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# The Wilsonian Moment of the Azerbaijani Delegation in Paris (1919-20)

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**Abstract** The delegation of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference fought for the international recognition of its country and for admission to the League of Nations. The analysis of mostly unpublished archival documents from the personal archives of head of delegation Əlimərdan Ələkbər oğlu sheds new light on the history of Azerbaijani diplomacy. Topçubaşov could rely above all on the tools of influence of public opinion, such as books, publications and magazines which were written in large numbers in Paris. The adoption, in Azerbaijani political communication, of languages and contents adapted to the Wilsonian culture was meant to justify the aspiration to self-determination, as other anti-colonial non-European elites attempted to do during the Paris Peace Conference.

**Keywords** Azerbaijan. Wilsonianism. Self-determination. Paris Peace Conference.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 An Anti-Colonial Struggle. – 3 The Road to Public Diplomacy. – 4 Armenia and Azerbaijan Between Confrontation and Cooperation. – 5 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

The year 1919 marked a revolutionary short-lived moment for many nationalities once subject to the multinational empires dissolved as result of World War I, as well as for colonized territories by the victors of the Great War. As the term 'revolutionary' should be understood as a nationalistic and anticolonial upheaval aimed to obtain national self-determination, find a place within the future international order and establish links of solidarity with other emerging national communities. Historian Eretz Manela focused on the Asian perspective (India, China, Korea) noting that the consequences of the Great War propelled an unprecedented political mobilization towards the principles embodied by Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points:

[t]hese [mobilisations] were all propelled by the accumulated material and ideological transformations of the years of war, transformation that imbued the moment with revolutionary potential and gave contemporaries a sense that the international order, its power structures and its norms of legitimacy were uniquely malleable, amenable to concerted action. (Manela 2019, 409)

The main hypothesis of this article is that this analytical framework could be adapted to the ephemeral experience of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic lasting from 1918 to 1920 and built on the ashes of the Russian Empire. Acting as an independent state - although not recognised by the Great Powers nor by the international community - the Azerbaijani Republic was able to dispatch a diplomatic mission to the Paris Peace Conference, seeking international recognition, admission to the League of Nations and military protection by the factions fighting in the Russian civil war. The outcome of the Paris mission was mixed: after months of relentless pressures the Azerbaijanis were able to obtain a *de facto* recognition on January 1920, whilst failed to achieve full *de jure* recognition of sovereignty before the invasion of the Red Army in April that same year. After the Bolshevik takeover of 27 April 1920, the Republic ceased to exist and Azerbaijan was incorporated within the Soviet Union. As noted by prominent historian Jamil Hasanli (2016) the main cause of the collapse of Azerbaijani independence should be found in external rather than internal factors. The victors of World War I were ambiguous towards the fate of the former Russian Empire and were not ready to recognize the new republics which emerged from the ruins of the Tsarist state. Woodrow Wilson, the US president and architect of the postwar concept of national self-determination, was very cautious towards the claims of non-Russian groups from the former empire. Nevertheless, the small group of amateur diplomats who represented Azerbaijan in Paris in 1919-20 counted on Wilson's message

as a tool of legitimacy. Azerbaijan did not only sought recognition but represented itself as a flourishing liberal democracy. The claims to self-determination were remarked with a political narrative representing Azerbaijan like a modern, secular, multi-ethnic state eager to integrate within the international community and to strengthen its ties with Western powers. Hasanli's judgement on the Azerbaijani foreign policy could be partially agreed-upon:

Taking into consideration the complicated historical conditions of the time, the builders of the Azerbaijani republic who originated its foreign policy and defined the place of Azerbaijanis in world politics and geography, strove to create a modern republic based on democratic principles and the values of a secular state. Not did they manage to reshape the world outlook of their countrymen, they managed to change the opinion of the world about Azerbaijan. (Hasanli 2016, 3)

This emphatic perspective should be contextualized. The partial recognition of January 1920 by Western powers was due more to the impending victory of Bolsheviks in Russian civil war – and the need to counteract Soviet Russia with pro-Western buffer states like Azerbaijan and Georgia – than to the Azerbaijan's internal conditions. The *de facto* recognition was a shallow success and the Great Powers retained from sending troops to help the Caucasian republics. After three months an informal alliance between the new Nationalist Turkey and Bolshevik Russia paved the way to Soviet invasion of Baku and forced Western powers like Great Britain to renounce to any influence in Caucasus (Gokay 1997). Nevertheless, during the months in Paris the Azerbaijani delegation tried to replace the weakness of the newborn State with a political and ideological challenge to the postwar international environment. The fate of Azerbaijan was dependent on the changing attitudes of the Great Powers towards Russia and Caucasus rather than on the merits of the Caucasian delegation. But the Paris conference opened a window of opportunity for non-European and postcolonial elites to be projected into the international context.

