



Research Article¹

Kamran Asadov

Doctoral Researcher, Department of Caucasus Studies
Institute of History
Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences
Baku, Azerbaijan

Email: kamranesedov@bk.ru
ORCID: [0000-0003-1115-3566](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1115-3566)

The Zangezur Question in Azerbaijani–Armenian Relations, 1918–1929: Territorial Contestation and Soviet Border-Making

Abstract

This article examines the Zangezur question as a central dimension of Azerbaijani–Armenian territorial relations between 1918 and 1929. The period encompassed the collapse of the Russian Empire, the emergence of the independent republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia, armed conflict over disputed borderlands, the establishment of Soviet authority, and the subsequent institutionalisation of administrative boundaries in the South Caucasus. Drawing on archival documents, government correspondence, diplomatic materials, contemporary press reports, maps, and relevant historiography, the study analyses how competing territorial claims to Zangezur were articulated and transformed under changing political conditions. Particular attention is paid to the strategic importance of the region, its ethnically mixed population, its geographical relationship with Karabakh and Nakhchivan, and the decisions through which portions of the former Zangezur district were incorporated into Soviet Armenia while other areas remained within Soviet Azerbaijan. The analysis distinguishes contemporaneous documentary evidence from later national and political interpretations. It argues that the territorial outcome cannot be explained through a single bilateral decision or exclusively ethnonational factor. Rather, it emerged from the interaction of local armed confrontation, demographic claims, competing state-building projects, Bolshevik nationality policy, Soviet security priorities, and broader regional diplomacy. The article concludes that the Zangezur question played a formative role in the territorial reorganisation of the South Caucasus and contributed to enduring Azerbaijani–Armenian disputes concerning sovereignty, historical geography, displacement, and regional connectivity.

Keywords: Zangezur; Azerbaijani–Armenian relations; South Caucasus; territorial conflict; Soviet border-making; Nakhchivan; Karabakh

DOI: 10.56334/cs/7.2.4

Citation: Asadov, K. (2026). The Zangezur Question in Azerbaijani–Armenian Relations, 1918–1929: Territorial Contestation and Soviet Border-Making. *Caucasus Studies*, 7(2), 56–77. <https://doi.org/10.56334/cs/7.2.3>

¹ Article received: 30.01.2026;
Article Revised: 06.07.2026;
Articles Accepted: 12.08.2026;
Published online: 16.08.2026

Introduction

The political transformation of the South Caucasus between 1917 and 1929 fundamentally altered the region's territorial and administrative structure. The collapse of the Russian Empire following the February and October Revolutions of 1917 weakened imperial institutions and created opportunities for competing national movements to establish new political authorities. The short-lived Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic failed to reconcile the divergent political, military, and territorial interests of its Georgian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian components. Its dissolution in May 1918 was followed by the establishment of the independent republics of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia (Hovannisian, 1967; Kazemzadeh, 1951).

The boundaries of these newly established republics were not clearly determined. Imperial administrative borders had not been designed as national frontiers, while patterns of settlement in many districts were ethnically, linguistically, and religiously heterogeneous. Consequently, the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia advanced competing claims to several strategically important territories, including Karabakh, Zangezur, Nakhchivan, and parts of the former Erivan and Elisabethpol governorates (Altstadt, 1992; Hovannisian, 1971; Swietochowski, 1985).

Zangezur occupied a particularly significant position within these territorial disputes. Under the Russian imperial administrative system, Zangezur formed a district of the Elisabethpol Governorate. Its mountainous geography connected the Karabakh highlands with the territories adjoining Nakhchivan and the Aras basin. The region's strategic importance derived not only from its settlement patterns and natural geography but also from its role in controlling communication routes between different parts of the South Caucasus.

The demographic composition of Zangezur became a central component of competing Azerbaijani and Armenian territorial arguments. Both sides referred to population statistics, historical settlement, administrative affiliation, property ownership, and security considerations to justify their claims. However, demographic data from the late imperial and early post-imperial periods require careful interpretation. Population movements, seasonal settlement, differences among statistical categories, wartime displacement, and the destruction or abandonment of settlements complicate efforts to reconstruct the region's population with precision.

The establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on 28 May 1918 and the Republic of Armenia during the same period transformed previously administrative disagreements into interstate territorial disputes. Azerbaijani authorities generally referred to Zangezur's inclusion within the Elisabethpol Governorate and its connections with Karabakh and Nakhchivan. Armenian political and military actors, by contrast, advanced historical, demographic, and strategic claims concerning the region. These competing projects were accompanied by armed confrontation, the displacement of civilians, and rival attempts to establish administrative control (Hovannisian, 1971; Kazemzadeh, 1951).

The decision of the Azerbaijani National Council concerning Erivan in May 1918 also occupies an important place in Azerbaijani historical and political discourse. Azerbaijani political correspondence from the period indicates that the status of Erivan was considered within negotiations concerning relations with the newly established Armenian republic. Later Azerbaijani interpretations have frequently presented this decision as a major territorial concession. For scholarly purposes, however, the episode should be analysed within the immediate military and diplomatic circumstances of May 1918 rather than through contemporary political judgments alone.

Zangezur subsequently became an arena of sustained military and political contestation. Local armed groups, representatives of the Azerbaijani and Armenian governments, Ottoman and British military authorities, Bolshevik organisations, and other regional actors attempted to influence the territorial outcome. Control over the region shifted repeatedly, and formal claims

did not always correspond to effective administrative authority. The difference between legal claims, military control, and local governance is therefore crucial to understanding the conflict.

Violence against civilian communities constitutes one of the most sensitive dimensions of the Zangezur question. Azerbaijani and Armenian sources document killings, destruction of settlements, forced displacement, and confiscation of property. However, the reported numbers of victims and destroyed villages often differ substantially across archival collections, political publications, and national historiographies. Quantitative claims should therefore be verified through source triangulation rather than reproduced from a single document. Archival records, contemporary press accounts, population lists, diplomatic reports, and later demographic studies must be compared to establish the reliability and context of individual estimates.

The Sovietisation of Azerbaijan in April 1920 and Armenia later that year fundamentally changed the political framework within which the Zangezur dispute was negotiated. The independent republics were replaced by Soviet governments formally committed to Bolshevik nationality policy and socialist internationalism. Nevertheless, territorial questions did not disappear. They were reconsidered through the strategic priorities of Soviet Russia, the Caucasian Bureau, republican party institutions, military authorities, and local administrative bodies.

Decisions adopted during 1920 and the following years contributed to the division of the former Zangezur district. Its western section was incorporated into Soviet Armenia, while its eastern areas, including territories associated with present-day Lachin, Gubadli, and Zangilan, remained within Soviet Azerbaijan. This reorganisation altered the geographical relationship between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan and became an important subject in subsequent Azerbaijani historical and political narratives.

The precise chronology and legal character of these decisions remain subjects of historiographical debate. Some accounts emphasise a specific party resolution or political declaration, whereas others describe the outcome as a gradual process involving military control, negotiations, administrative restructuring, and the subsequent consolidation of Soviet republican boundaries. The distinction is important because party declarations, diplomatic statements, and legally implemented territorial arrangements did not always coincide.

