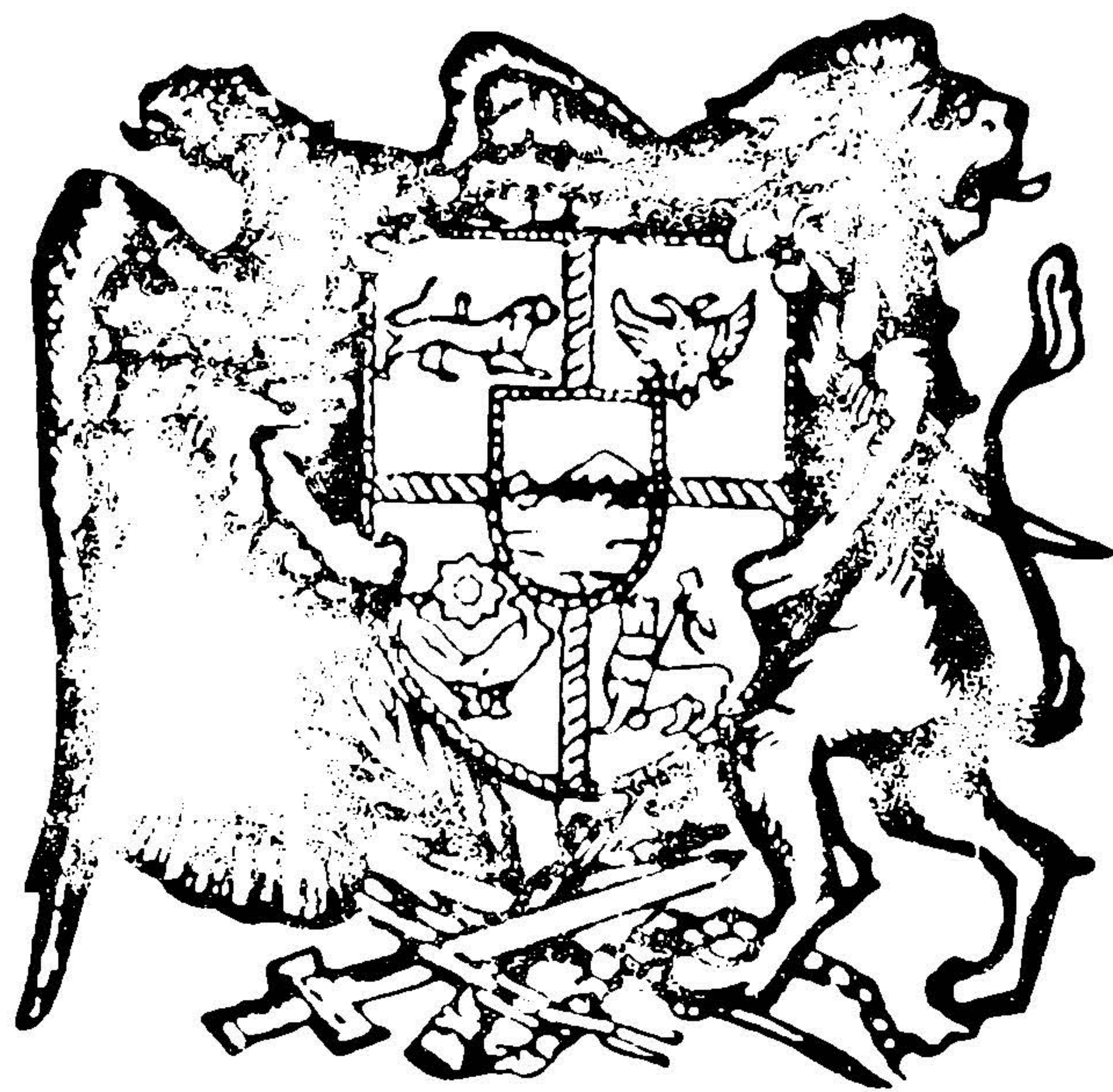


The Republic of ARMENIA



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RICHARD G. HOVANNISIAN

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1919,

In December, Muslim mobs led by Azerbaijani officers from Ordubad put the town of Akulis in historic Goghtan to sword and fire, and in January, Armenian partisans accompanied by officers from Goris overran a score of Turkic settlements in central Zangezur.

But the ink had scarcely dried before Armenian artillery sounded in the province of Kars and Azerbaijani troops were deployed for action throughout Karabagh. During the winter of 1920, the snow-covered soil of Transcaucasia was stained red once again.⁴

Childer-Aghbaba-Zarushat

The year began with serious unrest and retribution in the northeastern sector of the province of Kars.

