

*Данный материал является препринтом статьи «Deconstructing Soviet Kurdish Policies: the Kurds between Moscow, Baku and Yerevan», рекомендованной к печати в 1-ом выпуске 2025 года в научном журнале «Вестник Санкт-Петербургского Университета. Востоковедение и африканистика». По итогам издательской редакции в настоящий материал могут быть внесены изменения и дополнения.*

*This material is a preprint of the article «Deconstructing Soviet Kurdish Policies: the Kurds between Moscow, Baku and Yerevan», recommended for publication in the 1th Issue\_ 2025 of the scientific journal «Vestnik of St. Petersburg University. Asian and African Studies». Based on the results of the editorial editing, changes and additions may be made to this material.*

UDC: 94

## **Deconstructing Soviet Kurdish Policies: the Kurds between Moscow, Baku and Yerevan**

*A.O. Pobedonostseva*

St.Petersburg State University,  
7-9, Universitetskaya nab., St. Petersburg, 199034, Russian Federation

**For citation:** Pobedonostseva A. O. Deconstructing Soviet Kurdish Policies: the Kurds between Moscow, Baku and Yerevan. Vestnik of Saint-Petersburg University. Asian and African Studies, 2025, vol., issue , pp. . <https://doi.org/10.21638/>

Soviet Kurdish policies were a product of parallel or even conflicting courses of action pursued by actors most of whom acted far from Moscow. This paper investigates the history of the Soviet Kurdish projects by focusing on the agency of relevant non-central players—especially the Soviet republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan which interacted, cooperated and clashed among themselves, with Moscow and with Kurdish activists. The Union member republics were for a long time dismissed in terms of foreign relations despite known cases of their engaging in intra-Union (e.g. the role of Soviet Armenia in developing Kurdish-Yezidi separate identity in Transcaucasia) and extra-Union external relations or even something resembling foreign policies (the role of Soviet Azerbaijan in establishing Azerbaijani and Kurdish autonomies in Iran as well as in Soviet interaction with the Iraqi Kurdish rebels). The paper focuses on the competition and cooperation between Armenian and Azerbaijan Soviet Republics in the context of the policies towards Kurdish ethnic groups pursued by the Soviet Union central government and constituent Union republics in the 1920s-1960s. To clarify the actual trajectory of the Soviet Kurdish policies I leave out the demonstrative aspects of Soviet policies and analyse more how these policies interacted with the life of respective societies, scholars, and activists. To explore the issue, I have examined publications of the time, official records in archives, and memoirs.

**Keywords:** Kurds, Yezidis, Soviet Armenia, Soviet Azerbaijan, Karabagh, Red Kurdistan,

decolonisation

Author's information:

Angelika O. Pobedonostseva — PhD (History), Department of History of the Middle East Countries, Faculty of Asian and African Studies, Department of African Studies, Faculty of Asian and African Studies, Saint-Petersburg State University; [a.pobedonostseva@spbu.ru](mailto:a.pobedonostseva@spbu.ru), [apobedonostseva@gmail.com](mailto:apobedonostseva@gmail.com)

УДК: 94

## **Деконструкция советской курдской политики: курды между Москвой, Баку и Ереваном**

*А.О. Победоносцева*

Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет,  
Российская Федерация, 199034, Санкт-Петербург, Университетская наб., 7-9

**Для цитирования:** Pobedonostseva A. O. Deconstructing Soviet Kurdish Policies: the Kurds between Moscow, Baku and Yerevan // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Востоковедение и африканистика. 2025. Т. ??? Вып. ??? С. ???–???. <https://doi.org/10.21638/???>

Советская курдская политика зачастую являлась продуктом параллельных и даже конфликтующих действий, предпринимаемых субъектами, большинство из которых находились далеко от Москвы. Данная статья рассматривает историю советской курдской политики, уделяя особое внимание активной роли, которую играли в ее отношении соответствующие нецентральные акторы, особенно Армянская и Азербайджанская советские республики. В процессе формирования советской курдской политики эти республики взаимодействовали, сотрудничали и конфликтовали между собой, с Москвой и курдскими активистами. Внешние сношения республик СССР долгое время игнорировались, несмотря на известные случаи их вовлечения во внутрисоюзные (например, роль Советской Армении в курдско-езидском проекте в Закавказье), и внесоюзные внешние отношения (например, роль Советского Азербайджана в создании азербайджанской и курдской автономий в Иране, а также во взаимодействии с иракскими курдскими повстанцами). Исследование фокусируется на конкуренции и сотрудничестве между Армянской и Азербайджанской советскими республиками в формировании политики в отношении курдских этнических групп, проводимой центральным правительством СССР и союзными республиками в 1920-1960-х гг. Чтобы выяснить фактическую траекторию советской курдской политики, статья анализирует, как в реальности эта политика была связана с общественной жизнью, деятельностью соответствующих экспертов и активистов. Статья подготовлена на основе публикаций того времени, архивных документов и мемуаров.

