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HOW IREVAN BECAME ARMENIAN CAPITAL

Azerbaijani mosques and minarets were a distinctive feature of Yerevan's architecture on Russian postcards of the late 19th century



In May 1918, a national and state delimitation occurred in the South Caucasus, which had just freed itself from Russian tsarist colonialism, and the independent republics of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia were proclaimed. It is worth mentioning that Armenia (the Ararat Republic) initially possessed tiny territory that lacked urban settlements suitable for its capital. The Armenian National Council asked Azerbaijan to cede the city of Irevan (Erivan) as the capital city. The issue was discussed by representatives of both national councils and further considered by the Azerbaijan (Muslim) National Council in Tiflis on May 29.

Fatali Khan Khoyski, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR),

addressed members of the Council. Having informed them of progress in ongoing negotiations with the Armenian National Council, Khoyski said **the Armenian state needed a political center and that only Irevan could serve this purpose due to Turkey's assuming control over Alexandropol (presently, Gyumri)**. Therefore, he said, this concession was inevitable.

Following a debate, 16 votes were cast in favor of the proposal and one against it with three people abstaining. Afterwards, the issue of establishing an Azerbaijani-Armenian confederation and its structure was discussed (1). Shortly after that meeting, a group of lawmakers from Irevan issued a letter of protest urging to repeal the decision to cede the city. However, the document

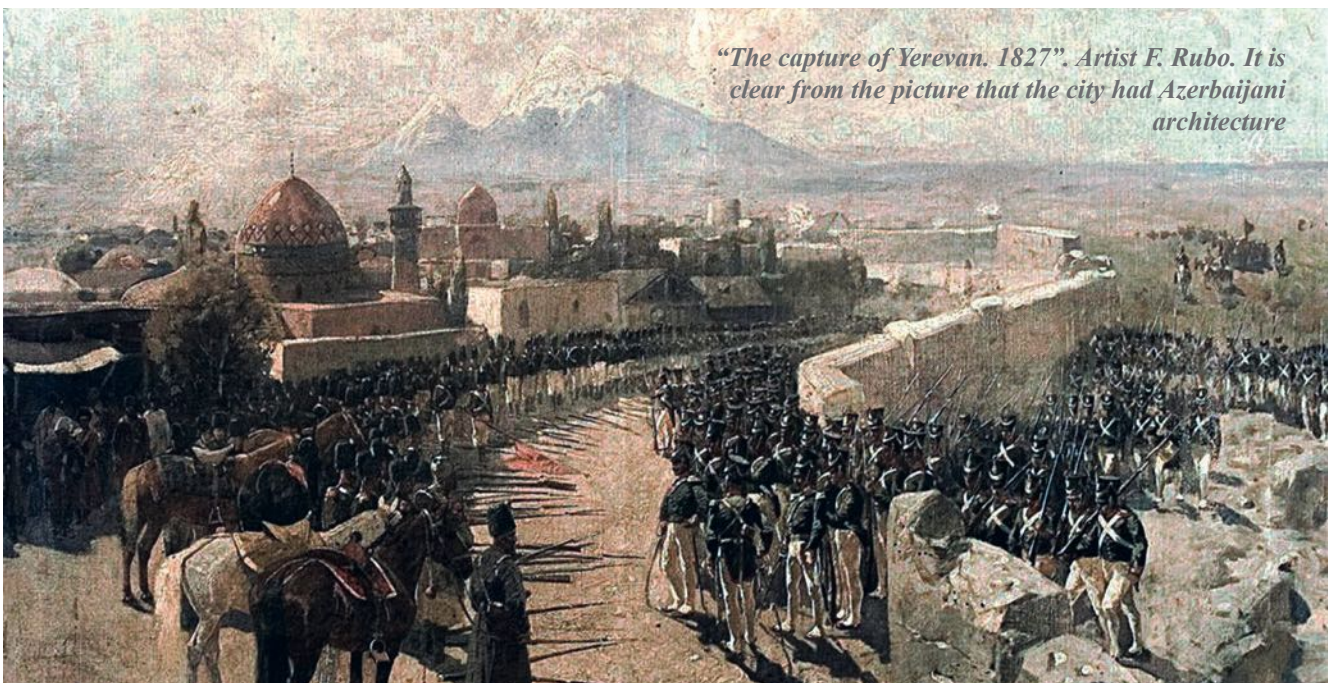
A Russian military map of 1903 shows that all place names of the Irevan province were of Turkic origin



was merely attached to a pertinent protocol without discussions during a session held on June 1 (2).

