new political situation in the region created by the sovietization of Armenia forced Moscow to make adjustments to the Soviet Eastern policy. In the report of December 3, 1920 addressed to the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) Party, G. Chicherin, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the RSFSR government noted: “If we do not provide diplomatic assistance to Soviet Armenia, it will disappoint the supporters of the Soviet government everywhere”.⁹ He considered it necessary to “moderate the demands of the Turks towards Armenia” and continue to insist on the independence of some parts of Western Armenia.¹⁰ Furthermore, with the sovietization of Armenia, the issue of convening a new Soviet-Turkish conference became urgent.

If after the sovietization of Armenia the Russian government repeatedly stressed the need to convene a Russian-Turkish conference as soon as possible and was worried that the Kemalists might “throw themselves into the arms of the Entente” at any moment, the Turks were in no hurry. According to British documents, on January 30, 1921 Jemal Pasha, one of the leaders of the Young Turks, telegraphed Enver telling the latter to find out from the British through the Afghans whether the rumors that Kemal had issued an ultimatum demanding the return of Kars were true and what were the relations between the Kemalists and Russia. This was followed by the response of the British that the Turks were faced with a choice: to choose the allied states or Russia.¹¹ As for the issue of Kars, the British diplomats were silent about it, which proves that

⁷ Kemal 1932: 102.

⁸ Hakobyan 2007: 19.

⁹ Khachatryan 2010: 36.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Documents on British Foreign Policy 1967: 299.

official London was not concerned about the issue of Armenian territories and their main goal was to win over M. Kemal.

Meanwhile, the Kemalists, seeking to gain time and following the developments, were taking steps to obtain the necessary guarantees from the Russian authorities to resolve the Armenian question in their favor before the official opening of the conference.

The Turkish delegation appointed to the Russian-Turkish conference, headed by Yusuf Kemal, the People's Commissar of Economy of the Kemalist Government, held preliminary talks in Kars with Budu Mdivani, the representative of Soviet Russia, on their way to Moscow in January 1921. From the memorandum addressed to G. Chicherin on January 30, 1921 by Ahmed Mukhtar, acting Foreign Minister of the Kemalist government, it becomes clear that the Turks had achieved some success in the negotiations. Mukhtar mentioned: "Your representative has officially confirmed on behalf of the RSFSR that territorial concessions from Turkey to Armenia are out of the question... Therefore, there are no serious obstacles that could complicate the Moscow talks".¹² After the talks with the Turks, in his letter sent to Orjonikidze from Kars on January 20, Mdivani wrote: "It is true that we have to take care of Soviet Armenia, but it is no less true that we have to flatter the Turks as well and at the moment, that side of the issue is more important".¹³ Mdivani expressed concern that there were conflicting views on the issue in Moscow. He wrote: "If Stalin and Lenin are telling me that one should not argue with the Turks about Kars, it turns out that Chicherin has demanded Van and Mush".¹⁴ Chicherin's demand to the Turks became known to Stalin as well and he hurried to share his concerns with V. Lenin.¹⁵

Neither did the Turkish delegation waste time after arriving in Moscow. On February 23, 1921 the Turks met with Stalin. The details of the meeting are described in the monograph "Moscow Memories" by Ali Fuat Pasha (Cebesoy), a member of the Turkish delegation and the first ambassador of the Kemalist government to Russia.¹⁶ According to Cebesoy, the delegation expressed their concern that the Armenian question might be included in the agenda of the Soviet-Turkish conference and negatively affect the Russian-Turkish relations, to which Stalin answered: "You have solved the Armenian question on your own. If there still are unresolved issues, solve them to the end".¹⁷

Thus, the strong Azerbaijani-Turkish cooperation and Soviet Russian government's attitude towards that alliance had already decided everything in advance. All that remained was to summarize the results of the Turkish-Armenian war, i.e. to

¹² Documents of Foreign Policy of the USSR 1959: 469.

¹³ Zohrabyan 1989: 15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cebesoy 1955: 33.