The establishment of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic in 1922 and the formation of the Soviet Union further institutionalised the regional political order. During the 1920s, administrative boundaries continued to be clarified through mapping, land-management decisions, population administration, and inter-republican negotiations. The study's terminal date of 1929 reflects the need to examine not only the initial political decisions of 1920–1921 but also the longer process through which the new territorial arrangement became administratively consolidated.

The Zangezur question has remained highly politicised in Azerbaijani and Armenian historiography. Azerbaijani scholarship commonly emphasises the region's inclusion within the Elisabethpol Governorate, its Azerbaijani and Kurdish Muslim settlements, violence against the Muslim population, and the Soviet-era separation of Nakhchivan from mainland Azerbaijan. Armenian historiography generally foregrounds Armenian settlement, political organisation, security concerns, and claims to territorial self-government. These historiographical traditions often employ different archival selections and conceptual frameworks.

A rigorous investigation must therefore distinguish between primary evidence, retrospective political interpretation, and collective memory. Government correspondence reveals official claims but may not accurately reflect conditions on the ground. Population statistics provide important evidence but depend on the categories and methods employed by imperial or republican administrations. Newspapers document contemporary perceptions but may reproduce wartime propaganda. Memoirs provide valuable testimony but are influenced by the author's political position and the time at which they were written.

This article addresses these methodological challenges through comparative historical analysis. It examines Azerbaijani, Armenian, Russian, and other relevant materials where available and situates individual documents within their institutional and political contexts. Rather than assuming that any single national narrative provides a complete explanation, it investigates how territorial claims were produced, negotiated, enforced, and subsequently remembered.

The study is guided by four principal research questions. First, how did Azerbaijani and Armenian political actors justify their competing claims to Zangezur between 1918 and 1929? Second, how did military developments, demographic change, and civilian displacement affect the exercise of territorial control? Third, what role did Soviet institutions and regional strategic considerations play in determining the administrative division of the former Zangezur district? Fourth, how did the resulting territorial arrangement influence the relationship among Azerbaijan, Armenia, Nakhchivan, and Karabakh?

The article argues that the Zangezur question cannot be reduced to a single act of territorial transfer. It was a prolonged process shaped by the collapse of empire, incompatible national projects, local violence, changing military control, population displacement, Soviet nationality policy, and strategic calculations concerning regional communications. Examining these interacting factors contributes to a more precise understanding of Azerbaijani–Armenian relations and the historical formation of the South Caucasus’s territorial order.

Literature Review

The Collapse of Empire and Territorial Contestation in the South Caucasus

The Zangezur question emerged within the broader political and territorial transformation that followed the collapse of the Russian Empire. Imperial administrative boundaries in the South Caucasus had not been designed as national borders, and the region contained extensive areas of ethnically mixed, seasonally mobile, and politically contested settlement. Consequently, the establishment of the republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1918 required political actors to transform former imperial districts into claimed national territories.

Kazemzadeh (1951) provides one of the earliest comprehensive English-language accounts of political competition in Transcaucasia between 1917 and 1921. He explains territorial disputes through the interaction of collapsing imperial authority, competing national movements, external military intervention, and the strategic interests of Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and Bolshevik Russia. Within this framework, disputes over Zangezur, Karabakh, and Nakhchivan were not isolated local conflicts but components of a broader struggle to construct viable states from the administrative and demographic legacy of the Russian Empire.

Swietochowski (1985) examines the development of Azerbaijani national identity and political organisation during the late imperial and early republican periods. His analysis demonstrates that Azerbaijani statehood emerged through the interaction of Muslim reformism, Turkic identity, territorial politics, and the institutional opportunities created by imperial collapse. The work is particularly important for understanding why the political leadership of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic regarded former districts of the Baku and Elisabethpol governorates as essential components of the new state.

Altstadt (1992) similarly situates the territorial development of Azerbaijan within the longer history of Russian imperial governance. She emphasises the significance of administrative structures, demographic classification, economic connections, and political identity. Her work demonstrates that the conversion of imperial administrative borders into national boundaries was not automatic. Competing groups selected different historical, demographic, administrative, and strategic criteria to legitimise their claims.

Reynolds (2011) expands this framework by analysing the interconnected collapse of the Ottoman and Russian empires. His study shows that the South Caucasus became a strategic borderland in which imperial security, nationalism, war, population movement, and international

competition converged. This broader perspective is essential because the Zangezur conflict cannot be understood solely as a bilateral Azerbaijani–Armenian dispute. Ottoman military operations, British intervention, Russian revolutionary politics, and regional transportation routes all influenced the positions and capabilities of local actors.

Competing Azerbaijani and Armenian Territorial Projects

Hovannisian's multivolume history of the Republic of Armenia provides detailed documentation of Armenian state-building, diplomacy, and territorial claims. His first volume examines the establishment of the Armenian republic and its initial territorial and humanitarian difficulties (Hovannisian, 1971). The second volume analyses Armenian diplomacy and conflicts during 1919–1920, including relations with Azerbaijan and struggles concerning Zangezur and Karabakh (Hovannisian, 1982). The third volume examines the final phase of the independent republic and its efforts to secure international recognition and territorial viability (Hovannisian, 1996).

Hovannisian's work is indispensable because of its extensive use of Armenian and Western diplomatic materials. However, it reflects a predominantly Armenian state-centred analytical perspective. Azerbaijani claims frequently appear in relation to Armenian political objectives rather than as an independently reconstructed state-building project. For this reason, his interpretations should be compared with Azerbaijani, Ottoman, Russian, British, and other archival sources.

Azerbaijani historiography generally emphasises that Zangezur formed part of the Elisabethpol Governorate under Russian imperial administration and contained substantial Azerbaijani and Kurdish Muslim populations. Azerbaijani authors also stress the region's geographical relationship with Karabakh and its strategic importance for communication between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. From this perspective, the subsequent incorporation of western Zangezur into Soviet Armenia is interpreted as a major territorial loss.

Armenian historiography commonly places greater emphasis on the Armenian population of mountainous Zangezur, local Armenian political organisation, security concerns, and the region's connection with the emerging Armenian republic. The two historiographical traditions therefore apply different combinations of administrative, demographic, historical, and strategic criteria. These criteria did not necessarily produce identical territorial conclusions.

Broers (2019) conceptualises Azerbaijani–Armenian relations as a sustained rivalry in which historical narratives, territorial claims, security fears, and competing projects of national legitimacy reinforce one another. Although his study primarily addresses the modern conflict, its analytical framework is relevant to the period under investigation. The Zangezur question illustrates how territorial disputes become embedded within national narratives and continue to shape political identity long after the original institutional context has disappeared.

Demography, Mobility, and Territorial Claims

Population statistics occupy a central place in both Azerbaijani and Armenian arguments. However, the demographic history of Zangezur is difficult to reconstruct. Russian imperial censuses and administrative surveys used categories that do not always correspond directly to contemporary national identities. Terms such as “Tatar,” “Muslim,” “Armenian Gregorian,” “Kurd,” and “nomadic population” reflected the administrative practices of their time.

Seasonal mobility further complicates demographic analysis. Pastoral communities moved between lowland winter settlements and mountain summer pastures, meaning that a census conducted in a particular season could undercount parts of the mobile population. War, forced displacement, massacres, village destruction, and refugee movements between 1905 and the early 1920s also altered the demographic composition of contested districts.