**Ключевые слова:** курды, езиды, Советская Армения, Советский Азербайджан, Карабах, Красный Курдистан, деколонизация

Контактная информация:

Победоносцева Анжелика Олеговна — к.и.н., кафедра истории стран Ближнего Востока, Восточный факультет, Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет;  
[a.pobedonostseva@spbu.ru](mailto:a.pobedonostseva@spbu.ru), [apobedonostseva@gmail.com](mailto:apobedonostseva@gmail.com)

Michael Reynolds argues that support provided by Russian and Ottoman imperial authorities for political actors in the other imperial rival's borderlands shaped then the political identities of Kurdish and Armenian nationalism more than cultural factors. According to him, "*nationalism [...] is best understood as a form of geopolitics, not as a phenomenon that springs from some non-political base*" [1, p. 18]. This paper follows his approach to analyse a later case of the most active phase of Soviet policies towards the Kurds in the 1920s-1960s by focusing on the agency exerted with regard to them by non-central players inside the Soviet state system – especially Soviet Union member republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan which interacted, cooperated and clashed among themselves, with central authorities and with Kurdish activists. This approach has been chosen to identify multiple actors involved in shaping "Soviet policy" by considering them linked yet relatively autonomous actors whose actions were determined by geopolitics.

The Union member republics were for a long time dismissed in terms of foreign relations despite known cases of them being involved in intra-Union (e.g., Soviet Armenia in Yezidi-Kurdish projects) and extra-Union external relations or even something resembling foreign policies (illustrated by the role of Soviet Azerbaijan in establishing Azerbaijani and Kurdish autonomies in Iran as well as in interaction with the Iraqi Kurdish rebels).

The paper focuses on the competition and cooperation between Armenian and Azerbaijani Soviet Republics in the context of the policies towards Kurdish ethnic groups pursued by the central government and constituent republics of the USSR. The study relies, first of all, on unpublished records of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St.Petersburg (SPbF ARAN), the Central State Archive of St.Petersburg (TsGA SPb), the Central State Archive of St.Petersburg of Historical and Political Documents (TsGAIPD SPb) and the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI). In particular, these documents contain administrative decisions related to respective Kurdish-populated territories as well as information on their cultural, social and political development.

Another group of sources is composed of publications in Soviet Transcaucasian periodicals. Particular attention is paid to the results of trips and expeditions discussed in them. The third group of materials consists of reference books and collections of documents on the All-Union population censuses [2-4], Soviet nationalities policy and its different aspects [5-11]. In addition, memoirs and interviews of Kurdish political figures [12-15] were consulted.

### **Soviet Kurdish Diversity**

The Kurdish population of the Soviet Union was dispersed in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic there were three Kurdish subgroups: the Yezidis and Sunnis in Armenia and Georgia and the Shi'ites in Azerbaijan. Especially deep cleavages existed between Yezidi and all Muslim Kurds. Soviet state building started by demarcating ethnic groups and providing them with modern socioeconomic and cultural institutions according to the Bolshevik ideas of socialist modernity.

Soviet Armenian authorities immediately signalled their interest in the Yezidi Kurds living on their territory. By that, they continued the traditions of Armenian nationalists which since the late 19th century tried to cooperate with Yezidis and considered them separate from the Muslim Kurds loyal to Ottoman authorities [16, p. 35]. There were far-reaching ambitions behind it. Armenian intelligentsia believed that some Kurds could adopt elements of Armenian culture, and during the rise of Armenian nationalism before WWI, Armenian writer Raffi put such deliberations into the mouth of a figure of his novel: "*I know something about the Kurds from our history. True, they robbed and exterminated our ancestors, but that was in*

*the distant past. This tribe gradually became civilised. At the beginning of the last century, the Kurds accepted our faith, their children began to study in our schools, and this tribe gradually merged with the Armenians*" [17, p. 366].

Violence in Kurdish-Armenian relations culminated during WWI and in its aftermath. During these dramatic events, a peculiar alliance of Armenian nationalists and a part of the non-Muslim Kurdish population, the Yezidis, emerged. Alongside the Ottoman Armenians, the Yezidis faced persecution at the hands of Muslim actors, which facilitated cooperation between Armenian nationalists and Yezidis<sup>1</sup>, including on the battlefield<sup>2</sup>.

