

The Republic of ARMENIA



VOLUME II

From Versailles to London, 1919-1920

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The Rising

Spread out among the orchards, vineyards, and streams of the Vedibasar district, Baouk-Vedi served as a rallying point for Muslim partisans. When the Armenians swept on to Nakhichevan in May, the village, east of the railway, was left unscathed. In June raiding parties from Baouk-Vedi struck in the direction of Davalu and on July 1 killed nine Armenian soldiers and twelve peasants. Because the village had become a symbol of resistance for other Muslim settlements, Colonel Plowden concurred with the Armenian military authorities that the attack had to be answered. With

400 men, Colonel Apresniank pitched camp before Baouk-Vedi on July 4 and demanded of the local commissar that the raiders be handed over, the weapons and goods of the murdered Armenians brought forth, and indemnity paid the families of the victims. Soon after the commissar returned to the village, the Muslim partisans opened machine-gun fire from concealed positions and decimated the Armenian unit. Preliminary casualty lists showed 5 officers and 30 enlisted men killed and 7 officers and more than 120 men seriously wounded.¹¹

As usual, widely divergent explanations of the immediate cause of the conflict were circulated. Khan Tekinskii and the Azerbaijani government stated that the trouble had started when the Armenian besiegers had killed the village commissar and his assistant.¹² British, French, and Armenian accounts maintained that Apresniank's men had been ambushed while awaiting the return of the Muslim spokesmen and that both the commissar and his assistant were alive and well.¹³ Still, no one could deny that the Armenian column had been routed and compelled to abandon most of its heavy arms and field equipment. It was the largest and most humiliating loss of the year.

For ten days after the calamity the Armenian army tried unsuccessfully to regain its honor by overwhelming Baouk-Vedi. The Muslim defenders, reinforced by volunteers from Karabaghlar, Kotuz, Dakhnaz, and other nearby hamlets and directed by Turkish officers Mehmed Chavush and Colonel Mehmed Effendi, turned back repeated charges up the hills facing the village.¹⁴ Responding cautiously to appeals by Plowden and

Khatanian, General Cory sent only two additional staff officers to Erevan and demanded an immediate cease-fire. Compliance by the Armenian command was indicative of its weakness. Plowden then urged Cory to insist that the Azerbaijani government recall some thirty officers who were collaborating with the Turkish instructors and discipline the deeply implicated Azerbaijani representative at Erevan.¹⁵

Throughout the crisis Khan Tekinskii kept his government informed about Armenian military movements and called for energetic counter-measures. On July 14 he cabled that Armenian forces were converging upon Vedibasar and that even "the priests are appealing in their sermons for an attack against Baouk-Vedi as a holy crusade." Stressing the psychological and moral importance of protecting the village, the envoy requested the financial means to sustain the resistance and gave assurances that "major developments are anticipated in Sharur-Nakhichevan-Ordubad and in the Kars region."¹⁶ A week later he added that the inhabitants of several Armenian villages in Sharur were already fleeing. He implored his government to order a military concentration along the borders to boost Muslim morale and increase Armenian confusion. The time was ripe for decisive action, as the Muslims were ready to rise from Vedibasar and Aralikh all the way to Nakhichevan.¹⁷ Usubbekov's cabinet, facing the threat of the Volunteer Army on the northern frontier and not so eager as Khan Tekinskii to engage in direct military intervention, responded with limited covert assistance; 200,000 rounds of ammunition and 300,000 Russian imperial rubles were sent to Nakhichevan through the desolate northern reaches of Persia, and on July 20 an additional 4 million rubles were dispatched to Khan Tekinskii via Tiflis.¹⁸