The exacerbation of Armeno-Azerbaijani relations over Zangezur and Goghtan at the end of 1919 had a strong unsettling effect on Childer-Aghbaba-Zarushat. Muslim militants such as Kurd Selim of Kizil-Kilisa became more audacious in their threats and attacks on Muslim villages that maintained a neutral or acquiescent relationship with Armenian officials. The militants were assisted by agents sent out from Erzerum by General Kiazim Karabekir, by demobilized Turkish officers left behind when the Ottoman army withdrew in the spring of 1919, and by Azerbaijani operatives and nonuniformed officers who brought large sums of money to assist in the struggle against Armenian rule. The weakness of the Armenian provincial administration contributed to the unrest, as strong rivalry and differing approaches to the Muslim population separated the civil and military authorities.⁶

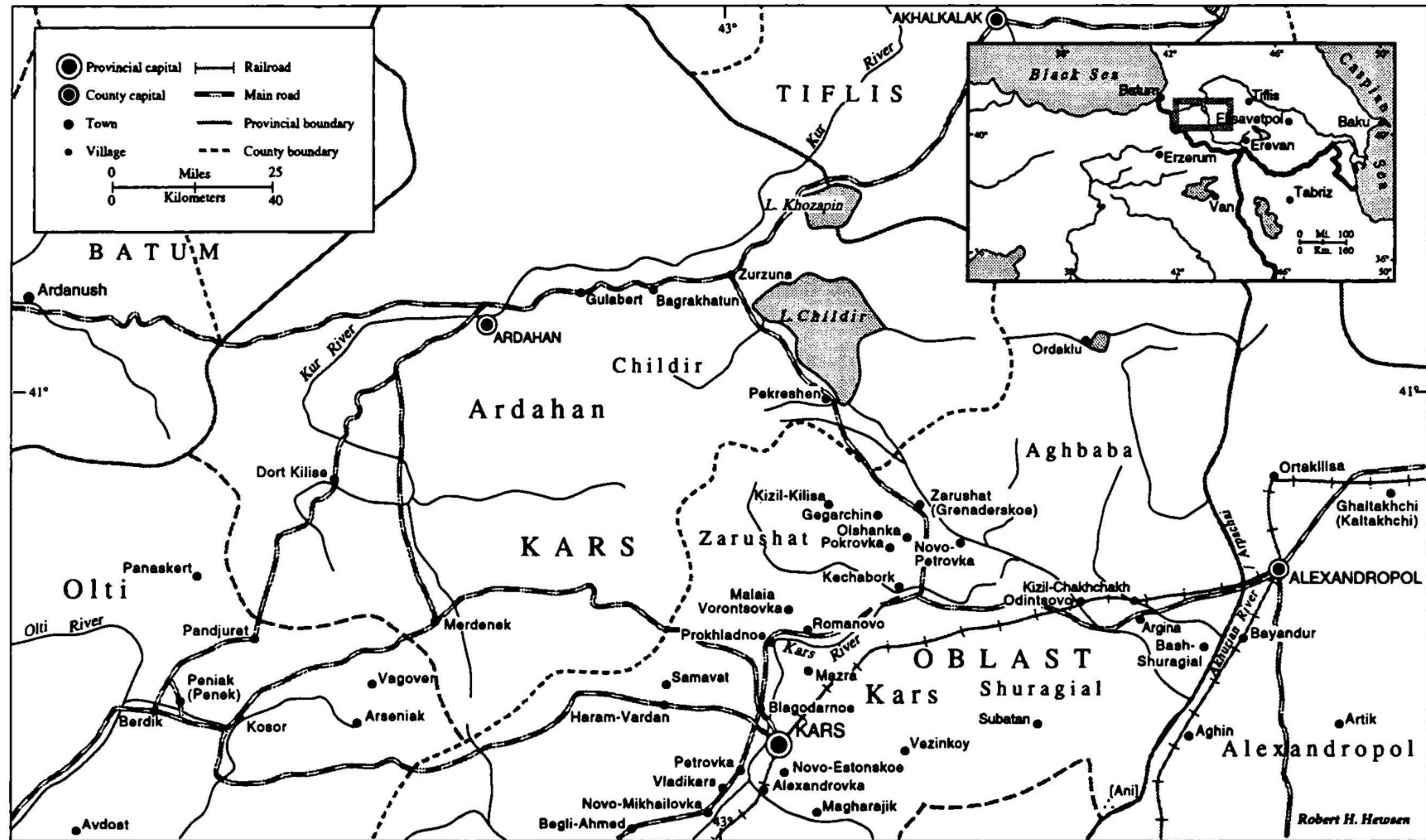
As the winter snows of 1920 began to seal the secondary roads in Kars province, representatives of Aghbaba and Zarushat met in the village of Gegarchin on January 12 to decide on a course of action. Led by Kurd Selim, Kerbala Mahmed Aghababekov, and an Azerbaijani officer identified as Nazaraliev, the Muslim notables decided to reject Armenian rule and oust Armenian officials, to organize a local administration financed by Azerbaijan, to mobilize and train men between the ages of eighteen and forty and form a local gendarmerie, and to keep surveillance over the Kars-Alexandropol road and railway, occupying if possible the station of Kizil-Chakhchakh some 25 kilometers west of Alexandropol.⁷