## 2 An Anti-Colonial Struggle

The prominent Azerbaijani politician Əlimərdan bəy Ələkbər oğlu Topçubaşov (Topçubaşı) and the young Vietnamese nationalist known as Nguyen-Ai-Quoc, who would later assume the pseudonym of Ho Chi Minh, were in Paris in 1919. They were both galvanized by Woodrow Wilson's ideas and attempted to gain Peace Conference support for their national cause. This process fell within the political climate of

the Paris Peace Conference and its influence on anticolonial movements. After the end of World War I groups from newly independent non-European and unrecognized States, as well as representatives of peoples subjected to colonial rule, converged in Paris, attracted by Wilson's message of national self-determination. Erez Manela (2001) defines this season as the "Wilsonian moment". The echo of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points raised the hopes of nationalists and anticolonial activists from Africa, Asia, the former Russian Empire and the Middle East:

Chinese and Vietnamese, Arabs and Zionists, Armenians and Africans and many others, rushed invited or uninvited to stake their claims in the emerging new world. To these representations of national aspirations Wilson was often a symbol and a saviour, committed to the establishment of a new world order, which would augur an era of self-determination for all. They adopted Wilsonian rhetoric in formulating and justifying their goals, and they counted on the president's support in attaining them. Most of these aspirations, however, were quickly met with bitter disappointment. The treaty signed at Versailles not only left the colonial system intact, it expanded its scope to unprecedented proportions. As the nature of the emerging peace settlement became clear in the spring of 1919 frustrated expectations and deep disillusionment fuelled a series of popular and often violent upheavals across the colonized world. (Manela 2001, 117)<sup>1</sup>

According to Manela, the roots of 20th-century anticolonialism have international origins. Anticolonial leaders found in Wilson and not in Lenin an ideological and legitimizing point of reference. Post-World War I nationalism should be considered an international ideology and Wilsonian ideas circulated worldwide. Once the delegations presented their claims in Paris the demands from anticolonial movements were met with hostility, mostly for a racial prejudice. For Wilson and his advisers self-determination was hardly applicable to non-European nationalities. Secretary of State Robert Lansing warned of "the danger of putting such ideas into the minds of certain races," since they were bound to lead to "impossible demands" and "breed discontent, disorder and rebellion" (Manela 2005, 1117).

Events occurring between the dissolution of the Tsarist Empire in Transcaucasia and the independence of the three states were extremely complex. Caucasus was a battlefield since 1914 and had been

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**1** Manela focused specifically his study (2001) on nationalist movements in Egypt, India, China, and Korea. The framework of the Wilsonian moment could be applied to other countries as well.

a field of military and political confrontation between Russia and Ottoman Turkey for more than a century (Allen, Muratoff 1953). With the 1917 February Revolution the Tsarist government collapsed and a phase of informal autonomy began for Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, while remaining formally within the Russian state. The three nationalities participated in the elections to the Pan-Russian Constituent Assembly in November 1917. In 1918, with the signing of peace with the Bolsheviks, the Ottomans resumed their advance in Caucasus, where the conflict had stalled. In April 1918 a federation of the three states was experienced, which lasted until the end of May of that same year. The three states split counting, at that stage, on different international perspectives and allegiances: the alliance with Germany for Georgia, the support from the Entente Powers for Armenia and the kinship with Ottoman Turkey for Azerbaijan (Afanasyan 1981). Three different and colliding options, which paved the way to separation and conflict. The end of the First World War led Britain to occupy Transcaucasia with a limited military contingent. At that stage, the three republics decided to send delegations to Paris to obtain recognition and security assurances against the return of Russian domination.