General Kiazim Karabekir was fully aware of the vital significance of the Araxes valley. Like officials in the Azerbaijani war ministry, he sent emissaries to convince wavering notables that the Armenians would be left prostrate by the British evacuation of Transcaucasia. As Armeno-Tatar relations moved toward armed conflict, Karabekir recalled his most trusted agent, Colonel Halil Bey, to Erzerum to detail strategy for neutralizing

the Armenian military forces and establishing a regional Muslim government. Accompanied by an artillery expert and several other officers whom Karabekir deceptively listed as deserters, Halil Bey slipped back over the border from old Bayazit on the night of July 17/18 and took command of the Muslim cavalry in Sharur.¹⁹

Reports of the British military representatives at Nakhichevan and Erevan conveyed the urgency of the situation. Both officers, blaming Turkish and Azerbaijani provocateurs for the disturbances, were alarmed because remote Armenian villages were under siege and newly repatriated residents were again being evicted. On July 18 Lieutenant Schwind cabled division headquarters at Tiflis that he was assuming control in Nakhichevan because the Armenian administration was powerless. The crisis, he said, had been caused by external interference, the Armenian expedition against Baouk-Vedi ("a most necessary measure"), the distortion of facts in such matters as the Armenian attempt to register arms, and, perhaps most important, the mutual "congenital inability on the part of both sides to settle any point except by murder or massacre."²⁰ In authorizing Schwind to attempt arbitration, division headquarters stipulated that no action requiring British troops could be taken. Meanwhile, Colonel Plowden recommended that Schwind retire to Erevan and that Kalb Ali Khan Nakhichevanskii, "the ring leader of the Moslem military organisation in the Nakhichevan area should be removed at once on any pretext."²¹ It was too late for either step, however, since the insurrection had already begun.

The sporadic clashes in the countryside spread to Nakhichevan on July 20, when, according to a British source, a signal volley was fired by a Muslim in the bazaar, "upon which another Tartar drew his dagger and cut off the nearest Armenian's ear." Within minutes fighting enveloped the city. Meeting with Kalb Ali Khan and the Armenian governor that evening, Lieutenant Schwind arranged a three-day cease-fire to enable Colonel Plowden to conduct a personal investigation. But the truce did not hold, and toward dawn Armenian station guards were overwhelmed and a train that had just arrived with British army rations and American flour and condensed milk was looted. With full-scale interracial violence erupting, Schwind persuaded the Armenian commander, Major General Shel-

kovnikian, and the Muslim council to allow Kalb Ali Khan to restore order with a mixed Armenian-Muslim militia. Once again, however, the truce collapsed and on July 22 the insurgents captured the police station and surrounded the Armenian garrison in the northern sector of Nakhichevan, whereupon the Armenian artillery began shelling the lower areas. Schwind decided that all he could do was "sit tight and be neutral." In the bitter fighting of the next two days, the Muslims, suffering heavy casualties, were unable to dislodge Shelkovnikian's 500-man garrison.²²

To the north, meanwhile, the Armenians were in retreat. On July 22 the partisans, directed by Colonel Halil, attacked all the posts in Sharur. The two companies at Shahtaght managed to join Colonel Karakeshishian's garrison at Bash-Norashen, but two days later the partisans surrounded the town, seized the defile known as Volch'i Vorota (Wolves' Gates) on the border of the Erevan *uezd*, and captured the 200-man garrison at Khanukhlar. On July 25 Karakeshishian's column fought its way out of the encirclement and, taking along the Armenians of Bash-Norashen and Ulia-Norashen, moved up the Arpa river valley toward the highlands of Erevan and Daralagiaz. The refugees first concentrated at Chanakhchi and Zindjirlu and then, with the inhabitants of these and several other Christian villages, made their way over mountain passes to Nor-Bayazit.²³ The Armenian armored train in Sharur did not fare so well. On July 26 the insurgents trapped it by cutting the rails near Norashen and weakening the bridge at Volch'i Vorota 12 miles to the north. As the train approached the defile the last car derailed, and the crew took to the safety of the hills. The unjustifiable abandonment of the train without even trying to cut loose the derailed car or to destroy the entire train to prevent its capture ultimately led to the court-martial and conviction of the officer in charge.²⁴

