



AZARBAIJAN V. HISTORY FROM 1941 TO 1947

Azərbaycan

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The United Kingdom and the Soviet Union invaded Iran on 3 Šahrivar 1320 Š./25 August 1941, invoking an unsatisfactory response to parallel demands for expulsion of four-fifths of the 1,500 Germans in Iran. Approximately 40,000 Soviet troops entered Iran from the north, occupying Azarbaijan and Mašhad, while 19,000 British troops entered from the south along a six hundred-mile front to protect the oil fields in Kūzestān. Reasons for the occupation included creation of a supply route from the Persian Gulf to Russia and protection of allied interests from the threat posed by the Germans. The significance of the supply route is suggested by the fact that 7,900,000 long tons of imports crossed Iran into the Soviet Union in the years 1941-45, including 180,000 trucks and 4,874 airplanes.

The dispersal of the Iranian army undermined Rezā Shah's earlier efforts to consolidate or repress the centrifugal forces (political, administrative, religious, tribal, and economic) in his country, leaving the central government vulnerable to them and aggravating mutual suspicions between central and provincial administrations. The collapse of government control in Azarbaijan, meanwhile, created the opportunity for local forces to come to the fore. Soviet



occupation, meanwhile, resulted in Soviet control over many aspects of the province's internal affairs and revived traditional rivalries among the great powers (Figure 3).

Upon entering Iran, the Soviets dismantled frontier and customs posts between Iran and the USSR, and set up military posts on the southern border of the Soviet occupied zone. The de facto result was extension of the Soviet frontier into Iran. The terms of occupation, meanwhile, were set in the Tripartite Treaty of Alliance (29 January, 1942), under which Britain and Russia agreed to respect the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political independence of Iran (Art. 1) and to withdraw from Iran within six months of an armistice between the allied and axis powers (Art. 5). In spite of this treaty, however, and the Declaration Regarding Iran (1 December, 1943), which provided for British, Russian, and American commitments to Iran's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Soviet policies ignored Iran's political independence. In Azarbaijan, wartime conditions combined with scarce resources to cause widespread hunger and insecurity among the region's communal groups. The Soviets exacerbated these problems and imposed a number of unfavorable agreements on the Azarbaijanis. They influenced the trade unions, which they infiltrated, and reinforced the power of both the Central Council of Federated Trade Unions and Azarbaijan's Communist Tūda (Tudeh) Party, which, because it saw Azarbaijan as a nation and not one among many diverse nationalities, had serious differences with the Tūda leadership in Tehran (Kuniholm, *Origins*, pp. 130-213; Abrahamian, *Iran*, pp. 388-415; Meister, *Soviet Policy in Iran*, pp. 147, 654-73). The Soviets also prevented the central government from maintaining order and exercised control over local populations through town commandants, who were responsible to the Soviet consul in Tabrīz.

In October, 1944, the Russian vice commissar of foreign affairs S. Kavtaradze, reacting perhaps to apprehension over potential American penetration of Iran (encouraged by the central government as a counterweight to Soviet and British influence), asked for exclusive exploration rights for five years along Iran's northern, Caspian coast from the Russian border in Azarbaijan to Khorasan. Fearing the proposal was only a cover for infiltrating the area, the Iranian cabinet on October 8 postponed oil concessions until after the war. Despite Soviet intimidation, Moḥammad Moṣaddeq led the Majles on 2 December, 1944, to pass a law forbidding oil negotiations between cabinets



and foreigners; thereafter, concessions were to be dependent on the Majles (Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy*, pp. 103ff.; *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1944 V*, Washington, D.C., 1966, pp. 452-54).

In 1945, the United States and Britain repeatedly sought the early withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iran, but the Russians refused to discuss the matter; instead, they encouraged dissolution of the Tūda Party in Azarbaijan and, in order to build a wider base of support, the establishment in its place of the Democratic Party of Azarbaijan (Ferqa-ye Demokrāt-e Ādarbāyjān). The social bases, interests, and policies of the two parties were very different. Ja'far Pišavarī, the Democratic Party's founder, was contemptuous of the Tūda Party and its Persian intellectuals whose Western European Marxism contrasted with the Leninism of his Azeri followers. His own party, however, was even more susceptible to Soviet manipulation (Ramazani, "Autonomous Republic," pp. 448-74; Abrahamian, *op. cit.*, pp. 388-415; Kuniholm, *op. cit.*, pp. 270-82).

