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The Determined Struggle of Nakhchivan's Population for Freedom and Independence Before Autonomy

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Abstract:

This article explores the historical struggle of Nakhchivan's population for independence and autonomy in the early 20th century, focusing on the challenges posed by neighboring states and the influence of Soviet Russia. The people of Nakhchivan, driven by a strong sense of national identity, engaged in a determined resistance against Armenian and Soviet incursions, culminating in the region being granted autonomous status under Soviet rule. The article examines key figures, important battles, and diplomatic efforts that shaped Nakhchivan's path to autonomy, as well as the long-term impact of this struggle on the region's political and cultural identity. By analyzing Nakhchivan's journey toward autonomy, the article highlights the enduring significance of this historical period in shaping the region's contemporary status as an autonomous republic within Azerbaijan.

1. Introduction

Nakhchivan, a region of great geopolitical importance, has long held a significant position in the South Caucasus due to its strategic location. In the early 20th century, it became a focal point of interest for neighboring powers such as the Ottoman Empire, Soviet Union, and Armenia. Each of these powers sought to exert influence over Nakhchivan, creating a complex political environment.

The population of Nakhchivan, characterized by a strong sense of national identity and loyalty to Azerbaijan, played a critical role in resisting these external forces. The struggle for independence in Nakhchivan was part of a larger national movement for Azerbaijani sovereignty.

This fight for self-determination was driven by the desire to protect the region's cultural, historical, and ethnic identity, as well as by the geopolitical pressures of the time (Muradov & Baxış, 2013).

Amid escalating regional conflicts, particularly with Armenia, the significance of Nakhchivan's role in the broader Caucasus became more apparent. As both internal and external challenges grew, the determination of Nakhchivan's inhabitants to maintain their autonomy and resist foreign influence intensified (Hasanli, 2022). Despite several attempts by external forces to impose control, the population of Nakhchivan remained steadfast in their quest for freedom and autonomy. This struggle eventually culminated in the region achieving autonomous status under the Soviet Union, although this autonomy came with certain compromises (Hasanli, 2022).

This article aims to explore the complex historical context of Nakhchivan's struggle for independence and how its population's efforts contributed to the broader Azerbaijani national movement. By examining the political, military, and cultural resistance during this period, the article will shed light on the region's pivotal role in shaping the early history of Azerbaijani independence (Yaqublu, 2015; Jamil, 2010).

The focus of this article is to examine the steadfast resistance of Nakhchivan's local population to external control in the early 20th century. Specifically, it explores how the people of Nakhchivan, driven by a strong sense of national identity and the desire for self-determination, opposed foreign interventions and sought autonomy before the official establishment of Nakhchivan's autonomous status. The article delves into the political, military, and cultural strategies employed by the population in their struggle for independence, and how these efforts ultimately shaped the region's future under Soviet influence (Hasanli, 2022; Muradov & Baxış, 2013). By providing a detailed historical analysis, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the broader Azerbaijani national movement and the role of Nakhchivan within it.

Nakhchivan's strategic location, bordered by Turkey, Persia (modern-day Iran), and Russia, made it a critical region in the geopolitical struggles of the early 20th century. Situated at the crossroads of major empires, Nakhchivan became a contested area due to its proximity to key trade routes and its cultural and political significance. The region's demographic makeup, heavily influenced by Azerbaijani identity, added complexity to its political status, as it became the focus of territorial claims by surrounding powers (Muradov & Baxış, 2013).

The collapse of the Ottoman, Russian, and Persian empires during and after World War I dramatically shifted the political landscape in the Caucasus, leading to instability in Nakhchivan. The weakening of these empires created a power vacuum in the region, with newly emerging states and external actors vying for control. The shifting borders and the competition between Turkey, Soviet Russia, and Armenia further complicated Nakhchivan's political standing (Hasanli, 2022). Despite these challenges, Nakhchivan's population remained resolute in their pursuit of autonomy and protection of their national identity.

The aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution further intensified the struggle for control in the region. As new governments and movements emerged, Nakhchivan found itself

in a precarious position, caught between the competing ambitions of neighboring powers (Hasanli, 2022). These geopolitical dynamics played a critical role in shaping Nakhchivan's eventual path toward autonomy within the Soviet framework.