Altstadt (1992) and Swietochowski (1985) demonstrate the broader problems associated with imperial ethnographic classification and the political use of demographic data. Hovannisian

(1971, 1982) provides detailed population-based arguments concerning Armenian claims, while Azerbaijani historical publications foreground Muslim settlement and displacement. A reliable reconstruction therefore requires comparison among censuses, household lists, land records, tax registers, refugee reports, diplomatic correspondence, and local administrative documentation.

Demographic evidence should not be treated as politically neutral. Governments and national councils used population statistics to legitimise claims to international representatives and peace conferences. The selection of a particular reference year, territorial unit, or population category could significantly affect the resulting demographic picture. The central methodological problem is therefore not only determining which statistics exist but also explaining how and why particular statistics were produced and used.

Violence, Displacement, and the Destruction of Settlements

A substantial part of the Azerbaijani-language literature focuses on violence against Azerbaijani and Muslim communities in Zangezur, Karabakh, Nakhchivan, and neighbouring districts. Məmmədov (2007), Məmmədov and Məmmədov (2009), Paşayev (2007), and Vəfa (2011) describe killings, forced displacement, the destruction of settlements, and the loss of property. Seyidov (2008) and Rüstəmli (2005) situate these events within a broader narrative of territorial dispossession.

These publications preserve important elements of Azerbaijani collective memory and draw attention to the experiences of communities that may receive insufficient coverage in other historiographical traditions. Nevertheless, newspaper articles have methodological limitations. Their evidentiary basis is not always fully documented, and politically charged terminology may replace precise identification of military units, decision-making structures, locations, dates, and archival sources.

Claims concerning casualty figures or destroyed settlements should consequently be verified through triangulation. Relevant evidence may include reports of local administrative authorities, refugee committees, medical institutions, military correspondence, international missions, contemporary newspapers, population lists, and material traces. Testimonies should be assessed according to their proximity to the events, institutional origin, intended audience, and potential political purpose.

Hovannisian (1971, 1982) documents violence and displacement affecting Armenian communities, while Azerbaijani sources emphasise violence against Muslim populations. A balanced historical analysis should not treat the suffering of one community as evidence that violence against another did not occur. Instead, it should reconstruct the chronology, actors, scale, and consequences of violence in particular localities.

The central analytical issue is not the allocation of collective guilt to an entire ethnic population. It is the identification of responsible political institutions, military formations, irregular armed groups, local authorities, and commanders. This distinction is necessary for preventing historical analysis from reproducing ethnic essentialism.

Zangezur in Ottoman–Russian and Regional Diplomacy

Qafarov (2011) examines the Azerbaijan question in Turkish–Russian relations between 1917 and 1922. His work places territorial disputes within the strategic interaction among the Ottoman government, the Turkish National Movement, Bolshevik Russia, Azerbaijan, and other South Caucasian actors. This perspective is particularly important because the settlement of Zangezur's status was connected with broader questions involving Nakhchivan, Karabakh, Turkish–Soviet relations, and regional transportation.

Reynolds (2011) provides a wider imperial context for these developments. The military and political collapse of Ottoman and Russian authority generated overlapping zones of intervention rather than immediately producing stable national states. Local actors sought

external support, while external powers attempted to use national and territorial conflicts to advance their own security objectives.

The British military presence introduced an additional layer of complexity. British officials sought short-term stability and the preservation of communication and supply routes while generally postponing final territorial decisions to an anticipated international peace settlement. Appointments, provisional administrative arrangements, and ceasefire initiatives therefore did not necessarily constitute final recognition of sovereignty.

The literature indicates that the territorial positions of Azerbaijan and Armenia were affected by changing expectations regarding Ottoman, British, American, and Russian involvement. Diplomatic correspondence must consequently be read in relation to the immediate balance of power. A declaration made during British predominance may have served different purposes from one issued after the consolidation of Bolshevik authority.

Sovietisation and Border-Making

The Sovietisation of Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1920 transformed the institutional context of the Zangezur dispute but did not immediately resolve it. Bolshevik authorities formally rejected nationalist territorial competition and promoted socialist internationalism. In practice, however, they had to establish administrative boundaries, suppress armed resistance, secure transportation routes, and manage relations with Türkiye and Iran.

Qafarov (2011) demonstrates that Turkish–Russian relations were closely connected with decisions affecting Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus. Soviet policy was shaped by military considerations, revolutionary strategy, regional alliances, and efforts to consolidate authority. Territorial arrangements were therefore not determined solely through local demographic preferences.

Broers (2019) argues that Soviet border-making institutionalised rather than fully resolved several aspects of Azerbaijani–Armenian territorial rivalry. The incorporation of western Zangezur into Soviet Armenia altered the territorial relationship between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. Meanwhile, the establishment of autonomous arrangements in Nakhchivan and Nagorno-Karabakh created a complex administrative structure whose political consequences continued beyond the Soviet period.

The literature differs over whether Zangezur was transferred through a single decisive act or through a gradual sequence of political declarations, military developments, demarcation decisions, and administrative consolidation. This distinction is important. A party resolution, diplomatic statement, military occupation, and legally implemented border change are different types of historical evidence and should not be treated as equivalent.

The period extending to 1929 is therefore analytically justified. Although the principal political transformation occurred in 1920–1921, inter-republican boundary questions continued to be considered through land commissions, mapping exercises, and administrative negotiations throughout the 1920s. The eventual boundary was produced through a process rather than a single isolated decision.

Zangezur in Azerbaijani Public Memory

The Azerbaijani newspaper literature published between 2005 and 2013 demonstrates the continuing place of Zangezur in national memory. Rüstəmli (2005) presents the issue through the language of territorial recovery, while Seyidov (2008) describes Zangezur as a homeland remaining under foreign control. Xəlilzadə (2007, 2013) connects the subject with Heydar Aliyev's political legacy. Other publications focus on the destruction of settlements, cultural heritage, displacement, and the perceived erasure of Azerbaijani historical traces.

These publications should be analysed as sources on memory politics and public discourse rather than used uncritically as direct evidence for events occurring between 1918 and 1929.

Their language reflects the political context in which they were written, including the unresolved Karabakh conflict and the displacement of Azerbaijani communities.

Hüseynov's (2005) literary-historical treatment of Zangilan and Zangezur further illustrates how territorial memory is preserved through cultural narrative. Such material is valuable for understanding the emotional and symbolic importance of landscape, homeland, rivers, settlements, and ancestral memory. However, literary representation and archival reconstruction serve different analytical purposes.

The distinction between history and memory does not imply that memory is historically irrelevant. Collective memory influences political identity, public policy, and interpretations of contemporary regional connectivity. The methodological requirement is to identify the type of evidence each source provides.

Research Gap

The existing literature is divided among national historiographies, diplomatic histories, newspaper narratives, and broad studies of imperial collapse. Few studies integrate these bodies of evidence within a single source-critical framework covering the entire period from 1918 to 1929.

Three gaps are particularly evident. First, the chronology of the administrative division of Zangezur requires reconstruction through dated institutional decisions rather than retrospective summaries. Second, demographic and casualty claims require systematic comparison across archival collections and national historiographies. Third, greater attention should be given to the relationship among military control, diplomatic recognition, party declarations, and legally implemented administrative boundaries.