¹⁷ Ibid, 67

“legalize” the occupation of Armenian lands by the Turks. That was the goal of the Soviet-Turkish conference held in Moscow in February-March, 1921. It started on February 26. It was not unexpected that no representative of the government of Soviet Armenia was allowed to take part in the talks, although the issue concerned the territories of Armenia and the fate of the Armenians. The delegation led by Alexander Bekzadyan, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Soviet Armenia did not receive an invitation to participate in the conference. The telegram sent to G. Chicherin, People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs of Soviet Russia by S. Vratsyan, chairman of the “Homeland Salvation Committee” in the last days of the conference, on March 12, is noteworthy. It said that since the Soviet power had already been overthrown in Armenia, Al. Bekzadyan was no longer authorized to represent the Republic at the conference.¹⁸ That was exactly what the negotiating parties wanted. The Turkish side in particular used Vratsyan’s telegram to insist even more firmly on its view not to let the Armenians participate in the conference. Of course, it would be naive to think that without that telegram, everything would have ended well for Armenia.

The Russian-Turkish conference was held in a rather tense atmosphere of mutual distrust. The Soviet delegation, represented by Foreign Minister G. Chicherin (Head) and J. Korkmasov, was not going to satisfy all the territorial claims of the Turks, including at the expense of Armenia. The second Russian-Turkish conference, just like the first one, seemed to be doomed to failure. However, such a development of events was not in the interests of Bolshevik Russia. In the spring of 1921, its domestic and foreign affairs situation were both very complicated, and the Bolsheviks were ready to sign an agreement with the Turks at any cost. In the existing conditions, the “heavy artillery” of the Bolsheviks was put to use: Lenin, who, according to Chicherin, “was observing the fate of the talks with real interest”, decided to put Stalin to work.¹⁹ At the height of the negotiations, on March 9, Lenin told Chicherin to interrupt the conference for half an hour under the pretext of meeting with Lenin and during that time Stalin “will speak openly with the Turkish delegation to clarify the matter and finish the case today”.²⁰ V. Lenin’s idea was realized as intended: on his instructions Stalin hastened to intervene in the work of the conference and settle the Russian-Turkish disagreements.

Discussing the Moscow conference, one must accept the following realities: first, the Kemalists did not intend to return even an inch of the land occupied from Armenia to its owner. Second, the interests of Soviet Russia in the East demanded that it should not create too many difficulties in its relations with “revolutionary” Turkey, which was fighting against imperialism. During the conference, the Turkish delegation repeatedly hinted that if Turkish territorial claims were not met, their country would turn to the Entente. And there was no gap between the words and deeds of the Kemalists. While negotiations were underway in Moscow, another Kemalist delegation was negotiating

¹⁸ Vratsyan 1967: 70.

¹⁹ Chicherin 1961: 283.

²⁰ Khachatryan 2010: 45.

with the British government in London. Lenin's "loyal comrade-in-arms" did not miss the opportunity to convince the British that Turkey could become a bastion against Soviet Russia.

Moreover, not only had the Kemalists started large-scale activities to get closer to the Entente countries, but also, on the instructions of the Ankara government, famous Ittihadist figures who had taken refuge in Europe, became involved in the same pursuit. Thus, in February 1921, when Tala'at left Berlin for Geneva, he met with a British diplomat and assured him on behalf of the Kemalists that the rulers of "new Turkey" had sincere political sympathy for the Entente countries.²¹ At the same time, Idris Bey, an Ittihadist figure who had taken refuge in Berlin and then got Kemalist shades, was actively spreading pan-Turkic propaganda. He travelled to the Entente countries calling for the continuation of the irreconcilable struggle. While the Soviet-Turkish conference was underway in Moscow, in Berlin during the funeral of Tala'at, the bloodthirsty executioner of the Armenian Genocide, Idris Bey delivered a eulogy speech calling to continue the struggle against Russia, "the natural enemy of the Muslims", to consistently continue "great Turk Tala'at's" work, which was continued by the leaders of "new Turkey" under the leadership of M. Kemal.²²

It is in such conditions that on last day of the Soviet-Turkish conference in Moscow, on March 16, 1921 the delegations of Soviet Russia and Turkey signed the "Treaty of Friendship and Brotherhood". That day is one of the saddest pages in the history of the Armenian people.