The fall of Shahtaght and Bash-Norashen placed the Nakhichevan garrison in an untenable position. On the evening of July 25, General Shelkovnikian led his men and hundreds of Armenian inhabitants to Aznaburt (Znaberd) in the north and then, with the Christians of that town, toward the mountain stronghold of Martiros. Many Armenian peasants in the Nakhichevan-Djagri river valley also fled into the mountains, but those who did not, together with those living west of the Nakhichevan-

Julfa road and railway, had to be left to their fate. The Muslims vented their rage upon the Armenian patients and wounded soldiers in the American hospital at Nakhichevan, upon the hamlets of Yamkhana and Tumbul southwest of the city, and upon the villages of Yarimdja, Giul-tapa, Kiarimbek-diza, Kulibek-diza, Alagiaz-Mazra, Diduvar, and Nazarabad in the Nakhichevan-Djagri valley. For days thereafter corpses filled the shallows of nearby streams and the Araxes River. The Muslim cavalry pursued the Armenians up the Arpa and Nakhichevan rivers, forcing the mountaineers of Aghkhach, Ses, and Sultanbek to withdraw for a time, but the Armenian military line soon firmed up along a string of highland settlements from Khachik to Nors. Eventually 6,000 refugees from the Araxes valley reached Zangezur and Nor-Bayazit by way of mountain paths and streams.²⁵

The Armenian border guards and refugees at Julfa, meanwhile, sought haven across the bridge in Persian Djolfa, whence they were transported to Tabriz. Lieutenant Schwind tried to withdraw along the same route, but his party, unable to secure safe-conduct passes, was turned back by Khan Nakhichevanskii. Finally, on July 28, the British staff and the American relief personnel, who had entrusted their hospital and orphanage to the Muslim council in the hope of safeguarding the children, were provided rail transportation to Julfa. After harrowing experiences there and the confiscation of two of their automobiles, they crossed the Araxes and arrived at Tabriz on the evening of July 29.²⁶

