

**M.V. Grigoryan,**

*Graduate student in the Master's program of Iranian Studies, YSU, Yerevan*

## **“RED KURDISTAN. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND NEW PERSPECTIVES”**

*Dedicated to the memory of the heroes of the second Artsakh conflict*

Red Kurdistan is one of the strange, still unexplored administrative-territorial formations in the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, the study of the reasons for its formation and dissolution, the assimilation of the Kurds living in this region, is important not only from the correct perception and assessment of historical realities, but also from a political point of view.

The October Revolution had a huge impact on the growth of national liberation movements in the East, including the Kurds, who fought for human rights and national inequality. In Iraq, they had an anti-British tendency when the Kurds drove out the British [1, 10-11]. In Turkey, these movements took place in Dersim and Diyarbakir [10, 84-85]. Later, Kurdish movements took place in Iran, which were against the policy of Reza Shah, who called the Kurds "Iranians" [3, 31] and prescribing to the ideology of one-nation = one-language, banned non-Persian languages [2].

The problem is different in the South Caucasus, where the Kurds settled mainly in the first half of the 19th century, after the Russo-Turkish, Russo-Persian wars [3, 36-37]. Despite this fact, there is historical information that some Kurdish tribes settled in Karabakh in the late sixteenth century [6, 135-136]. What concerns to the territory of modern Azerbaijan, the Kurdish population appeared here in the 19th century. They were migrants from Qajar Iran. After the establishment of social order in Azerbaijan, the issue of creating a single Kurdish unit was being discussed. This is how on July 16, 1923 the Red Kurdistan was formed, which included the regions of Kelbajar, Lachin, Kubatlu and Zangelan. In the 1930s, it was transformed into a district (okrug) which included Zangelan, Kelbajar, Koturlin, and partly Kubatlu, and Jabrail. In fact, in this

way Red Kurdistan became the bordering region with Iran. The center of the new region was again the settlement of Lachin [9].

The story of the choice of Lachin settlement is very interesting. When Red Kurdistan was formed, first its center became the village of Pirjahan, and later the village of Minkend, then Abdallar. That place was of strategic importance. This was the narrowest part separating Nagorno Karabakh from Armenia. This part was united by the northern and southern parts of Red Kurdistan. The establishment of the center in that area guaranteed the growth and development of the city, turning it into a major hub that would, on the one hand, strengthen the ties between the two parts of Kurdistan and, on the other hand, more effectively fulfill its function of separating Nagorno Karabakh from Armenia.

Later, the Kurdish district (okrug) was abolished again, but the Kurdistan region was not created. Thus, in general, the Kurdish administrative-territorial union survived for about 7 years.

Despite this short period, this administrative unit, which was quite small in terms of territory, its creation, activity, abolition and the fact of its existence is the subject of various speculations. The Kurdish map began to be manipulated in 1918 from the very first day of the establishment of the state of Azerbaijan. During the short period of existence of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1920), the ruling Musavat regime used the Kurds as one of the key elements in the struggle against Nagorno Karabakh. The main imperative here was the creation of an inter-ethnic watershed between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. For that, it was necessary to clean the western mountainous regions of Nagorno Karabakh of the Armenian population.

According to Davit Babayan, the creation of the Red Kurdistan had a very important geopolitical significance, first, for the young Soviet state, which was doing everything to establish itself in the South Caucasus. In 1918, independent states were formed in the South Caucasus, and almost the same formations remained after the sovietization, since it was necessary to create conditions in which they would be dependent on the central government. One of the most effective mechanisms was the

creation of administrative-territorial formations, which were constantly dependent on the central government.

By creating a province of Kurdistan, Soviet strategists were simultaneously solving several important issues.

First, by creating a Kurdish administrative unit, the Kremlin had a very active influence on Azerbaijan, which at that time was the main oil-producing region not only of the Soviet state, but also the whole region. In case of strengthening anti-Soviet sentiments in the Azerbaijani SSR, the administrative-territorial formations became a very effective mechanism of pressure on Baku. By raising the issue of his status if necessary, in fact, the central government was dealing a painful blow to Baku.

It is important to mention that with the creation of Red Kurdistan, Azerbaijan gained the territories of strategic importance between Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh.

Nevertheless, Baku was concerned about the existence of the Red Kurdistan and did everything possible to assimilate the Kurds, to convince the central government that the Kurds had assimilated and become Turks. That is why Baku took various steps to implement the policy of assimilation. First, G. Haji (from Shushi), an ethnic Azerbaijani, who had previously headed the Kubatli administration [5, 53], was appointed head of the Red Kurdistan. Throughout the existence of Red Kurdistan, Turks from different parts of the Azerbaijani SSR were regularly settled there. Thus, in 1925 Kurds made up 80.7% of the population of Kurdistan province. And in 1926, they were already 73.1%. Therefore, within a year, the Baku authorities managed to reduce the number of Kurds in Red Kurdistan by more than 7% [4]. Meanwhile, two thousand Kurds from Turkey were not settled in Kurdistan.

The Azerbaijani authorities did everything possible to promote the turkification of Red Kurdistan by banning the opening of Kurdish schools, the development of Kurdish culture, and the spread of the language. The word "Kurd" was given an insulting meaning, which created tension in the inter-ethnic relations of Red Kurdistan (in general, the word "Kurd" and the use of the language was forbidden in Turkey, where Kurds were called "mountain Turks" and the language was considered a Turkish

dialect [10, 88]). During this period, many members of the Kurdish society had to renounce their nationality in order not to lose their jobs.

It is interesting that before 1931 there were no Kurdish language schools in Azerbaijan. The first Kurdish schools appeared in 1931-1932, that is, after the final dissolution of the Red Kurdistan, but they did not last long and were closed in 1937-1938. After that, no Kurdish schools were opened in Azerbaijan [5, 77]. In 1929-1938, only 28 Kurdish books were published in Azerbaijan. It is noteworthy that even Kurdish scholars in Azerbaijan were not allowed to publish materials about the Kurds of the Azerbaijani SSR.

According to the last census of the USSR in 1989, the number of Kurds in Azerbaijan was a little more than 12 thousand. Most of them did not speak their mother tongue [8, 2]. The Kurds could not find enough potential to resist the policy of assimilation of the Baku authorities. Among the Kurds of the USSR of Azerbaijan, the percentage of linguistic assimilation was high. Thus, in 1926, according to the census, there were 41.1 thousand Kurds registered in the Azerbaijani SSR, of which only 6.8 thousand stated that their mother tongue was Kurdish, 34.1 thousand Kurds mentioned Turkish as their mother tongue [9].

It is interesting that the situation in Nakhchivan was absolutely different. Out of 2649 Kurds in Nakhicivan, 2631 mentioned Kurdish as their mother tongue. Thus, out of 41.1 thousand Kurds of the Azerbaijani SSR, only 1756 were literate, and only 10 of them knew grammar.

At the same time, a rather strong economic growth began in the whole USSR, in particular, in Azerbaijan, when art, culture and education were developing. The developments directly influenced the process of national self-consciousness. The most expedient strategy became the unification of the Muslim peoples of the Azerbaijani SSR as one Azerbaijani people. People belonging to different nationalities had to be identified with Azeris and considered residents of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan was the only republic in the USSR where this could be done, since the name of the state is not derived from the name of the main peoples living on its

territory. Within the framework of the creation of the Azerbaijani society, the policy of changing the ethnicity of the Muslim peoples of Azerbaijan was encouraged, and they were simply registered as Azeris.

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