The present study addresses these gaps by combining diplomatic, administrative, demographic, cartographic, and press materials. It distinguishes contemporary evidence from later memory narratives and examines the Zangezur question as a process of imperial collapse, interstate conflict, Sovietisation, and administrative consolidation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design based on source criticism, document analysis, and process tracing. The methodology is designed to reconstruct the transformation of the Zangezur question between 1918 and 1929 and to explain how competing territorial claims became institutionalised through military, diplomatic, and Soviet administrative processes.

A qualitative approach is appropriate because the principal research problem concerns the interpretation of historical decisions, political claims, changing administrative authority, and contested evidence. The study does not attempt to establish a single numerical measure of territorial legitimacy. Instead, it examines how different actors formulated their claims, which sources they used, and how changing power relations shaped the territorial outcome.

Research Questions

The analysis is guided by the following questions:

1. How did Azerbaijani and Armenian political actors justify their claims to Zangezur between 1918 and 1929?
2. How did imperial administrative affiliation, demography, geography, and security considerations influence these claims?
3. What role did armed conflict and civilian displacement play in changing territorial control?
4. How did Ottoman, British, Bolshevik Russian, and Turkish political interests affect the dispute?
5. Through which decisions and administrative procedures was the division of the former Zangezur district consolidated?

6. How has the Zangezur question subsequently been represented in Azerbaijani public memory?

Source Base

The study draws on four principal categories of sources.

The first category consists of primary documentary materials, including government correspondence, party resolutions, administrative decisions, diplomatic communications, military reports, census data, maps, and records of territorial commissions. Archival references should identify the repository, collection, inventory, file, and folio numbers to enable independent verification.

The second category consists of contemporary and later press publications. Newspaper articles by Rüstəmli (2005), Məmmədov (2007), Paşayev (2007), Seyidov (2008), Məmmədov and Məmmədov (2009), Vəfa (2011), and Xəlilzadə (2007, 2013) are used primarily to examine Azerbaijani historiographical narratives and public memory. They are not treated as sufficient evidence for casualty figures, territorial decisions, or demographic claims unless corroborated by primary documents.

The third category consists of Azerbaijani academic and political scholarship, particularly Qafarov's (2011) study of the Azerbaijan question in Turkish–Russian relations. This material is used to reconstruct Azerbaijani diplomatic objectives and the strategic context of the early Soviet period.

The fourth category consists of international scholarship, including Altstadt (1992), Broers (2019), Hovannisian (1967, 1971, 1982, 1996), Kazemzadeh (1951), Reynolds (2011), and Swietochowski (1985). These works provide alternative national, diplomatic, and imperial perspectives against which Azerbaijani interpretations can be evaluated.

Selection Criteria

Sources were selected when they met at least one of the following criteria:

- they were produced between 1917 and 1929 and directly addressed Zangezur or related territorial disputes;
- they contained demographic, military, administrative, or diplomatic information;
- they represented an identifiable Azerbaijani, Armenian, Russian, Ottoman, British, or Soviet institutional perspective;
- they contributed to the later historiography or collective memory of the Zangezur question;
- they enabled comparison among competing interpretations.

Sources were excluded when their authorship, date, institutional origin, or documentary basis could not be established. Unsourced internet claims and politically circulated numerical assertions were not treated as verified evidence.

Source Criticism

Each source was evaluated using external and internal criticism. External criticism addressed authenticity, authorship, date, provenance, institutional origin, and archival completeness. Internal criticism examined the author's purpose, intended audience, terminology, access to information, political position, and potential bias.

Government documents were treated as evidence of official policy or institutional perception, not automatically as accurate descriptions of conditions on the ground. Military reports were compared with reports from opposing forces and third-party observers. Press materials were examined in relation to censorship, propaganda, political affiliation, and wartime information constraints.

Retrospective memoirs and later newspaper articles were evaluated according to the temporal distance between the author and the events described. These sources were considered

especially useful for analysing memory and interpretation but required corroboration when used to reconstruct specific events.

Process Tracing

Process tracing was used to reconstruct the sequence connecting imperial collapse to the eventual administrative division of Zangezur. The analysis was organised around five historical phases:

1. the collapse of imperial authority and the Transcaucasian institutions in 1917–1918;
2. the establishment of the republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1918;
3. military and diplomatic contestation during 1918–1920;
4. Sovietisation and the reconfiguration of territorial authority in 1920–1921;
5. administrative demarcation and consolidation during 1922–1929.

For each phase, the study identified the principal actors, territorial claims, military conditions, diplomatic initiatives, and institutional decisions. This procedure enabled differentiation among claims of sovereignty, effective military control, provisional administration, and legally implemented territorial arrangements.

Thematic Analysis

Documentary evidence was coded according to the following themes:

- imperial administrative inheritance;
- demographic claims and population mobility;
- strategic geography and communication routes;
- military control and armed confrontation;
- civilian violence and displacement;
- international and regional intervention;
- Soviet nationality policy;
- border demarcation and administrative consolidation;
- national historiography and collective memory.

Thematic coding was combined with chronological analysis. This prevented later interpretations from being projected backward onto earlier political conditions.

Demographic Analysis

Demographic claims were assessed by recording the year, territorial unit, season, population categories, and institutional producer of each dataset. Particular attention was given to changes in district boundaries and the treatment of nomadic or seasonally mobile populations.

No demographic figure was considered conclusive when it originated from a single source. Census materials were compared with household lists, land records, refugee statistics, and administrative reports. Wartime population data were treated cautiously because displacement and underregistration could significantly affect totals.

Analysis of Violence and Displacement

Reports of killings, village destruction, and forced displacement were analysed at the event level wherever possible. The study sought to identify:

- the date and location of the event;
- the affected population;
- the alleged perpetrators;
- the military or political context;
- the source of the reported casualty figure;
- corroborating or contradictory documentation.

Ethnic or national groups were not treated as collectively responsible for the conduct of particular military formations or political organisations. Responsibility was attributed only where evidence identified specific institutions, commanders, units, or armed groups.

Triangulation

Triangulation was applied across archival, diplomatic, demographic, cartographic, press, and secondary sources. A claim was considered strongly supported when independently produced sources converged on its central elements. Where Azerbaijani and Armenian accounts differed, the disagreement was reported explicitly rather than resolved through unsupported selection.

International diplomatic reports were used as an additional perspective but were not assumed to be neutral. British, Ottoman, Russian, and other representatives possessed their own strategic interests and often depended on incomplete local information.

Terminology and Transliteration

The study uses “Zangezur” as the principal English form because it corresponds to the terminology employed in the article and much of the historical literature. “Syunik” is used when referring specifically to Armenian administrative or historiographical contexts.

Historical geographical names are preserved where necessary, while current names are provided for clarification. Personal and place names are transliterated consistently, although quoted documents retain their original spelling.

Terms such as “occupation,” “transfer,” “cession,” “incorporation,” and “annexation” are not used interchangeably. Each term is applied according to the legal and political character of the event being described. Where the status is disputed, the competing terminology is attributed to the relevant source.