The Azerbaijani diplomacy at the Peace Conference shaped the contents of propaganda (the main instrument at its disposal in the political arena) within the context of the anticolonial, 'liberal nationalist' ideology Wilson and the United States championed. Azerbaijan "after 1918 was a typical textbook example of a postcolonial country ill-prepared for the trials of independence" (Swietochowski 1985, 147). As a postcolonial nation Azerbaijan justified its goals and aspirations for independence and international recognition within the conceptual framework of the Wilsonian principle of self-determination for former colonial subjects, as did many other nationalist and anti-imperialist groups operating in Paris during the months of the Peace Conference. On 9 May 1919 the official delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference of the recently established Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (*Azərbaycan Demokratik Respublikası - Azərbaycan Xalq Cümhuriyyəti*) arrived in Paris. The Azerbaijani diplomats had departed from Baku at the end of December 1918. On the route to the French capital they were delayed by a forced four-month stop in Istanbul. The tasks of the delegation were the same as those of the Georgians, Armenians and Northern Caucasians: to ensure recognition of independence from Russia and admission to the League of Nations. This meant obtaining the political and military support of the Entente Powers, which in Paris were redefining the post-World War international system. As Kazemzadeh pointed out: "The people of Transcaucasia believed that the Paris Peace Conference would solve all their difficulties and establish a durable peace which would assure their independent existence" (Kazemzadeh 1951, 253). The con-

ference had opened in January 1919. The delegation, headed by the Parliament speaker Topçubaşov, was neither invited nor officially accepted as a participant in the conference negotiations. In addition to this precarious status the circumstance of the late arrival in Paris of the Azerbaijani delegation further weakened its country's position as compared to those of other southern Caucasian states:

[they arrived in Paris] too late to lay necessary groundwork and lobby for their cause. Unlike their neighbours, they lacked support comparable to the Armenophile movement in the West or the Georgian Menshevik's connection with international system. (Swietochowski 1985, 154)

The outstanding result achieved by the Azerbaijani delegation after its eight months of work was the *de facto* recognition of the republic by the Allied Supreme Council on 11 January 1920. The Allied recognition was an ephemeral success and the Allies did not send any material and military support to Baku against Bolshevik pressure. In late April 1920 the Republic collapsed. Baku was invaded by the Bolsheviks and Azerbaijani independence abruptly came to an end. After the Republic's downfall, Topçubaşov and his comrades faced the hardships of exile and continued as *émigrés* to promote the cause of an independent Azerbaijan.<sup>2</sup> In 1919-20 the Topçubaşov group in Paris worked tirelessly to promote the cause of Azerbaijani independence from Russia. During its short-lived independence, Azerbaijan was threatened both by the 'White' Russians and by the Bolsheviks. The activity of the diplomatic mission is richly documented in Topçubaşov's personal archives donated by his family and conserved in the Centre d'Études des Mondes Russe, Caucasiens et Centre-Européen (CERCEC) at the École des Hautes Études en Science Sociales (EHESS) in Paris.<sup>3</sup> The archival sources shed a new light on the nature of Azerbaijani diplomacy during the independence period. An initial element is that the Paris mission was semi-autonomous from the national government in Baku. Communications with Azerbaijan were difficult and scarce and Topçubaşov often had to rely on his own sources of information.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the Republic was affected by political instability and by a succession of five cabinets in less

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<sup>2</sup> For the Azerbaijani, Caucasian and Turkic exile in Paris during interwar period see Penati 2008; for the 'Prometheus' movement and journal, unifying in Paris non-Russian *émigrés*, see Copeaux 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Əlimərdan bəy Topçubaşov Archive, Centre d'Études des Mondes Russe, Caucasiens et Centre-Européen (CERCEC); Ecole des Hautes Études en Science Sociales (EHESS), Paris).

<sup>4</sup> In September 1919 Topçubaşov, in a report addressed to the head of the government Yusifbəyli thanked him because he had received "for the first time" since the starting