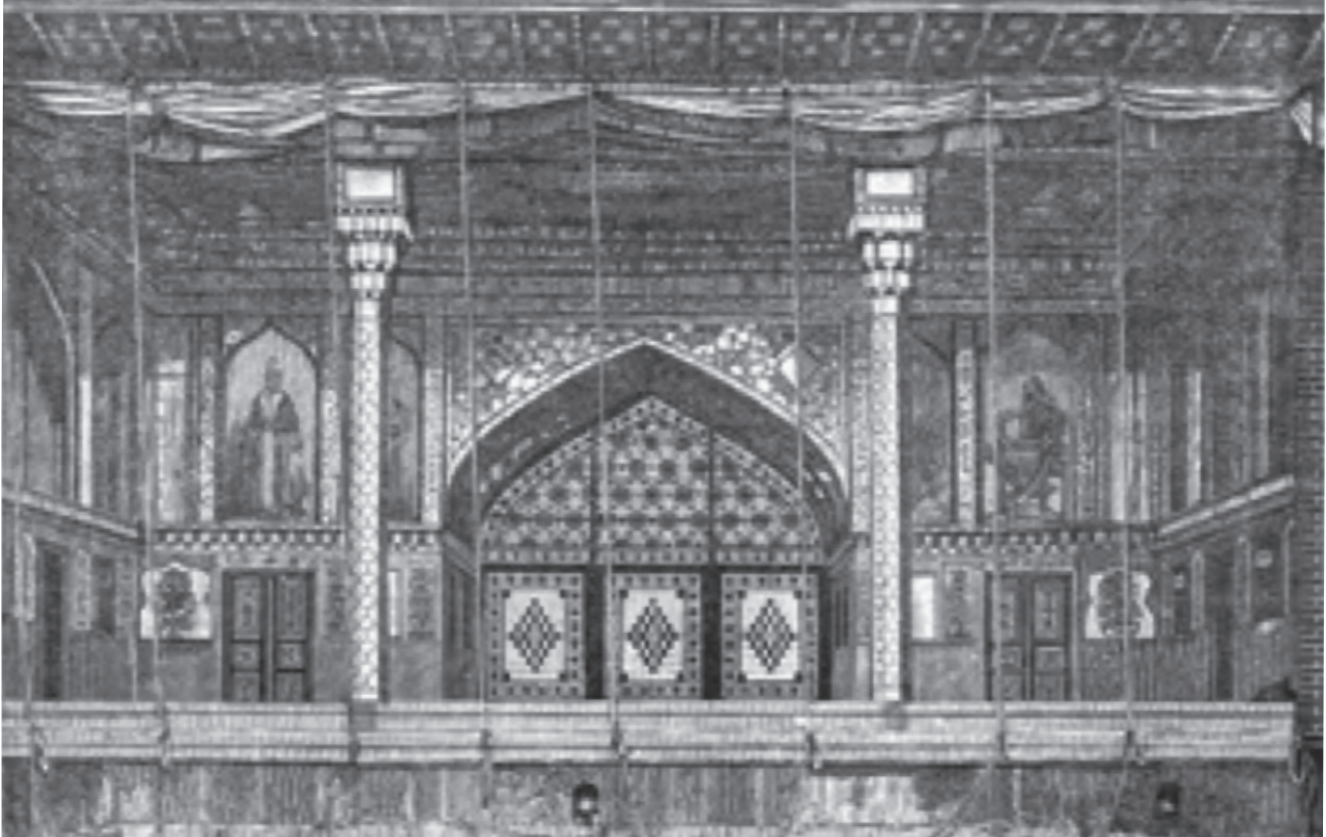
As early as on May 27, **Nasib Bay Yusifbayli (Usubbayov)**, a member of the Transcaucasian Muslim Coun-

cil, delivered a report at an extraordinary meeting of the Azerbaijan National Council convened to discuss the situation following the disbandment of the Transcaucasian Seim. The speaker said, "According to the