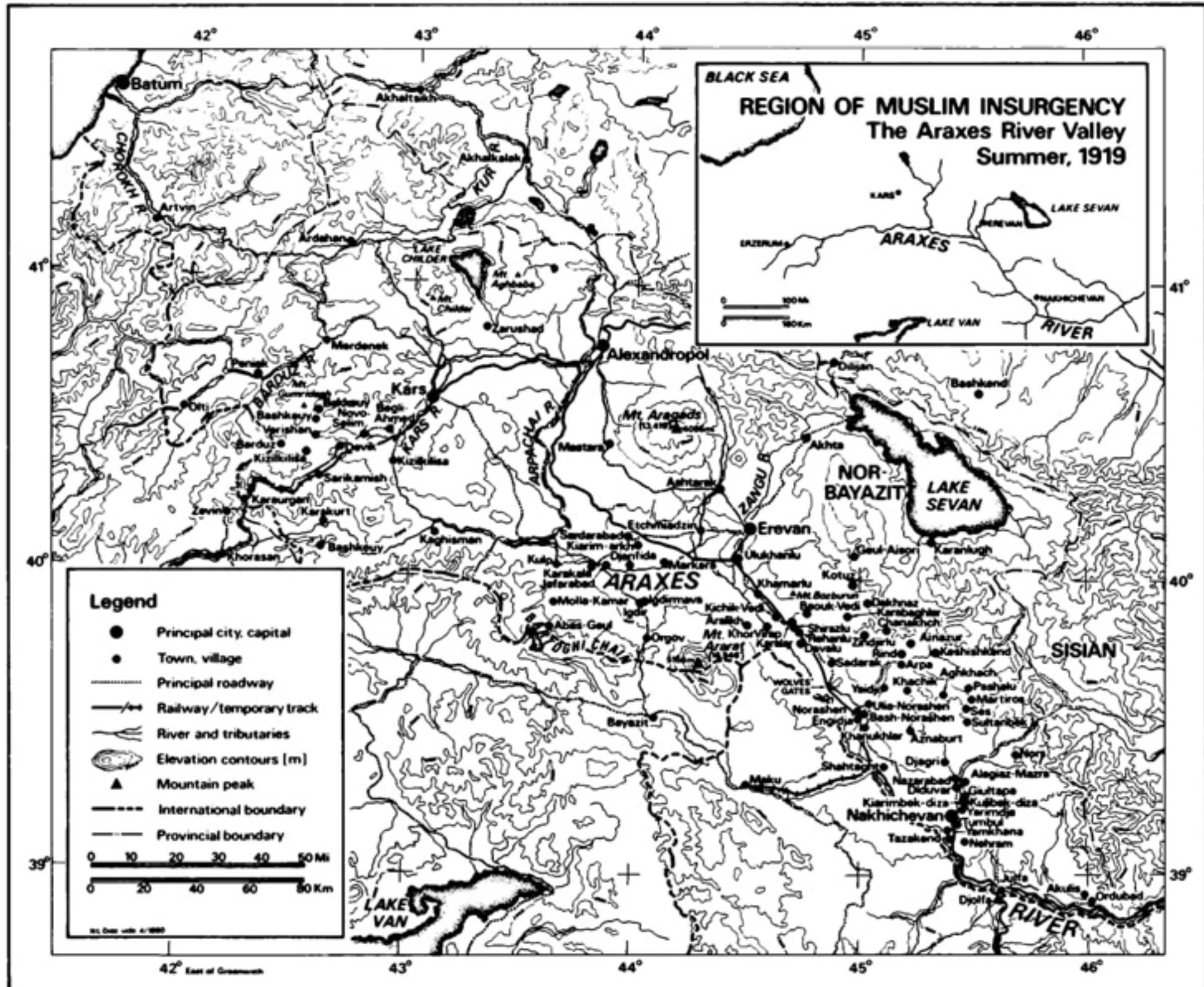
Armenian losses in July were staggering. Twenty-five officers of the 2d and 3d Infantry Regiments had been killed and twice as many wounded; no complete list of casualties among noncommissioned ranks was ever published. Heavy losses of military equipment and supplies were compounded by the abandonment of the armored train and the entrapment of eight locomotives and more than 100 freight cars.²⁷ Although the outnumbered Armenian troops had fought bravely and had managed, except for the two companies at Khanukhlar, to withdraw in order, the Muslim victory inspired daring raids far to the north. The partisans at

Aralikh, equipped with fieldpieces and machine guns and led by an officer who had come from Erzerum with Halil Bey, struck at the rear of the Armenian lines along the perimeter of Erevan county, while the defenders of Baouk-Vedi hurled back another assault upon their fortified positions on July 24 and 25. The seriousness of the situation was put clearly to the Armenians when Halil Bey returned twenty-nine gravely wounded soldiers to Armenian field headquarters at Khamarlu on July 25, with the warning that continued hostilities would seal the fate of the many prisoners still in his custody.²⁸

Feeble Countermeasures

The Armenian government reacted to the uprising with frantic directives and emergency decrees. On July 23 all able-bodied men between the ages of twenty-six and twenty-eight in the counties of Erevan, Etchmiadzin, and Surmalu were ordered to military duty, thus further reducing the work force at harvest time. Personnel losses also required the activating of nearly all reserve officers up to forty years of age in these counties and in Nor-Bayazit and Kars. On July 24 the Council of Ministers asked citizens to turn in their own weapons and ammunition because of depleted supplies in the state arsenals; 500 rubles in cash and foodstuffs would be paid for each Mosin or Lebel rifle and half a ruble for each bullet, and those who responded would be exempt from an extraordinary military tax. In a public rally two days later, Arshak Djamalian, Arsen Mikayelian, Vardges Aharonian, and partisan chiefs Hamazasp and Sebouh (Arshak Nersesian) urged the crowd to join in the struggle against the foreign-directed conspiracy to obliterate the Republic. The few hundred rifles and several thousand rounds of ammunition gathered at Erevan were insignificant in view of the need. Moreover, a special committee formed to combat desertion and the harboring of fugitives had almost no means to enforce its regulations. Finally, on July 30, the entire country was put under a committee of public safety, composed of Premier Khatisian, Acting Interior Minister Sargis Manasian, and Military Minister Kristapor Araratian.²⁹