In western Azarbaijan, the Soviet commander at Miāndoāb summoned the Kurdish chieftains and transported them to Baku in southern Russia. There, in late September, 1945, the Prime Minister of the Azarbaijan SSR told them that neither their own nationalist party, the Komala-ye Žiān-e Kordestān, nor the Tūda Party was looked on favorably, that they should seek their goals within Azarbaijani autonomy, and that they should call themselves the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (Ḥezb-e Demokrāt-e Kordestān; see Eagleton, *The Kurdish Republic*, pp. 43-46; Roosevelt, "Kurdish Republic," pp. 256-57).

The Azarbaijan movement, one must keep in mind, was not created solely by Soviet pressures. While benefiting from Soviet support, the Azeris were partly reacting to the process of centralization instituted under Režā Shah and to the central government's incompetence, corruption, and discrimination against the province; the Kurds opposed, among other things, the government's attempts at detribalization. Thus, a concern for identity within their own communal groups seemed logical to both Kurds and Azeris in the aftermath of the Soviet occupation in 1941. Characterizing in terms of class what were primarily communal and regional differences (Azarbaijan had only twelve towns with a population of 10,000 or more and there was a substantial number of factory workers only in Tabrīz), the Tūda Party gained support in Azarbaijan under the aegis of the Soviet occupation and, when Soviet tactics dictated a shift, provided what became the Democratic Party with a ready group of supporters (although only one of nine cabinet ministers were former Tūda members).



After the armistice with Japan on 2 September 1945, open Soviet sympathy for the Azarbaijan movement, and repeated incidents of interference in the province, were protested by the Iranians and ignored by the Soviets who only replied with a renewed demand for oil concessions. In the fall, the Soviets distributed arms in key areas, and in October and November sponsored large-scale uprisings throughout the province. When Britain and Russia occupied Iran in 1941, the British captured the Iranian Army arsenal in Teheran. When the Soviets expressed a desire for the weapons in it, the British handed them over, but only after recording their serial numbers. Rifles collected from the *fedā'iyīn* in Tabrīz after the fall of the Democratic Republic in almost every case matched those handed over to the Red Army (Kuniholm, op. cit., pp. 278-79. See also, Meister, op. cit., p. 186; Eagleton, op. cit., p. 55; Abrahamian, op. cit., pp. 389-400). When the Iranian gendarmerie tried to control the newly-armed rebels, the Soviets challenged them and forced them to retire. By November 19, all major routes entering the province had been seized by the Democratic Party; communications had been cut, and an Iranian force of 1,500 troops was stopped at Qazvīn by the Soviets. By December 10, Tabrīz was in the hands of the Democratic Party; shortly thereafter, a newly inaugurated “National Assembly” proclaimed the Autonomous Government of Azarbaijan with Pīšavarī as Premier. On December 15, Qāzī Moḥammad, an hereditary judge and religious leader of Mahābād, inaugurated the Kurdish Republic (Roosevelt, op. cit., pp. 256-57; Eagleton, op. cit., p. 60).

Stalin’s stated reason for maintaining approximately 30,000 troops in Azarbaijan after the war was that they served as a precaution against sabotage and “hostile” actions. More likely, he was protecting security interests on his southern flank, preventing Anglo-American influence in what he felt to be his sphere of influence, exploiting several of the opportunities that occupation afforded him with a view to controlling the government in Tehran and, perhaps, creating conditions that, in the long run, would give the Soviet Union access to warm water ports. A friendly government in Azarbaijan and oil concessions were both means to the same end.

Within Azarbaijan, Pīšavarī played down class differences, focused on communal conflict, and with Soviet backing instituted two reforms: redistribution of non-azerbaijani-owned land (which was confiscated in 687 out of a total of over 7,000 villages) and nationalization of the larger banks. He also began badly needed work on roads, established workers’ welfare pensions, and declared Azeri Turkish the official language of Azarbaijan.