than two years. News exchanges between Baku and Paris could only take place through the mediation of Entente missions in the Caucasus. A second element is that the Azerbaijani diplomats (all of whom were unfamiliar with professional diplomacy) counteracted the weaknesses of their political position with an emphasis on public diplomacy. They focused their economic and political resources on publishing and circulating books, pamphlets, journals and articles for the French and international press. The Azerbaijanis were poorly received in official diplomatic circles for different reasons, which went from 'White' Russian influence to suspicions arising from the alliance with the Ottoman Turks in 1918, and to the Armenophile attitude of French public opinion. Azerbaijani diplomacy appealed to public opinion in order to gain consensus for their political objectives. Azerbaijani propaganda went beyond a mere nationalistic claim. Thanks to the intellectual ingenuity of Topçubaşov, Azerbaijani public diplomacy insisted on the internal aspects of the Azerbaijani state, by promoting the self-image of a secular and welcoming country, a young democracy based on liberal values and the rule of law. In order to gain recognition of their independence, the Azerbaijanis were even willing, under the aegis of the League of Nations, to constitute a new Caucasian confederation with Armenia and Georgia, one that would restore the first Transcaucasian confederation of May 1918.<sup>5</sup> Thus the Caucasian State was ready to give up part of its national sovereignty in order to avoid submitting to a new, either 'White' or Bolshevik, Russian domination. The Azerbaijani diplomacy embraced anticolonial solidarity showing, at least on a propaganda level, a conciliatory (though erratically contradictory) attitude towards Armenia and the other Caucasian states, while the Great Powers showed little or no sympathy at all for the "first Muslim republic in the world" (Smith 2001, 228). The *de facto* recognition was little more than a symbolic gesture. As a result of the Soviet invasion, Azerbaijan, though formally retaining its independence, was effectively annexed to the Bolshevik State and later became a constituent part of the Soviet Union, regaining its independence only in 1991. During Topçubaşov's months as chairman of the Peace Delegation he adapted his reformist and liberal culture to the new Wilsonian principles. In his vision of the future

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of his mission a detailed report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an answer to his previous reports. Topçubaşov to Yusifbəyli, 1919-09-22/25, in *Paris məktublari*, 24.

**5** A Confederation of Transcaucasian states, made up of Armenians, Georgians, and Azerbaijanis, lasted for four weeks between April and May 1918. After the collapse of Tsarist Empire and Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the Transcaucasian assembly (*Sejm*) was not able to resist Ottoman pressure on the Caucasian front and accepted Turkish peace terms proclaiming independence. The unity of the three members lasted scarcely a month, as fundamental divergences emerged and war continued with Ottoman advance towards Baku. See Forsyth 2013, 367-73.

of Azerbaijan was close to democratic Europe and an integral member of the League of Nations. The Azerbaijani delegation in Paris actively and intellectually pursued a gradual integration of the country into the international system as an equal partner to European and Western nations and regional leader in Caucasus.

### 3 The Road to Public Diplomacy

The Azerbaijani delegation was made up of representatives of different political and cultural forces which, since the end of the 19th century, had led the process of national self-determination.<sup>6</sup> Topçubaşov (1865-1934) was a key figure of Muslim political life in the Tsarist Empire.<sup>7</sup> In 1897, he carried on sociopolitical initiatives as chief editor of the newspaper *The Caspian*. After the 1905 revolution he became known as one of the leaders of the empire's Turkish-Muslim population. He was one of the leaders of All-Russian Muslim Congresses held in 1905-7. He cofounded in 1905 the Union of Russian Muslims (Soyuz Rossiyskikh musul'man, Rusya Müsülmanlarının Ittifakı), the leading Muslim political organization in the Russian Empire, which formed an alliance with the Russian Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadets). In 1906 he was elected to the State Duma as a deputy of Baku province and then established the Muslim faction in the Duma. In May 1917 he was among the politicians leading the Moscow Congress of Russian Muslims and worked in the Muslim social and political organizations of Transcaucasia. Topçubaşov was appointed minister without portfolio in the second Republican government formed on 17 June 1918 by Fətəli-xan Xoyski. He left for Istanbul on 22 August 1918 as ambassador to the Ottoman government. The Azerbaijani Parliament opened in December and elected him as Chairman *in absentia*. On 28 December it appointed him Chairman of the delegation to the Peace Conference. Other members included Məmməd həsən Cəfərqulu oğlu Hacınski (1875-1931) who served as first Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic, the socialist Əkbər ağa Şeyxülislamov (1891-1961) and the journalist and writer Ahmet Ağaoğlu (Əğaoğ bba Ağayev, 1869-1939) founder of the *Difai* party, considered one of the first national political parties in Azerbaijan. In 1909 Ağaoğlu was forced to immigrate to Turkey, where he estab-

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**6** For a detailed analysis of the cultural and political roots of the Azerbaijani political forces between the 19th and early 20th century, see Ybert 2013.