Alexandre Khatisian tried in vain to secure British intervention. The



2. REGION OF MUSLIM INSURGENCY: THE ARAXES RIVER VALLEY, SUMMER, 1919

Armenians were bewildered by the hasty British withdrawal from Kars and Nakhichevan, particularly as the 27th Division remained in Georgia and Azerbaijan for weeks thereafter. General Cory had, however, received instructions from Milne that no troops could be deployed to restore order and that "the inhabitants must settle their own differences and stand or fall by the result."³⁰ In response to the appeals of Khatisian and Plowden, therefore, Cory consented only to dispatch two Punjabi platoons to serve as escorts for the British military representative at Erevan.³¹ On July 25 he advised Milne that the unrest stirred by Turkish and Azerbaijani agents was jeopardizing American relief efforts and that the only effective countermeasure would be military occupation of the offending countries or else "a protective occupation of Russian Armenia." Even the more limited protective operation, Cory later added, was impossible as it would have to be sustained for two or three years. He would, however, agree to station two battalions at Erevan and a third at Alexandropol temporarily if the Italians still intended to assume responsibility in the Caucasus.³² Further messages from Milne instructed Cory to remind the Armenians that they had been cautioned to establish their administration peaceably, whereas they had resorted to force, and that they would have to settle their differences with the Muslims as best they could. Cory was authorized to arrange an armistice so that the Armenians might withdraw from territories they could not control, but at no time were British troops to be engaged.³³

Attempts to bring about a cease-fire were already being made by Colonel Plowden and his small staff. On July 25 Lieutenant Charles drove into the battle zone displaying a white flag and the Union Jack, but he had to return to Erevan when his automobile came under Muslim fire and his batman was taken prisoner.³⁴ Two days later the 27th Division's chief of staff, Colonel Charles Grattan-Bellew, learned from Khatisian and Minister of Military Affairs Araratian that the fighting force in the threatened districts amounted to only 3,000 rifles and 12 small guns under

Dro's command on the southern front, the same number under General Harutiun Hovsepian at Kars, and 800 rifles and 2 field guns in the Surmalu uezd. It was also revealed that Halil had just offered to suspend hostilities and guarantee the safety of Armenian inhabitants behind his lines provided that Sharur-Nakhichevan remain under local Muslim rule pending action by the Paris Peace Conference. After conferring with Dro and General Hovhannes Hakhverdian at Khamarlu, Grattan-Bellew, Plowden, and the French military representative, Captain Antoine Poidebard, were received by Halil Bey at Bash-Norashen on August 1. The Turkish officer maintained that what had occurred was not a rebellion but the assertion of the right to self-determination. All repressive measures against the Armenians had been stopped, but Armenian dominion would never again be tolerated. Grattan-Bellew returned to Tiflis impressed with Halil's apparent sincerity about preventing further "butcheries." While the Armenians would probably win Baouk-Vedi through force of arms or a negotiated settlement, they would certainly have to relinquish Sharur and Nakhichevan.³⁵