These reforms—or at least the intentions which motivated them—were popular, but economic difficulties (the result, primarily, of bad weather and a bad harvest) forced him to demand even more money from farmers and landlords than previously exacted under the old system. With a police force modeled after the Soviet NKVD, Azarbaijan became a police state. Even those friendly to Pīšavarī's rule denounced his abuse of power (Hooglund, *Land and Revolution*, pp 41-42; Abrahamian, op. cit., pp. 409-412; Kuniholm, op. cit., p. 309; Meister, op. cit., p. 256; Rossow, "The Battle of Azarbaijan," p. 19; Lenczowski, *Russia and the West*, p. 290; *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946 VII*, Washington, D.C., 1969, pp. 332-34).

On 19 January 1946, meanwhile, Iran called for investigation of Russian interference in Iran's internal affairs. In February and March, 1946, the Soviets attempted to pressure prime Minister Aḥmad Qawām (Qawām-al-salṭana) to recognize the autonomy of the Democratic Party and to acquiesce in the creation of an Irano-Soviet petroleum company; in contravention of the Tripartite Treaty, they also indicated that they would not evacuate Azarbaijan until order had been restored and Iran's "hostile" attitude had ceased. By March 2, the date set under the Tripartite Treaty for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iran, British and U.S. troops had withdrawn, but Soviet troops had not. Rather, in the course of the next three weeks, Soviet reinforcements of at least 200 tanks and 3,500 trucks arrived in Tabrīz and were deployed south toward Qazvīn, west toward the Turkish border, and southwest toward the Iraqi border (see Kuniholm, op. cit., pp. 318-19 and nn. 40-41). Subsequent developments are subject to differing interpretations. Whatever Soviet motives, and their movements suggest the possibility of a coup d'état, they were thwarted by masterful Iranian diplomacy and by firm U.S. support for the Iranian case at the United Nations. The Soviets finally agreed to withdraw, but not before extended debate of the issue in the United Nations and a commitment by Qawām to ratify within seven months an Irano-Soviet agreement to exploit oil in northern Iran (ibid., pp. 303-42).

The Democratic Party, meanwhile, was still ensconced in Azarbaijan. Without a Soviet presence, however, its authority began to erode. In spite of a tentative agreement with the central government that granted Azarbaijan considerable autonomy and allowed the Democratic Party to remain in full control, negotiations broke down. The influence of both Qawām and the Shah in resolving the situation in Azarbaijan was crucial and can be quickly summarized: Departure of the Soviets made it possible for the military to arm



opponents of the Tabrīz regime; a revolt by the Qašqā'ī and Baḳtīārī tribes in the South made it possible for Qawām to assert the central government's authority throughout Iran and to order the military into Azarbaijan to maintain order during elections (which could be held only with security forces present). In the face of Soviet threats and with the unqualified support of the United States in the Security Council if complications arose, Iranian troops began moving into Azarbaijan on 9 December 1946. By 21 Āḍar 1325 Š./13 December 1946, Pīšavarī had fled to Baku and Iranian forces entered Tabrīz. Two days later, on December 15, Qāzī Moḥammad announced the surrender of Mahābād. Almost a year to the day after the republics had been founded, they collapsed. In the process, several hundred rebels were killed, while approximately one thousand Azarbaijanis and as many as 10,000 Kurds under Mollā Moṣṭafā Bārzānī fled to the Soviet Union. Grim reminders of the regimes were embodied for months afterward in rows of bodies swinging from crude gibbets in many public squares of Azarbaijan and northern Kurdistan. In Iran, a complicated election process that had begun in January ended in June, 1947. The fifteenth Majles did not open until July, and did not vote on the controversial oil agreement with the Soviet Union until October. Then, by a vote of 102 to 2, the agreement was rejected and the issues generated by the Soviet occupation of Azarbaijan were finally resolved (*ibid.*, pp. 342-50, 383-98, 414).

See also [Ferqa-ye Demokrāt-e ĀḍarbāyJān](#); [Pīšavarī](#); and [Qawām al-saltāna](#).

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