Research Quality and Reflexivity

The study recognises that the Zangezur question remains politically sensitive. Reflexivity is therefore necessary to prevent contemporary territorial positions from determining the interpretation of historical evidence. The author’s national and institutional location is acknowledged as a potential influence on source selection and interpretation.

Analytical credibility is strengthened through the inclusion of scholarship representing different historiographical traditions, transparent discussion of source limitations, and separation of archival evidence from later political commentary. The study does not assume that equal consideration of sources requires treating all claims as equally well supported. Evidentiary weight is determined by authenticity, proximity, corroboration, and methodological transparency.

Ethical Considerations

The research uses publicly accessible historical and archival materials and does not involve living human participants. Institutional ethical approval was therefore not required.

Nevertheless, ethical standards apply to the representation of mass violence and displaced communities. The study avoids dehumanising language, collective attribution of guilt, and unsupported casualty claims. Quotations containing historically discriminatory terminology are contextualised rather than adopted as the author’s own language.

Limitations

The research is limited by uneven archival accessibility, differences among national cataloguing systems, incomplete documentation, and the political conditions under which many sources were created. Some archival collections may contain gaps resulting from war, institutional transfer, document loss, or restricted access.

The newspaper sources provide valuable evidence of public memory but cannot independently establish events from 1918–1929. International scholarship also reflects different national and methodological perspectives. Finally, the instability of territorial units and population movement limits the precision of demographic comparisons.

These limitations do not prevent historical analysis, but they require conclusions to be calibrated according to the strength of available evidence. Where the documentary record remains contradictory or incomplete, the study identifies uncertainty rather than presenting a definitive claim.

Results

The Zangezur Question Emerged from the Transformation of Imperial Administrative Space

The first finding is that the Zangezur dispute developed from the difficulty of transforming Russian imperial administrative divisions into internationally recognised national boundaries. Zangezur had formed part of the Elisabethpol Governorate, but imperial administrative affiliation did not automatically determine the borders of the republics established in 1918. Azerbaijani and Armenian political actors employed different combinations of administrative, demographic, strategic, and historical arguments to justify their territorial claims (Altstadt, 1992; Hovannisian, 1971; Kazemzadeh, 1951).

Azerbaijani claims emphasised Zangezur's imperial administrative affiliation, its substantial Muslim population, its relationship with Karabakh, and its importance as a connection between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. Armenian claims focused more strongly on Armenian settlement in the mountainous districts, local Armenian political institutions, military control, and the region's perceived strategic importance to the security and territorial viability of the Armenian republic (Hovannisian, 1971, 1982).

The evidence consequently does not support interpreting the dispute through a single territorial criterion. Imperial administration, population distribution, economic interaction, military control, and geographical connectivity produced different and sometimes incompatible territorial conclusions. This pattern was not unique to Zangezur; it was characteristic of the broader territorial transformation of the South Caucasus after the collapse of the Russian Empire (Reynolds, 2011; Swietochowski, 1985).

The 1918 Political Settlement Did Not Resolve the Wider Territorial Dispute

The second finding concerns the negotiations accompanying the formation of the Azerbaijani and Armenian republics in May 1918. Azerbaijani political correspondence indicates that the status of Erivan was considered within a broader effort to establish a political centre for the emerging Armenian republic and stabilise relations among the new South Caucasian states. The Azerbaijani National Council's deliberations reveal disagreement among its members, including objections raised by representatives connected with Erivan.

Later Azerbaijani political and journalistic narratives frequently interpret the decision as an avoidable territorial concession and a precedent for subsequent claims concerning Zangezur, Karabakh, and Nakhchivan (Rüstəmli, 2005; Seyidov, 2008; Xəlilzadə, 2007, 2013). These later interpretations demonstrate the decision's importance in Azerbaijani collective memory. However, they should be distinguished from evidence concerning the immediate military and diplomatic conditions of May 1918.

Qafarov's (2011) use of Ottoman archival materials indicates that Azerbaijani political leaders discussed territorial arrangements before the formal declaration of independence and attempted to reconcile Ottoman strategic demands with the perceived requirements of Azerbaijani statehood. These documents suggest that the decisions of May 1918 emerged under conditions of military pressure, institutional uncertainty, and concern regarding the viability of separate national political entities.

The available evidence therefore indicates that the Erivan decision did not constitute a comprehensive settlement of Azerbaijani–Armenian territorial relations. Disputes concerning Zangezur, Karabakh, and Nakhchivan remained unresolved and developed into military and diplomatic confrontations during 1918–1920 (Hovannisian, 1982; Kazemzadeh, 1951).

Sovereignty Claims and Effective Territorial Control Frequently Diverged

The third finding is that formal claims to Zangezur did not consistently correspond to effective administrative or military control. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia claimed authority over the region, but control varied geographically and changed according to military developments.

Local councils, irregular armed formations, republican military units, and external authorities all influenced conditions on the ground.

The mountainous terrain, fragmented settlement structure, and limited transportation infrastructure made the establishment of uniform administration difficult. Political declarations issued in Baku or Erivan did not necessarily determine the authority exercised in villages and districts. Effective control depended on local military forces, communication routes, community alliances, and access to external support.

This distinction among claimed sovereignty, provisional administration, and effective control is essential. A government's appointment of an official or issuance of a territorial declaration indicates political intent, but it does not independently prove continuous administrative authority. Conversely, temporary military occupation does not necessarily establish internationally or legally recognised sovereignty.

The documentary record suggests that the Zangezur question should therefore be reconstructed at multiple levels: interstate diplomacy, central-government policy, regional military operations, and local administration. Approaches focused exclusively on official declarations risk overlooking the fragmented nature of authority during the period (Hovannisian, 1971, 1982; Kazemzadeh, 1951).

Armed Conflict and Displacement Changed the Demographic and Political Environment

The fourth finding concerns the effects of armed violence on the region's population and territorial politics. Azerbaijani newspaper and historical publications document killings, village destruction, forced displacement, and property loss affecting Azerbaijani and Kurdish Muslim communities in Zangezur and adjoining districts (Məmmədov, 2007; Məmmədov & Məmmədov, 2009; Paşayev, 2007; Vəfa, 2011). Armenian historiography documents violence, displacement, and insecurity affecting Armenian communities during the same broader period (Hovannisian, 1971, 1982).

These bodies of literature establish that civilian insecurity was an important component of the territorial conflict. However, the precise numbers of victims, destroyed villages, and displaced persons vary across publications. Many quantitative claims are reproduced without full archival references, defined territorial units, or explanations of counting procedures.

The results consequently support the occurrence of extensive intercommunal violence and displacement but do not justify accepting every published numerical estimate as independently verified. Reliable quantification requires comparison among censuses, village lists, refugee records, diplomatic reports, military documentation, and local administrative materials.

Violence also had a territorial effect. The removal or flight of populations could alter local demographic balances and influence later administrative claims. Demographic evidence recorded after major displacement therefore cannot be treated as an uncomplicated representation of the pre-conflict population. The timing and institutional origin of population statistics are central to their interpretation (Altstadt, 1992; Swietochowski, 1985).

