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World War II and Azerbaijan

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May 1995 marks the 50th year commemoration of the Allied Victory of World War II. Despite the major commemoration events that will be taking place throughout the world, very little is actually known in the West about the incredible contribution that the small Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan played in helping defeat the Nazis. Without their sacrificial commitment and effort, particularly in the production of oil and oil products, the war might well have had a very different outcome.

The War's Toll

World War II broke out rather unexpectedly in the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Although Azerbaijan never became a combat zone during the years that followed, the republic suffered tremendous losses. Between 1940 and 1946, the population decreased from 3.27 million to 2.73 million, a loss of at least 534,000 people. In other words, one out of every six Azeris became a victim of this war.



Photos: Hitler's mind was set to capture Baku's oil. Even the date of attack was scheduled (September 25, 1942). Anticipating a forthcoming victory, Hitler's generals presented him with a cake of the region - Baku and the Caspian Sea.



Delighted, Hitler chose the best piece for himself - Baku. Fortunately, the attack never occurred, and German forces were defeated before they ever reached Azerbaijan.

(Photos from documentary film are courtesy of the National Archives: Film Division).

Of the estimated 700,000 Azeris who were recruited into the Soviet Army, 400,000 never returned home. Their graves are spread all over Europe from the Volga River to Berlin. Others died of starvation, particularly in rural districts, or they became victims of Stalin's cruel exiles. And yet, these figures are mere estimates. There are no precise statistics tracing the paths of the millions of people who were mobilized, evacuated, and dispatched to different areas within the Soviet Union. If we take into consideration the hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens who made Azerbaijan their second homeland between 1941 and 1945, the casualty list would even be larger.

Baku-Main Source for Soviet Fuel Supply

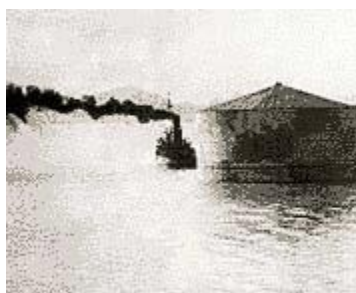
On the eve of what came to be known as "The Great Patriotic War," Baku was the cradle of the Soviet oil industry, and as such, the major supplier of oil and oil products. In 1940, for example, 22.2 million tons of oil were extracted from Baku which comprised nearly 72% of all the oil extracted in the entire USSR. Consequently, the war could barely have been won had it not been for Baku oil and the fine quality of fuel that this city continuously supplied to the war front between 1941-45.

During that first year of the war, Azerbaijan produced 25.4 million tons of oil—a record for the entire history of its oil industry. Never before nor ever afterwards would Baku ever extract so much oil. By the Decree of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in February 1942, the commitment of more than 500 workers and employees of the oil industry of Azerbaijan was awarded orders and medals of the USSR.

By the end of 1941, thousands of Azeris had joined the so-called People's Voluntary Corps. Mobilization affected all spheres of life, particularly the oil industries. A week after fighting began, the oil workers themselves took the initiative to extend their work to 12-hour shifts, with no days off, no holidays, and no vacations until the end of the war.

By the end of the year, so many engineers and oil workers had left for the war front that positions had to be filled by women. By the summer of 1942, more than 25,000 women or 33% of all the workers were working 18-hour shifts in the oil industries. At refineries and chemical plants, the percentage of women was even higher estimated 38%. By 1944, women's participation had grown to 60%. Veterans and retirees also returned to the oil fields to help as much as they could.

Women's participation in factories, industrial plants and mills grew, too, as did work on agricultural projects. When the men left, it was the women who became machine operators and tractor drivers, replacing their fathers, husbands and brothers. Though the traditional role for women in rural families had always been confined to the home, the women worked hard in the fields to supply the front with cotton, corn, wool, tobacco, tea and many other crops. By 1942, for example, Azerbaijan became the second largest tea producer of the Soviet Army. (Madatov 47, 63).



Above: Baku sailors were desperate to find new ways to get the oil to the war front. Since there weren't enough tankers to do the job, they improvised ways to tow cisterns across the Caspian Sea to Krasnovodsk, Turkmenistan (1942).



Left: Hazi Aslanov leading his armored troops in Belarus 1943. Aslanov was awarded the highest Soviet national medal of heroism in World War II.

Hitler Wanted Baku

Hitler was determined to capture the oil fields of the Caucasus including those in Maikop (Russia) and Grozny (Chechnya). But most of all, he wanted Baku. Hitler was obsessed with oil.