As soon as Soviet Armenia was established in 1920, its leaders set out to actively integrate Yezidis into Armenian society, politics and culture. They even settled Yezidi Kurds who fled from historical Western Armenia, together with Armenian refugees in localities within the Soviet Armenian Republic from which the Muslims had been expelled [18, p. 9]. Thus, the majority of Soviet Yezidi Kurds lived then in Talin, Aparan and Ashtarak regions of Armenia, compactly or mixed with Armenians [19, p. 20]. Among other most visible measures was an attempt to introduce – as part of all-Union literacy programmes – the Armenian letters-based alphabet for the Kurdish language. It was done promptly, in 1921, after the Soviet government was stabilised in Armenia [20, p.24-25]. The Armenian focus on Yezidis squared with the Bolshevik ideology: the Yezidis were preferred because of their socially marginalised status [6, p. 292].

Yerevan's policy collided with the standing of central Soviet authorities. The latter had their own experts and academic and policy-making centres which were commissioned to design nationalities policies. The key role was played by the Yaphetic Institute of Nikolai Marr<sup>3</sup>. Applying its definition of nationality, the Institute judged that Yezidis were part of the Kurdish people<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the alphabet had to be Latinised alongside numerous other nationalities living then in the Soviet Union. Yerevan complied but didn't capitulate, and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia on 8 June 1928 established a committee, consisting of Askanaz Mravyan<sup>5</sup>, Arab Shamilov<sup>6</sup>, Shamir Teymurov<sup>7</sup> and others, to design and distribute the Latin-based Kurdish alphabet [11, p. 118]. Illiteracy among the Yezidis [7, p. 64] facilitated these Armenian attempts to take the initiative in integrating this part of the Kurds and shaping their identity. Only on rare occasions, Yerevan agreed that *"in terms of language, customs and morals, the Yezidis are the same as the Kurds and differ from the latter only in faith"* [7, p. 67; 23, p. 71].

The decisions on the need for Yezidis to be included in Kurdish nationality and on the

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<sup>1</sup> The Armenian Dashnaks demanded in a memorandum the right to self-determination for the Kurds under the protection of the British Empire [21, p. 98-99], which amounted to the implementation of the aborted Sevres Treaty. The Armenians undermined Russia's control by using money intended to buy out Armenian refugees to bribe the Kurds and to turn them against the Russians and persuade them to support the "Armenian revolution" [1, p. 161-162]. Soviet authors believed that this would allow *"the Dashnak project to create "two Armenias", one in Cilicia, the other in the Erivan region, located between between Kurdistan"* [22].

<sup>2</sup> The most known example is the collaboration of Armenian radical Andranik Ozanyan and Jangir Agha [8, p. 366], who, when arrested, introduced himself as a "Yezidi Kurd" [13, p. 226].

<sup>3</sup> According to Marr's Japhetological theory, the Kurds (both Yezidis and Muslims) as the autochthonous population of the Caucasus were originally Japhetids and, together with the autochthonous Japhetids of Armenia, were strongly influenced by the languages of Iran [24, p. 25].

<sup>4</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. F. 1728. Op. 1-38. D. 298298. L. 5-5ob.

<sup>5</sup> Askanaz Arutyunovich Mravyan (1985-1929) – Soviet Armenian party activist and statesman, Deputy Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the Armenian SSR.

<sup>6</sup> Arab Shamoyevich Shamilov (Erebê Şemo) (1897-1978). He was born in the family of a Yezidi sheikh in Kagyzman District of Kars Oblast'. He consulted Soviet authorities and lobbied them on Kurdish issues.

<sup>7</sup> Shamir Yusupovich Teymurov (1892/1898-after 1940) – Soviet military officer, participated in both World Wars and the Civil War. Before WWII, he was head of the Batumi and Nakhichevan Operational Posts of the Red Army's Intelligence Department.

use of the Latin script were painful enough for the Armenian establishment. But Moscow went even further and decided in 1923 that an autonomy for the Soviet Kurds should be established within Azerbaijan, which implied that Azerbaijan would be put in charge of Soviet Kurds' affairs in general<sup>8</sup>. That was a tremendously important decision for Armenia because of its rivalry with Soviet Azerbaijani authorities and wish to expand the territory of the Armenian Republic.