The uprising began on January 24, as officials and militiamen representing the Republic of Armenia were expelled from most of Childer, Aghbaba, and Zarushat. In Childer the insurgents seized the strategic Zurzuna pass and dispatched 500 mounted men toward Ardahan to occupy the county capital. To meet the challenge, Colonel Mazmanian (Mazmanov) moved his Merdenek detachment to secure Ardahan and reopen the pass. On January 25 he declared Childer under martial law.

At the same time, county governor Kadimov sent a Muslim deputation to urge the rebels to spare the district from ruin by laying down their arms and opening the way for Mazmanian's detachment. The partisans, reportedly led by an Azerbaijani officer named Ussufov, turned back the deputation, insisting that no one would be allowed to intrude into the internal affairs of Childer. As Mazmanian's column advanced on January 27, the partisans, concealed in the forest west of the foremost village of Bagrakhatun, opened fire. Mazmanian replied with an artillery bombardment for two hours but was unable to break through the thick snowdrifts and finally retired to the village of Gulabert. For the moment, the rebels in Childer were jubilant (see map 3).⁸

The most serious threat to the Armenians came from Zarushat because of its strategic location and influence on other nearby Muslim districts. Rebel success at Zarushat could lead to a renewed Muslim rebellion throughout the province. Although the Russian inhabitants of the city of Kars maintained proper relations with the Armenians, the Russian sectarian Molokan and Dukhobor villages in Zarushat were at best coldly neutral. To deal with the Zarushat rising, Major General Harutiun Hovsepien (Ossipov) drew up troops and artillery into the Russian village of Romanovo on January 28. From there, he dispatched Molokan messengers to demand that all the villages of Zarushat send deputations to acknowledge Armenian sovereignty. Receiving no response, Hovsepien two days later issued a proclamation stating that the Armenian republic had now received international recognition and was regularizing its relations with the other Transcaucasian republics. It was therefore all the more desirable to liquidate the local disturbance without bloodshed, but he offered to wait only one more day for the required pledge of loyalty. The Muslim spokesmen tried to gain time by replying that the representatives of Zarushat's forty-six villages would have to be consulted.⁹

Hovsepien now had the desired justification to advance and at dawn on February 1 commenced the bombardment of Pokrovka and Kechabork. The defenders were unable to withstand the Armenian offensive and scattered into the hills during the next few days as Hovsepien turned his artillery on Gegarchin, Olshanka, and Kizil-Kilisa, putting Kurd Selim's native village to flame and occupying a score of Turkish and Kurdish settlements. The Zarushat partisans were in disarray and, although



3. THE KARS OPERATION: CHILDIR, ZARUSHAT, AND AGHBABA

pockets of resistance persisted until the end of the month, on February 10 most leaders of Zarushat formally acknowledged the jurisdiction of the Armenian government.¹⁰ Despite the efforts of Kerbala Mahmed, who arrived from Aghbaba to urge his co-religionists to continue the struggle, twenty-five notables from Zarushat and Ardahan traveled to Kars on February 15 to profess loyalty to the Republic of Armenia. In telegrams to Prime Minister Khatisian, they asked to be liberated from outside agitators and to be accepted as equal citizens. During a banquet hosted by Governor-General Stepan Korganian on February 18, the Kurdish and Turkish spokesmen of Zarushat reaffirmed their pledge of fidelity and cursed the provocateurs who had deceived the population.¹¹ Denunciations of external agitators were also made by the chairman of the Muslim National Council of Kars, Mashadi Mahmed Hajiev, and the head of the ulema, Ali Effendi Hazadzade, who declared that the malicious accounts of Armenian excesses being spread in Tiflis and Baku were utterly false.¹² These professions may have been sincere, of course, but there could be no doubt that they were made in an atmosphere of duress.