As the impasse continued, Colonel Plowden was ordered to withdraw from Erevan whenever conditions warranted. Before going he could try to arrange an armistice and "then leave the Armenians to make terms or not as they see fit."³⁶ Despite difficulty and delays, Plowden did meet with the Nakhichevan Muslim Council in mid-August. His party, including Poidebard, Major Stewart Forbes of the ARA, and Dr. Ussher of the ACRNE, hoped at least to have rail traffic between Julfa and Erevan resumed, but after three days at Nakhichevan and Julfa they returned to Erevan thoroughly shaken. They had been subjected to verbal and physical abuse and even imprisoned for a few hours by Halil Bey, who heaped insults upon Great Britain and the United States. At Nakhichevan the relief facilities were in shambles, and the Muslim spokesmen refused to restore the goods and properties of the American organizations. Turkish officers and enlisted men were stationed in every important town and village and more were reportedly crossing over from Maku, although all claimed to have been discharged from the Ottoman army. Colonel Plowden reported that "the Tartars are well organised and hungering for violence."³⁷

The Azerbaijani diplomatic representative in Armenia was elated by this turn of events. Still unaware that his messages were being intercepted and deciphered, Khan Tekinskii advised his government on July 28 to propose to the British command a settlement whereby Azerbaijan would administer the railway from Shahtaght to Julfa and be allowed to complete the Baku–Aliat–Julfa line for transit trade with Persia. Furthermore, Azerbaijan would oversee the establishment of a provisional regional administration with jurisdiction from Ordubad and Julfa to Baouk-Vedi and Davalu in the county of Erevan. Khan Tekinskii was disappointed that the Muslim partisans were still reluctant to extend operations to Erevan itself. He urged his superiors “to square accounts” in Zangezur within two weeks and to bring the Azerbaijani forces all the way to Khamarlu. Since the British, he was certain, would not assist the Armenians, the operation could be completed without a formal declaration of war. In his dispatch of August 3, the envoy concluded: “I beseech you, take advantage of the moment and waste no more time.”³⁸

Khan Tekinskii’s admonitions had become so provocative that both the French and American missions in Tiflis urged General Cory to demand his recall. Moreover, General Milne had learned that Khan Tekinskii was helping to recruit Turkish officers for action in Transcaucasia. When General D. I. Shuttleworth, in command of the British garrison at Baku, confronted Usubbekov with this information, the premier denied any knowledge of the alleged misbehavior but promised to summon Khan Tekinskii for questioning. Having performed yeoman service for the militant, pro-Turkish faction in the Azerbaijani government, Khan Tekinskii left Erevan on August 8. But instead of having to account for his extradiplomatic activities in Armenia, he was appointed assistant to Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed Iusuf Jafarov.³⁹

On August 14 the columns of *Azerbaidzhan*, the Baku organ of the Musavat party, were filled with praises for the valor of the Muslims in the Araxes valley. The warriors of Baouk-Vedi, demonstrating that they would “never bow their heads before the Armenians,” had annihilated up to 4,000 of the enemy, including the hated Van detachment. A Muslim force of 1,500 men had reportedly driven the Armenians from Davalu and thus broken the stranglehold on Baouk-Vedi and restored the demar-

cation line that prevailed before the Anglo-Armenian maneuvers in May.⁴⁰

The Azerbaijani account, although exaggerated, was inaccurate only in details, for by the beginning of August the Armenian army and civil administration had been expelled from Julfa all the way to Davalu. On August 4 Muslim raiders even penetrated the environs of Khamarlu. In a counterattack launched on August 10, Dro overran the Vedibasar villages of Engidja, Shirazlu, Karalar, Djatkran, and Rehanlu and the hills above Baouk-Vedi. During the following week those heights changed hands several times, but the Armenian units were unable to break across the trenches into Baouk-Vedi. For the rest of the year the village cluster remained boldly defiant within sight of the Armenian army. Dro placed pickets along a front line extending from Kotuz to Mount Bozburun, Shirazlu, Kichik (Küchük) Vedi, and Khor-Virap on the Araxes River; despite frequent skirmishes and occasional daring raids, both sides held firm. The overall results gratified the Muslim insurgents and their supporters in Turkey and Azerbaijan, whereas for the Armenians the nightmare of July had brought the *de facto* southern frontier to within 20 miles of Erevan.⁴¹