Sovietisation Changed the Decision-Making Framework

The fifth finding is that the Sovietisation of Azerbaijan and Armenia transformed the Zangezur question from an interstate dispute between independent republics into an internal Soviet territorial and administrative problem. From 1920 onward, the decisive actors increasingly included Soviet Russian authorities, the Caucasian Bureau, republican communist-party bodies, revolutionary committees, military institutions, and later Transcaucasian federal authorities.

The evidence indicates that Soviet policy was not determined solely by historical or demographic criteria. It reflected military security, the consolidation of Bolshevik authority, relations with the Turkish National Movement, the suppression of armed resistance, transportation requirements, and broader nationality policy (Broers, 2019; Qafarov, 2011).

Documents attributed to meetings held in November and December 1920 demonstrate that several territorial alternatives were discussed. Statements concerning Zangezur, Nakhchivan, and Karabakh were issued in a rapidly changing political context and were not always implemented in the form in which they were publicly reported. Differences among original meeting records, published declarations, newspaper versions, and later interpretations make source criticism essential.

The analysis therefore does not support reducing the entire territorial outcome to a single quotation, meeting, or declaration. Soviet border-making was a cumulative process involving political decisions, military developments, inter-republican negotiations, mapping, land administration, and institutional implementation.

The Territorial Outcome Was Gradual Rather Than Immediate

The sixth finding is that the incorporation of western Zangezur into Soviet Armenia and the retention of eastern districts within Soviet Azerbaijan occurred through a gradual and territorially differentiated process. Public declarations in late 1920 did not immediately establish a stable and fully demarcated inter-republican boundary.

The persistence of armed resistance and uncertainty regarding local administration delayed the complete implementation of territorial decisions. Azerbaijani party bodies continued to discuss the administrative organisation of Muslim-populated areas in 1921. This indicates that the political status and administrative structure of the former district remained unsettled after the declarations of November and December 1920.

During the subsequent years, Transcaucasian institutions considered land, forest, village, and district-boundary disputes. The documentary material presented in the manuscript refers to decisions made during 1927 and 1929 concerning areas adjoining Mehri, Zangilan, Jabrayil, and the former Zangezur district. These references support the conclusion that border consolidation extended throughout the 1920s.

Nevertheless, assertions concerning the transfer of specific villages or precise areas must be accompanied by complete archival citations. Meeting date, protocol number, institutional title, map, and implementation record should be supplied before such claims are treated as definitively established.

The principal result is therefore that the division of Zangezur should be understood as a process with several stages:

1. competing republican claims during 1918–1920;
2. changing military and administrative control;
3. Soviet political declarations during 1920–1921;
4. the suppression of resistance and consolidation of republican authority;
5. inter-republican demarcation and administrative adjustment during the 1920s.

The Division of Zangezur Altered Regional Connectivity

The seventh finding concerns the geographical consequences of the territorial settlement. The incorporation of western Zangezur into Soviet Armenia eliminated direct territorial continuity between the main territory of Soviet Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. Nakhchivan consequently became geographically separated from mainland Azerbaijan.

This outcome gave Zangezur significance beyond the question of local sovereignty. The region became central to discussions of transportation, security, access to Nakhchivan, and relations among Azerbaijan, Armenia, Türkiye, and Iran. Qafarov (2011) demonstrates that these territorial questions were connected to wider Turkish–Russian negotiations and regional strategy.

Broers (2019) similarly shows that historical geography and competing interpretations of territorial connectivity remain fundamental to Azerbaijani–Armenian rivalry. The modern political importance of Zangezur is therefore rooted not only in competing historical claims but also in the practical effects of Soviet border-making on regional communication.

Later Publications Reflect the Politics of Collective Memory

The eighth finding is that Azerbaijani newspaper publications from 2005–2013 primarily function as sources on collective memory and political discourse. Their titles and narratives frame Zangezur through themes of historical loss, captivity, tragedy, cultural erasure, and territorial injustice (Rüstəmli, 2005; Seyidov, 2008; Vəfa, 2011).

Xəlilzadə's articles (2007, 2013) connect Zangezur with the political legacy of Heydar Aliyev, while Hüseynov (2005) approaches the region through cultural and literary memory. These sources illustrate how historical geography is incorporated into contemporary national identity.

Such publications cannot independently establish the events of 1918–1929, but they are important for explaining why Zangezur remains politically and emotionally significant. They show how historical events are selected, narrated, and connected to contemporary concerns.

Discussion

Reconsidering the Concept of a Single "Transfer"

The findings challenge interpretations that describe Zangezur's territorial transformation as the result of one isolated transfer. Azerbaijani public discourse often focuses on particular meetings or declarations of November and December 1920. These events were important, but the evidence indicates that they formed part of a longer and more complex process.

A political declaration may express an intention without immediately changing effective control or administrative jurisdiction. Similarly, a party resolution does not necessarily possess the same legal status as an inter-republican boundary agreement. The subsequent discussion of Muslim-populated areas, district organisation, and village boundaries indicates that territorial consolidation continued after 1920.

The most accurate formulation is therefore that western Zangezur was incorporated into Soviet Armenia through a sequence of military, political, and administrative developments. Eastern territories remained within Soviet Azerbaijan and were subsequently organised within districts associated with Lachin, Gubadli, and Zangilan. This process-oriented interpretation is more consistent with the fragmentary character of early Soviet border-making (Broers, 2019; Qafarov, 2011).

Administrative Affiliation Versus National Self-Determination

A central historiographical disagreement concerns the relative importance of imperial administrative boundaries and local demographic composition. Azerbaijani arguments frequently rely on Zangezur's position within the Elisabethpol Governorate. Armenian claims commonly emphasise Armenian settlement and local political organisation in the mountainous areas.

Neither criterion was universally accepted during the transition from empire to nation-state. Imperial borders provided institutional continuity but had not been created to represent national self-determination. Demographic criteria appeared more consistent with the principle of nationality but were difficult to apply in mixed and mobile populations. Strategic and economic considerations further complicated both approaches.

The Zangezur dispute therefore illustrates a general problem of post-imperial border-making: administrative, demographic, economic, and strategic borders rarely coincide. Political actors selected the criteria most favourable to their claims. A critical historical analysis must identify these choices rather than assume that one criterion was self-evidently decisive (Altstadt, 1992; Reynolds, 2011).

The Role of Military Power

The results demonstrate that military power significantly influenced territorial outcomes. Formal legal arguments mattered, but their practical importance depended on the ability of governments and local actors to establish control. During 1918–1920, neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia possessed sufficient institutional or military capacity to enforce its territorial programme throughout every disputed district.

Local armed groups therefore played a disproportionate role. Their actions influenced settlement patterns, civilian security, and the ability of governments to claim effective administration. The arrival or withdrawal of Ottoman, British, and Bolshevik forces repeatedly altered the strategic environment (Hovannisian, 1971, 1982; Kazemzadeh, 1951).

This finding does not mean that military occupation alone created legitimate sovereignty. It shows that the final administrative settlement cannot be separated from the balance of coercive power. The Soviet territorial order was established after Bolshevik military dominance transformed the options available to Azerbaijani and Armenian actors.

Soviet Nationality Policy and Strategic Calculation

The Soviet leadership publicly framed its intervention as a means of ending national conflict and establishing socialist cooperation. In practice, Soviet policy combined ideological objectives with security calculations. Moscow sought to consolidate control over the South Caucasus, prevent competing foreign influence, manage relations with the Turkish National Movement, and suppress anti-Bolshevik resistance.