2. Historical Background

The early 20th century saw a significant rise in nationalist movements throughout the South Caucasus, driven by the collapse of empires and the subsequent power vacuum. In regions such as Nakhchivan, nationalism became a key force in the population's efforts to assert their identity and resist external control. Inspired by the larger Azerbaijani independence movement, the people of Nakhchivan embraced the concepts of self-determination and national sovereignty, seeing them as essential to preserving their cultural and political autonomy (Muradov & Baxış, 2013).

The Azerbaijani independence movement, which was gaining momentum in Baku and other major cities, also resonated strongly in Nakhchivan. The population viewed themselves as an integral part of the newly emerging Azerbaijani nation, and their desire to remain united with Azerbaijan fueled their resistance against both Soviet and Armenian forces. The struggle in Nakhchivan was not just a regional fight but part of a broader national effort to maintain the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan amidst external threats (Yaqublu, 2015).

As the concept of self-determination spread across the South Caucasus, Nakhchivan's leaders and intellectuals began to articulate their vision for autonomy within an independent Azerbaijan. Their goal was to resist the influence of foreign powers, particularly the Soviets and Armenians, who sought to integrate Nakhchivan into their spheres of influence. This nationalist fervor played a critical role in shaping the population's resistance and ultimately led to the establishment of Nakhchivan's autonomous status within the Soviet Union (Hasanli, 2022).

3. Key Figures and Movements in the Struggle

The struggle for Nakhchivan's independence and autonomy was shaped by the contributions of several key figures who galvanized the local population. These leaders played pivotal roles in organizing political and military resistance, as well as fostering a sense of national identity among the people.

One of the most influential figures was Məhəmməd Əmin Rəsulzadə, the founder of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR), whose vision of a unified and independent Azerbaijan resonated strongly in Nakhchivan (Yaqublu, 2015). His efforts in promoting the cause of national independence inspired leaders in Nakhchivan to stand firm against external pressures, particularly from Armenia and Soviet Russia. Rəsulzadə's ideals of freedom and self-determination laid the ideological groundwork for Nakhchivan's resistance efforts.

In addition to political leaders, military commanders played a crucial role in defending the region. Local militias and armed forces were organized to protect Nakhchivan from incursions by foreign forces, particularly Armenian military units seeking to claim the region. These military leaders, often drawn from the ranks of local landowners and tribal leaders, mobilized the population to take up arms and defend their homes. Their efforts were critical in

resisting Armenian claims over Nakhchivan during the chaotic post-World War I period (Hasanli, 2022).

Social and cultural leaders also contributed to the cause by using their influence to foster a sense of national unity. Intellectuals, educators, and religious figures worked tirelessly to promote the idea of Nakhchivan's inclusion within a larger Azerbaijani state. Their efforts to raise awareness of the cultural and historical significance of Nakhchivan helped build a strong foundation for the local population's resistance against external domination (Muradov & Baxış, 2013).

These leaders, through a combination of political, military, and social efforts, were instrumental in gaining the support of the Nakhchivan population and ensuring the region's eventual recognition as an autonomous republic within the Soviet Union.

4. Major Events Leading to the Struggle for Autonomy

In the early 20th century, Nakhchivan found itself at the center of a geopolitical struggle involving several powerful neighboring states, each vying for control over the region. The military and political interventions of these states, including Armenia, Turkey, and Soviet Russia, played a significant role in shaping the course of Nakhchivan's history, as its population resisted external dominance while seeking to secure autonomy within Azerbaijan.

Armenia's Military Aggression

Following the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, Armenia, which had territorial ambitions in the South Caucasus, laid claim to Nakhchivan and other Azerbaijani lands, citing historical claims and demographic arguments. Armenian forces launched several military incursions into Nakhchivan, aiming to bring the region under their control. The Armenian government argued that Nakhchivan was historically Armenian and that a significant Armenian population justified their claims. However, the overwhelming Azerbaijani Muslim population of Nakhchivan rejected these claims, viewing the Armenian presence as an attempt to undermine their national identity and sovereignty (Muradov & Baxış, 2013).