The treaty was signed on behalf of Soviet Russia by G. Chicherin, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs and Jelal-ed-Din Korkmasov, member of the Central Executive Committee and on behalf of the Turkish Grand National Assembly by Yusuf Kemal, the People's Commissar of Economy, Reza Nur Bey, Turkish politician and Ali Fuat Pasha.

The treaty was a diplomatic victory for the Kemalists, as they had already declared Western Armenia an integral part of the Turkish state in their "National Covenant". The Moscow Treaty not only finalized that reality, but also ratified the occupation of the territories of the Republic of Armenia by the Turks during the Turkish-Armenian war in the autumn of 1920. The region of Kars, the province of Surmalu, the districts of Kaghzvan, Ardahan, Olti and other territories were handed over to Turkey - 19,215 sq. kilometers.²³ The occupation of the Nakhijevan region from Armenians was also very important for the Kemalists. During the negotiations the Kemalists became convinced that Russia would not agree to the handing over of that territory to Turkey, mainly due to its strategic position. Nakhijevan was of particular importance from the point of view of pan-Turkism. In fact, that territory was a link between Turkey and Azerbaijan, Turkey and other Turkic-speaking nations. Taking Nakhijevan from Armenians was of primary

²¹ Documents on British Foreign Policy 1967: 294.

²² Sarukhanyan 2011: 120.

²³ Zavriev 1936: 8.

importance to the pan-Turkists. Feeling the friendly position of the Soviet Russian government, the Turkish side did its best to hand over the region to its “younger brother”, Soviet Azerbaijan. According to Article 3 of the Moscow Treaty, the Nakhijevan region, which is located in the very center of the Ararat valley, was taken from Soviet Armenia and placed under Soviet Azerbaijan’s care, in short, it was annexed.²⁴ However, the Turkish side was not satisfied with that. The whole territory of Sharur was separated from the province of Sharur-Daralagyaz and affixed to Nakhijevan. In other words, under the contract, a territory of another 5.5 square kilometers was torn from Armenia. Thus, under the 1921 Moscow contract Armenia lost more than 25 thousand square kilometers. It should be noted that after that Turkey had to resort to various diplomatic means for more than 10 years in order to establish direct territorial ties with Nakhichevan, which had become an autonomous republic in Azerbaijan. And it finally succeeded. On January 23, 1932, a special agreement was signed between Iran and Turkey, according to which the two countries exchanged territories in the region of Mount Ararat. With a narrow strip, Turkey was directly connected to Nakhijevan. This fulfilled the long-cherished wish of the pan-Turkists²⁵. The Moscow Treaty established the border that still exists today. Seven months after signing that treaty, on October 13, 1921, with the participation of a representative of Soviet Russia, a sham treaty was signed in Kars between Turkey and the three Soviet republics of Transcaucasia, which was, in fact, a copy of the Moscow Agreement and did not make any change to the created borders.

Thus, looking at the lessons of the past from a historical perspective, it is easy to see that in a broader, strategic sense, the Ottoman Empire traditionally was Russia’s main adversary in the South Caucasus and the Middle East. But, unfortunately, there were times of tactical rapprochement. Such were the 1920s. Actually we encounter the same situation in the present time, when for the sake of interest the Russian-Turkish “friendship and partnership” is becoming closer again. What is the actual conclusion of history lessons? These lessons imperatively demand that the Armenian social and political thought should not be indulged in illusions. It neither has grounds nor the right to connect the “salvation” or “security” of the nation with this or that country of the world. The lessons of history imperatively dictate to prioritize the slogan “The security of the Armenian people is in its collective power and powerful statehood” and to be unswervingly guided by that slogan in order for the Armenian people to draw their own state borders in the next stages of history.

²⁴ Armenia in the international diplomatic and Soviet foreign policy documents 1972: 501.

²⁵ Zavriev 1936: 8.

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