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The “Iran Crisis” of 1945-46: A View from the Russian Archives

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In Soviet "Cold War" historiography, even an important issue like the 1945-46 "Iran Crisis"—the first major diplomatic confrontation between the USSR and the United States of the postwar era—remained on the periphery of investigators' research interests. This was true not only because scholars' attention after the Second World War focused primarily on the knot of contradictions between the great powers in Europe, the central arena of the ideological and geopolitical rivalry between the two systems, but because the limited and odious character of state-approved documentary publications¹ (intended primarily for propaganda purposes) and the total inaccessibility of archives for the study of USSR foreign policy in the Middle and Near East during the post-war years quenched any scholarly interest in this issue. Consequently, Soviet historians in their published works either completely ignored the Iran issue,² or presented the official version, the essence of which was that the Soviet Union did not interfere in the problems of post war Iran and provided only moral support for national liberation and democratic movements in Iranian Azerbaijan and Iranian Kurdistan, while imperialistic circles in Great Britain and the USA, assisted by reactionary Iranian authorities, used the Iranian issue as a pretext to aggravate international tensions.³

That is why it was left to American researchers (largely of post-revisionist orientation), who connected the origin of the "Cold War" with events in the Near and Middle East, to elucidate the real reasons behind the conflict between great powers caused by the situation in Iran and its consequences for international relations.⁴ These researchers were among the first to suggest that Iranian and Turkish political leaders influenced the process which led to the "Cold War." Thorough analysis of documents from American and European archives allowed them to introduce many new ideas into the traditional interpretation of American, British, and Soviet policy in the Near and Middle East.

Still, the lack of materials from Soviet archives led to a situation in which many of their conclusions about the USSR policy in this region and, in Iran in particular, were necessarily based on speculation. The one-sided nature of their sources of information is responsible for a long, drawn-out

¹ *Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union: Documents and materials, 1945* (Moscow, 1949); *Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union: Documents and materials, 1946* (Moscow, 1952).

² See, e.g., *Iran: Studies in Contemporary History* (Moscow, 1976); S.L. Agaev, *Iran in the Past and Present: Ways and Reforms of the Revolutionary Process* (Moscow, 1981); *History of the Foreign Policy of the USSR, vol 2 (1945-1985)* (Moscow, 1986).

³ *International Relations after the Second World War, 3 vols., vol. 1* (Moscow, 1962), 255-260, 538; Y.A. Orlov, *The Foreign Policy of Iran after the Second World War* (Moscow, 1975), 29-61.

⁴ Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Barry Rubin, *The Great Powers in the Middle East, 1941-1947: The Road to the Cold War* (London and Totowa, NJ, 1980); D.J. Alvarez, *Bureaucracy and Cold War Diplomacy: The United States and Turkey, 1943-1946* (Thessaloniki, 1980); Stephen L. McFarland, "A Peripheral View of the Origins of the Cold War: The Crisis in Iran, 1941-1947," *Diplomatic History* 4 (Fall 1980), 333-351; Fraser J. Harbutt, *The Iron Curtain: Churchill, America and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Richard W. Cottam, *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988); J.F. Good, *The United States and Iran, 1946-51: The Diplomacy of Neglect* (New York, 1989); et al.

discussions among modern American historians devoted to: 1) the influence of Soviet policy in Iran and Turkey on development of the post-war conception of U.S. national security policy; 2) the very notion of the "state interests of the Soviet Union"; 3) the true goals of the USSR in the Near and Middle East; and other equally vexing issues.⁵

It would be naive to expect that the still very limited amount of declassified documents from Russian archives⁶ would allow us to offer exhaustive answers to all the unclear questions connected with events in Iran and the policy of the great powers. Nevertheless, the new archival materials allow us, on the one hand, to confirm a number of the assumptions and conclusions of foreign historians, and, on the other, to introduce some corrections to the general view of Soviet-Iranian and Soviet-American relations during the first post-war years. Moreover, documents from the archives of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) partly illuminate the mysterious mechanism by which Kremlin leaders made decisions on the "Iran Crisis" and other foreign policy issues.

In investigating the sources and development of Soviet policy toward Iran at the close of World War II on the basis of newly-available archival sources, the author found that state economic and political interests were of decisive importance in understanding Moscow's motives and behavior. These interests, not surprisingly, centered on the prospect of gaining access to oil in northern Iran, a potential boon to the Soviet economy, but were also linked to considerations of Soviet state prestige vis-a-vis the other principal members of the anti-fascist coalition, the United States and Great Britain.

The presence of Soviet troops in northern Iran during the war awakened Soviet state and scientific interest in exploring the natural resources, primarily oil fields, of this part of the country. The headquarters of the engineering troops of the Central-Asian military district and the Trans-Caucasian front ordered expeditionary investigations in northeastern Iran, in coordination with the Soviet Academy of Sciences, in 1942-1943. On 25 January 1944, Assistant Foreign People's Commissar of the USSR Vladimir Dekanozov received extensive information from the Commissariat of Oil on the results of surveys in northern Iran carried out in July-September 1943. This report discussed the possibility of industrial development of oil fields, and triggered considerable discussions in various quarters of the Soviet government. The geologists relayed information on the rich oil fields in Gogran, Mazandaran and Gylan—the fields that merged with potential and already developed oil resources in Soviet Azerbaijan in northwestern Iran and with the resources of Turkmenian SSR in the northeast. At the same time, these

⁵ Bruce R. Kuniholm, "Evidence, Explanation, and Judgment: The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East," paper presented for international conference on "Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1991: A Perspective," Moscow, 4-7 February 1992.

⁶ Historians still lack broad access to the protocols of Politburo meetings, the historical part of the President's Archives, materials of the KGB, secret service and the General Staff.

experts pointed out that serious exploratory work would require large investments and the annexation of a part of Iranian territory. This required taking special decisions on the state and diplomatic level.⁷

The activities of the USSR's Western Allies in the Middle East also stimulated Soviet interests in the area. Since the end of 1943, two U.S. oil companies, "Standard Vacuum" and "Sinclair Oil," along with "British Shell," supported by the U.S. and British embassies in Teheran and encouraged by the Iranian government, started negotiations with Iran to obtain oil concessions in the southern part of the country, in Baluchistan. In August 1944, the USA and Great Britain held a bilateral conference on oil issues, producing a special agreement, signed in Washington on August 8, which envisaged further joint policies with regard to oil concessions.⁸ These events influenced Soviet diplomacy, including the USSR's negotiations with Iran on a concessions treaty, and the instructions to the Soviet delegation for the 1944 talks on north Iranian oil.

The key figure behind the Kremlin's design to obtain an oil concession in northern Iran was Lavrenty Beria, who occupied the position of Deputy Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars. When, on 11 March 1944, Beria received a package of documents on the establishment of a Soviet-Iranian oil company and on the Concessionary Treaty, he demanded amendments that further impinged on the rights of the Iranian side. However, as the experts struggled with the nuances of the Iranian legislation on foreign concessions and with the conditions of the Anglo-Iranian oil company (where 51% of shares were owned by the Iranian state), Beria agreed to introduce substantial corrections in the Concessionary Treaty.⁹

On 16 August 1944, Beria signed and sent to Stalin and Molotov an analytical report of the Council of People's Commissars on the issues of oil reserves and production, as well as on British and American oil policies. The report contained recommendations on an appropriate Soviet response, and as a whole, was exceptionally important for understanding postwar Soviet aims in Iran. The report referred to Anglo-American contradictions in the struggle for the Iranian oil fields, but also pointed out that they tended to act jointly against "any third country," i.e., the USSR. Beria proposed "to set out vigorously to negotiate with Iran with the goal of obtaining a [Soviet] concession in Northern Iran." Stressing that "the British and perhaps the Americans have been working secretly to prevent the transfer of the oil fields of Northern Iran to the discretion of the Soviet Union," he recommended that the USSR insist on participation in the Anglo-American oil talks "to defend Soviet interests in the sphere of international oil affairs."¹⁰

In other words, the USSR's yearning to obtain an oil concession in the northern provinces of Iran reflected, besides security interests and economic calculations, the desire of Soviet political leaders to participate on a par in the postwar competition of great powers for the right to possess the new oil fields in

⁷ Archive of Foreign Policy, Russian Federation (AVP RF), fond (f.) 094, opis (op.) 30, papka (p.) 347a, delo (d.) 48, listy (ll.) 1, 159, 99, 102.