One of the most notable moments of Armenian aggression occurred in 1919, when Armenian forces, emboldened by foreign support, attempted to seize control of Nakhchivan. This invasion prompted a fierce response from the local Azerbaijani population, who quickly organized militias to defend their homes and lands. The armed resistance of Nakhchivan's population, though not professionally trained or equipped, managed to fend off several Armenian incursions, demonstrating the determination of the people to maintain their sovereignty. These battles marked a turning point in the struggle for autonomy, as they solidified the population's resolve to resist foreign domination (Hasanli, 2022).

Soviet Intervention and the Establishment of Power

While Armenia posed a significant threat, Soviet Russia's growing influence in the South Caucasus also played a critical role in the external pressures on Nakhchivan. In 1920, the Red Army, under the auspices of Soviet Russia, intervened in Azerbaijan, leading to the Sovietization

of the country. This intervention extended to Nakhchivan, where Soviet forces sought to establish control by appealing to both the Azerbaijani and Armenian populations. Although the Bolsheviks initially promised autonomy and protection for the region, their ultimate goal was to bring Nakhchivan under Soviet rule as part of their broader strategy to dominate the South Caucasus (Hasanli, 2022).

The local population of Nakhchivan, wary of Soviet promises and distrustful of their intentions, resisted this external pressure. However, faced with the superior military capabilities of the Red Army, Nakhchivan's leaders were forced to negotiate with the Soviet authorities. This marked the beginning of a complex period of political maneuvering, as Nakhchivan sought to preserve its autonomy within the framework of Soviet influence. The fight for Nakhchivan's independence and autonomy was marked by several key battles and uprisings that reflected the fierce determination of the local population. These moments of armed resistance were crucial in shaping the region's future, as they demonstrated the people's unwavering commitment to defending their land and identity.

The 1919-1920 Battles Against Armenian Forces

One of the most significant periods of armed resistance in Nakhchivan occurred in 1919-1920, during the height of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over territorial claims. Armenian forces, bolstered by support from foreign powers, attempted multiple invasions of Nakhchivan in an effort to annex the region. However, the local Azerbaijani population, led by tribal leaders and militias, organized a defense that successfully repelled these attacks. The battles around the town of Sharur and the Aras River are particularly notable, as they saw fierce fighting between Armenian forces and local Azerbaijani defenders. Despite being outgunned and outnumbered, the people of Nakhchivan managed to hold their ground, preserving their control over the region (Muradov & Baxış, 2013).

The 1920 Uprising Against Sovietization

In addition to fighting Armenian forces, the people of Nakhchivan also rose up against the Sovietization of the region in 1920. The Bolshevik presence in Nakhchivan was met with widespread resistance, as the local population feared losing their national identity and autonomy under Soviet rule. In response to the Red Army's attempts to establish control, several uprisings broke out in Nakhchivan, with local militias and tribal leaders organizing armed resistance against the Soviet forces. One of the most significant uprisings occurred in May 1920, when a large-scale revolt erupted in Nakhchivan's rural areas. This uprising was brutally suppressed by Soviet forces, but it highlighted the depth of the local population's opposition to Soviet control (Hasanli, 2022).

The Role of Turkish Support

Turkey, which had historical and cultural ties to Nakhchivan, played a crucial role in supporting the region's efforts to resist foreign domination. In 1920, Turkey signed the Treaty of Kars with Soviet Russia, which included provisions recognizing Nakhchivan's autonomy within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic. Turkish military and diplomatic support helped bolster

Nakhchivan's position during this period, as it provided a counterbalance to the pressures exerted by Armenia and Soviet Russia. The Treaty of Kars is a key moment in Nakhchivan's history, as it secured the region's status as an autonomous entity within Azerbaijan, albeit under Soviet influence (Khalilov, 2022).

Diplomatic Efforts

While armed resistance played a critical role in the struggle for autonomy, Nakhchivan's leaders also engaged in diplomatic efforts to secure the region's future. These efforts were aimed at negotiating with foreign powers and finding a political solution that would preserve Nakhchivan's autonomy while avoiding outright annexation by either Armenia or Soviet Russia.