The swift capitulation of Zarushat isolated and discouraged the other rebel centers. The Armenian army pressed its advantage by moving against hostile enclaves in the Shuragial (Shuragel) district, which extended to the vicinity of the Kars-Alexandropol railway on the Kars side of the Arpachai River.¹³ Meanwhile, Colonel Mazmanian broke through the Zurzuna pass on March 8 and forced Childer to submit on March 14, when a group of notables wrote Colonel Kadimov that the district accepted the jurisdiction of the Republic of Armenia. Even after this assurance, however, the Armenian artillery pounded out volleys for good measure, scattering the terrified inhabitants into the mountains.¹⁴ In Aghbaba sporadic resistance continued until the end of March, largely because the people were afraid that surrender and disarmament would not spare them from retribution. Ultimately, the villages of the district handed over a certain quota of weapons and ammunition and welcomed

Major General Khachatrian, on inspection from Alexandropol, with the traditional offering of salt and bread.¹⁵ At the same time, General Hovsepian withdrew his artillery and infantry from Zarushat, carting away wagonloads of captured arms and ammunition. He informed general headquarters in Erevan that Zarushat was again linked with Kars in communication and trade, was now paying taxes, and had been allowed to retain enough guns and rifles for the protection of livestock. The notables of Zarushat, too, relayed messages to Erevan commending the army for its correct behavior and pledging loyalty to the Armenian government.¹⁶ For the moment, there was no other way.

In his own report to Commander in Chief Tovmas (Foma I.) Nazarbekian, General Hovsepian claimed that provocateurs had persuaded local leaders that the Armenian government was weak and would be helpless in the face of a general rising. Such propaganda had brought much trouble to the Muslim citizens, who hopefully would now turn away from Turkish and Azerbaijani agitators. At the same time, Hovsepian stated that Childer, Aghbaba, and Zarushat could have been pacified by his clearing out the population, but he had refrained from effecting this solution in order not to compromise the prestige of the government.¹⁷ The implication was clear.

Reactions and Reprimands

The military activity in the province of Kars aroused a storm of protest. General Karabekir sent the commander of the 9th Caucasus Division, Lieutenant Colonel Halid, across the old boundary to organize the defense of Olti in case of continued Armenian expansion, and he addressed a direct warning to General Nazarbekian about the consequences of Armenian excesses against the peaceful Muslim population.

The Kurdish chieftains of Olti, the smallest of the four counties (*okrug*) of the former Kars *oblast*, were supported by Turkish officers and military equipment in the struggle to prevent the district's incorporation into the Armenian republic. General Karabekir, commander of the Turkish XV Army Corps, disregarded the fact that Olti lay on the Russian side of the old frontier when he instructed 9th Caucasus Division commander Halid Bey to send mountain cannons, machine guns, military instructors, and small infantry detachments to train and reinforce the men led by Ayyub, Jafar, Izzet, and other Kurdish chieftains. The pres-

ence of Turkish regulars in the district violated the Mudros Armistice and contravened Mustafa Kemal's directives to desist from offensive operations for the time being, but Karabekir rationalized his action by stressing that control of this mountainous area was essential to the defense of Erzerum and the supply of food for his troops. Moreover, the Armenians had no right to be there.¹⁶

Both Armenian and Turkish sources confirmed that Turkish regulars with cannons and machine guns were operating in Olti during the winter and spring of 1920. In March a detachment of the 3d Battalion, 29th Regiment, 9th Caucasus Infantry Division, moved into Olti to establish an outpost with 1,000 fighters and heavy weapons, together with medical facilities and food rations, facing the Armenian positions at Merdenek.¹⁷ Azerbaijani agents were also active in Olti.

As one of the counties of Kars province, Olti was claimed by the Armenian republic and so acknowledged by the British military authorities in 1919. Yet almost all of Olti remained under the control of Kurdish chieftains and Turkish and Azerbaijani officers, even as Armenian juris-

diction in Kars province filled out to the border districts at Kaghisman, Bashkoy, Karakurt, and Karaorgan and northward into Ardahan.

Korganian complained bitterly that General Hovsepien and the military establishment were undermining his efforts by conducting separate negotiations with the chieftains of Olti, threatening the Muslim population, and mixing in every aspect of the civil administration. The Kurds and other Muslims, Korganian maintained, were orientals and as such were accustomed to a clear and simple chain of command. They could be pacified quickly by a strong show of force. Hence, Armenian power in the mountainous areas of the province could have been demonstrated by conducting military maneuvers rather than engaging in hostilities.

the end of Armenian patience, as practiced by the administration of Alexandre Khatisian, was signaled from the first days of Hamazasp Ohandjanian's Bureau-Government. Immediately after the suppression of the May uprising, the cabinet allocated funds to occupy the Peniak coal fields for the dual purpose of expanding to the former Russo-Turkish frontier and alleviating the chronic fuel crisis.²¹



