

General Thomson's little war

by Joseph Brewda and Linda de Hoyos

The next occasion for British interference in the Caucasus was World War I. This time the intervention was not disguised. In the aftermath of the March 1917 Menshevik revolution in Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia declared themselves independent from Russian rule. The Chechens, Dagestanis, and other mountain tribes also declared independence from Russia, and formed a Mountaineers Republic.

But independence was short-lived. In November 1918, a 23,000-man British expeditionary force led by Gen. William Thomson invaded the Caucasus region via Persia. Thomson's force occupied the Batumi, Georgia-Baku, Azerbaijan railway and other strategic points of what had been Russia, establishing military governorships in Batumi, Baku, and other areas in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Direct military occupation continued until their recapture by Russia in 1920.

In 1919, a British Foreign Office memorandum stressed the necessity for Britain to design a flexible policy: "If Russia recovers rapidly, they [Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the mountain tribes] might conceivably rejoin her in some federal relation; if the anarchy in Russia lasts many years, their present separation from her will probably be permanent. Our policy toward the Caucasus should be framed to meet either eventuality."

In reality, this meant pursuing different options simultaneously, all of them mutually exclusive (see **Map 12**), under Lord Palmerston's dictum "no permanent allies, only permanent interests."

For instance, in 1919, General Denikin's White Russian Army, heavily backed by the British, invaded the Mountaineers Republic in Dagestan, whose primary patron was Lord Curzon.

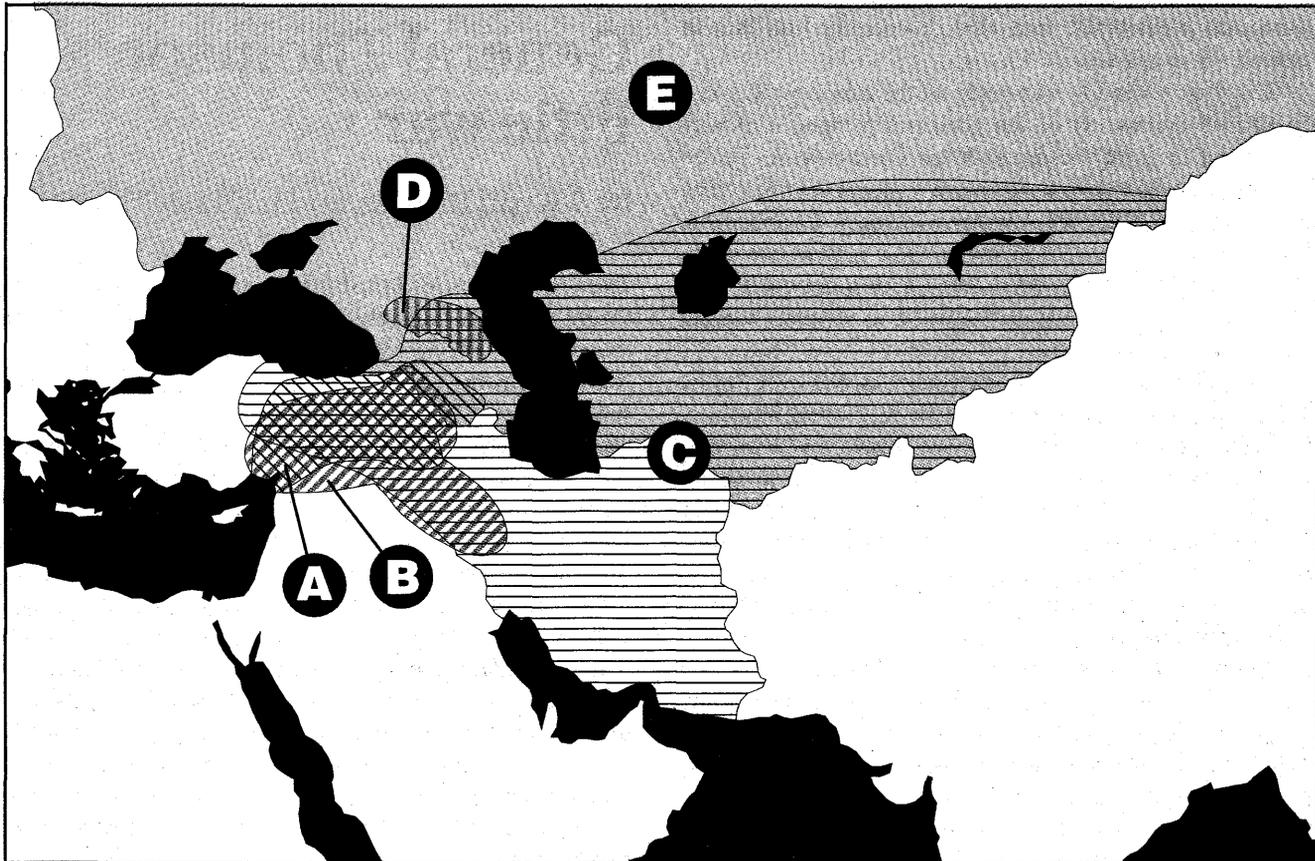
And, London fostered a constant state of conflict between its dependents Armenia and Azerbaijan, the center of which was the tug of war over the status of Karabakh.