Negotiations with Turkey and Soviet Russia

One of the most important diplomatic efforts in Nakhchivan's history was the negotiation of the Treaty of Kars in 1921. This treaty, signed between Turkey, Soviet Russia, and the newly established Soviet republics of the South Caucasus, played a pivotal role in determining Nakhchivan's future. Under the terms of the treaty, Nakhchivan was recognized as an autonomous region within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, with Turkey serving as a guarantor of its autonomy. This diplomatic victory was crucial for Nakhchivan, as it prevented the region from being absorbed into Armenia and secured its status within Azerbaijan (Hasanli, 2022).

The negotiations leading up to the Treaty of Kars involved complex diplomacy, with Nakhchivan's leaders working closely with Turkish officials to ensure the region's autonomy was protected. Turkish diplomats, recognizing the cultural and historical ties between Nakhchivan and Turkey, were instrumental in advocating for the region's autonomy during these negotiations. At the same time, Soviet Russia, eager to solidify its control over the South Caucasus, agreed to the arrangement as a way to placate Turkish concerns and stabilize the region.

Internal Diplomacy and Compromises with Soviet Authorities

In addition to external diplomacy, Nakhchivan's leaders also had to navigate the internal politics of Soviet Azerbaijan. After the Sovietization of Azerbaijan in 1920, Nakhchivan's leaders worked to negotiate a special autonomous status for the region within the Soviet framework. This involved a delicate balancing act, as Nakhchivan's leaders had to ensure that their demands for autonomy did not provoke a harsh response from the Soviet authorities. Through careful diplomacy and political maneuvering, Nakhchivan was eventually granted autonomous status within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924, marking the culmination of both armed resistance and diplomatic efforts (Khalilov, 2022).

These diplomatic efforts, combined with the region's military resistance, played a critical role in securing Nakhchivan's autonomy. The leadership's ability to negotiate with both Soviet and Turkish authorities ensured that Nakhchivan would retain a degree of self-governance, even under Soviet rule.

5. Challenges Faced by the Population

Internal Struggles

The internal divisions within Nakhchivan during the struggle for autonomy added significant complexity to the fight for independence. These internal challenges were often rooted in social, political, and ethnic factors, which at times undermined the region's ability to present a united front against external pressures. In the early 20th century, Nakhchivan, like much of the South Caucasus, was politically fragmented. The region was home to a variety of political factions, each with differing ideologies and objectives. Some groups sought closer ties with Soviet Russia, seeing alignment with the Soviet Union as the best path to stability and autonomy. Others, however, were staunchly nationalist and were determined to resist Soviet influence, favoring independence or alignment with Turkey. This political division made it difficult for the population to unify under a single cause, as leaders debated the best course of action for Nakhchivan's future (Hasanli, 2022).

Social and Ethnic Divisions

Ethnic tensions also played a role in complicating the struggle for independence. While the majority of Nakhchivan's population identified as Azerbaijani, there were minority groups, including Armenians, who had different political allegiances and aspirations. These ethnic groups often found themselves at odds, particularly during times of conflict. Armenian communities, in particular, were more inclined to support Armenia's territorial claims to Nakhchivan, leading to tensions and, in some cases, violent confrontations with Azerbaijani nationalists (Muradov & Baxış, 2013). This internal ethnic divide created a volatile environment, further weakening Nakhchivan's ability to resist external invasions and navigate the complex regional politics.

In addition, within the Azerbaijani community itself, there were social divisions based on class and tribal affiliations. Landowners and tribal leaders, who held significant influence in rural areas, often had different priorities than the emerging urban intelligentsia, who advocated for modernization and national unity. These internal divisions not only complicated decision-making processes but also weakened the region's ability to mobilize effectively against external threats. Nakhchivan's struggle for autonomy was made even more difficult by the dire economic and social conditions that plagued the region during this period. The aftermath of World War I, the collapse of empires, and continuous conflicts with neighboring states had left the region economically devastated.