⁸ AVP RF, f. 06, op. 6, p. 37, d. 461, ll. 16, 28.

⁹ AVP RF, f. 094, op. 30, p. 347a, d. 48, ll. 130, 133, 134.

¹⁰ AVP RF, f. 06, op. 6, p. 37, d. 37, ll. 16-18.

the Middle East. From a geostrategic viewpoint, an oil concession that would confirm Soviet exclusive extraction and production rights on a territory of 150,000 square kilometers would have yielded great advantages. The Western Allies understood this all too well, and did all they could to prevent it from happening.

It was more or less clear to all researchers who worked on the "Iran Crisis" that the Tudeh Party, created in October 1941 and supported by the All-Union Communist Party (bolshevik), was broadly used by Soviet leaders to satisfy, first of all, those aforementioned "imperial" (i.e. geopolitical and economic), rather than the ideological, interests of the USSR in this region. (During this period, the CPSU was formally known as the All-Union Communist Party (bolshevik), hereafter abbreviated as AUCP(b).) Yet, researchers could only guess as to the extent to which methods of ideological and party influence, along with traditional diplomatic and- considering the presence of the Soviet troops in northern Iran--military methods, were practical and effective. In this respect, it is difficult, one finds, to understand the specific character of Soviet policy in Iran without analyzing the functions of those structures which appeared in the CPSU *apparatus* during the last stage of World War II.

Let us try to reconstruct the "ideological" side of events as precisely as possible. It is well known that Comintern was disbanded in May 1943. But the Department of International Information (DII), originally created in July 1944 inside the structure of the AUCP(b) Central Committee (CC), directly inherited its *apparatus* and well-qualified staff. The fact that Georgy Dimitrov, who for many years headed the Comintern Executive Committee, was appointed the DII's director makes the succession between Comintern and the new department evident. Though the new DII enthusiastically continued to use many Comintern methods and connections, it was created not only in order to preserve control over the World Communist movement, but also because of the favorable situation at the front, where the Red Army's victorious westward march in Eastern Europe was raising the USSR's global status. These events demanded practical steps to consolidate the USSR's position in regions which the Kremlin considered within its rightful "spheres of influence." Northern Iran was one of these.

Documents from the CPSU archives show that the DII and its successor within the Central Committee starting at the end of December 1945, the Department of Foreign Policy (DFP), took an active part in implementing Soviet plans in Iran. Besides providing the Politburo and the Central Committee with information about the political situation there and about the activity of different parties, particularly the Tudeh, the Department was responsible for implementing those decisions of the Kremlin which were outside the competence of official diplomacy. The DFP became the basis for a very special part of the post-war system for working out and passing decisions on foreign policy issues, the part which may be called "party diplomacy." To distinguish "party diplomacy" from state policy, which identified with the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (PCFA)-- since 1946 known as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-- it is necessary to understand some fundamental characteristics of the former.

For one thing, "party diplomacy" was completely secret, oriented toward the propagandizing of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Soviet system in foreign countries; it also directly employed national communist and democratic movements to promote Soviet interests. That is why it was no accident that the founding curator of the department was Andrei Zhdanov, the major ideologist of the country, and from 1946 until 1949 it was headed by Mikhail Suslov, who also later became well-known as the leading Soviet ideologue. It must be pointed out that aggravation of the Iranian situation occurred at a time when the DII (and then DFP) had more similarities with the Comintern than differences.¹¹ Most of the work related to the functioning of the system of bilateral party relations was carried out by special institutes created on the basis of the Department of Press and Special Communications of the Comintern Executive Committee.

As for Iran, from the time of the Second World War, at least two important, well-concealed representatives of the Department worked there under the aegis of the AUCP(b) CC. One of those representatives had "appropriate cover"¹² while the other one was illegal.¹³ The responsibilities of these party workers, who ensured constant communication with the leadership of the DII (and later DFP) included, besides information-related and other responsibilities, control over the Tudeh Party's policy and leaders. According to Comintern tradition, Tudeh activity was corrected in accord with instructions sent from Moscow.¹⁴ The new party's nucleus consisted of former communists who were released from prison after the Red Army entered Iran on 25 August 1941. Many members and activists of the Tudeh Party Politburo graduated from Soviet party educational establishments in the 1930s. All this predetermined that the Tudeh Party would be particularly dependent on the AUCP(b), which exploited the idea that the Tudeh, while acting in line with Soviet interests, also promoted Iran's democratic development.

Until 1944, in synch with the Kremlin's traditional regional strategy, the Tudeh directed its activity toward trying to prevent the widening of British political influence in Iran, while supporting, as a means to this end, the growth of American influence.¹⁵ But these priorities changed dramatically after an unsuccessful visit to Teheran by a Soviet government delegation headed by S.I. Kavtaradze, the Vice Commissar of Foreign Affairs, in September-October 1944. Though negotiations with Prime Minister Mohammed Saed and the Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, were conducted on a number of issues related to Soviet-Iranian trade and economic cooperation, the Soviet side's chief goal was to obtain exclusive rights for oil development in Iran's northern provinces.

¹¹ The DFP's evolution into a bureaucratic-party organ closely connected with the ideology and policy of "Cold War" began, in the author's view, in mid-1946. Evidence for this interpretation includes the way the Department was reorganized, particularly the effort to shed its inheritance from the Comintern, as well as the substance of its work. (See RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 128, d. 846, ll. 62-63.)

¹² G. Dimitrov to A. Paniushkin (Deputy Head of the Department of Foreign Relations), 17 April 1945, RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 128, d. 817, ll. 185, 189.

¹³ A secret agent of the AUCP(b) CC in Iran to A. Paniushkin, 7 March 1945, *ibid.*, l. 154.

¹⁴ Special correspondence of the AUCP(b) CC, 1 June 1945, *ibid.*, d. 818, ll. 1-10.

¹⁵ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 128, d. 817, ll. 5-7.

However, as is known, the Soviet proposal failed to sway the Iranian authorities. On 11 October 1944, Saed's Cabinet officially rejected the request, declaring that all negotiations concerning concessions should be postponed until the war ended and the world economic situation clarified. The situation around the issue of granting oil concessions revealed a new tendency in Iranian foreign policy. The Iranian government intended to use the United States as a counter-balance to traditional British and Russian (now identified with the USSR) influence—taking the place of Germany, which formerly (i.e., before the war) had occupied the role of "third power." The U.S. Embassy in Iran acted as Saed's Cabinet's main advisor on developing tactics to deflect Moscow's request for an oil concession in the north.¹⁶ Even so, the Soviet leadership blamed the Iranian government decision on Britain's anti-Soviet policy. Thus, in the report of a Central Committee informer, dated by 19 February 1945, the law passed on 2 December 1944 to prohibit prime ministers and their Deputies from granting concessions or negotiating on this issue was presented as directly connected to the activity of pro-London forces. According to this experienced party informer, Britain was acting through its obedient weapon, the Iranian Majlis (parliament), which "managed (by declining the concession proposal) to demonstrate strong resistance to our first attempt to widen our economic interests."¹⁷ In this regard his main proposed countermeasure was as follows. "Before we leave Iran, there is a possibility to gain a majority in the Majlis and then to use it to pursue the interests of our State as well as the democratic interest of the Iranian people. The northern regions have 54 places in the Majlis and we have an opportunity to get them all, since the masses are likely to support us." In the event that the elections were successful, he continued, the new Majlis will ensure resolution of our economic problems with Iran "in the way we want."¹⁸

As we see, "the interests of the Soviet State" and the interests of the people's democratic movement in Iran were fully identified. Thus the conclusion of historian Bruce R. Kuniholm that it was during the period of the oil crisis in 1944 that the Tudeh became an important instrument in the Soviet foreign policy, which was based only on indirect information when it appeared in *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece*, published in 1980, now receives documentary corroboration.¹⁹

Consequently, without analyzing the essence of Moscow's party diplomacy, it is impossible to reconstruct the escalation of the "Iran Crisis." Naturally, the Soviet Embassy in Teheran, as well as in many other foreign countries, had to deal with internal party issues together with official diplomatic activities. In this respect we can mention the tight cooperation between the PCFA and the new DII/DFP of

¹⁶ For U.S. actions and reports concerning Kavtaradze's visit, see U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1944, vol. 5 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965), 452 ff., esp. 455. (Hereafter *FRUS* with volume and year.)

¹⁷ A letter of a secret agent of the AUCP(b) CC in Iran, 19 February 1945, RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 128, d. 817, l. 29.