When the general advance began on the morning of June 19, the Armenians met stiff resistance from the entrenched defenders, who were linked by field telephones. After two days of close combat, Mazmanian captured the Pandjuret pass, and Shahbudaghian took the Akundir pass. Nesterovskii continued to encounter a spirited defense from the Kurdish levies, especially after they were joined by Turkish regulars on June 20.²² Armenian occupation of the Pandjuret pass threatened the Kosor-Tuzla road, the route of escape for the Olti detachment. Major Ibrahim appealed for immediate reinforcements and reported to regimental headquarters on June 20 that the detachment would have to draw back to Tuzla (10 miles) to avoid entrapment by the Armenians flanking from north to south. General Karabekir, reiterating the critical importance of keeping Olti out of Armenian hands, ordered one battalion each from the 3d Caucasus Division's 8th Regiment and the 9th Caucasus Division's 29th Regiment to hasten to the relief of the detachment. Deserters were to receive their due reward—the death penalty.²³ Before these reinforcements arrived, however, Colonel Mazmanian's 1st Infantry Regiment, especially Murad Khan's partisans, had dislodged the last defenders, and on June 22 the three Armenian columns converged at Peniak. The expedition suffered light casualties (5 killed and 22 wounded) and seized significant booty, including 2 rapid-fire mountain guns with 300 shells, 4 Maxim machine guns, 100,000 rounds of ammunition for Mosin rifles, hand grenades, livestock, and stores of grain, sugar, and meat.²⁴

Most of the Olti detachment retreated through the Tuzla pass on the night of June 21–22. Major Ibrahim distributed as much ammunition as his men could carry and destroyed two cannons and some of the arms caches to deprive the Armenians of their use. The Armenian advance

stopped at the Olti River, a short distance from the town of Olti and the prewar Russo-Turkish frontier. The Turkic forces regrouped at Tuzla following the arrival of additional elements of the 3d and 9th Caucasus divisions at the end of June. Major Atif, commander of the 8th Regiment, now led the Olti detachment. Although the Armenian outposts at Israil and other camps from Mount Susuz to Mount Vaskut (Baskot) were small and semi-isolated, only minor skirmishes between the two sides occurred during the summer of 1920.²⁵

On the Barduz front, Armenian probes produced only small changes in the front lines. During engagements from June 18 to June 21, the Turkish command reported that Armenian columns advancing from Yenikoy, Paldum pass, and Mount Kumru had forced the retreat of Mehmed Bey's militia from Mount Allahekbar, Sermet Bey's militia from Verishan, and Lieutenant Naji's company from Mount Akmezar. Each column of several hundred men was moving with two cannons, sizable cavalry, and infantry companies believed to be from the Armenian 5th Regiment. To meet this threat, General Karabekir ordered the remainder of Halid Bey's 9th Caucasus Infantry Division (17th, 28th, and 29th regiments and auxiliary battalions) to pass over the old border from Zevin to Barduz to retain possession of that strategic district. The 15th Cavalry Regiment was dispatched to Posik with the responsibility of patrolling the rugged terrain between Barduz and Olti and filling the gap between these two vital passageways leading from the province of Kars to Erzerum. At the beginning of July, the Armenian forward positions stabilized along the eastern slopes of several mountains from Hamid Dagħ to Chambar Dagħ and Keroghli.²⁶

The success of the expedition not only held out the prospect of mitigating the shortage of fuel but also brought the Republic to within a few miles of the western perimeter of Kars province, beyond which lay Erzerum and other territories that the Allied Powers had agreed in principle to award to united, independent Armenia.

During the Armenian military operations, Commander in Chief Na-

zarbekian took the precaution of writing General Karabekir to disclaim any intent of aggression against Turkey. The action at Olti, he stated, had been initiated at the request of the local Muslim inhabitants, who were troubled by anarchic, lawless elements.

Such sentiment aside, the Armenian armed forces acted with impunity in the occupied sector of Olti. Governor Korganian protested that they harassed the inhabitants and requisitioned at will. The thirty-six villages in the affected area were tired of Turkish interference and ready to enter into a just and lasting relationship with the Armenian republic. Yet General Hovsepian and his ilk were ruining everything. They allowed the Armenian partisan bands free rein and closed their eyes to intolerable acts that could only alienate men of moderation such as Iso Bek, from whom 800 head of sheep had been rustled.²⁹ It was obvious that the deep estrangement between the civil and military administrations of the province of Kars augured no good for the Republic of Armenia.