"The capture of Yerevan. 1827". Artist F. Rubo. It is clear from the picture that the city had Azerbaijani architecture

Interior of the Sardar Palace (18th century) in Yerevan. The palace was destroyed by Armenians in the 20th century



Ottoman representatives in Batum, the unity and solidarity of the Transcaucasian nations will be the main guarantor of prosperity in Transcaucasia. On our end, some territorial concessions to the Armenians will be necessary in order to achieve this" (3).

So, what were exactly the underlying causes for the decision to hand over Irevan to Armenia? First of all, pressure was applied by foreign states. Thus, **the government and military leaders of the Ottoman Empire, a country that had sustained severe consequences due to the so-called "Armenian issue", suggested setting aside all differences and living peacefully alongside Armenians, calling for inter-ethnic accord between Azerbaijanis and Armenians as a pre-condition for the viability of their states.**

According to a document titled "The counter-revolutionary role of the Dashnaktsutyun party", drawn up later by the Soviet authorities, the Dashnak government of Armenia concluded an agreement with the Ottoman government that envisaged ultimate withdrawal of all Armenian national units subordinate to the Baku Council from Baku in exchange for Ottoman and German aid. Armenia was also assuming a commitment to arrange

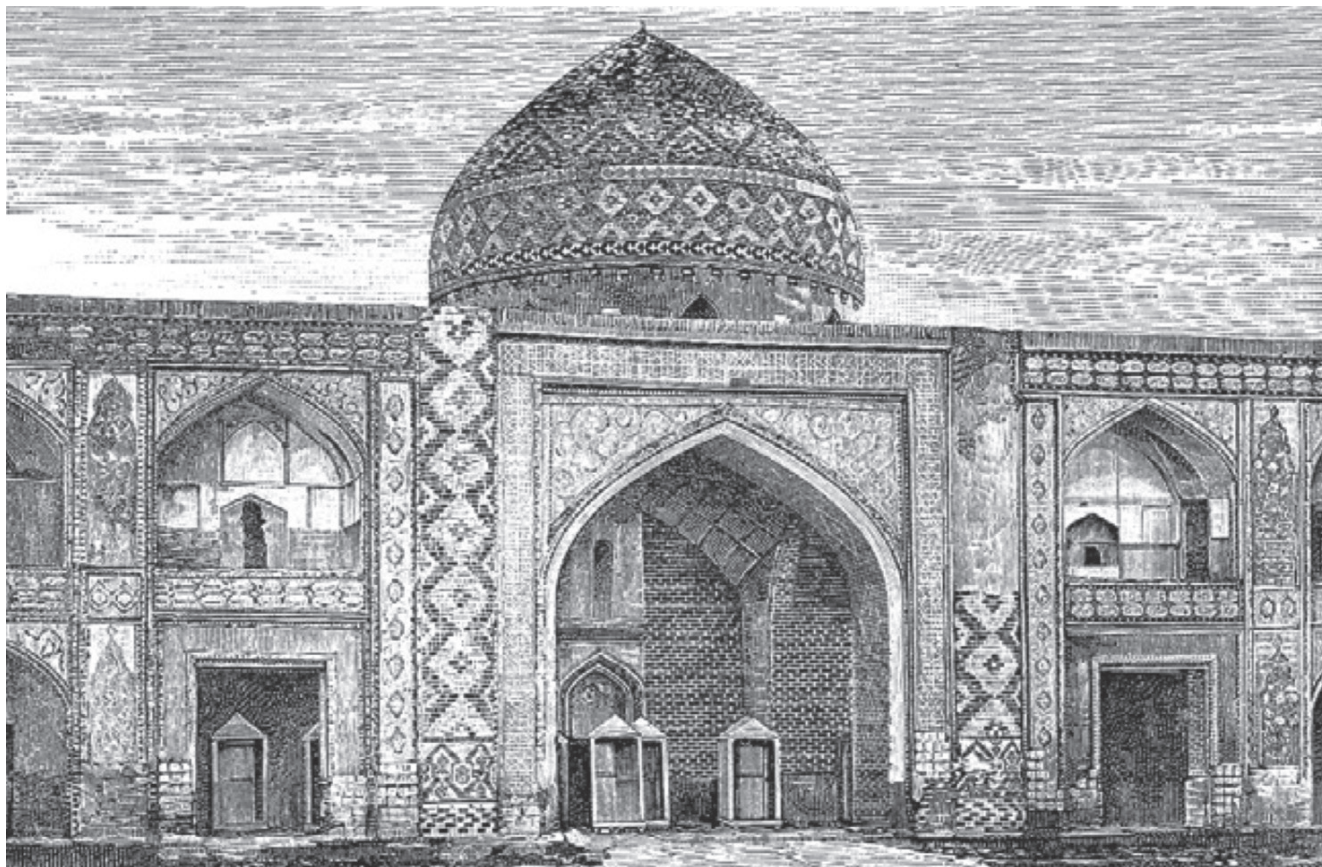
propaganda in the city aimed at its handover to Turkish troops (4).