¹⁸ A letter of a secret agent of the AUCP(b) CC in Iran, 7 March 1945, *ibid.*, l. 132 (opposite side).

¹⁹ Kuniholm, *Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, 154.

the AUCP(b) CC. Vyacheslav Molotov's dual role— as People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs and as a CC Secretary and a Politburo member who controlled the many spheres of activity of the DII/DFP— only strengthened this relationship. Yet to implement the leadership's decision, which implied engaging the Tudeh and other progressive forces, the AUCP(b) CC preferred to act without mediators, either directly through its trustworthy representatives (mentioned above), or by transporting the Tudeh Politburo members to the USSR in order to get their reports, give them instructions, or both. This inevitably led to friction and miscoordination in the activity of the two foreign policy institutions, which often duplicated each other, and had a negative effect on the position in Iran of the Tudeh and other leftist organizations.

The oil concession issue was another major element in any objective analysis of the "Iran Crisis" which could not receive sufficient attention from foreign researchers who lacked access to Soviet documents. As noted above, my own historical retrospective, which was prepared with the help of archival materials, indicates that the issue of the oil concession dominated Soviet thinking at that time and determined the development of Soviet-Iranian relations during the last months of the war and immediately following its conclusion. This issue was closely tied to other problems which sparked the crisis in Iran: the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the movement for autonomy in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Kavtaradze's fall 1944 mission and the Iranian government's intransigent attitude toward granting oil concessions rekindled the Soviet leadership's traditional anti-British sentiment, which originated from pre-revolutionary rivalry between Russia and England, and fanned suspicions about their ally's policy in Iran. Anti-British propaganda in the Soviet press and in the Tudeh publications grew gradually from the end of 1944.

The issue of the oil concession arose again on 26 February 1945, when Iranian Ambassador Akhi met with Molotov in Moscow. Reminding Molotov that the Majlis had banned the granting of concessions until the end of the war, Akhi raised the idea of the possible creation of a Soviet-Iranian society for oil exploration and extraction in northern Iran. The Soviet-Iranian society "Iran-fish" has already established a precedent. But in the course of the conversation it became clear that the Iranian was, most likely, just probing and that his words had nothing concrete behind them. The disappointed People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs declared that "such a suggestion can not be the basis for any kind of negotiations" and insisted that Iran grant the USSR an oil concession.²⁰ Yet, judging by the Shah's reply to a Majlis deputy from the northern province of Hiljan, who in April 1945 told the Shah again about the Soviet government's wish to get the oil concession, Iranian authorities had made a firm decision to carry out negotiations only on the creation of a Soviet-Iranian joint stock society.²¹ At that time the Soviet leadership considered the prospect of creating a joint stock oil society to be an obviously discriminatory act in comparison to the rights which England— their main rival in Iran— possessed in the south.

²⁰ From the journal of V. Molotov, 26 February 1945, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 7, p. 33, d. 461, l. 8.

²¹ From the journal of M. Maksimov, the USSR Ambassador in Iran, 11 April 1945, *ibid.*, d. 461, l. 8.

The fact that the Soviet position in Iran had been significantly strengthened during the war gave its leaders, above all Stalin, grounds to hope that the USSR would manage to enhance its geopolitical and economic standing and interests in the Middle East. And an important prerequisite for fulfilling the Kremlin's "imperial" dreams was the presence of Soviet troops in northern Iran. The PCFA's reaction to the appeal of the Iranian Foreign Minister to the Ambassadors of the USSR, England and the USA, on 19 May 1945, to withdraw their troops from the country leaves no doubts about this. In his May 25 report to Molotov, Kavtaradze stressed that "the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Iran will lead, necessarily, to the strengthening of reaction in the country and to the inevitable defeat of democratic organizations... Reactionary and pro-English elements will direct every effort and use every means to eliminate our influence and the results of our work in Iran. That is why I would consider it appropriate to postpone the date of our troops' removal from Iran and to ensure the possible fulfillment of our goals after the troops are withdrawn (mainly by acquiring the oil concession, and in the worst case by creating a joint stock society with our overwhelming majority in it)."²²

Since the USA and Great Britain responded favorably to the Iranian appeal, the Soviet government found it necessary to inform Teheran that it "was ready to favorably consider the request of the Iranian government about the early withdrawal of Allied troops."²³ Draft answers of the PCFA to the May 31 letter of Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, the British Ambassador in Moscow, and to the June 14 letter of Averell Harriman, the American Ambassador, stressing the congruence among the Soviet, American and British positions, are also preserved in the Archives.²⁴ But these documents were never transferred outside the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs: they still bear the resolution-- "at Molotov's disposal." At the Potsdam Conference (17 July-2 August 1945), the heads of the three great powers agreed to start the withdrawal of Allied troops from Teheran and to make further decisions on the issue at the London Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) in September 1945.²⁵ By then Moscow's position concerning the early removal of Soviet troops from Iran had crystallized. M. Silin, a member of the PCFA's Middle East department, reported to Andrei Vyshinskii, the Deputy People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs, on the eve of the London CFM: "I suppose that the request of the Iranian government to participate in the London conference should be declined because the Council of Foreign Ministers will not discuss any questions about changes in the post-war position of Iran."²⁶ Molotov, in his answer to the September 19 letter of British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, not only refused to support his proposal regarding the early withdrawal of Allied troops from Iran by the middle of December 1945 (with the

²² S. Kavtaradze to V. Molotov, 25 May 1945, *ibid.*, d. 466, l. 4.

²³ Quoted from the draft of a letter of V. Molotov to A. Kerr, 2 June 1945, AVP RF, f. 094, op. 31, p. 351a, d. 2, l. 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; draft letter of V. Molotov to A. Harriman, n.d., AVP RF, f. 094, op. 31, p. 351a, d. 2, l. 15.

²⁵ *The Soviet Union at International Conferences during the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945. A Collection of Documents*, vol. 6, *The Berlin (Potsdam) Conference of the Three Allied Powers -- the USSR, the USA and Great Britain (July 17 -- August 2, 1945)* (Moscow, 1980), 165, 166, 347, 476.

²⁶ M. Silin to A. Vyshinsky, 12 September 1945, AVP RF, f. 094, op. 31, p. 352a, d. 33, l. 1.

exception of the southern oil regions of Azerbaijan), but also refused to discuss the question of the withdrawal at the CFM.²⁷ He made it clear only that the USSR would stick to the date for troop withdrawal that had been set by the Anglo-Soviet-Iran treaty of 1942.

Thus the Soviet leadership chose the tactic of delaying the withdrawal of its troops from Iran with the idea of winning necessary concessions from the Cabinets of Morteza Qoli. Bayat, Muhsin. Sadr, and Ibrahim. Hakimi. The proposal of "party diplomacy" to use the electoral campaign to foster the creation of a new Majlis which would be more loyal to the USSR also received attention. Consequently, the Soviet leaders started to support and activate the national-liberation movement in northern Iran, which had its own roots and means of expression. The Soviet Military Command found different pretenses to delay government troops which Teheran sent to suppress the rebellious provinces. All this made the question of the Soviet troops withdrawal from Iran particularly urgent for all participants in the "Iran Crisis." However, the activity of "party diplomacy" turned out to be no less important for the successful development of the intended events.

Though we so far lack access to records of Politburo meetings, the archives of the party's DFP as well as the MFA appear to establish that the idea of the formation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP) originated from the top Party leadership, most likely Stalin himself. The 1943 Teheran Declaration presaged Stalin's personal participation in the resolution of all foreign policy questions concerning Iran, as did the generalissimo's acute interest in strategically important regions of the Near and Middle East. Most of the important documents on Iran from the PCFA bear notes stating that they were sent to Stalin and to a narrow circle of Politburo members: V. Molotov, L. Beria, G. Malenkov, A. Mikoyan.²⁸ But there are also documents addressed to Stalin personally. According to the established system of making major decisions on foreign policy issues, not only was all important information to be sent to the Kremlin, but also the suggestions of the PCFA were to be confirmed by top authorities. For example, on a letter from the General Staff to Molotov containing contained a request to liquidate the bands on the northern Iranian

²⁷ M. Silin to A. Vyshinsky, 12 September 1945, AVP RF, f. 094, op. 31, p. 352a, d. 33, l. 1.

