

## Caucasus in Crisis (1870-1923)

### Authors

Soykan DURDAĞI<sup>1</sup> \*

### Affiliations

<sup>1</sup> Master's Program in History, Graduate School of Social Sciences, Yeditepe University, 34755, Istanbul, Turkey.

\*To whom correspondence should be addressed; E-mail:  
[soykan.durdagi@std.yeditepe.edu.tr](mailto:soykan.durdagi@std.yeditepe.edu.tr)

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## **Abstract**

Elviye-i Selâse (“Triple Cities”) is the region consisting of Batumi, Ardahan and Kars sanjaks during the Ottoman Period. The fact that the region was taken from the Ottoman Empire after the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878) was a major disadvantage for the Turkish people living in this region. After the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, this region remained in Russian domination for about 40 years and attempted to withstand every kind of persecution.

This region was given to the Ottoman Empire pursuant to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which was signed as a result of the collapse of Tsarist Russia due to its internal struggle; however, the joy was short-lived. After the Armistice of Mudros, which was signed after the World War I, the region was taken once more from the Empire. On the other hand, people of Elviye-i Selâse who foreseen the future painful days established national organizations in the hope not to relive the dark days. In order to manage these organizations from a single center, the Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus was established on January 17-18, 1919.

**Keywords:** Elviye-i selâse; Ottoman empire; Russian dominance

## INTRODUCTION

The Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus is the first republic established in Anatolia, which was established to create solidarity as an attempt to find a temporary solution due to lack of authority that emerged in Kars and its surroundings as a result of the World War I and in addition to the fact that the British did not want to give this region to the Armenians. Established in Kars, this Republic acts as the Council of Ministers and the state organization, and it is the second Republic established by the Turks, first being the Independent Government of Western Thrace established in 1913.

Kars Oblast was established in 1878 by the Russian Tsardom in some districts of some provinces like Erzurum, Kars and Ardahan, such as Şenkaya and Oltu, which were lost during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 – 1878. Kars Oblast is a province established in this region. The Russian administration lasted for 40 years, and there were Russians who settled in this region. Meanwhile, some Germans who have been residing in Russia during this time also settled in this region. Moreover, a folk poet from Çıldır, Âşık Şenlik (1853-1913) lived under the Russian dominance and had kept the national consciousness alive with the songs he wrote and sang. However, after the communist revolution, Russia withdrew from the World War I and left Kars Oblast to the Ottoman Empire on March 3, 1918, pursuant to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. However, the Ottoman forces entered Kars on April 25, 1918. Upon signing the Armistice of Mudros in 1918, the Ottoman Empire's role in World War I ended, and the Kars Oblast was redefined by the Ottoman Empire. Declared its independence from Russia at the beginning of 1918, the Armenian Republic claimed to have rights on Kars, and therefore, the Kars Islamic Council was established by the Muslims inhabitants of Kars in order to avoid a major power gap in this region. By this way, Muslims declared their authority in this province and at the center of Kars Oblast. The Muslim residing in Kars considered that they should establish a state within Kars in order to defend themselves as the Ottoman forces were evacuating this region; therefore, a congress was held in Kars on November 30, 1918. It is known that the residents of Kars Oblast attended this congress. Moreover, Muslims living in this area and representatives from Batumi, Meskhetian and Akhalkalaki within the borders of Georgia attended this congress as well. At the congress, Cihangirzade İbrahim Bey, known as İbrahim Aydın

after the surname law, was selected as president. It was resolved that establishing a state in Kars to manage the province would be required due to the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire. One of the most important reasons for this resolution was to have the authority to form an army there. Upon this development, the idea of establishing an independent Islamic State in Kars was accelerated.

Another congress was held in Kars in 1919 within the scope of the congress held in 1918. Muslims residing in Artvin, Nakhchivan, Iğdır and Gümrük, almost all of which were within the borders of the Tsardom of Russia, attended this congress. Also, Muslim representatives participated to this congress, where the Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus was established. The main reason to establish a “provisional government” was that it was their high hope that the Ottoman Empire, which evacuated this region pursuant to the Treaty of Mudros, would return. However, upon communication in Istanbul, it was understood that there was unfortunately no such hope for the time being and thus, the Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus was established. Activities of the Caucasus Islamic Council began to be widely known within this republic. Known as the Kars Republic, the Republic declared Islam as its official religion and accepted the Sharia as its legal order. Meanwhile, its capital was announced as Kars and its language was accepted as Turkish. A parliament consisting of 64 representatives was created by the election, and of the deputies, 3 were Greek, 1 was Russian and 60 were Muslim representatives. The women also had the right to vote in the elections, which was a great development. It is known that only few countries allowed women’s suffrage, especially in the Western countries. The Kars Republic established communication with all other states, especially the big ones, to declare its independence to the world. Many states recognized the Kars Republic, one of the first being the Empire of Japan.

## **RESULTS**

The British decided to divide the Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus between Georgians and Armenians with all the negative events in the region. Pursuant to this idea, Armenians would dominate the Kağızman, Batumi and Kars regions,

while the Georgians would dominate the Akhalkalaki region along with the northern part of Ardahan. In order for these plans to be realized, a very different path must be followed. It has been reported that within the scope of the realized plan, the government has been given great freedoms in terms of administration. In parallel with this plan that the British were trying to realize, the government was trying to take great measures against the British. A delegation guided by Fahrettin Erdoğan was sent to Erzurum in order to request help from the Ottoman Empire. However, before the delegation reached Erzurum, they learned about the possibility of the British disbanding the government. Simultaneously, the British landed soldiers in Meskhetian and Kars, and these events caused the South Caucasian Government to be very concerned.