### **Red Kurdistan and Armenia's Opposition**

The Kurdistan District was established just between Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAR) of Azerbaijan. The decisions to establish the Nagorno-Karabakh Region and Kurdistan District were taken by the Central Committee of the Azerbaijani Communist Party almost simultaneously on 7 July and 16 July 1923, respectively [9, p. 153-155]. This indicates probable logic between these decisions. The lack of a joint border between Armenia and Karabakh precluded the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia. Kurdistan District was established in one of the most socioeconomically marginalised areas of Azerbaijan, known as "Red Kurdistan"<sup>9</sup>. It had little population (51,075 in 1926), yet Kurds were estimated to constitute 73% (37,470) of it [3, p. 13]. No cities existed there so even its centre was moved between four settlements before being fixed in the fifth location, Lachin, constructed from scratch beginning in August 1924 [9, p.159-160].

However, the existence of the Kurdistan District provided hope for Soviet Armenian authorities. If they had succeeded in the Kurdish autonomy being transferred to Armenia – that would open an opportunity for territorial expansion inside the USSR, because the hypothetical inclusion of the Kurdistan district into the Armenian Republic ensured the contiguity with Karabakh, fulfilling one of the semi-official conditions for reassignment of lands between Union republics. That was no fantastic plan: e.g., in 1930-1936, Kara-Kalpak autonomy was transferred between Kazakhstan, Russia and Uzbekistan.

No wonder, Yerevan didn't give up on the Kurds. Competing with Baku, it continued supporting Kurdish culture. So, as a pendant to Azerbaijan's Shusha pedagogical college offering training inter alia for the Kurds, Armenia established a Transcaucasian Kurdish Pedagogical College named by A. Mravyan in Yerevan [11, p. 139]. Azerbaijan reciprocated by opening a Kurdish pedagogical college in Lachin, so that in 1934-1935 two Kurdish colleges with 203 students were functioning<sup>10</sup>.

In parallel, Yerevan kept developing its Kurdish cultural institutions. For example, on 25 March 1930, the Central Committee of the Armenian Communist Party added to the list of its media outlets a weekly in Kurdish – Rja Teze<sup>11</sup>. It became the first newspaper for Soviet Kurds and the first Kurdish newspaper<sup>12</sup> using the Latin alphabet [26, p. 13]. In the beginning, the newspaper was run by Armenians<sup>13</sup>. Only in 1934 a Kurdish intellectual Djerdo Gendjo<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Smaller ethnic minorities in the USSR were assigned to a Union republic, where they received institutions of modern culture and elements of their own administration.

<sup>9</sup> The region was mentioned as Red Kurdistan in the media two years before its establishment [25].

<sup>10</sup> TsGA SPb. F. 4363. Op. 1. D. 1008. L. 18.

<sup>11</sup> The second issue of the weekly featured a poem dedicated to the Kurdistan Region [27].

<sup>12</sup> In response, Azerbaijan began publishing the newspaper "Soviet Kurdistan," which was published in Lachin from 1931 to 1960 in the Azerbaijani language [28, p. 279].

<sup>13</sup> The first few issues were published and signed only by an "editorial board." After that, the editor-in-chief was appointed Hrachya Kochar[yan], an Armenian writer, an expert in the Kurdish language, a native of Turkey. Except for him, the newspaper was headed by Harutyun Mkrtchyan, an Armenian writer, fluent in Kurdish. This was due to the fact that there were no professional journalists among the Kurds at that time [Sardar A. The Role and Significance of the weekly "Rja Teze". URL: <http://amarikesardar.com/?p=77> (accessed: 01.12.2024)]. The Armenians from Turkey were fluent in Kurdish because of long-time living alongside Kurds.

was appointed the publication's editor [11, p. 139]. Ethnic Armenians participated in shaping Kurdish culture at other levels as well<sup>15</sup>. The wish of the Soviet Armenian establishment to integrate the Kurds is also illustrated by the fact that in the 1934 First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, the only Kurdish delegate, Hadji Djndi, was a member of the Armenian delegation with a decisive vote [5, p. 688, 705].

Moreover, Yerevan tried to ignore Moscow's guidelines on the designation of nationalities and informally kept the Yezidi designation alongside the Kurds<sup>16</sup>. The Armenian stance was quite resolute: when the experts from the Union's central institutions visited the Caucasus they had no problems studying the Kurdish population in Azerbaijan and Georgia but couldn't properly do it in Armenia because of sabotage by local officials acting<sup>17</sup> probably on orders from higher Soviet Armenian authorities.

Yerevan also succeeded in promoting "its Kurds" as experts on the issue even for Soviet central authorities. All the principal Soviet ethnically Kurdish experts on Kurdish issues were Yezidis from predominantly Armenian-dominated areas. As a result, Yezidi Kurds from Armenia rose to prominence in the Soviet Kurdish community and their preeminence is illustrated by the fact that even the standard Latin-based alphabet for Soviet Kurds was designed by these Armenian-supported Yezidi Kurdish intellectuals.