²⁸ A June 1946 letter of M. Suslov to A. Zhdanov shows that despite the creation of a special DFP in the CC apparatus, the new Department was excluded from the foreign policy decision-making processes. The Head of the Department, Secretary of the AUCP(b) CC, Suslov, requested not only that the DFP be given the possibility to receive MFA materials, but also that the DFP management be given the capability to be informed about AUCP(b) CC decisions on foreign policy. (M. Suslov to A. Zhdanov, 14 June 1946, RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 128, d. 846, l. 53).

Thus, in creating new foreign policy structures, the AUCP(b) CC strictly separated the functions of "state diplomacy" and "party diplomacy." Accordingly, they had access to different amounts and types of information. Relations between the MFA and DFP were rather complicated. The DFP, for example, had broad responsibilities for the training of diplomats and control of their work, but was excluded from the process of developing decisions on foreign policy on the level of "state diplomacy." Trying somehow to change the established tradition of passing decisions on foreign policy behind properly closed doors, Suslov probably did not know that Zhdanov himself lacked information on some foreign policy questions. On the MFA documents on the "Iranian issue" which were sent to Politburo members, Zhdanov's name can be found only rarely. Yet, the "Iranian Crisis" turned out to be perhaps the only international problem of the early postwar years, when Soviet "state" and "party" diplomacy had to act in a closest concert.

border, Molotov wrote: "I do not object, but it is necessary to gain Stalin's agreement."²⁹ And another example: On 10 August 1946, the Assistant People's Commissar Dekanozov sent Molotov a draft document containing a positive answer to the request of the Iranian government to receive reimbursement for damage caused by the war with Germany, and to obtain the right to take part in the peace conferences. After studying the document, the Molotov on August 23 made two decisions: "To support (with amendments)" and "To introduce to the higher authorities for approval."³⁰ Of course, "higher authorities" could mean no one but Stalin. Finally, on August 25, the text of the same letter, containing the new phrase, "comrade Molotov agrees to this proposal," was prepared by Dekanozov and addressed to Stalin.³¹ Such was the hierarchy of working out decisions on foreign policy issues and the degree of independence and responsibility of the highest PCFA authorities. (The strongest evidence to support the contention that Stalin was personally involved in developing the idea of creating the separatist party of Iranian Azerbaijan is his private letter to its leader Ja'afar Pishevari; see below.)

The main demand of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (created on 6 September 1945, and based on provincial Tudeh organizations and Azerbaijani labor unions), was national and cultural autonomy. Yet, in the ADP's Appeal, issued on September 11 in Tabriz, much attention was paid to elections for the Iranian Majlis. The party promised to ensure that representatives of Iranian Azerbaijan, in accordance with its population, would account for one third of Majlis deputies (instead of 20 deputies, roughly one sixth of the parliament, as was the situation until then).³² If we recall that the AUCP(b) CC representative in Iran had considered using the elections to the Iranian Majlis during the last months of the war, it is easy to understand what specific hopes were connected with this kind of Democratic Party activity.

Much has been written in American historiography about "the hand of Moscow" being behind the creation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party. But until now it was unknown that this action was carried out without the Tudeh Party's knowledge and agreement, and in fact provoked an extremely negative reaction from the Tudeh Politburo. The Tudeh leadership considered the elimination of its organization in Azerbaijan and, following instructions from the Kremlin, the creation of the ADP with its autonomy program, to be a major mistake by the Soviet comrades. It was viewed by various circles in Iran as the first step toward the country's division. Responsibility for this step was laid not on the Azerbaijan national leaders, but on the Tudeh, which had the reputation of a party closely linked to the policy of the USSR. As the result there appeared a threat to the entire left-wing democratic movement in the country. As noted in a critical letter from the Tudeh Central Committee to the AUCP(b) CC, "If the enemies of the

²⁹ Gen. A. Antonov, head of the Red Army General Headquarters, to V. Molotov, 9 April 1945, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 7, p. 33, d. 466, l. 1.

³⁰ V. Dekanozov to V. Molotov, 10 August 1946, AVP RF, f. 012, op. 7, p. 109, d. 254, l. 20.

³¹ V. Dekanozov to I. Stalin, 25 August 1946, *ibid.*, l. 4.

³² *Izvestiya*, 14 September 1945.

USSR had created a plan against it, they could not possibly invent anything better than what is taking place at the present time."³³

The part played by the Soviet Embassy in the Azerbaijan events stands out clearly in a report of A. Avanesyan, one of those who inspired this Tudeh letter to the AUCP(b) CC. Having expressed to the Soviet Ambassador his doubts about the USSR's secret and hasty action which had led to the ADP's creation, he received the following answer: "You are of course right in theory. Everything you say is true, but we have little time left. Time waits for no man."³⁴ The Tudeh leaders received information on the plans and means of creating the ADP from one of the Embassy secretaries. Should the national elections be delayed it would be necessary to carry out separate elections for deputies to the Iranian Majlis from the northern regions. In the event that Teheran refused to recognize these elections as lawful, it was planned to establish democratic power in the north, using the ADP for this purpose. The same employee from the Embassy reported that everything must be accomplished within six months. "Otherwise we can under several pretenses wait a little longer (to withdraw the troops), while they make a final decision about the democratic regime."³⁵ These were the real facts, known only to the creators of the policy themselves and their immediate executors.

But no matter how actively the Embassy in Teheran participated in carrying out instructions from Moscow, "party diplomacy" played the decisive role during this critical period. In embassy reports and Avanesyan's letters, references to a comrade Bagirov often pop up. M. Bagirov was a secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party (bolshevik), who held very high commissions and was responsible for the success of Soviet policy in Iranian Azerbaijan. His reports, addressed directly to the two major figures in foreign policy issues (Stalin and Molotov), are kept in the Foreign Ministry archives.

It must be specially pointed out that the Tudeh leaders, brought up by the Comintern, preferred to deal with representative authorities of the AUCP(b), rather than with Soviet diplomats posted in Iran. In the Tudeh letter, mentioned above, and in Avanesyan's report, we find an insistent request to send representatives of the AUCP(b) CC to Iran in order to correct personally the situation. Avanesyan even provided an extensive analysis of why "Embassy employees are not able to direct the social movement of the country."³⁶ Its main idea was that the sphere of diplomats' obligations corresponded poorly with the requirements of party work. According to this Tudeh Politburo member, only Molotov and Vyshinskii, despite their diplomatic status, thought in the context of party interests. Therefore he proposed placing in the Soviet Embassy a special representative of the Central Committee, who would outrank the Ambassador.³⁷ We have here an idealized understanding of "party diplomacy," which was not lacking in

³³ Letter of the Tudeh to the AUCP(b) CC, September 1945, RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 128, d. 818, l. 182.

³⁴ Letter of A. Avanesyan to the AUCP(b) CC, 22 September 1945, RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 128, d. 819, l. 54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 62.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 55.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 55, 67.

common sense regarding either the incompatibility of diplomatic and ideological work, or the protection of the Tudeh's own national interests.

After all, even the Central Committee informer had to admit that the formation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party had been badly organized. In his regular report on 11 October 1945 he wrote: "We can now say with conviction that the good idea of creating the Azerbaijan Democratic Party was badly prepared and carried out by our party workers, who introduced irrelevant confusion and nervousness."³⁸

Nevertheless, the tactic, planned in Moscow, was still carried out. First of all it was necessary to put some pressure on the Tudeh, which had demonstrated some unexpected resistance. The policy of twisting the Tudeh's arms was successful. Its second letter to the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Azerbaijan not only recognized the ADP as "necessary" and "useful," but also contained a sworn promise to "follow directions of the All-Union Communist Party in every case and always."³⁹

Besides gaining a possibility to influence the formation of the Majlis, what were the aims of Soviet policy in Iranian Azerbaijan? Although the creation of the ADP and its activity had an undeniably separatist character, it is hardly probable that the Soviet leadership short-sightedly planned to divide Iran. It was self-evident that if Iranian Azerbaijan, which was ethnically connected with the Soviet Azerbaijan, achieved autonomy, Soviet political influence in Iran and in the Near and Middle East would be strengthened significantly. Yet, Soviet diplomacy in Baku as well as in Tabriz tried to squelch every attempt of the nationalists to view Iranian Azerbaijan as a possible part of the USSR. Even before the events in Iranian Azerbaijan, Kavtaradze wrote to Molotov in connection with some articles in the Azerbaijani press: "Despite the fact that we are interested in propagandizing the idea of the shared national characteristics of people from Iranian and Soviet Azerbaijan, it seems to me that renaming Iranian Azerbaijan into Southern Azerbaijan would be inexpedient and fraught with the risk of unwanted consequences. Such an action, undoubtedly, can be used by the English, the Saudis, and other reactionary elements in their anti-Soviet activity in Iran. That is why I suggest that it is necessary to reject the aforementioned renaming."⁴⁰ The USSR's long-term interests in the Near and Middle East also excluded such plans. The Soviet leadership, though it used various methods to apply pressure on the Iranian government (including its policy in Iranian Azerbaijan), was anxious to preserve good neighborly relations with Iran. Although the present author was unable to gain access to one evidently very interesting document containing a recommendation to Molotov to support Iran as a candidate to temporary membership in the Security Council, such arguments as "Iran and the USSR are neighbors" and "Iran

³⁸ Report of a secret agent of the AUCP(b) CC in Iran, 11 October 1945, RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 128, d. 819, ll. 90 (opposite)-91.