Secondly, **Armenians were a significant factor to be reckoned with in the South Caucasus region by that time.** This is proven by a memorandum of the British government dated October 28, 1918. *"The entry of Armenians to the Caucasus from Turkey as refugees in recent decades requires a solution to the 'Armenian issue'. That is, the issue of locating the center of a future Armenia in the south of Asia Minor arises,"* the memorandum said (5).

Thirdly, the newly established Armenian state required a capital indeed. Initially, Alexandropol was considered as a potential capital city. However, Armenian leaders started to eye Irevan for the purpose after Alexandropol ended up under the Ottoman army's control as a result of short-lived warfare. Most of this city's residents were Azerbaijanis. As early as in the period of World War I, the offices of Armenian organizations were relocated there from Tiflis on the instruction of Russian authorities.

Finally, the process of establishing an Azerbaijani state was extremely challenging at first. The Baku governorate was under the control of the Baku Council, ruled by the Bolsheviks, who had reached an agreement with

The Sardar Mosque inside the Irevan Fortress (16th century). The mosque was destroyed by Armenians in the 20th century



the Dashnaks. In addition, Dashnak and Bolshevik military units were committing bloody acts in a number of other areas, in particular, in Karabakh, as well as the Guba, Shamakhi and Nukha provinces. Considering this dire situation, the Azerbaijan National Council and the government it had formed were making preparations to relocate from Tiflis to Ganja, which was designated as a temporary capital. However, there was no tranquility in Ganja either, given that its Armenian population was opposed to the new government. One of the urgent tasks facing the government was liberation of Baku, a natural capital city and major economic center of the country with its developed oil industry, which was considered to be "the key" to Azerbaijan. All these factors necessitated building a combat-ready army. However, **the development of armed forces was being impeded by serious challenges that were beyond control. Since the Muslim population of the Russian Empire was not subject to compulsory military service, Azerbaijan was significantly surpassed militarily by Georgia and Armenia.** This factor, in itself, was deemed a valid reason for ceding

Irevan; Azerbaijan National Council representatives became increasingly confident that such a move would, in fact, facilitate reaching peace between the two peoples. Nevertheless, the ensuing course of developments indicated that this hope was unjustified. **Having obtained Irevan as their capital, Armenian Dashnaks put forward even more ambitious territorial claims targeting Nakhchivan, Zangazur and Karabakh.** They planned to create a "great Armenia" spanning between the Mediterranean, Black Sea and the Caspian, which would also include the entire eastern part of Asia Minor and the southern part of the South Caucasus, i.e. predominantly, the territories that had never been part of the Armenian state.

The territorial claims were exacerbated by bloody ethnic cleansing, in particular, in the territories that had become part of the "Ararat Republic". Anastas Mikoyan, an official of the Bolshevik Party, wrote, "As a result of the reactionary and chauvinist policy of the Armenian government, Muslims, who account for two-fifths of the total population, are being sidelined from involvement in any form of government in the country. They became completely

*Attack of Russian troops on Sardarabad fortress. 1918.
Artist V. Mashkov*



disenfranchised in their homeland, just like foreign nationals. The people can only think about physical existence. The Muslims have been terrorized. A threat posed by plundering detachments is looming over them. Acting with “patriotic sentiments”, they are seeking to reduce alien forces in Armenia by annihilating them to the greatest possible extent.”