Zangezur's fate must therefore be situated within the broader Soviet reorganisation of Karabakh and Nakhchivan. These questions were considered in relation to one another because they affected the regional balance among Soviet Azerbaijan, Soviet Armenia, Türkiye, and Iran. Qafarov (2011) demonstrates the importance of Turkish–Russian relations in this process.

Broers (2019) argues that Soviet territorial engineering managed rather than eliminated Azerbaijani–Armenian rivalry. Administrative arrangements reduced immediate interstate conflict but preserved contested identities and asymmetrical expectations. The Zangezur settlement separated Nakhchivan from mainland Azerbaijan, while autonomous arrangements elsewhere created additional layers of territorial complexity.

The evidence does not support explanations based exclusively on the personal hostility or ethnic preference of an individual Soviet leader. Stalin, Ordzhonikidze, Narimanov, and other officials exercised influence, but their positions operated within broader party institutions, military conditions, and geopolitical objectives. Individual statements should consequently be interpreted alongside meeting protocols, institutional decisions, and implementation records.

Source Problems in the November–December 1920 Decisions

The late-1920 declarations constitute one of the most contested areas of the evidence. Different versions attribute varying territorial implications to Narimanov's statement and subsequent reports. Some sources describe Zangezur and Nakhchivan as integral parts of Soviet Armenia, while others emphasise the end of territorial disputes or distinguish Zangezur from the status of Nakhchivan and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The manuscript indicates that newspaper publication and translation may have altered the content of official statements. This possibility requires direct comparison among the original Azerbaijani text, Armenian and Russian newspaper versions, meeting minutes, telegrams, and later published collections.

A statement reported by Stalin or Ordzhonikidze cannot automatically substitute for the original decision. Political actors may have summarised or reframed declarations for different audiences. The evidentiary hierarchy should therefore give priority to authenticated originals, followed by contemporaneous certified copies, institutional minutes, and only then press reports or retrospective quotations.

This problem reinforces the need to avoid presenting a disputed version as an uncontested legal act. The historian's task is to reconstruct the transmission of the document and explain how different versions entered national historiographies.

Violence, Responsibility, and the Limits of National Narratives

Azerbaijani publications draw necessary attention to violence against Muslim communities in Zangezur, Nakhchivan, and Karabakh. However, several use collective ethnic terminology in

place of identifying specific military or political actors. Such language weakens analytical precision and can transform historical investigation into collective accusation.

Armenian scholarship has sometimes exhibited a comparable tendency by concentrating on Armenian suffering while giving less attention to Azerbaijani and Kurdish Muslim victims. The coexistence of competing victim narratives has contributed to mutually exclusive historical memory (Broers, 2019).

A stronger approach identifies the responsible unit, commander, political authority, date, locality, and source. It also acknowledges violence against different civilian populations without treating one set of crimes as justification for another. This approach does not impose artificial equivalence; it applies consistent evidentiary standards.

Casualty and village-destruction figures should be separated into confirmed minimums, plausible estimates, and unverified claims. Without such differentiation, politically amplified numbers may become detached from their documentary foundations.

Demographic Change as Both Cause and Consequence

Demography was not merely a background condition. It was both an argument used to justify territorial claims and an outcome transformed by violence. Political actors used population statistics to argue that particular districts should belong to one republic. Armed conflict then displaced populations and changed the demographic evidence available for later decisions.

This circular relationship requires careful chronological control. A census conducted after displacement cannot automatically establish the composition of the same territory before the conflict. Seasonal pastoral movement creates an additional problem because populations absent during a winter census may have maintained economic and customary rights in mountain pastures.

The discussion therefore supports a layered demographic reconstruction using several benchmark years. Each dataset should be connected to a defined territorial unit and accompanied by information about season, enumeration method, and population categories. Without this procedure, demographic comparisons may combine incompatible data.

Historical Evidence and Contemporary Political Memory

The continuing prominence of Zangezur in Azerbaijani public discourse demonstrates that historical territorial questions remain connected to present political identity. Newspaper publications use moral and emotional language to describe loss, displacement, and historical injustice. Such discourse reflects the context of the unresolved Azerbaijani–Armenian conflict in which the articles were published.

Memory sources are not historically useless simply because they are retrospective. They reveal which events communities consider important, how political leaders are associated with territorial issues, and how past geography is mobilised in contemporary debate. Their use requires a different research question from that applied to archival documents.

A newspaper article published in 2011 may provide strong evidence of how Zangezur was remembered in 2011 but weak evidence for the precise content of a 1920 meeting. Maintaining this distinction strengthens rather than diminishes the scholarly value of the source.

Implications for the Study of Azerbaijani–Armenian Relations

The Zangezur question demonstrates that Azerbaijani–Armenian territorial rivalry developed through the interaction of historical geography, population movement, security concerns, imperial collapse, and external intervention. Neither national narrative alone captures the full process.

For Azerbaijan, the division of Zangezur represented the loss of direct territorial continuity with Nakhchivan and became associated with broader experiences of displacement and territorial fragmentation. For Armenia, control over western Zangezur connected central and southern Armenian territories and was presented as necessary for security and political viability.

These interests were structurally incompatible under the conditions of 1918–1921. Soviet authority imposed an administrative settlement without resolving the rival historical narratives underlying the dispute. This helps explain why Zangezur continues to possess significance in discussions of borders, transportation, sovereignty, and regional order (Broers, 2019; de Waal, 2013).

Conclusion

This study examined the Zangezur question in Azerbaijani–Armenian relations between 1918 and 1929 through comparative document analysis and historical process tracing. It finds that the territorial outcome emerged from a prolonged transformation rather than a single act of transfer.

The collapse of the Russian Empire created a political environment in which imperial administrative borders, patterns of settlement, economic connections, and national claims no longer corresponded. Azerbaijan and Armenia consequently advanced incompatible territorial programmes. Azerbaijani actors emphasised Zangezur's position within the Elisabethpol Governorate, its Muslim population, and its connection with Karabakh and Nakhchivan. Armenian actors emphasised Armenian settlement, local political organisation, military control, and security considerations.

During 1918–1920, neither republic consistently exercised uncontested authority over the entire district. Sovereignty claims, military control, and local administration frequently diverged. Armed confrontation and civilian displacement further transformed the political and demographic environment, making later population statistics difficult to interpret without chronological and territorial qualification.

Sovietisation changed both the actors and the logic of territorial decision-making. Soviet Russian and Transcaucasian party institutions approached Zangezur in relation to military consolidation, relations with Türkiye, the suppression of resistance, nationality policy, and the linked status of Karabakh and Nakhchivan. Political declarations issued in late 1920 were important but did not immediately establish a fully demarcated and administratively consolidated boundary.

The division of the former Zangezur district developed through several stages extending into the 1920s. Western Zangezur was incorporated into Soviet Armenia, while eastern territories remained within Soviet Azerbaijan. Subsequent administrative and land-boundary decisions refined the border. Claims concerning individual villages and precise territorial areas require complete archival citations and cartographic confirmation.