Economic Hardship

Nakhchivan's economy, traditionally based on agriculture and trade, was severely disrupted by the political instability and military conflicts of the early 20th century. The region's strategic location, once an asset for trade, became a liability as it was repeatedly caught in the crossfire of competing empires. Agricultural production suffered as land was destroyed by military campaigns, and many farmers were forced to abandon their fields to join the armed resistance or flee the violence (Khalilov, 2022). As a result, food shortages became a common issue, exacerbating the population's struggle to sustain itself during the conflict.

The breakdown of trade routes further worsened the economic situation. Nakhchivan, which had traditionally relied on trade with neighboring regions and countries, found itself isolated as war and territorial disputes disrupted commerce. The inability to access essential goods and resources placed additional strain on the population, limiting their ability to maintain resistance efforts.

Social Challenges

The social fabric of Nakhchivan was also severely impacted by the ongoing conflicts and economic hardships. The constant threat of invasion and the presence of foreign military forces created a climate of fear and uncertainty. Many families were displaced by the fighting, with thousands forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in safer areas. This displacement not only caused immense suffering but also weakened the social cohesion necessary for organizing and sustaining resistance efforts (Muradov & Baxış, 2013).

Additionally, the constant state of war and political instability led to a breakdown in social services and infrastructure. Schools, hospitals, and other essential institutions were either destroyed or left severely underfunded. The lack of access to basic services, combined with the high levels of poverty, made it difficult for the population to focus on the fight for independence, as survival became the primary concern for many families.

The Burden of Military Conscription

The other serious social problem was the heavy burden of military draft. Since the war gradually became terribly intense, both Soviet Russia and the Armenian forces tried to draft men from Nakhchivan into their armies. In this respect, many Azerbaijani men were in the most cold-blooded position: they were forced to choose between their struggle either for one of the foreign countries or against the foreign rule. This conscription took the principal breadwinner in many families, therefore increasing social ferment and economic hardships in this particular region.

The economic and social conditions of the time thus placed an enormous strain on Nakhchivan's population. Despite their strong desire for autonomy and independence, the internal divisions and hardships weakened their ability to sustain a prolonged fight. However, even under these difficult circumstances, the population continued to resist external pressures, driven by a deep sense of national identity and the hope for a better future.

6. Outcome: The Road to Autonomy

Soviet Influence and the Establishment of Autonomy

The road to autonomy for Nakhchivan was shaped significantly by the intervention of Soviet forces in the South Caucasus. After World War I and the collapse of the Russian Empire, the newly formed Soviet government sought to consolidate its influence in the region. The Red Army's invasion of Azerbaijan in 1920 led to the Sovietization of the country, and this process extended to Nakhchivan. Despite the population's resistance to external control, Soviet forces gradually took control of the region, offering the possibility of autonomy within the framework of the Soviet Union (Hasanli, 2022).

The establishment of Nakhchivan's autonomy was part of a broader strategy by the Soviet Union to pacify regional tensions and prevent further conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan over contested territories like Nakhchivan. The Bolshevik leadership, recognizing the importance of Nakhchivan's strategic position, sought to prevent it from falling under Armenian control. At the same time, Soviet leaders were keen to secure Turkey's cooperation, as Turkey also had an interest in Nakhchivan due to historical and ethnic ties. This geopolitical balancing act resulted in the Treaty of Kars in 1921, which guaranteed Nakhchivan's status as an autonomous region within Soviet Azerbaijan, with Turkey serving as a guarantor of its autonomy (Khalilov, 2022).

Nakhchivan's leaders and population were forced to make several concessions in order to secure this autonomy under Soviet rule. While the region retained a degree of self-governance, it was now subject to the political, economic, and ideological control of the Soviet Union. The local leaders who had once championed complete independence had to accept the reality of Soviet hegemony, with the understanding that this arrangement would at least protect Nakhchivan from annexation by Armenia. Many in the population were wary of Soviet promises, but they recognized that this compromise was necessary to preserve the region's territorial integrity and cultural identity (Hasanli, 2022).