He read about it, talked about it, and knew the history of the world's major oil fields. If he captured the oil of the Caucasus-along with the 'black earth,' farmlands of the Ukraine, he was convinced that the German empire's New Order would be self-sufficient within its own borders and thus invulnerable. (Yergin, 334).

The operational plan given to Hitler's assault in the Caucasus was "Edelweiss" (the name of the tiny white flower which grew on alpine mountainous slopes). To reach Baku, the German Führer would have to cross the Great Caucasus Range and thus the symbolism.

It's interesting to note that, originally, the German leaders had no plans to bomb Baku. Hitler's objective was not to destroy the oilfields but to be able to utilize them for his own troops.

Plans to Bomb Baku by Allies

On the other hand, Great Britain and France, which were the most active European nations attempting to counter Hitler's attack, seriously considered the possibility of bombing Azerbaijan's oil fields.

According to archival materials recently discovered, before the war broke out, both England and France were deeply concerned that Stalin's supply of Baku's oil might be transferred to Hitler after the Soviet German Pact was signed by the Foreign Ministers Molotov and Ribbentrop on August 23, 1939. This didn't happen. But it was Ribbentrop himself who later observed, "When the Russians run out of oil, we'll bring them to their knees."

The US Ambassador to France, W. Bullitt, dispatched a telegram to Washington concerning "the possibilities of bombing and demolition of Baku" which were being discussed in Paris at the time. The operation was to have been carried out by the French Air Forces in Syria.

On October 31, 1939, such attacks were actually under discussion at the British General Headquarters. However, by that time most politicians and diplomats in the UK were opposed to bombing Baku. Prime Minister Chamberlain and Winston Churchill as Minister of Naval Forces, openly expressed their disapproval and tried to convince the others that a more feasible plan would be to prevent the transportation of oil in the Black Sea with British submarines.



Left: Azerbaijanis made an incredible contribution to medical field during the war. Here Surgeon, Mustafa Topchubashev, operates on a wounded soldier. An estimated 440,000 soldiers were treated in Baku hospitals between 1941-45.



Right: Azerbaijan's first woman pilot of the war, Leyla Mamedbeyova with her son, Rustam.

Charles de Gaulle was extremely critical of the plan according to both his wartime and postwar statements. Such ideas, he believed, were made by some "crazy heads that were thinking more of how to destroy Baku than of resisting Berlin."

Nevertheless, the French Government ordered General Gamelen and Admiral Darlan to work out a "plan of possible intervention with the view of destroying Russian oil exploitation." Ambassador Bullit informed US President Franklin D. Roosevelt that Daladye considered that aircraft attacks against Baku would be "the most efficient way to weaken the Soviet Union."

On January 11, 1940, the British Embassy in Moscow notified London that demolishing Baku's oil fields would be "a knock-out" for the Soviets. According to the document, "Basic Strategies of the War" submitted on January 23, 1940, to the British General Headquarters by the Staff Commands, "The Russian economy was strongly dependent on oil supplies from Baku", a region which was easily accessible for British dive-bombers stationed in Iraq.

Mr. McLeen, a Sovietologist with the British Foreign Office, observed that British and French Air Forces would be able to cause substantial damage both to the oil wells and refineries in Baku and the northern Caucasus, as well as to the system of pumps and oil pipelines between Baku and Batum (Georgia).



Left: Azeri youth in Baku were heavily involved in the war effort, working in factories that had been converted for manufacturing war materiel (1943).

According to a report submitted on February 22, 1940, by General Gamelen to French Prime Minister Daladye, since Baku provided 75% of all oil requirements of the USSR, he believed the Soviets would fall into crisis if those sources were lost.

"Dependence on oil supplies from the Caucasus is the fundamental weakness of Russian economy. The Armed Forces were totally dependent on this source also for their motorized agriculture. More than 90% of oil extraction and 80% of refinement was located in the Caucasus (primarily Baku). Therefore, interruption of oil supplies on any large scale would have far-reaching consequences and could even result in the collapse of all the military, industrial and agricultural systems of Russia."

In April 1940 Intelligence flights by the British and French Air Forces did fly over the Absheron Peninsula where Baku is located. However, the bombing mission was not carried out although everything was in place to do so by the end of June. More likely than not, this was meant as a threat to pressure Stalin's regime. However, after Hitler invaded Holland, Belgium and France on May 10, 1940, the "Absheron targets" lost their significance.