This predominance of Armenia in Soviet Kurdish policies is evident at the macro-level of book publishing. The statistics of publications in Kurdish in 1921-1938 shows how Armenia<sup>18</sup> dominated in publishing books for the Kurds (Table 1). 148 book titles (with a total circulation of 251,900) were published in Armenia, 27 titles (42,000 copies) in Azerbaijan and only five titles (5,000 copies) in Turkmenistan [10, p. 23-51, 68].

**Table 1. Publications in Kurdish in the USSR, 1921-1938<sup>19</sup>**

Number of titles/copies	1921	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938
Yerevan	1	2	5	10	17	18	24	29	22	20	
	1,000	5,500	12,500	25,000	26,400	25,500	45,000	47,500	26,500	37,000	
Baku			1	2	3		4		5	11	1
			1,000	7,000	8,500		8,000		5,500	11,000	1,000
Ashgabat						2	3				
						2,000	3,000				

<sup>14</sup> Both Soviet Kurdish writers Djerdo Gendjo (Cerdoyê Gêncî) (1904-1945) and Hadji Djndi (Heciyê Cindî) (1908-1990) were born in Yamanchayir village of Kars Oblast' [14, p. 142-145, 170-171].

<sup>15</sup> By 1938, Soviet school books for Kurdish schools were written by one Assyrian author (I. Marogulov), ten Armenians (A. Kazaryan (Lazo), R. Drambjian, V. Petojan, H. Mkrtchyan, A. Movsesyan, S. Gasparyan, A. Xacatryan, M. Santrosyan, A. Qaribyan, G. Qapantsyan), six Yezidi Kurdish authors from Armenia (E. Evdal, H. Djndi, Dj. Gendjo, Dj. Djalil, A. Shamilov, E. Shero), five Kurdish authors from Azerbaijan (A. Axundov, S. Nedjfeliev, C. Nagiev, I. Hesenov, S. Shamsuvarov) and one Kurdish author from Turkmenistan (G. Pəhləwi) [10, p. 23-51, 68].

<sup>16</sup> By the mid-1950s, references to Yezidis appeared in the republican press, e.g., [29; 30], and "Yezid" as a nationality designation appeared in the nationality column of the Soviet Armenian passport [13, p. 69].

<sup>17</sup> SPbF ARAN. F. 22. Op. 2. D. 79. L. 47.

<sup>18</sup> Some Kurdish activists praised Yerevan as the "Capital of Kurdish Culture" [26, p.13].

<sup>19</sup> The 1946-1960 confirmed Armenia's domination in publications in Kurdish. 53 titles (72 350 copies) were published only in Armenia [10, p. 179-234].

## The Decline of the 1930s

Aware of the risk of getting Kurdistan and Nagorno-Karabakh transferred to Armenia, Azerbaijan moved to prevent it by reducing the scope of Kurdish autonomy around Lachin and, later, by abolishing its major administrative structures in 1930. Against the backdrop of the abolition of the Kurdistan District in Azerbaijan, a possible establishment of a Kurdish national region in Armenia was discussed, which would have allowed the republic to gain more leverage in determining the Soviet policy towards the Kurds.

Armenian-Azerbaijani competition over Kurdish issues disrupted even crucial cultural measures: e.g. after the first conference on Kurdish orthography was held in Yerevan on 9-14 July 1934, the second was scheduled to convene in Baku but never did<sup>20</sup>. The numbers of the Kurds in Azerbaijan in the 1920s-1930s dramatically decreased, most probably, reflecting the Azerbaijani authorities' policies to remove the basis for Kurdish autonomy. Interestingly, while Kurdish policies of Yerevan and Baku collided, Moscow showed little interest in the issue.

The authorities of Soviet Union republics seem to act purposefully, although their intentions remain sometimes hidden behind the complicated terminology they used. Some republics continued the assimilationist line for decades. In a 1961 survey prepared by the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijani SSR for Azerbaijan's leadership, its authors emphasised that after 1930 ethnic minorities (except for Armenians) "*started to intensively merge with Azerbaijanians*", they started to get education in Azerbaijani language, integrated into the sociopolitical and cultural life of the republic. According to this memorandum, "*historical facts confirm the voluntary character of the merger of numerous ethnic groups of the republic with ethnic Azerbaijanians*" [31, p. 431]. The results of the censuses [2, p. 4-5, 124-128; 4, p. 58, 71-72] reflect the results of these policies (see Table 2)<sup>21</sup>.