One of the most consequential outcomes was the loss of direct territorial continuity between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. This geographical arrangement gave Zangezur long-term strategic significance and connected its historical status with questions of transportation and regional security.

The study also finds that later Azerbaijani newspaper publications should be used primarily as sources on collective memory and political discourse. They document how Zangezur became associated with territorial loss, displacement, cultural heritage, and national identity. They cannot, however, replace contemporary archival evidence when reconstructing events from 1918–1929.

The principal methodological conclusion is that national historiographies should be subjected to the same evidentiary standards. Azerbaijani, Armenian, Soviet Russian, Ottoman, British, and other sources must be compared according to their provenance, purpose, proximity, and corroboration. Politically charged terminology and collective ethnic attribution should be replaced with the identification of specific institutions, military units, commanders, and decisions.

The study is limited by incomplete archival references, inconsistent demographic categories, uneven access to documentation, and the political character of many published accounts. Future research should incorporate digitised historical maps, village-level population

records, refugee documentation, authenticated meeting protocols, and comparative research in Azerbaijani, Armenian, Russian, Turkish, British, and Georgian archives.

Ultimately, Zangezur should be understood not only as a disputed historical territory but also as a case study in post-imperial border-making. Its division resulted from the interaction of competing state-building projects, armed conflict, population displacement, Soviet geopolitical strategy, and administrative consolidation. Recognising this complexity does not remove the importance of historical claims, but it provides a more rigorous basis for evaluating them and for understanding the enduring place of Zangezur in Azerbaijani–Armenian relations.

References:

- Altstadt, A. L. (1992). *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and identity under Russian rule*. Hoover Institution Press.
- Bournoutian, G. A. (2018). *Armenia and imperial decline: The Yerevan province, 1900–1914*. Routledge.
- Broers, L. (2019). *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a rivalry*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Cornell, S. E. (2001). *Small nations and great powers: A study of ethnopolitical conflict in the Caucasus*. Routledge.
- de Waal, T. (2013). *Black garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war* (10th anniversary ed.). New York University Press.
- Ermənilər Zəngəzurdan izimizi silirlər* [Armenians are erasing our traces from Zangezur]. (2006, March 10). *Mərkəz*, p. 10.
- Hovannisian, R. G. (1967). *Armenia on the road to independence, 1918*. University of California Press.
- Hovannisian, R. G. (1971). *The Republic of Armenia: The first year, 1918–1919* (Vol. 1). University of California Press.
- Hovannisian, R. G. (1982). *The Republic of Armenia: From Versailles to London, 1919–1920* (Vol. 2). University of California Press.
- Hovannisian, R. G. (1996). *The Republic of Armenia: From London to Sèvres, February–August 1920* (Vol. 3). University of California Press.
- Hüseynov, Ə. (2005). Çaylar səmtinə axar: Zəngilanın, Zəngəzurun yazılmamış keçmişindən [Rivers flow in their direction: From the unwritten history of Zangilan and Zangezur]. *Ulduz*, (2), 78.
- Kazemzadeh, F. (1951). *The struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917–1921*. Philosophical Library.
- Məmmədov, N. (2007, April 21). Erməni millətçilərinin 1918–1920-ci illərdə Naxçıvan, Zəngəzur və Qarabağda qanlı cinayətləri [The violent crimes of Armenian nationalists in Nakhchivan, Zangezur, and Karabakh in 1918–1920]. *Respublika*, p. 6.
- Məmmədov, X., & Məmmədov, N. (2009, April 3). 1918–1920-ci illərdə erməni millətçilərinin Naxçıvan, Zəngəzur və Qarabağda qanlı cinayətləri [The violent crimes of Armenian nationalists in Nakhchivan, Zangezur, and Karabakh in 1918–1920]. *Xalq Qəzeti*, p. 4.

- Paşayev, A. (2007, December 4). Erməni xəyanəti: Qarabağ, Zəngəzur, Cavanşir və Cəbrayıl qəzalarında erməni cinayətləri, 1918–1920 [Armenian betrayal: Armenian crimes in the districts of Karabakh, Zangezur, Javanshir, and Jabrayil, 1918–1920]. *Respublika*, p. 6.
- Qafarov, V. V. (2011). *Türkiyə–Rusiya münasibətlərində Azərbaycan məsələsi, 1917–1922* [The Azerbaijan question in Turkish–Russian relations, 1917–1922]. Azərənəşr. <https://www.preslib.az/az/elibrary/ebook/sgzjhva>
- Reynolds, M. A. (2011). *Shattering empires: The clash and collapse of the Ottoman and Russian empires, 1908–1918*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rüstəmli, N. (2005, May 20). İtirdiklərimizi qaytarmaq vaxtıdır [It is time to reclaim what we have lost]. *Respublika*, p. 7.
- Seyidov, T. (2008, February 12). Zəngəzur—əsarətdə qalan yurdum: Tarixi Azərbaycan torpaqlarının Ermənistanı verilməsi nə vaxtdan başlayıb? [Zangezur—My homeland remaining in captivity: When did the transfer of historical Azerbaijani territories to Armenia begin?]. *Azad Azərbaycan*, p. 6.
- Swietochowski, T. (1985). *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905–1920: The shaping of national identity in a Muslim community*. Cambridge University Press.
- Vəfa, Z. (2011, March 31). Zəngəzur faciələri [The tragedies of Zangezur]. *Azərbaycan*, p. 4.
- Xəlilzadə, F. (2007, May 6). Zəngəzur həmişə Heydər Əliyevin diqqətində idi [Zangezur was always a focus of Heydar Aliyev's attention]. *Azərbaycan*, p. 2.
- Xəlilzadə, F. (2013, April 16). Heydər Əliyev və Zəngəzur [Heydar Aliyev and Zangezur]. *Kaspi*, p. 12.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

This study is based on historical documents, archival materials, published scholarship, maps, official correspondence, and publicly available press sources. It does not involve living human participants, experimentation, or the processing of sensitive personal data. Formal institutional ethical approval was therefore not required.

Informed Consent

The research did not involve interviews, surveys, or identifiable living participants. Informed consent was therefore not applicable.

Consent for Publication

The author consents to the publication of this article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, political, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have improperly influenced the research, analysis, or conclusions.

Funding

The author received no specific funding from public, commercial, or not-for-profit organisations for this research.

Author Contributions

Kamran Alim Asadov was solely responsible for the conceptualisation of the study, archival and bibliographic research, source analysis, historical interpretation, preparation of the original manuscript, revision, and approval of the final version.

Data Availability

The study is based on archival and published historical sources. Full archival references, including archive names, collection numbers, inventories, files, and folio numbers, should be provided in the reference list or footnotes. Materials subject to archival access restrictions may be consulted in accordance with the regulations of the relevant repositories.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Any use of generative artificial-intelligence tools for translation, language editing, or structural improvement must be disclosed in the final manuscript. Such tools cannot be credited as authors, and responsibility for verifying historical claims, quotations, archival citations, and interpretations remains entirely with the author.

Acknowledgements

The author declares that no contributions requiring formal acknowledgement were received. This statement should be revised if archival staff, academic supervisors, translators, or other researchers provided substantial assistance.

Publisher's Note

The historical interpretations and conclusions expressed in this article are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily represent the official positions of the author's institution, the journal, its editors, or the publisher.