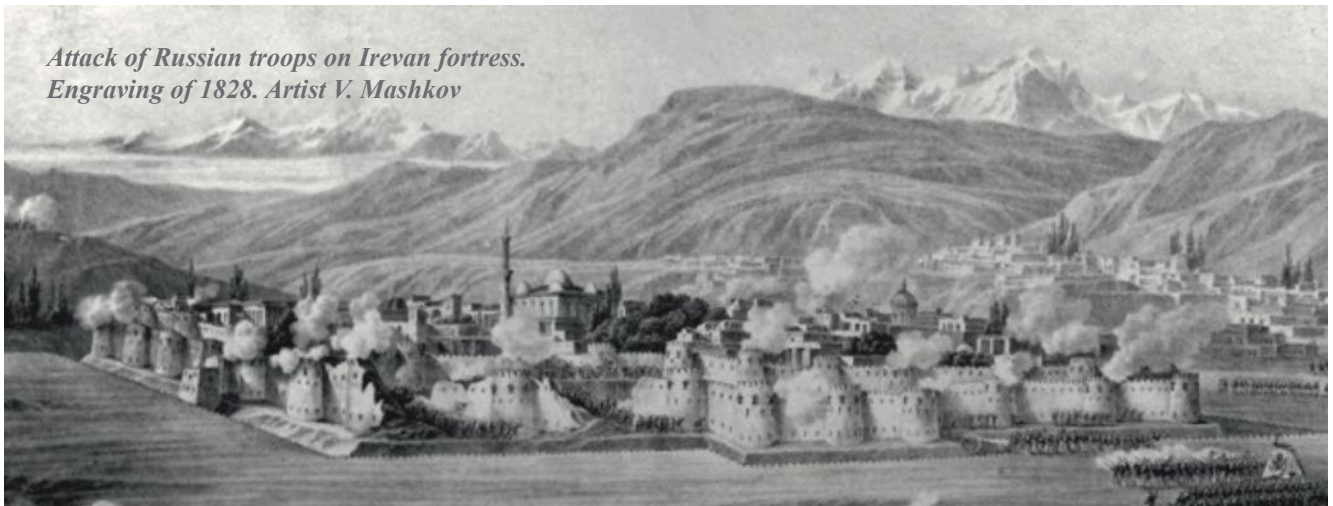
Mikoyan wrote further that **the mentioned criminal policy aimed at persecuting Muslims had a disastrous impact on the Armenian working class, creating “a deep abyss” between the latter and the Muslims that was “full of bloodshed and mutual hatred”** and raising suspicions about “a constant threat of re-

venge and new bloodshed posed to the Armenian people.”

“Such a mutually terrorized situation between the Muslim and Armenian workers strengthens the power of the criminal Dashnaksutyun party, which is materializing the “divide and rule” idea, eternalizing its governance,” he said (6).

Mikoyan also mentioned the massive pogroms committed by the Dashnaks in an article published on May 29, 1918. “Chauvinists and uncontrollable Armenian armed gangs, blinded by ethnic hate and craving for revenge, burned down and completely destroyed 200 villages with Muslim population amounting to 135,000,” he said (7).

*Attack of Russian troops on Irevan fortress.
Engraving of 1828. Artist V. Mashkov*





*“Equestrian games in front of Sardarabad fortress”.
1830s. Artist G. Gagarin*

Furthermore, a document prepared by the Bolshevik leaders reporting to their supervisors for May-June 1918 said “250 Muslim-populated settlements were destroyed in the territory of the Republic of Armenia during its establishment” (8).

Having obtained an ancient Azerbaijani city as their capital, the leaders of the “Ararat Republic”, the first Armenian state in the South Caucasus, defied the expectations of the Azerbaijan National Council, significantly stepping up military expansion efforts aimed at adjacent Azerbaijani land, and simultaneously unleashed ethnic cleansing of the indigenous Azerbaijani population in their territory. ❖

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