**Table 2. Kurdish Population in Transcaucasia**

Year of population census	1926			1939	
Living place	Yezidis	Kurds	Total	Kurds	Total
Azerbaijani SSR		41,193	43,842	No dates	No dates
Nakhichevan		2,649			
Armenian SSR	12,237	3,025	15,262 <sup>22</sup>	20,481	20,481
Georgian SSR	2,262	7,955	13,512	4,511	8,723
Adjar ASSR		3,295		4,212	

<sup>20</sup> RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 162. D. 17. L. 134.

<sup>21</sup> The results of the 1939 census weren't published until the 1990s. Various studies quote the following figures of the Kurds: 20,481 in Armenian SSR, 12,915 in Georgian SSR and 6,005 in Azerbaijani SSR, with a total Kurdish population of 39,401 [Russian State Archive of Economics (RGAE). F. 1562. Op. 336. D. 966-1001. URL: [http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng\\_nac\\_39.php](http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_39.php) (accessed: 01.12.2024)].

<sup>22</sup> In 1927, the number of Yezidis in the Armenian SSR was 9,759 [7, p. 64].

<b>Kurdish Population in Transcaucasia</b>			<b>66,692</b>		<b>29,204</b>
<b>Kurdish Population in the USSR</b>			<b>69,123</b>		<b>45,877</b>

The mild assimilation wasn't a policy limited to Azerbaijan: during the same period thousands of Uyghurs became integrated in the same way into Uzbek nationality in Soviet Uzbekistan under pressure and incentives offered by Soviet Uzbek authorities (who tried to consolidate the positions of titular Uzbek nation whose numerical dominance was far from certain) [32, p. 34-35]. Such policies of separate Union republics preceded by far the gradual wrap-up in the late 1930s of radical nationalities policies in the USSR.

Yerevan also struggled to get Yezidis reestablished as a separate "official nationality" in Soviet official usage yet failed. In 1938, a leading Soviet expert on Kurdish issues Vilchevsky explained the situation about the Yezidi/Kurdish dualism in the parlance of the time *"It isn't surprising, that Yezidism, without encountering any serious resistance, not only continues to exist but also in 1935, when developing the nomenclature of nationalities of the USSR for the 1936 census, the Dashnak-friendly elements who were entrenched in the government of the Armenian SSR, headed by the enemy of the Armenian people Khanjan<sup>23</sup>, quite seriously insisted on giving the Yezidis a special position, considering them a people different from the Muslim Kurds"*<sup>24</sup>.

Kurdish intellectuals were by that time integrated with Armenian politics, and cultural and social life and present in the Armenian establishment. They were much less noticeable in the Soviet Azerbaijani establishment. Their most prominent representative, Chingiz Yildirim<sup>25</sup> was shot, and although in 1939 Süleyman Rahimov<sup>26</sup> became the chairman of the Writers Union of Azerbaijan, he never gained as much influence as Yildirim. Meanwhile, the Kurdish communities of three Caucasian republics remained compartmentalised, and the higher status of the Kurdish community in Armenia didn't mean that the Kurds from other republics could migrate there: non-Armenian settlers from Georgia weren't allowed to migrate to Armenia. For example, in 1931 Kurdish refugees from Turkey and Iran were settled in the tiny Nakhichevan region of Azerbaijan and not in neighbouring Armenia<sup>27</sup>.

Despite some decline, till the Second World War, most Soviet affirmative action measures for non-Russian nationalities still were being implemented. So, inside the bigger Red Army formations established on the territory of different Union republics and staffed mostly by personnel from respective major ethnic groups, smaller units were formed for less numerous ethnic groups. There were Kurdish companies as national units of the 'second order' in Azerbaijan [33, p. 139] and Armenia. More specifically, some "Kurdish battalions" existed in Shusha since 1921 [34] and a Kurdish platoon was established in 1929 in the mostly Kurdish-populated Leninakan District, as part of the Armenian Division [35]. The company, led first by a former high official of the Armenian Communist party and a former member of the commission on the Kurdish alphabet, Shamir Teymurov [36], existed probably into the 1940s.

<sup>23</sup> Agasi Gevondovich Khanjan (1901-1936) – head of Armenian Communist party in 1930s.

<sup>24</sup> SPbF ARAN. F. 77. Op. 2. D. 5. L. 19, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Chingiz-zhan Yildirimovich Sultanov (Chingiz Yildirim) (1891-1937) – Soviet engineer and politician. He was born in Zangezur District of the Elizavetpol (Ganja) province of Azerbaijan.