Hitler Pushes Toward Baku

But by late July 1942, Hitler's quest for Baku seemed well on its way to achieving his goal. The Germans had already captured the city of Rostov and severed the oil pipeline from the Caucasus. On August 9, they reached Maikop, the most westerly of the Caucasian oil centers-which turned out to be quite a small source for the Germans. Even under normal conditions, Maikop's production was only one tenth that of Baku's. However, before withdrawing from the city, the Russians had thoroughly destroyed the oil fields and supplies and equipment, right down to the small incidental tools of the workshops. Consequently, by January 1943, the Germans were able to eke out no more than 70 barrels per day there (Yergin, 336-337).

"Still, the Germans drove on, now thousands of miles from their homeland and supply centers. In mid-August, German mountain troops planted the swastika at the summit of Mount Elbrus, the highest point in the Caucasus and in Europe (Yergin, 337).

The determination to capture Baku was so intense that the date for the final attack and seizure had been fixed-September 25, 1942. A few days prior, Hitler's generals presented him with a large decorated cake which depicted the Caspian Sea and Baku. Documentary films show how amused Hitler was at the gesture and how he chose the most desirable piece-Baku-for himself. Fortunately, for Azerbaijan and the Allies, Hitler's attempt to devour Baku was confined to the icing on this cake. Fate changed and he didn't get the chance to "have his cake and eat it, too", as the saying goes.

Fortunately, Hitler's strategy of fighting on two fronts-Stalingrad (Volgograd) and the Caucasus-spread his resources too thin and proved disastrous. Field Marshal Erich von Manstein supposedly begged Hitler to transfer the German forces in the Caucasus to his command in order to help the embattled Sixth Army at Stalingrad, but the Dictator's mind was set, "Unless we get Baku's oil, the war is lost." He then proceeded to rant on about the central importance that oil had assumed in warfare and how much fuel a single aircraft or a tank needed. "If I can no longer get you the oil for your operation," he purportedly told the Field Marshal, "you will be unable to do anything."

Manstein tried to argue about the immediate strategic issue-the survival of the Sixth Army but Hitler would not listen. Instead, he focused on how the German armies would meet up in the Middle East and then march through Iran and Iraq as an assembled force finally convening in India, where they would seal their final victory over England (Yergin, 338).

Because of his misjudgment, Stalingrad became German's first major defeat in Europe and Baku was never captured.

Squeezing Old Wells for the Last Drop

But at that time, no one knew what the outcome would be. In the summer of 1942, the threat of attack became so strong that the Soviet authorities decided to terminate drilling operations to evacuate the most valuable machinery and equipment further East. By autumn, 764 wells in Baku were sealed and 81 complete sets of drilling equipment together with the personnel were transported to Turkmenistan (Madatov, 129).

And thus, the oil producers in Baku were caught in a huge dilemma: at the exact time when their own production was being reduced, the demand for fuel was increasing. To resolve the problem, machine building and equipment manufacturing plants in Baku began converting their factories, and diversifying production. Working around the clock, they were able to manufacture sufficient piping at the Azneftecombinat factory to repair 25 old wells that had not been used for decades. Since it was impossible to drill new wells, the old ones were exploited to full capacity. Unfortunately, consideration for the environment was not part of the formula. A glance at Azerbaijan's oil fields today is a reminder of the tremendous pressure that the war placed on oil production at any cost.

The Caspian Shipping Company

Another problem inseparably tied to fuel production was its transportation. By the summer of 1942, the enemy had blocked the main railways through which oil and its derivative products were transported. Thus, alternate means of transport had to be found via the Caspian and Volga water way. When the Germans also succeeded in blocking this route, transportation was routed through Central Asia.

But the front couldn't wait. Aircraft, armored carriers, trucks, and tanks all needed fuel. Then the naval experts of the Baku oil-tanker fleet performed an incredible feat. For the first time in the world's history, they began towing a floating railway of oil tankers (wagons) from Baku to Krasnovodsk (Turkmenistan) as well as several thousands tons of oil reservoirs from Makhachkala (Dagestan) to Krasnovodsk.

The fleets were extremely overloaded. For example, the amount of oil transport in July 1941 exceeded 10 million barrels of crude oil and fuel. This amount was beyond the technical capabilities of the tanker fleet in Baku. But the demands from Moscow did not take into account the physical limitations. It was then that Baku naval experts hit upon the idea of attaching whole tanks and cisterns to each other by steel ropes and lowering them into the sea by cranes and towing them by steam tugs. This had never been done before in any place in the world and it enabled them to tow up to 35 cisterns together or 3 huge oil tanks (5 ton capacity) with a single tugboat.