**7** According to Audrey Altstadt in her introduction to a recent biography of Topçubaşov translated in English, the Azerbaijani leader during his career “shaped the emerging Azerbaijani press, the reform education, and the struggle for female equality starting with access to schools with women’s enfranchisement in the Republic’s constitution” (Altstadt 2019, 1).



lished bonds with the Young Turks and the Union and Progress Government. Since his first days as Chairman of delegation, Topçubaşov adopted Wilson's rhetoric and arguments. The concepts of collective security and economic interdependence for the Caucasian region appeared in a long memorandum addressed to the Entente representatives in Istanbul, presumably in late December 1918. The document, written in Russian and in French, is the first known official communication of Azerbaijani diplomacy addressed to Western nations. The memorandum provided information about the history, geography, ethnography and politics of the Southern Caucasus and Azerbaijan. Topçubaşov's political proposal adopted the Wilsonian argument that a renewed political and economic confederation of the Transcaucasian people would have better chances of being internationally recognized and protected by the Entente Powers. For Topçubaşov the project of a confederation and the political affiliation of his supporters were strictly related elements:

Liées entre elles, comme nous venons de l'expliquer par la communauté des intérêt particulièrement importants dans le domaine économique, ses trois nationalités forment la population originaire de la Transcaucasie, sont appelées par la nature elle-même à une vie politique commune, basée sur le principe de la confédération comme les trois nationalités de l'Union Suisse [...]. Cette idée vit encore et ses partisans ne sont pas seulement les libéraux modérés et nationalistes arméniens, géorgiens, et azerbaïdjanais. La même idée trouve encore des défenseurs chez les sociaux-démocrates [*sic*], qui veulent à présent unir toutes les nations de la Transcaucasie. (Memorandum to the Entente Power representatives in Istanbul, December 1918. Topçubaşov Archives, case 1)

The delegation was stalled for four months in Istanbul, being unable to obtain from French authorities the authorization to reach Paris. For various reasons the French government distrusted Azerbaijan. The republic had proclaimed its independence under the protection of the Ottoman Army in May 1918 and was considered pro-Turkish. France was more inclined to support the counter-revolutionary fight of the 'White' Russians, whose goal was to restore Russian territorial integrity in Caucasus. The delegation faced other problems while in Istanbul. In March Ahmet Ağaoğlu was arrested by the Ottoman government at the behest of the British authorities. On the sole basis of his journalistic writings Ağaoğlu was accused of atrocities against Armenians during wartime. Ağaoğlu was deported to Malta along with other leading cultural and political nationalistic figures of Ottoman Turkey, though no specific charges were lodged against him. In 1921 he was released in a prisoner exchange between the British government and the Turkish nationalist forces (Shissler 2002). His

arrest prolonged the stay of the delegation in Istanbul. Topçubaşov addressed British Prime Minister David Lloyd George on this matter, using Wilson's arguments that 'small States' should be treated with justice. Excluding Azerbaijan would have been unfair and would have prejudiced a balanced solution to Caucasian problems:

les délégations analogues des États voisins composte dans de même conditions que l'Azerbaïdjan - la Géorgie, l'Arménie e la Nord-Caucasie - ont obtenu l'autorisation pour le voyage à Paris et les diverses revendications, des détails sur la situation économique, territoriale et d'importants questions touchant de près l'intérêt vital d'Azerbaïdjan, vu le voisinage de tous ces pays. Il est évident que la solution de pareilles questions ne correspondrait pas à la vérité et à la justice si l'un des pays intéressés était absent [...]. Étant donné que le peuple azerbaïdjanien a fait beaucoup de sacrifices au cours de la guerre européenne et par la suite débarrassa le Caucase du danger bolcheviste, il est en droit de compter que sa voix sera entendue par la conférence de la paix comme la voix d'une nation ayant pris la vie politique selon les grands principes du Président Wilson. (Memorandum to Lloyd George, 21 March 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 8)

Eventually the Azerbaijanis received authorization to leave Turkey and to enter France. After a brief stay in Rome they reached Paris and sought interviews with Entente diplomats. On 28 May, a date, incidentally, marking the first anniversary of Azerbaijani independence, the delegation met with Woodrow Wilson and his close advisors. Wilson's attitude was "cold and unsympathetic" (Kazemzadeh 1951, 254) and, as recorded in the transcription, the meeting lasted only twenty minutes. Topçubaşov praised Wilson's role in shaping a new international environment in which "oppressed nations" like Azerbaijan could aspire to independence. For this reason he demanded American support for recognition and admission to the League of Nations. Wilson replied by summarizing the guiding principle of the Allied policy towards the territories of the former Russian Empire:

I am glad, gentlemen, to have met you and heard your claims, but the question of the independence of your country cannot be settled before the Russian question is definitely settled. Please, send your memoranda to the Peace Conference and I shall study them. I trust your claims will be validated. (Wilson to the Azerbaijani Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, 28 May 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 2)

The chasm between the harsh reality of Wilson's words and Wilsonian rhetoric did not discourage Topçubaşov. In a report sent to Ba-

ku he outlined the strategy of the delegation (Topçubaşov to Ussubeyov, 8-10 June 1919. Topçubaşov 1998, 15-18). The Allies prioritized the resolution of the Russian question and supported the 'White' forces against the Bolsheviks. The influence wielded by 'White' Russian circles in Paris was prominent. For the Azerbaijanis the most effective way to counteract it was to influence public opinion. The cause for independence was favoured by a narrative of democratic, liberal, secular ideals and struggle for survival against Russian oppression. From the summer of 1919 numerous memorandums and booklets were published, including a biweekly journal entitled *Bulletin d'informations de l'Azerbaïdjan*, which contained information and propaganda about Azerbaijan's economic and political life. The publications included territorial claims, descriptions of the republican institutions, a history of the process of independence and studies on ethnic distribution in the Southern Caucasus. Much emphasis was given to the economic profile and natural resources of the Azerbaijani State, with the aim of attracting foreign investors and capital.<sup>8</sup> Relations with other Caucasian states were pivotal. A unity of intents among states that had been part of Tsarist Russia was considered crucial for persuading the Entente Powers to lean towards independence and halt the chances of a new Russian conquest. Topçubaşov promoted political coordination among the Caucasian delegates in Paris. On 23 June 1919 the three delegations (the Armenian, the Azerbaijani and the Georgian) sent a joint note to Georges Clemenceau, President of the Peace Conference, protesting against the recognition by the Supreme Allied Council of the 'Omsk government' (ruled by Tsarist admiral Kolchak) as the legitimate power in the former Russian Empire. The Caucasian diplomats wrote to Clemenceau about the danger of a Russian invasion of the Caucasus. If recognized, the three States would constitute a democratic confederation and establish peaceful relations between the Caucasus and Europe:

Les Républiques caucasiennes envisagent leur avenir politique dans l'établissement d'une union des états du Caucase, placée sous la sauvegarde de la Société des Nations qui mettrait l'Istme caucasique, ainsi affranchi, à l'abri de tout impérialisme envahisseur et lui assurerait son rôle de ligne [sic] entre l'Occident et l'Orient. (Delegations of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to Clemenceau, 23 June 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 4)

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<sup>8</sup> *La République de l'Azerbaïdjan du Caucase*. Paris: Harnabat Imprimeur, 1919; *Claims of the Peace Delegation of the Republic of Caucasian Azerbaijan Presented to the Peace Conference in Paris*. Paris: Imp. Robinet-Houtain, 1919; *Composition Antropologique et Ethnique de la population de l'Azerbaïdjan du Caucase*. Paris: Imp. Robinet-Houtain, 1919. *Situation économique et financière*, Paris 1919; *La première république musulmane: l'Azerbaïdjan*. Paris: Editions Leroux, 1919.

In the spring of 1919 a 'White' Russian invasion of the Caucasus seemed inevitable. General Denikin's volunteer army had invaded the Northern Caucasus and crossed the lines drawn by British occupation forces in the Caucasus. On 16 June Azerbaijan and Georgia decided to sign a defensive pact against the peril of invasion. In vain the two countries invited Armenia to adhere.<sup>9</sup> In Paris the text of the treaty (defined a 'convention') was translated and sent to the Peace Conference, where it was presented to Clemenceau as a collective security instrument aimed at preserving the right to national self-determination:

Nous tenons à faire ressortir l'esprit de solidarité des peuples transcaucasiens dont la convention du 16 Juin est profondément pénétrée. Il y a tout lieu d'espérer que cette convention, dont le but est purement et exclusivement défensif, ne sera jamais appliquée en ce qui concerne l'action militaire commune y prévue, et que la Transcaucasie restera à l'abri de toute agression extérieure grâce au contrôle que les Puissances Alliées exercent sur les opérations du général Denikine. (Note to the President of the Peace Conference, 24 July 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 4)

#### 4 Armenia and Azerbaijan Between Confrontation and Cooperation

Another important issue was the relationship with Armenia. In his communiqué to Baku of 22 September 1919 Topçubaşov stressed the importance of seeking cooperation with the Armenian delegation operating in Paris:

in the interests of the peoples of Azerbaijan and Georgia, and maybe even of the Armenian, We have try not only to interrupt the relations with the Armenian representatives, but to support them and also cooperating with them. (Topçubaşov to Yusifbəyli, 22-5 September 1919. Topçubaşov 1998, 28)