³⁹ Letter of the Tudeh Central Committee to the AUCP(b) CC, 3 October 1945, *ibid.*, d. 818, l. 189.

⁴⁰ S. Kavtaradze to V. Molotov, 7 June 1945, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 7, d. 476, l. 6.

could be even more appropriate for us than Turkey or Egypt" were used in favor of this recommendation.⁴¹

Concurrent with the events in Iranian Azerbaijan and according to the same pattern, a national-liberation movement was developed in Iranian Kurdistan. One can learn much from the text of the telegram from Bagirov to the PCFA: "Our comrades once again warned Cazi Magometh that he must keep to the instructions, which had been given to him before, and that he must not undertake any actions against Iranian troops, so that they were not provoked to start fighting against the Kurds."⁴²

Diplomatic correspondence between Iran's Foreign Ministry and the USSR PCFA shows that Soviet-Iranian relations became significantly more complicated by November 1945 due to the events in the northern provinces.⁴³ The Iranian authorities insisted, even more energetically than in September-October,⁴⁴ that the Soviet command allow the introduction of supplementary government troops (in addition to regular military detachments and police, which were already there) in northern Iran.

The Soviet Embassy in Teheran was aware that the Cabinet of Ibrahim Hakimi was seriously considering the idea of sending a special three-person delegation (including Qavam-el-Sultaneh) to the USSR for negotiations.⁴⁵ In a profile of this politician written by the PCFA's Middle East department, it was specifically pointed out: "At present he has a negative attitude to the English. He supports the idea of strengthening Iranian-Soviet relations."⁴⁶ For the Kremlin, which put special emphasis on assuring that a pro-Soviet government came to power in Iran, Qavam was far preferable to Prime Minister Hakimi—all the more so because the latter's biography indicated that he had participated in a government which in 1919 had presented Soviet Russia with territorial claims.

However, a letter from the American administration to the USSR and Great Britain, written on 23 November 1945 and containing a proposal to withdraw Allied troops from Iran by 1 January 1946, contributed to a decision by the Iranian government to postpone the trip to Moscow "until after the present crisis ends."⁴⁷ This is clear by the favorable evaluation given to the letter by Iranian officials in conversations with American diplomats. Nor did the reasons given by the Soviet government to explain its opposition to the introduction of government troops into Iranian Azerbaijan predispose the two sides to bilateral negotiations. In the PCFA's November 26 note to Teheran, there was the hint of a threat: It

⁴¹ M. Silin to V. Molotov, 9 November 1945, AVP RF, f. 094, op. 31, p. 352a, d. 33, l. 3.

⁴² Governmental telegram of M. Bagirov and I. Maslennikov (the commander of the 4th army), 11 April 1946, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 8, p. 35, d. 557, l. 11.

⁴³ See the 17 and 23 November 1945 notes of the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

⁴⁴ Records of talks of M. Silin with Akhi, the Iranian Ambassador, 8 September 1945, 10 October 1945, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 7, p. 33, d. 465, ll. 5, 8-9.

⁴⁵ Record of the talk of G. Rassadin, a deputy head of the Department of Middle East of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs with A. Yakubov, a charge d'affaires of the USSR in Iran, 20 November 1945, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 7, p. 33, d. 461, l. 46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 47.

⁴⁷ See ambassador in Iran (Murray) to Secretary of State, 26 November 1945, *FRUS*, 1945, vol. 8, *The Near East and Africa* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969), 455-456.

stressed that the introduction of additional government troops into northern Iran would provoke unrest "and might cause bloodshed, which will force the Soviet government to bring its own additional troops to Iran to provide order and security for its garrisons."⁴⁸

Similarly, on November 29, in reply to U.S. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes' letter of November 23 (delivered by ambassador Harriman the next day), the Soviet government also stressed that it would view negatively the introduction of new Iranian troops into the northern regions, because this would increase unrest and provoke bloodshed, "which would force the Soviet government to bring its supplementary troops to Iran."⁴⁹ Dekanozov gave a similar reply to a November 25 note from British ambassador Kerr expressing concern about the Soviet Command's action on November 18 in Kazvin of delaying Iranian troops heading north. The Soviet government justified its refusal to accept the American proposal about the early withdrawal of Allied troops from Iran by reference to: 1) the 1942 tripartite Anglo-Soviet-Iranian treaty; 2) the right "to introduce Soviet troops into the territory of Iran, provided by Soviet-Iranian treaty concluded on February 26, 1921"; 3) the agreement between Molotov and Bevin during the September 1945 London CFM; and 4) the fact that the British government in its note of November 25 "does not raise the question of withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran."⁵⁰

The November 26 Soviet note influenced the Iranian government decision to seek an opportunity to appeal on an unofficial level to the United Nations, while not excluding bilateral negotiations with the USSR.⁵¹ Judging by the Iranian Foreign Ministry notes of 13 and 14 December 1945, the Iranian government retained great expectations in connection with the CFM about to convene in Moscow, and even intended to take part in it.⁵²

This CFM, gathering once again the Soviet, American, and British foreign ministers, marked a significant point in the escalation of "Iran crisis." The Iranian question was not included on the agenda prepared by the PCFA, but it was suggested that this question could be raised informally. On November 26, staff members (*referents*) of the Middle East department were told to prepare a dossier on the withdrawal of Allied troops from Iran.⁵³ Soon afterward, M. Silin received instructions to prepare the material on Iran by December 1.⁵⁴ Analysis of these documents shows that the recommendations of Molotov's diplomatic advisors were rather harsh. The memorandum to the People's Commissar contained the following suggestions:

⁴⁸ Note of the USSR Embassy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran, 26 November 1945, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 7, p. 33, d. 467, l. 15.

⁴⁹ V. Molotov to A. Harriman, 29 November 1945, AVP RF, f. 094, op. 31 p. 351a, d. 2, l. 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, ll. 17-18.

⁵¹ See ambassador in Iran (Murray) to the Secretary of State, 27 November 1945, *FRUS*, 1945, 8:458.

⁵² Notes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran to the USSR Embassy in Teheran, 13, 14 December 1945, AVP RF, f. 0430, op. 2, p. 5, d. 16, ll. 20, 23.

⁵³ AVP RF, f. 94, op. 33, p. 88, d. 15, l. 20.

⁵⁴ Preparation of questions for the Conference of three Ministers of Foreign Affairs, n.d., AVP RF, f. 0430, op. 1, p. 2, d. 8, ll. 22-23.

1. To remove the question of the withdrawal of Allied troops from Iran from the agenda of the conference for the three Ministers, if Americans and the English do not accept our proposal about including on the agenda the question of the withdrawal of Anglo-American troops from China and Greece.