Closing the Wells

Meanwhile, the enemy was closing in on Baku. On September 9, 1942, martial law was declared in Transcaucasia. The danger of an attack on Azerbaijan was becoming more likely. The emergency measures which had been prepared beforehand were set into operation-Azerbaijanis began closing the functioning wells with plans, if necessary, to explode the wells themselves so that the Germans wouldn't get a single drop of oil.

Those were tragic days. As Yakov Aragonav writes in his book, *Oil and Victory*, it was especially painful since so much labor and effort had been put into every well. The workers had labored day and night to supply the front with oil. And now they were being required to destroy everything with their own hands. It was so sad to see some of these same people who had, more than once, risked their lives in putting out oil fires, now having to close the bore holes. So often they did it with tears in their eyes as if they were burying their very own relatives."

Setting Up the "Second Baku"

Because of the crisis, the State Defense Committee decided to transfer the main forces of oil-workers and oil enterprises of Baku to the regions of Volga, Ural Mountains, Kazakhstan and Central Asia for the enforcement of the oil extraction there. In October, 1942, more than ten thousand oil workers left for these eastern parts.

All the nine drilling offices, oil-expedition and oil-construction trusts as well as various other enterprises with their staffs were transferred to an area near Kuybishev, (Russia Federation in Tartarstan near the

Ural Mountains north of Kazakhstan). This city soon came to be known as "the Second Baku" as highly qualified specialists and masters in oil industry were sent there along with more than 5,000 workers as well as half of the equipment.

The weather in the region was bitter for the Bakuis who were used to a temperate climate. In the winter, the temperature dropped to as low as 30-35° C. below zero. Despite the hardship, they tried their best to apply their knowledge and experience.

Despite the severe frost the drillers started searching for oil. Winter was over but spring brought torrential rains and flooding. The small river, Kinel, overflowed its banks and the water rose 3-4 meters, flooding the mouths of wells, causing considerable loss of oil. The Bakuis, who were up to their waists in the icy water, defended the wells. All in all, with such determined efforts, the new Bakuis in the region of Povolzhye, increased the fuel extraction in "Kinelneft" trust that first year by 66% and by 42% in entire region of Kuybishev.

They did it the "Bakui way" which meant not allowing the decrease of oil extraction or cessation of drilling in winter; working in winter as hard as in summer, working at night as much as in daytime; and generally increasing the oil extraction by any means possible. As a result, five new oil and gas fields were discovered and huge oil refinery construction projects were undertaken, including the first pipe line between Kuybishev and Buturslan was built that same year. The pipeline rendered a tremendous service to defense factories saving them the trouble of importing coal and mazut (black oil) from remote places.

A number of large modern oil refineries were also built in Kuybishev. But the most significant assistance that Bakuis gave was in extracting oil from the Devonian Strata in Kuybishev for the first time (June 9, 1944). This historical event marked the beginning of industrial development unprecedented in its volume. It made it possible to restore oil extraction to pre-war levels and Russia became the largest oil industry power in the entire world.

Nevertheless, back in Azerbaijan, the oil workers searched for new ways of supplying the front with oil, diesel and aircraft fuel. Young boys and girls came from collective and state farms to help the oil workers.

Beginning in late 1943 when the front line was gradually withdrawing, the intensification of drilling work in Baku was reestablished. However, the sealing off of a number of wells turned out to be a tragedy. Many of them were impossible to restore. Eventually, the oil extracting had considerably been reduced by the end of the war: in 1945 only 11.5 million tons of oil was extracted.

Perhaps, the irony of the war is that after Azerbaijanis worked so hard to produce the oil first in Baku and then in the "Second Baku", and after their efforts clearly determined and shaped the outcome of the war, never again was their production equivalent to the output of the early 1940s. Relatively little investment was made to re-activate or invest in Baku's fields onshore, many of which could never be productive again after being closed.

Moscow began focusing on the new fields in their own Federation which promised vast reserves, fields that Azerbaijan's specialists had done so much to help develop. Apart from Oily Rocks, Azerbaijan's first offshore field which was opened in the early 50s, investment was not made to exploit the deeper reserves. As a consequence, Azerbaijan today, 50 years later, as an independent Republic, is left with one of the largest known undeveloped offshore reserves in the world today.

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