<sup>26</sup> Süleyman Hüseyn oğlu Rahimov (Süleyman Rəhimov) (1900-1983) – Azerbaijani and Soviet Kurdish writer. He was also born in Zangezur District. In 1923-1924, he worked as head of school in Lachin region. In 1926, he was elected chairman of the Union of Education Establishments Workers.

<sup>27</sup> RGASPI. F. 17. Op. 3. D. 896. L. 16.

## WWII Revives the Soviet Kurdish Policies

Anticipating a major conflict since the late 1930s Moscow focused on war preparations, dropped the revolutionising policies and severely reduced affirmative actions for smaller ethnic groups within its borders. Even Armenia's Kurdish policy declined: in 1938 it stopped publishing Rja Teze.

However, after the German invasion of 1941, the Soviet troops, together with the British, toppled the Iranian shah and occupied the adjoining Iranian Azerbaijan and the northern part of Iranian Kurdistan. The Allies were concurrently worried about a possible clash with Turkey which would involve Kurdish-populated areas. These events once again gave prominence to Azerbaijan in Soviet Kurdish policies by allowing it to play a decisive part in supporting Kurdish separatism in the Middle East. Kurmanji-speaking Soviet experts and Kurdish intellectuals with Armenian links couldn't help in dealing with mostly Sorani-speaking Kurds of Iraq or Iran. Azerbaijani-speaking experts were more suitable for Iranian Kurdish areas where Kurds lived in the vicinity of Azerbaijanis or mixed areas and many knew Azerbaijani.

The Azerbaijan Republic's leader Baghirov, who enjoyed an influential standing in the Soviet state and party hierarchy, played an important part in promoting separatist and secessionist movements in Azerbaijani and Kurdish areas of Iran. He aspired to bind the pro-Soviet Kurdish movement, and the Kurdish autonomy to Iran's Azerbaijani autonomy, hoping to unite the latter with Soviet Azerbaijan. Bagirov reportedly had a good knowledge of the Middle East and played a role in Soviet policies in Iran and Iraq [37, p. 16]. In July 1945, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party appointed Bagirov and Azerbaijan's Education Minister Mirza Ibrahimov responsible for promoting separatist activities in North Iranian provinces [37, p. 22]. Kurdish activists recalled the prevalence of Azerbaijanians among Soviet officials dealing with the Kurdish population and activists in the Soviet-sponsored Kurdish autonomy in Iran, the so-called Mahabad Republic [12, p. 63].

Baku was also chosen to prepare cadres for possible Kurdish autonomy, and Kurdish youths were even sent to undergo officer training at the Baku Infantry School. Due to the remnants of earlier Soviet policy of establishing specific military units for different ethnic groups, many Soviet army formations in Azerbaijan until the mid-1950s remained predominantly Azerbaijani. The Azerbaijani state had some ethnically Kurdish officials at higher levels. In 1944, Rahimov was again appointed the chairman of the Writers Union of Azerbaijan. He remained in this office till 1946 when the Soviet Union gave up its support for Azerbaijani and Kurdish autonomies in Iran.

After the Mahabad republic collapsed in 1946, Barzani and his fighters as well as Iranian Kurdish activists fled to Soviet Azerbaijan whose authorities tried to keep them at their disposal. Even after Barzani fighters left for Central Asia, Baghirov retained many foreign activists of pro-Soviet movements in Baku, including Iranian and Iraqi Kurds<sup>28</sup>. Iranian Kurdish activists were included in the Azerbaijan Democratic Party – the favourite project of the Soviet Azerbaijani leadership.

During the Korean War in 1950-1952 and instability in Iran, the expectations of Kurdish rebellions in the Middle East rose to their highest [12, p. 71]. Against this backdrop, Suleyman Rahimov was again elected to be the chairman of Azerbaijan's Writers Union – he stayed in the office till 1957, being at the same time a member of the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan. However, in these later years, he didn't speak out on Kurdish themes [14, p. 401].

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<sup>28</sup> See numerous complaints of these conditions by the Tudeh members, e.g., Ehsan Tabari, Kazhraheha; Nureddin Kianuri, Khaterat.