2. In the event that the question of the withdrawal of Allied troops from Iran is discussed all the same, we could, depending on Bevin and Byrnes' position on the withdrawal of Anglo-American troops from China and Greece, either refuse to admit any new obligations as far as removal of the Soviet troops from Iran is concerned, or make definite "concessions" and agree to withdraw the Soviet troops from Iran within the shortest possible period of time.⁵⁵

Molotov's aides also urged the rejection of possible proposals by Bevin and Byrnes to move fresh Iranian troops to Iranian Azerbaijan or to send a special Allied Commission to Iran to study the situation (an idea which was to be rejected "as interference in the domestic affairs of Iran").⁵⁶ The arguments given in the draft decisions of the Moscow Conference "On the issue of withdrawal of Allied troops" and "On the events in North Iran", prepared on December 13-15, were identical to those in the memorandum to Molotov.⁵⁷

Given these simmering tensions, it is not surprising that Molotov and Bevin haggled tooth and nail over whether the Iranian question should be included on the agenda.⁵⁸ Byrnes, who did not, in general, object to discussing the withdrawal of American troops from China, during the conflict over the agenda played the part of a "peacemaker" between the heads of the British and Soviet delegations. Indeed, he played the same part during all subsequent confrontations over Iran. On the whole, Byrnes' position did not contradict the attitude of the U.S. State Department to "the discussion on Iran," which was expressed in recommendations issued by its Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs.⁵⁹

The first conflict about Iran at the Moscow CFM, which met from 16-26 December 1945, resulted in a decision by the sides to confine the discussion of the Iran question on the informal level during the subsequent sessions.⁶⁰ It was brought up on December 24 (in addition to during Byrnes' and Bevin's

⁵⁵ M. Silin to V. Molotov, 13 December 1945, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 7, p. 33, d. 466, ll. 11-12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 12.

⁵⁷ AVP RF, f. 094, op. 31, p. 351a, d. 2, ll. 22, 23; *ibid.*, f. 0430, op. 2, p. 5, d. 16, ll. 12, 13.

⁵⁸ Protocols of meetings of Moscow conference for Ministers of Foreign Affairs, AVP RF, f. 0430, op. 1, p. 1, d. 1, ll. 2-9.

⁵⁹ See memorandum by the Director of the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs (Loy W. Henderson) to the Secretary of State, "Subject: Iran--Suggested Approach During the Moscow Discussions," 11 December 1945, *FRUS*, 1945, 8:488-490.

⁶⁰ Protocols of meetings of Moscow conference for Ministers of Foreign Affairs, AVP RF, f. 0430, op. 1, p. 1, d. 1, l. 9.

December 19 and 23 talks with Stalin in the Kremlin) during a closed meeting at the conference. The head of the British delegation, as if fulfilling a promise to Stalin, presented the draft "On the question of the competence of the Trilateral commission on the Iran issue." It is known that Byrnes introduced into the original draft by Sir Reader W. Bullard, the British ambassador to Iran, a key amendment dealing with the presence of foreign troops on Iranian territory.⁶¹ On December 25, an emotional argument erupted around this part of the draft's preamble. When the Soviet delegation proposed changing the phrase "facilitating the quickest withdrawal of Allied troops"⁶² into "withdrawal of the Allied troops in the least possible period of time,"⁶³ neither Bevin nor Byrnes was satisfied with the vagueness of the phrase. To Bevin's direct question: "You do not agree to establish March 2 [1946] as the date of the troops withdrawal?"—Molotov answered: "We do not agree to this."⁶⁴ The head of the Soviet delegation unconvincingly justified this statement by reference to the complicated wintertime conditions. He tried to play his trump card by suggesting that the question be deferred to the yet-to-be-created Trilateral Commission and that consideration of the issue be postponed because of the absence of representatives.⁶⁵

During the meeting on December 26, Molotov finally made his position clear. Having agreed with Byrnes' proposal to consider the Iran issue, he observed that "nothing is working out with Iran" for the simple reason that "The Iranians are not here, and we can not do anything without them."⁶⁶ Bevin, who, like Byrnes, had some illusions after conversations with Stalin, asked directly: "Do I understand correctly that the Soviet government has now no possibility to reach an agreement on this issue?"⁶⁷ He never received an answer. But, taking into consideration the documents which were prepared in the PCFA on the eve of the conference, it is not hard to conclude that Molotov acted strictly in accordance with previously adopted arrangements: The Soviet delegation was playing a diplomatic "game" to assure that, at least on the Iranian issue, the Moscow conference achieved nothing. The time factor was of decisive importance both for the national government of Iranian Azerbaijan and for Soviet economic and political aims in Iran. At Molotov's insistence, without any opposition from Byrnes, the Iranian issue was omitted from the Moscow conference communiqué.⁶⁸

⁶¹ *FRUS*, 1945, vol. 2: *General: Political and Economic Matters* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1967), 771 fn; Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Harriman) to the Secretary of State, 28 December 1945, *FRUS*, 1945, 8:517-519.

⁶² Draft of the British delegation "On the issue of competence of the trilateral committee on Iran," 24 December 1945, AVP RF, f. 0430, op. 2, p. 5, d. 16, ll. 1-2.

⁶³ Amendments introduced by the Soviet delegation into the draft of the British delegation "On the issue of competence of the trilateral committee on Iran," 25 December 1945, AVP RF, f. 094, op. 31, p. 351a, d. 3, l. 23.

⁶⁴ Protocols of meetings of Moscow conference for Ministers of Foreign Affairs, AVP RF, f. 0430, op. 1, p. 1, d. 1, l. 240.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 240-245.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 262.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 269.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

The fact that the Moscow conference failed to reach any decisions on Iran gave Teheran a good opportunity to introduce the issue at the United Nations, thus giving Iran's internal political crisis an international character. When more documents from the Russian Foreign Ministry archives become accessible, researchers will be in a better position to answer the question: How accurate is the view, widespread in American historiography, that the USSR was forced to remove its troops from Iran in 1946 by the firm position of the USA in the United Nations? So far, at least, the impression created by documents seen by the author on Soviet-Iranian relations following Qavam's assumption of power on 27 January 1946 suggests the conclusion that the Qavam government's concessions and the agreement that had been reached between Iran and the Soviet Union, rather than American pressure at the United Nations, was of decisive importance.⁶⁹ Following the Iranian delegation's 19 January 1946 letter to the Security Council, all Soviet diplomatic efforts at the U.N. General Assembly were directed at returning the Iranian issue to the sphere of bilateral relations. On January 30, at the Security Council meeting which passed the well-known resolution on Iran, the Iranian delegation finally expressed its desire to start the process of negotiations.

The situation in Iranian Azerbaijan and the withdrawal of Soviet troops continued to be the central topic of complicated Soviet-Iranian negotiations during an official visit of an Iranian delegation to Moscow from February 19 to March 5. However, behind this stood the real principal question which concerned the Soviet government: access to oil in northern Iran. Archival documents reveal the drama in the negotiations on this issue. The February 28 multi-part memorandum to Qavam is the most important document. It shows that on February 25, the Soviet government, "conceding to the Iranian side to the detriment of its own interests," agreed to replace the proposed oil concession with a proposal to create a joint Soviet-Iranian oil society (51% of whose stock would belong to Moscow, 49% to Iran). The Soviet leadership evaluated the Iranian delegation's refusal to agree to this proposal, as indicated in its February 26 letter, as a lack of desire to consider "the interests of the USSR" and as "discrimination" against the country. This part of the memorandum ended with a strong threat: "The People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs thus declares that after the report to Prime Minister I.V. Stalin it was decided to withdraw the Soviet side's compromise proposal and to return to the official proposal made in 1944 vis-a-vis providing the USSR with an oil concession in northern Iran on conditions similar to those of the English concession in southern Iran."⁷⁰

Besides this, the obvious interdependence between the continued presence of Soviet troops in Iran and the refusal to provide an oil concession was seen in this document. Apart from mentioning that at the Peace Conference in Prague in 1919 Iranian nationalistic elements presented territorial claims to Soviet

⁶⁹ In American historiography, some researchers also share this point of view. See Rubin, *The Great Powers in the Middle East, 1941-1947*, 176, and Cottam, *Iran and the United States*, 1.

⁷⁰ PCFA memorandum to the Prime Minister of Iran Qavam, February 1946, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 8, p. 36, d. 562, l. 1.

Russia, the document also noted attempts of Iranian authorities to grant oil concessions to foreign states on the southern border of Baku during the 1920s and '30s. "All these facts," the memorandum stressed, "show that Iranian ruling circles have evil intentions towards the USSR and are ready, if the opportunity presents itself, to harm the interests of the USSR and to create a threat to the oil regions of Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet Turkmenistan."⁷¹ It is hard to believe that Soviet leaders, having such a powerful army, could sincerely believe in the possibility of Iranian aggression. But, it appears, the prospect of Britain and the USA developing Iranian oil deposits near the Soviet border really was taken as a threat to Soviet national security interests, which, in turn, were closely connected with historical Russian geopolitical interests. Therefore, the USSR's acquisition of rights to an oil concession in northern Iran was treated in the Soviet government as an important guarantee of security for the southern regions of the country. Moreover, at the same time, the settlement of the oil problem on its preferred terms would give the USSR an advantageous position in the eternal rivalry with England for political influence in Iran.

