

# Small Nations and Great Powers

A study of ethnopolitical conflict in the Caucasus

Svante E. Cornell

 RoutledgeCurzon  
Taylor & Francis Group



**Also available as a printed book**  
see title verso for ISBN details

**small nations and great  
powers**

A STUDY OF ETHNOPOLITICAL  
CONFLICT IN THE CAUCASUS

Svante E. Cornell

 **RoutledgeCurzon**  
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

authorities, issued a statement that Karabakh, Zangezur, and Nakhchivan were all to be transferred to Armenian control. Stalin (then commissar for nationalities) publicised the decision on 2 December, but the Azerbaijani leader Narimanov later denied the transfer. Four months later, the pendulum swung back. The 'Treaty of Brotherhood and Friendship' between the Soviet Union and republican Turkey included a provision that both Nakhchivan and Karabakh were to be placed under the control of the Azerbaijani SSR. It appears that this was a concession on the part of the Bolsheviks to the newly founded Turkish republic in Ankara—Lenin and Stalin were initially positively inclined to Kemal Atatürk, whom they saw as a potential ally at the time. Atatürk was hostile to any territorial arrangements favouring Soviet Armenia, since a strong Armenia could have potential territorial claims on Turkey. Even given Stalin's tendency to divide the Caucasian peoples to prevent unified resistance,<sup>51</sup> the idea of separating the Armenians into two entities—an Armenian republic and Nagorno-Karabakh—must have been welcome. Furthermore, this decision not only divided the Armenians but also the Azeris, into the Azerbaijani republic and Nakhchivan.

However, the game was not over yet. On 4 July, a meeting of the Kavburo (Caucasian section of the Soviet Communist party) voted in Stalin's presence to include Karabakh in the Armenian SSR.<sup>52</sup> The following day, Narimanov protested against this decision and the Kavburo once again reversed its decision, agreeing to Karabakh's remaining in the Azerbaijani SSR, although the region was to be granted substantial autonomy.

During 1922, while unrest was still being reported in Karabakh, discussions took place concerning the potential status of Karabakh within the Azerbaijani SSR. Finally, it was decided to give the region the rank of an autonomous oblast (the oblast included the mountainous part of Karabakh and consequently was called the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, hereafter the NKAO) and a decree from Baku on 7 July 1923 officially established this state of affairs. A month later, the capital of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was moved from Shusha to Khankendi, not ten kilometres to the north, and the city was renamed Stepanakert, after Stefan Schaumian, the 'great Armenian Bolshevik' of the Baku commune. The NKAO was officially proclaimed in November 1924. Interestingly, a 1926 map in the first volume of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* had the NKAO touching upon Armenia at one point; however, one of the border changes of the oblast that were made evidently cut the region off from the Armenian republic and, by 1930, maps had been adjusted accordingly, leaving the Lachin corridor under sovereign Azerbaijani territory, separating the NKAO from Armenia proper.<sup>53</sup>

In 1924, Nakhchivan received the status of an autonomous republic (ASSR) within the Azerbaijani SSR, despite the fact that the region had no land connection with mainland Azerbaijan. Nakhchivan's belonging to the Azerbaijani republic was actually decided at the same time as the discussions on Nagorno-Karabakh. Nakhchivan's status was, it seems, decided in talks between Soviet Russia and Kemalist Turkey, without involving any Armenians, at the treaty of



Nagorno-Karabakh

Moscow in March 1921. This treaty stipulated that Nakhchivan would remain an autonomous region of Azerbaijan, and that the region's status could not be altered without Turkey's explicit approval.<sup>54</sup> It is clear that this deal was clinched by Turkey in view of Ankara's military offensive in the Caucasus immediately following the Ottoman signing of the Sevres treaty in August 1920. Turkey, aware of Soviet Russia's need for allies at the time of the civil war, successfully