Lieutenant Colonel Preston stated that he would visit the Assembly in April and demanded that the members of the assembly meet with the head of the government. On April 13, the assembly was raided down by the British. The British, who carried out various tricks to achieve their aim, dissolved the government and arrested 12 prominent members of the Assembly. Government members were arrested and exiled first to Batman and then to Malta. The British, who were in a dominant position in the region, declared that the peace in Kars and its surroundings would be realized by the British by issuing declarations in Russian and Turkish in the villages and towns. Along with all these developments, a telegram was sent to the British General Staff by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan on April 29, 1919, and it was stated that Azerbaijan protested against the partition of Kars. Even though there were reactions from both the Azerbaijani government and the Turkish and Muslim people against the unfair occupations, this situation did not change the result. On April 30, 1919, the administration was handed over to the Armenians. From this date on, the Armenian persecution started again in the region. The Azerbaijani government, on the other hand, stood by the Turkish people constantly and frequently sent warnings against the destruction caused by the Armenians in Kars and its surroundings. Despite all these activities and efforts, Armenians were only able to dominate Sarıkamış, Kağızman, Kars and Zarzat Regions. Oltu, Çıldır, Mount Allahuekber, Oltu, Akbab and Parnavut regions continued to fight the Armenians until they were captured by the Turks again. The Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus and the councils affiliated to the government have always aimed to be united with the motherland

since its establishment. These governments were established temporarily due to the occupation of the region and its separation from the motherland. However, although these governments were temporary, they represented the parliamentary regime and showed that they were a state with a parliament, the head of government, the Council of Ministers and a constitution. Due to the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, the people of the region, who lived under Russian captivity for about 40 years, were forced to migrate while under Russian domination, and the lands left were attempted to be filled with other nations. However, despite all these efforts, the Turks managed to survive. They were not discouraged by the oppression and persecution that continued for years, and they fought despite the assimilation policies by establishing their national identities. The biggest basis of the struggle was this resistance of the people.

## **DISCUSSION**

The Ottoman Empire, which was defeated in World War I, was forced to sign the Armistice of Mudros. Within the agreement, there was a statement that the Ottoman soldiers must be withdrawn to their borders before the war started. As a matter of fact, based on this article, since Batumi, Ardahan and Kars were not within the borders of the Ottoman Empire before the war started, Ottoman soldiers were forced to withdraw from there. The withdrawal of the powerful army of the Ottoman Empire to its previous borders in 1914 created a great authority gap in the region. For the Turks living in the region, this situation has caused a great deal of anxiety. In addition, the claims that the Elviye-i Selâse Region would be occupied by the British became the beginning of a much faster organization process. The researches conducted show that national organizations have begun to be established in this region. These governments, which were established within the principles of Wilson, first became the Akhaltsikhe Government-i Muvakkata on 29 October 1918 under the presidency of Ömer Faik Bey. Afterwards, Iğdır-based Aras Turkish Government was established under the chairmanship of Emir Bey Ekberzade on 3 November 1918 and Kars Islamic Council was formed on 5 November 1918.

The constitution, called Esas Organization, which was accepted by the government in 1918, revealed that the official language was Turkish, and all courses were taught in Turkish. This article, which was very similar to the Law of Unification of Education, which was declared after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, was based on the requirement that all schools be affiliated with the Ministry of National Education and be taught by Turkish teachers in courses, such as geography and history taught in foreign schools. When the similarity is taken into consideration, it becomes clear how important the Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus was for the Turkish republic and how much it is connected to national values with the ideas it had before the Turkish Republic was established. However, it could be stated that it gave a great idea to Mustafa Kemal and his friends for the Turkish Republic to be established in the future.

In the constitution of the government, there is also an article stating that all individuals who were over the age of 18 were free to participate in the parliamentary elections and that one deputy will be appointed for every 10.000 population in the parliamentary elections. However, the absence of a clear statement that only men will participate in the elections was a very important expression for the democratic rights and freedoms accorded to women. While it is known that women had no place in democracy in many countries of the world during that period, the democratic promise of the Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus to women also shed a very important light on the history of Turkish democracy. The Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus accepted the Wilson Principles as its foundation and emphasized at every meeting and at every opportunity that it would not be subjugated by any nation within the framework of these principles. The government, which expected respect from other states at every opportunity, was unfortunately not respected and even exposed to the provocation of many countries that were uncomfortable with the existence of the organization.

Furthermore, the policy of expelling the Turks from Anatolia and the Caucasus and the occupying structure of the Allied Powers tied the Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus into a knot. It was claimed that the government could not provide security in the region, and an attempt was made to create anxiety among the people, and claims that the organization and order in the region would be carried out more comfortably by the British command. Unfortunately, these promises were not true, and it was revealed

that the British turned a blind eye to the atrocities committed by the Armenians after the occupation of the region. The British paved the way for the massacre of the Turkish people who have been living in this region for centuries.

## CONCLUSION

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