As for public diplomacy, this meant representing Azerbaijan as willing to settle territorial and ethnic disputes with its neighbour. A dual communication strategy was envisaged in the second half of 1919. The *Bulletin* published news about Armenian "atrocities" perpetrated against the Muslim population, while the Azerbaijanis plied Armenia and Western public opinion with requests for cooperation towards a

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<sup>9</sup> The Armenian position whether to adhere to the convention was divided between Turkish Armenians, who were in favour, and Caucasian Armenians staunchly opposing. See Afanasyan 1981.

peaceful resolution of conflicts.<sup>10</sup> Since gaining independence in 1918 the two countries had had a series of border disputes in the ethnically-mixed regions of Karabakh, Nakhicevan and Zangezur:

In Nakhicevan, the westernmost, Azerbaijan consolidated control that year with Turkish support, driving out thousands of Armenians. In Zangezur across the mountain to the east, the ferocious Armenian guerrilla commander known as Andranik swept through the region, burning Azerbaijani villages and expelling their inhabitants. In the mountains of Karabakh the situation was more complex: the local assembly of Karabakh Armenians tried to declare independence but had almost no contact with the Republic of Armenia across the mountains. (De Waal 2013, 142)

Given the difficult contact of the Armenian population of Nagorno Karabakh with the Republic of Armenia and through the support of the British occupation forces, an agreement between the local Armenian council and the Baku government was reached in August 1919, recognizing Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and granting the local Armenian population a certain degree of self-government and cultural autonomy. The agreement remained dead letter and in 1920 new ethnic clashes broke out. In March 1920 attacks by Armenian forces on Azerbaijani officers resumed and the government sent troops to the Western frontier, “leaving the northern border unguarded as the Bolsheviks began their invasion” (Altstadt 1992, 103). In September 1919 Topçubaşov translated the text of the agreement into French and disseminated it in diplomatic circles. The Karabakh agreement, with its provisions for self-governance by Armenian local councils, fostered the idea of Azerbaijan as a young but advanced democracy, able to solve ethnic disputes and worthy of international recognition (Accord provisoire entre les Arméniens du Karabakh montagneux et le gouvernement azerbaïdjanien [*sic*], 22 August 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 4). At the end of the summer of 1919 the delegation released, in English and in French, the *Claims of the Peace Delegation of the Republic of Caucasian Azerbaijan Presented to the Paris Peace Conference*. On 30 August 1919 Topçubaşov eventually sent the official memorandum to Clemenceau as President of the Peace Conference. Topçubaşov used in large part Wilson’s argument championing the right of the small nations of the world “to enjoy the same respect for their sovereignty and for their territorial integrity that great and powerful nations expect and insist upon” (Speech of Woodrow Wilson, 27 May 1916, cited in Cooper 2009, 327). Topçubaşov rhetorically appealed to the same concept:

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10 *Bulletin d’informations de l’Azerbaïdjan* 1919a, 1919b, 1919c, 1919d, 1919e.

La noble tâche donc s'est chargée la Conférence de la Paix dans la sainte cause de la défense des droits des petites nations nous encourage à espérer que la Conférence de la Paix, de sa suprême autorité, reconnaîtra l'indépendance de la République de l'Azerbaïdjan et remplira ainsi sa noble mission de protéger et de défendre les intérêts des petits peuples appelés à la vie par les Puissances de l'Entente sous l'égide des grands principes du Président Wilson. (Azerbaijani Delegation to the President of the Peace Conference, 30 August 1919. Topçubaşov Archives, case 1)

It should be noted that in the *Claims*, as in many other official documents, numerous elements of the recent history of Azerbaijani independence were concealed or misrepresented to Western public opinion and peacemakers. The fact that independence was obtained with the support of the Ottoman Army was represented as incidental; the season of bloodshed from ethnic clashes in Baku in 1918 was attributed solely to "Armenian Bolsheviks"; the whole independence process of the Azerbaijani people was represented as a fight against the Bolsheviks, concealing the complexity of the events of 1918. The Azerbaijani propagandists attempted to accredit the country as a democratic bulwark against the Bolshevik threat. The *Claims* insisted on the democratic and liberal roots of independence. For a century Azerbaijanis were heavily oppressed by Russian authoritarianism. The spread of European values in Russia fuelled the process of independence:

In spite of all obstacles, the Azerbaijanians could not, as may well be expected, remain insensible to the ideas of public, civil, political and religious liberty, which had come from Western Europe and had been spreading in Russia since the beginning of the XIX century. Since 1860, these ideas had conquered the minds of the cultured classes of Russia, as well as of the other natives subjected to the Empire. (*Claims of the Peace Delegation of the Republic of Caucasian Azerbaijan Presented to the Paris Peace Conference*, 1919, 88)

The *Claims* went further, theorizing a sort of "anthropological" and "racial" difference between the Turkic Muslim population of Azerbaijan and the Russian oppressors:

As is proved by their existence of nearly one century under the yoke of Russia, the turn of minds, ideals, political and cultural, the aspirations of the Russians, a Slavonic race, are quite different from those of the Azerbaijanians and are often quite opposed to them. It was this difference of genius that was the source of misunderstanding and mutual ignorance. They did not understand

each other and that very incompatibility proves that the ways of the two nations are quite opposed. (*Claims of the Peace Delegation of the Republic of Caucasian Azerbaijan Presented to the Paris Peace Conference*, 1919, 111)

For this reason it was incumbent upon the two nations to separate and live independently of each other.

## 5 Conclusion

In August of 1919 the British troops abandoned Azerbaijan and the Caucasian territory. The project of replacing Britain with Italy rapidly faded as well as the hypothesis of an American mandate over the Caucasus. Since October the 'White' forces had retreated and faced continuing defeats by the Bolsheviks. At the beginning of 1920 the Bolsheviks threatened the Caucasian republics. It was not the Wilsonian rhetoric that changed the attitude of the Entente Powers towards recognizing the Southern Caucasian states but the fact that these countries were facing the wave of Bolshevik expansion entirely on their own.<sup>11</sup> After the downfall of independent Azerbaijan, Topçubaşov and his delegation continued to pressure the Western powers to condemn the Soviet invasion. In the first two years after the seizure of Baku they acted as a quasi-diplomatic mission, addressing memoranda to and attempting to intervene in the international conferences of the early twenties, as in Genoa in 1922. One of the most prominent battles they fought and lost was Azerbaijan's request to join the League of Nations, which was rejected in November of 1920 (*Admission de la République Azerbaïdjan dans la Société des Nations*, November 1920. Topçubaşov Archives, case 1). During the 1920s they repeated their request for admission, which was denied on the grounds that Azerbaijan was part of another State and lacked an effective government. Ever since Topçubaşov and his colleagues had conducted a cultural and propaganda action within the *émigré* movements in Paris.<sup>12</sup> The work performed by the Azerbaijani delegation in 1919-20 had a cultural and political meaning because it tried to modernize the political culture and language of a postcolonial state. This modernization process was fully compatible with the political culture of the Azer-

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<sup>11</sup> For the circumstances leading up to the *de facto* recognition of January 1920 by the Allied Supreme Council, see *Papers Relating the Foreign Relations of The United States* 1946, 866-8.

<sup>12</sup> Since 1924 the non-Russian *émigré* circles in Paris revived the idea of a Transcaucasian confederation. In 1934 a pact among the exiled governments of Azerbaijan, Georgia and North Caucasus was signed in Brussels. Topçubaşov was the Azerbaijani representative. See Copeaux 1993.

bajjani leadership. In 1919-20 the change of attitude was facilitated by an ideology easily adaptable to Wilsonianism. When Azerbaijan became independent, the *Musavat* government perceived independence as a necessity produced by war and revolution. The independence act was written without any ethno-nationalist rhetoric:

It made no reference to a titular or dominant nation, but defined the state in terms of territory and embraced the principle of neutrality with regard to nationality, religion, and sex. Its content demonstrated that the ideals of Russia's February Revolution and democratic socialism still retained a strong grip over the imagination of Azerbaijan's political elite. (Reynolds 2011, 213)

Wilsonianism was a natural consequence of this approach. During the twenty-three months of its existence, the Republic's foreign policy was deeply reoriented from being a client state of Ottoman Turkey towards an attempt at 'Western integration'. The Paris delegation laid the intellectual basis of this change of policy and inserted Azerbaijan into the cultural wave of anticolonialism and its international origins as happened for the nationalist movements in India, Vietnam and China.

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