Before Qavam answered the Soviet memorandum, the radio and the press reported a TASS dispatch to the effect that, beginning March 2 the USSR would withdraw only part of its troops, from "relatively stable" regions of Iran. (The USA finished the withdrawal of its troops by January 1, Britain completed the evacuation of its garrisons by March 2.) On March 3, Qavam sent a strong protest against the Soviet government's decision.⁷² But in Qavam's response to the Soviet memorandum his tone was already different. On March 4, the Prime Minister assured the Kremlin that the goal of the "present-day Iranian government is to strengthen honestly and sincerely friendly relations between Iran and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics." Bringing the oil issue to center stage, he proposed a compromise: "If the Soviet government will accept my positions regarding the immediate withdrawal of all Soviet troops from Iran and on the Azerbaijan issue, I will have enough time on returning to Teheran to agree on all conditions for the creation of this [joint Soviet-Iranian oil] society and to present an appropriate draft project for confirmation of the Parliament."⁷³

There was no official reaction to Qavam's new proposals. But it follows from the draft reply to the March 3 Iranian government protest, and from additions to Soviet memorandums of February 25 and February 28, that the Soviet government believed that a basis of a possible agreement should be a stabilization of the situation in Iranian Azerbaijan; a friendly attitude of the Iranian government toward the USSR; and a decision on access to oil in northern Iran.⁷⁴ Naturally, the Soviet government could only be alarmed by the prospect of the armed confrontations which were expected in Iranian Azerbaijan on the border with the USSR in the event of a withdrawal of Soviet troops, as well as on the Iranian-Turkish border, which would be left without reliable protection (it was then being guarded by Soviet troops).

⁷¹ Ibid., ll. 2-3.

⁷² Note of Qavam to V. Molotov, 3 March 1946, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 8, p. 35, d. 551, l. 15.

⁷³ Qavam to V. Molotov, 4 March 1946, *ibid.*, l. 21.

⁷⁴ Draft reply of V. Molotov to Qavam, 11 March 1946, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 8, p. 35, d. 551, ll. 23-26.

Nevertheless, it is hard to view the delay in the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the introduction of new military detachments and technology as anything but a means to put pressure on the Iranian government and as a demonstration of strength.⁷⁵

The Soviet government's refusal to remove all its troops obviously hastened the process of bringing England and the USA together in an anti-Soviet alliance. On March 5, the final day of the Iranian delegation's official visit and its final reception with Stalin, Winston Churchill made his famous speech in Fulton, Missouri, declaring that an "Iron Curtain" had descended over Soviet-occupied Europe. The anti-Soviet theme of his speech and his call for an Anglo-American alliance were to a considerable extent inspired by recent Soviet actions in Iran. One must also recognize that the Soviet behavior in Iran, which exploited the factor of "military threat," was one of the stimuli behind the creation of a global doctrine in the post-war foreign policy of the United States and its approach to relations with the USSR "from the position of strength." This made the task of reorienting public opinion in the United States, which still cultivated isolationist illusions and friendly feelings toward its former ally in the just-concluded war against Hitler, much easier for the Truman Administration.

In accordance with the Moscow agreement, further Soviet-Iranian negotiations were to take place in Teheran with the participation of the new Soviet Ambassador, Ivan Sadchikov. Draft confidential letters on the issues of Iranian oil and the withdrawal of Soviet troops were prepared in the PCFA for exchange between Sadchikov and Qavam. In Molotov's cover letter, sent with these documents to Stalin, it was noted that these letters were given to Sadchikov on March 18 at the time of his departure for Teheran.⁷⁶ On this very day, as is known, the Iranian government again turned to the United Nations. We do not know if this accelerated the departure of the new Soviet Ambassador. But the fact remains that Soviet diplomacy prepared documents which reflected the agreement of the Soviet government to remove its troops from Iran in exchange for creating a joint stock oil society even *before* this question was discussed at the United Nations. This casts doubt upon the theory that it was Washington's firm stand in the Security Council that caused the USSR to remove its troops from Iran. However, the American position may well have prompted the Soviet side to activate its efforts in the negotiations with Iran and to introduce changes in its initial proposals. In the PCFA's instructions to Sadchikov on transmitting the letter about withdrawal of Soviet troops, it was pointed out: "Must be given to Qavam on the *day of exchange*

⁷⁵ It should be possible to gain a fuller answer to questions about the reasons for introducing supplementary Soviet troops and military hardware into Iran when scholars gain access to records of Politburo meetings, General Headquarters archives, espionage files, and other still-inaccessible documents. But from Bagirov's information it follows that change of location of Azerbaijani people's voluntary detachments, Soviet troops and armor in northern Iran was caused by concentration of about 30,000 governmental troops at the southern and southeastern borders of Iranian Azerbaijan, which were expected to start the offensive in the region of Zandijan. (Governmental telegram of M. Bagirov and I. Maslennikov to I. Stalin and V. Molotov on 13 March 1946, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 8, p. 35, d. 551, l. 27.)

⁷⁶ V. Molotov to I. Stalin, n.d., AVP RF, f. 06, op. 8, p. 36, d. 563, l. 2.

[author's emphasis] of letters on a joint Soviet-Iranian oil society."⁷⁷ So, the question of the Soviet troops withdrawal was directly connected to the Iranian authorities' agreement to create the joint stock oil society.

In fact, the withdrawal of all Soviet troops from Iran was officially announced for March 24, but the exchange of letters never took place. On this day the Soviet envoy gave to Qavam only a draft of a letter which the prime minister was to hand back to the Soviet side after a mutual agreement was achieved. The draft acknowledged the Shah's agreement to establish, on Soviet terms, a Soviet-Iranian joint stock oil society.⁷⁸ The Iranian Cabinet adopted the PCFA draft as a foundation for the future agreement. Still to be determined were the dates of the confirmation of the agreement and the precise size and borders of the area which would be controlled by the oil society (some regions of west Azerbaijan, which the Iranian government promised not to give to foreign companies for concessions, were excluded).⁷⁹ Finally, on April 4, Sadchikov and Qavam simultaneously exchanged the letters on the withdrawal of Soviet troops within one-and-a-half months beginning March 24, and on the creation of a stock oil society. The agreement on the Soviet-Iranian oil society was to be approved of by the new Majlis not more than seven months from 24 March 1946 (i.e., by 24 October 1946).⁸⁰

On that same day, April 4, the Soviet Embassy in Teheran received a letter from Qavam on the Azerbaijan question. It contained the Iranian government's agreement to implement the basic measures which had been proposed during the Moscow negotiations to resolve the Azerbaijan situation. Among these was an agreement to increase the number of seats in the Iranian Majlis in accord with the population of each province.⁸¹ One of the main demands of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party thus was met, though the final decision was delayed until its confirmation at the Majlis's 15th legislative session. There were no objections in the Soviet ambassador's response. Thus, Qavam's decision to concede to the Soviet demands and the fact that the Soviet government overcame its distrust of the prime minister's promise of friendly relations—the more so because the process of negotiations was still under control of the United Nations—led to a settlement of the "Iranian crisis." The Deputy Head of the General Staff, Col.-Gen. S. Shtemenko, reported to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lozovskii that on May 9 all troops and freight were removed from the territory of Iran.⁸²

The withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Iran significantly complicated the position of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party. On 8 May 1946, Stalin sent a private letter to Pishevari, who considered

⁷⁷ Draft letter of I. Sadchikov to Qavam, n.d., *ibid.*, l. 4.

⁷⁸ Draft letter of Qavam to I. Sadchikov (handed by the USSR Embassy in Iran I. Sadchikov to Qavam on 24 March 1946), AVP RF, f. 06, op. 8, p. 36, d. 562, l. 6.

⁷⁹ Letter of Qavam to I. Sadchikov, 4 April 1946, *ibid.*, l. 7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 8.

⁸¹ Letter of Qavam to I. Sadchikov on the Azerbaijan issue, 4 April 1946, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 7, p. 34, d. 544, ll. 3-4.