The Karabakh region had been an ancient Armenian center, but under the Mongols had been populated by the Azeris. After Russia seized the region in the early nineteenth century, Karabakh was repopulated by Armenians, becoming an Armenian enclave in the Azeri-populated czarist district of Baku.

Jurisdiction over the enclave had become a heated emotional issue for both Azeris and Armenians. General Thomson deliberately intensified the problem.

While Thomson dished out military aid to Armenia and

British play 'Greater This' versus 'Greater That'

**Key to Map 12**

In the aftermath of World War I, the British simultaneously fostered several irreconcilable territorial schemes—all involving different groups of people, or conflicting lines of organization for the same people—in the Mideast, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. British sponsorship of these geopolitical entities laid the basis for conflicts for years to come, up through today.

A: "Greater Armenia." This impossible scheme was floated by Britain at the Versailles Peace Conference. In much of the area, either Armenians had ceased living there centuries before, or the Armenian population had been lost in the 1915 slaughter of Armenians by the Young Turk regime in Istanbul, itself dominated by British intelligence (see "Lord Palmerston's Multicultural Human Zoo," *EIR*, April 15, 1994). The idea of a Greater Armenia had first been concocted in the 1890s by former British Prime Minister William Gladstone and Foreign Minister Lord Salisbury, as a way to dismantle the Ottoman Empire. During World War I, the primary British case officers for the project were Sir Mark Sykes, who supervised plans to divide the Ottoman Empire with France and Russia, and Lord Noel Buxton, from the powerful Quaker family that controls Barclays Bank.

The geopolitical purpose of Greater Armenia was to drive

a wedge between Turkic Central Asia and Turkey, and to lay the seeds for continuing Armenian-Turkish conflict, and continuing Armenian-Kurdish conflict. As Sykes noted at the time, "The Armenian question is the real answer to Pan-Turanisms, just as free Arabia is the answer to Turkish pan-Islamism."

B: "Greater Kurdistan." London had also promoted the creation of this entity at Versailles. Kurds had never occupied most of these lands. Kurdish nationalism had also come into being through British sponsorship in the 1890s. During World War I, the British case-officer for Greater Kurdistan was Lord Cornwallis (a descendant of the general who surrendered to George Washington at Yorktown).

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C: The Muslim buffer state. The project to create a vast Muslim buffer state between Russia and British India and the British Mideast, had been first championed by Lord Lytton, the Viceroy of India, in the 1870s, and his uncle, Sir Henry Bulwer, ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. The ideological basis for this buffer state was the Pan-Islamic movement. In the immediate aftermath of World War I, the idea was advocated by Col.

Georgia, but *not* Azerbaijan, he decreed that Karabakh remain under Azeri administration, and appointed an Azeri governor general for Karabakh, who was notorious for his massacring of Armenians. Thomson gave the nod to Azeri repression of Karabakh Armenians.

Thomson armed the Armenians, albeit inadequately. In August 1919, the outgunned Armenians of Karabakh finally accepted Azeri jurisdiction.

The same month, the British began their withdrawal from the Transcaucasus, deliberately paving the way for chaos. "I am fully aware that the withdrawal of the British troops would probably lead to anarchy," wrote General Milne, commander in chief of the Army of the Black Sea, "but I cannot see that the world would lose much if the whole of the inhabitants of the country cut each others' throats."

Stalin in charge

The return of Russian rule to the region, in 1920-21, however, did not bring peace. Joseph V. Stalin was Soviet Commissioner for Nationalities Affairs (an organization he headed from its inception in 1917 through its dissolution in 1924). A son of neighboring Georgia, Stalin had served the Bolshevik underground in Baku, Azerbaijan, where, in the words of one Azeri historian, "he witnessed the outbreaks of violence between Azeri Turks and Armenians as well as the methods used by czarist agents and police to ensure rivalry which could deflect deep-seated anti-Russian resentment." Stalin employed the same methods.

Under his direction, the Azerbaijan presidium formed a

Central Commission on Nagorno-Karabakh affairs, which decreed that an autonomous Armenian enclave, only a dozen miles from Armenia itself, be created within Azerbaijan. The decision satisfied none of the parties.

Thus, Stalin continued the same geopolitical machinations in the region, played by the czar and British General Thomson, before him. But as the events of the 1990s have shown, once a region is locked into a geopolitical chessboard, anyone can play.

Claude Stokes, the British High Commissioner in Transcaucasia, with the quiet support of Lord Curzon, then British foreign minister. This state, he asserted, "would lean upon Great Britain and provide a buffer between Russia and the British Asiatic possessions."

The additional geopolitical purpose of this plan was to instigate Russian-Turkish and Turkic conflict.

D: The Mountaineer Republic. The idea of creating a Caucasian mountain state separating Russia from the Transcaucasus and Mideast, was first advanced by David Urquhart, an agent of British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, in the 1830s. After World War I, it was revived as policy by Lord Curzon.

The geopolitical purpose of this republic was to foment Russian-Turkish conflict.

E: The Russian Empire. In 1919, Britain proposed two conflicting schemes to preserve the territory of the collapsed Russian Empire. One was the creation of a new Bolshevik form of the old empire, based on the doctrine of Karl Marx, a political dependent of David Urquhart. The second was the restoration of monarchist or anti-Bolshevik "White" forces led by General Denikin, among others. The case of British intelligence agent Alexander Helphand Parvus, who patronized both sides, exemplifies British operations in this theater.