After the death of Stalin, Soviet Azerbaijani leader Baghirov lost the power struggle, was arrested in 1954 and shot. That resulted in weakening Baku's role in Soviet Kurdish policies. In 1953, radio broadcasts in Kurdish from Baku stopped. In November 1954, the CPSU Central Committee's staff in coordination with the Iranian Tudeh Party prepared the project of an effective incorporation into the Tudeh Party of the Azerbaijani Democratic Party (ADP) and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). Azerbaijani leadership, and personally Imam Mustafayev, Azerbaijan's Communist party leader, opposed this initiative, as it would have taken away from Baku the projects it had cherished. However, Azerbaijani authorities could only delay the merger until August 1960 by helping the ADP and the KDP to resist it. When the same year the KDP leader Rahim Qazi relayed via the Central Committee of Azerbaijani Communist Party to Moscow requests from Kurdish activists in Iran and Iraq, who asked for consultations with the CPSU (to counter Mustafa Barzani's rise in Iraqi Kurdish politics), it was rejected. Baku couldn't support Kurdish activists in Moscow as earlier.

### **Silent and Partial Triumph of Armenia in the 1950s**

On the contrary, Armenia pursued its quasi-foreign policies by promoting Kurdish projects. In 1955, the Central Committee of the Armenian Communist Party resumed after almost twenty years of interruption publishing *Rja Teze*, the main Kurdish-language media of the Soviet Kurds. The establishment in Yerevan never gave up hopes to enhance the territory of the republic, above all by including the Nagorno-Karabakh Region of Azerbaijan. During Khrushchev's time in power, such attempts intensified and were accompanied by attempts to revive the Kurdish autonomy which could have provided the link between Armenia and the NKAR.

Authorities in Baku knew that if the Kurdish question got linked to Armenian plans for Karabakh, it might result in redrawing the borders of Azerbaijan. They continued with mild assimilation of the Kurds into the Azerbaijani nation, which was facilitated by knowledge of the Azerbaijani language and cultural proximity widespread among the Kurds. Even in Kazakhstani exile<sup>29</sup> most of the Kurds registered themselves as "Turks" [15, p. 579] (probably, Azerbaijanis). Aware of these facts, the majority of Soviet Kurdologists considered the figures of the 1959 Soviet census as undercounting the actual numbers of Kurds. The correctness of low numbers of Kurds (and other ethnic minorities) in Azerbaijan wasn't believed even by official institutions. In 1961, Azerbaijani leadership commissioned the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijani SSR to prepare a brief survey on some ethnic groups of Azerbaijan. In a promptly produced document experts assessed the number of Kurds in Soviet Azerbaijan at about 20,000 [31, p. 428-430].

Armenian authorities also worked with the non-Soviet Kurds at that time. The above-mentioned Armenian Kurdish intellectuals and scholars in the mid-1950s started working with Kurdish activists and politicians from abroad. For example, Kanat Kurdoyev enjoyed a high standing among them [12, p. 91]. Soviet Armenia persuaded Moscow to let it launch massive "repatriation programmes" since the 1950s, especially from the Middle Eastern countries, which ensured its unprecedented access above all to the countries with major Kurdish communities. As a result, in the 1970s one of the major Iraqi Kurdish armed opposition groups – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – established an additional communication channel with the USSR via its Yezidi members connected to their Soviet brethren [12, p. 334, 342, 365].

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<sup>29</sup> There were two waves of deportation of the Kurds – in 1937-1938 and 1944 – from Transcaucasian to Central Asian Soviet republics.

## Conclusions: Multi-player game of Soviet Kurdish policy

This paper highlights the USSR member republics' efforts to shape Soviet Kurdish policies in a way which suited their peculiar interests. This was the case concerning Soviet policies towards both Soviet and non-Soviet Kurds. Even the issues that mattered a lot to the Soviet Union's foreign policy, like the support of the Kurdish movement in the Middle East, were influenced by the Union member republics' interests and agendas which differed from those of Moscow and other member republics.

The role of Soviet non-central authorities, especially the Union republics, requires further investigation but their agency is obvious. Moreover, the discipline, subordination, and hierarchy inside the Soviet state and party structures are exaggerated. The totalitarian state concept is one of the most remarkable myths about the USSR. The massive persecution of different groups and persons or gross violations of rights and law demonstrate not the control but, on the contrary, the inability of the government to manage or control the country's affairs.

To make more sense of such general notions as "Soviet Kurdish policy," we should study specific driving forces and specific groups and persons involved in shaping and implementing respective policies. It can be done by zooming in and out on actors in the Soviet policies towards the Kurds looking sometimes at individuals and sometimes at major organisations. It will clarify connections, alliances, patronages, animosities, and cleavages of Kurdish politics inside and outside the USSR.

Soviet history requires further deconstruction in terms of identifying the actors who shaped Soviet policies. Recognising the Union republics as such actors willing and able to deal with issues outside their territory – inside and outside the Soviet Union – in a way that resembled foreign policy, will help us to make more sense of Soviet history and post-Soviet developments.

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