⁸² S. Shtemenko to S. Lozovskii, 10 May 1946, AVP RF, f. 094, op. 37, p. 357a, d. 11, l. 29.

himself "deceived" by Soviet actions. This extraordinary document (for the full text, see appendix) sheds light on several aspects of the crisis: about the role of Iranian Azerbaijan in Soviet policy; about the tactics of the Soviet government in relations with Qavam's Cabinet; and about Stalin's attitude toward England and the USA. First of all it becomes entirely clear that the USSR had no plans for the revolutionary overthrow of the central Iranian government.⁸³ Stalin openly declared that there was no "deep revolutionary crisis" in Iran and that the success of the democratic movement in Azerbaijan was connected with the presence there of Soviet troops.⁸⁴ True, the "leader of the world proletariat" tried to disguise the pragmatic reason behind the decision to withdraw these troops by referring (in Comintern style) to the fight for liberation in Europe and Asia. In his words, the English could exploit the presence of Soviet troops in Iran as a pretext to keep their own troops in Egypt, Syria, Indonesia, and Greece, while the Americans would keep their troops in China, Iceland, and Denmark.⁸⁵

Stalin explained to Pishevari "a common revolutionary method, familiar to every revolutionary" and used by the USSR in Iran: the method of presenting maximal demands and creating a threat in order to force a government to make concessions. (The national-liberation movement in Iranian Azerbaijan was used in precisely this way.) How did Stalin evaluate the situation in Iran after the departure of Soviet troops? He wrote: "We have a conflict between the government of Qavam with the Anglophile circles in Iran, who represent the most reactionary elements in Iran." Proceeding from this, Stalin proposed to the leaders of the Democratic Party "to use this conflict in order to wrench concessions from Qavam, support him, isolate the Anglophiles and, thus, to create some basis for further democratization of Iran."⁸⁶ The quotations from Stalin, given above, give some grounds for believing that after Qavam's Cabinet made concessions, Soviet leaders tried to avoid any actions which could have spoiled this leader's position in Iranian ruling circles. The main goal of the Soviet diplomacy was to conclude Soviet-Iranian agreements. Exactly this, above all, accounts for the fact that the Soviet Union limited itself to "friendly warnings"⁸⁷ when Qavam, under the pretense of elections to the Majlis, decided to introduce government troops into Iranian Azerbaijan in December 1946. Soviet goals in Iran were limited to concrete demands and, despite the USSR's aggressive behavior during the "Iran crisis," did not include territorial expansion.

And finally, Stalin's letter shows that in spring 1946, despite Washington's openly pro-Iran policy, Moscow still considered England to be its main rival in the Near and Middle East. Nevertheless, by the autumn of 1946, more and more information about the weakening of the British position and the increase in American influence in the region started to appear in analytical and intelligence materials

⁸³ Kuniholm put forward this suggestion in *Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, 328.

⁸⁴ I. Stalin to J. Pishevari, 8 May 1946, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 7, p. 34, d. 544, l. 8.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., l. 9.

⁸⁷ Report of Hussein Ala, the Iran Ambassador in the USA and the Iran representative in the Security Council, to the Chairman of the U.N. Security Council J. Johnson, 5 December 1946, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 8, p. 34, d. 543, l. 16.

received by the AUCP(b) CC. Moreover, the Central Committee agents believed that it was the U.S. Embassy in Teheran, after studying the situation in Iranian Azerbaijan and the possibility of Soviet military intervention there, which had suggested to Qavam a favorable time for introducing government troops to northern Iran and provided it with military supplies.⁸⁸ These reports accurately conveyed the shifting balance of forces in the country and, thus, the region: After government troops entered Iranian Azerbaijan on 11 December 1946, the nationalist-democratic movement in that province was drowned in blood; the Iranian Kurdistan movement experienced a similar fate. The new Majlis, reconvened in the middle of 1947, refused to ratify the Soviet-Iranian agreement on a joint oil society.

The "Iranian crisis" had led to irreversible geopolitical consequences in the Near and Middle East: the United States was gradually occupying Great Britain's traditional place, and Iran, with Washington's help, had successfully resisted Soviet encroachment. The next regional conflict between the USSR, England and the USA, in the eastern Mediterranean, took place at a time of noticeable aggravation on Soviet-American relations and brought into force the Truman Doctrine, which was rooted in the Iranian experience. While the "Iran crisis" expired as an international problem in May 1946, its consequences spread far beyond its regional limits. The events in Iran influenced the formation of the major components of the "cold war:" the tendency of Britain and the USA to ally in order to confront widening Soviet influence in strategically important regions of the Near and Middle East; the appearance of the concept of "containment" of Communism; and the involvement of 'third world' countries in the Great Power rivalry which had already begun.

⁸⁸ Report to the AUCP(b) CC on the situation in Iran, 20 January 1947, RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 128, d. 1111, l. 46.

APPENDIX

Joseph V. Stalin to Ja'afar Pischevari, Leader of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, 8 May 1946

To comrade Pischevari,

It seems to me that you misjudge the existing situation, inside Iran as well as in the international dimension.

First. You want to meet all revolutionary demands of Azerbaijan right now. But the existing situation precludes realization of this program. Lenin used to put forth revolutionary demands as practical demands - I stress - as practical demands only when the country experienced a grave revolutionary crisis aggravated by the unsuccessful war with external enemy. Such was the case in 1905 during the unsuccessful war with Japan and in 1917 during the unsuccessful war with Germany. You here want to emulate Lenin. This is very good and laudable.

However, the situation in Iran today is totally different. There is no profound revolutionary crisis in Iran. There are few workers in Iran and they are poorly organized. The Iranian peasantry still does not show any serious activism. Iran is not waging a war with external enemy that could weaken Iran's revolutionary circles through a military failure. Consequently, there is no such situation in Iran that could support the tactics of Lenin in 1905 and 1917.

Second. Certainly, you could have counted on a success in the cause of the struggle for the revolutionary demands of the Azerbaijani people had the Soviet troops continued to remain in Iran. But we could no longer keep them in Iran, mainly because the presence of Soviet troops in Iran undercut the foundations of our liberationist policies in Europe and Asia. The British and Americans said to us that if Soviet troops could stay in Iran, then why could not the British troops stay in Egypt, Syria, Indonesia, Greece, and also the American troops - in China, Iceland, in Denmark. Therefore we decided to withdraw troops from Iran and China, in order to seize this tool [*oruzhiie*] from the hands of the British and Americans, to unleash the liberation movement in the colonies and thereby to render our liberationist policy more justified and efficient. You as a revolutionary will certainly understand that we could not have done otherwise.

Third. All this said, one can come to the following conclusion with regard to the situation in Iran. There is no profound revolutionary crisis in Iran. There is no state of war in Iran with external enemies, and, consequently, no military failures which could weaken the reaction and aggravate the crisis. So long as Soviet troops stayed in Iran, you had a chance to unfold the struggle in Azerbaijan and organize a broad democratic movement with far-reaching demands. But our troops had to leave and left Iran. What do have now in Iran? We have a conflict of the government of Qavam with the Anglophile circles in Iran who represent the most reactionary elements of Iran. As reactionary as Qavam used to be in the past, now he must, in the interests of self-defense and the defense of his government, carry out some democratic reforms and seek support among democratic elements in Iran. What must be our tactics under these conditions? I believe we should use this conflict to wrench concessions from Qavam [*virvat ustupki u Kavama*], to give him support, to isolate the Anglophiles, thus, and to create some basis for the further democratization of Iran. From this assumption stems all our advice to you. Of course, one could adopt a different tactic: to spit on everything, to break with Qavam and thereby ensure there a victory of the Anglophile reactionaries. Yet, this would not have been a tactic, but stupidity. This would have been in effect a betrayal of the cause of the Azerbaijani people and Iranian democracy.

Fourth. You, as I found out, say that we first raised you to the skies and then let you down into the precipice and disgraced you. If this is true, it surprises us. What has really happened? We used the technique here that every revolutionary knows. In the situation similar to the situation of Iran today, if one wants to achieve a certain minimum of demands pursued by the movement, to movement has to run ahead, to progress beyond the minimal demands and to create a threat for the government, to ensure a possibility of concessions on the part of the government. Had you not run far ahead, you would not have had a chance in the current situation in Iran to achieve these demands [sic: concessions?-trans.] that the government of Qavam has to make now. Such is the law of revolutionary movement. There could not be even mention of any disgrace for you. It is very strange that you think that we could have let you down in disgrace. On the contrary, if you behave reasonably and seek with our moral support the demands that would legalize essentially the existing factual position of Azerbaijan, then you would be blessed both by the Azeris and [by] Iran as a pioneer of the progressive democratic movement in the Middle East.

I. Stalin

[Source: AVP RF, f. 06, op. 7, p. 34, d. 544, ll. 8-9; translation for CWIHP by Vladislav M. Zubok.]

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