The Impact of Autonomy on Nakhchivan

The granting of autonomy to Nakhchivan under Soviet rule had a profound impact on the region's identity, political landscape, and future struggles for independence. On one hand, the establishment of autonomy provided Nakhchivan with a certain degree of protection and self-administration, which allowed the region to maintain its distinct Azerbaijani identity. This was especially important given the historical pressures from neighboring Armenia, which continued to assert claims over Nakhchivan throughout the 20th century. The autonomous status meant that Nakhchivan had its own local government and institutions, albeit under the strict oversight of Soviet authorities (Muradov & Baxış, 2013).

Politically, autonomy under the Soviet Union also introduced new dynamics in the region. The Communist Party quickly became the dominant political force in Nakhchivan, and the region's leadership was required to align itself with Soviet policies and ideology. This often led to tensions between the local population's desire for greater independence and the centralized control of Moscow. Although Nakhchivan's leaders were able to exercise a degree of local governance, they were constrained by the demands of Soviet economic and political systems. The population's earlier aspirations for full independence had to be tempered by the realities of living under Soviet rule (Khalilov, 2022).

Culturally, the impact of autonomy was more nuanced. While Soviet rule imposed certain restrictions on religious practices and nationalistic expressions, the autonomous status allowed Nakhchivan to preserve its Azerbaijani cultural and linguistic identity to some extent. The Soviet government's policies of promoting local languages and cultures within certain limits meant that Nakhchivan could maintain its distinct heritage, even as it was integrated into the broader Soviet framework. However, this cultural preservation was always balanced against the Soviet Union's

larger goal of creating a unified socialist state, which often suppressed overt expressions of nationalism (Hasanli, 2022).

The long-term impact of autonomy on Nakhchivan's future struggles for independence became evident as the Soviet Union began to collapse in the late 20th century. The region's autonomous status allowed Nakhchivan to navigate the turbulent period of Soviet dissolution with a certain degree of stability. However, as Azerbaijan declared independence in 1991, Nakhchivan's leaders were faced with new challenges. The region's unique political status under the Soviet system meant that its path to integration into the newly independent Azerbaijani state was not straightforward. The legacy of Soviet-imposed autonomy left a lasting imprint on Nakhchivan's political landscape, which continues to shape its relationship with Azerbaijan and its neighbors today (Muradov & Baxış, 2013).

7. Conclusion

The struggle of Nakhchivan's population for independence in the early 20th century remains a defining chapter in the region's history. Faced with constant external pressures from neighboring states like Armenia and imperial powers such as Soviet Russia, the people of Nakhchivan demonstrated unwavering determination to protect their land, cultural identity, and political autonomy. The series of military, political, and social efforts, despite facing numerous internal and external challenges, ultimately resulted in the recognition of Nakhchivan's autonomous status within the Soviet Union in 1921.

The significance of this struggle cannot be overstated. It was not just a battle for territorial control, but a fight to preserve Nakhchivan's Azerbaijani identity in a tumultuous period of regional realignment. The determination of Nakhchivan's population to resist foreign domination and assert their right to self-determination laid the foundation for the region's contemporary status as an autonomous republic. This autonomy continues to define Nakhchivan's relationship with both Azerbaijan and the broader international community, as the region remains a critical part of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

The early struggles for independence and autonomy have left a lasting impact on Nakhchivan's political and cultural identity. Politically, the region's ability to secure autonomy under Soviet rule provided a framework that allowed it to navigate the challenges of Soviet control while maintaining a distinct status. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Nakhchivan's political landscape continues to reflect the legacy of these early efforts, with the region retaining a degree of self-governance under the framework of the Azerbaijani state. This autonomy has allowed Nakhchivan to develop its own administrative structures, while still aligning with the broader interests of Azerbaijan. Culturally, the independence movement fostered a strong sense of identity within Nakhchivan. The region's early resistance to external domination helped solidify a cultural and national identity that remains deeply intertwined with the broader Azerbaijani identity. Nakhchivan's cultural institutions, traditions, and historical narratives continue to be shaped by the memory of these early struggles. The region's ability to maintain its Azerbaijani identity, even under Soviet rule, is a testament to the resilience of its people and their commitment to preserving their heritage.

In conclusion, the legacy of Nakhchivan's early struggle for independence continues to influence its political and cultural trajectory. As an autonomous republic within Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan remains a vital part of the nation's history and future, serving as a symbol of the enduring strength and unity of its people.

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