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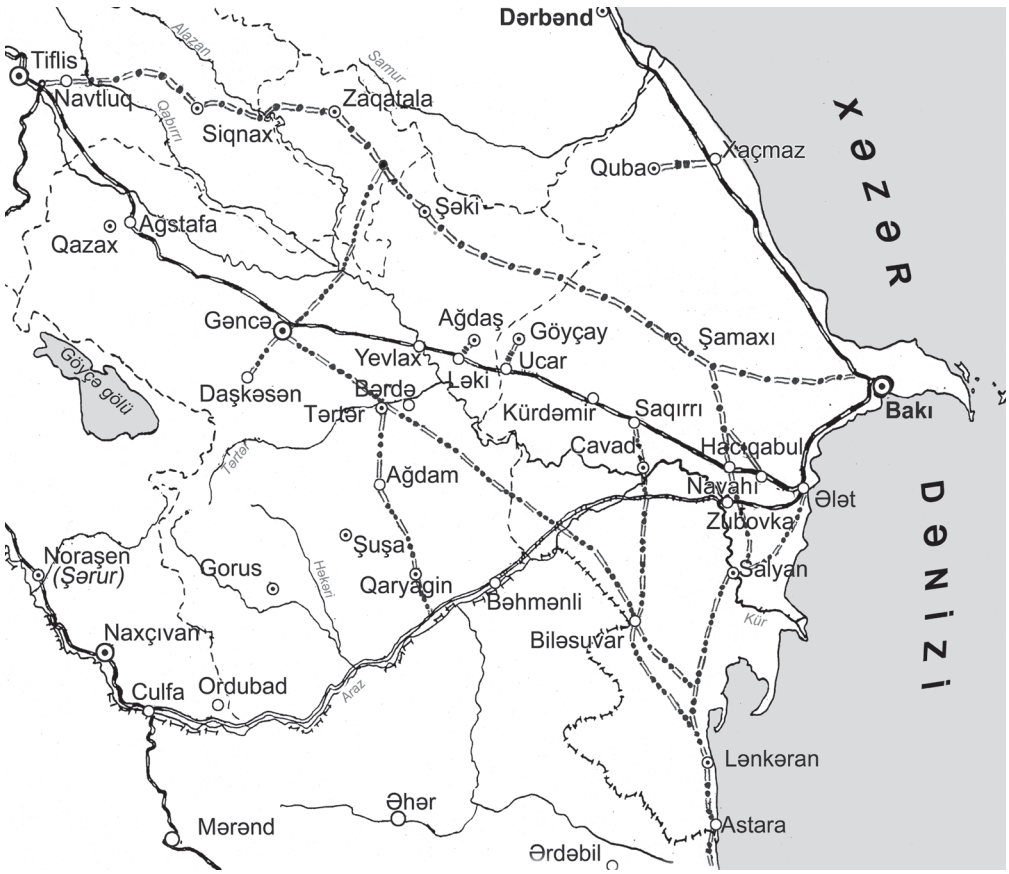
KARABAKH RAILWAY

At the end of the 19th and in the first decades of the 20th century, many proposals and projects were put forward for the construction of railways in the Caucasus. The increased interest in railway construction was due to the fact that the railways gave a powerful impetus for the revival of socioeconomic activity and the development of productive forces in surrounding territories.

Among the proposals put forward in this area at the end of the 19th century was a plan on building a railway line from one of the locations along the Hajigabul-Yevlakh stretch to Jabrayil settlement in the south of Karabakh and further to the Iranian city of Tabriz. The was initiated by an engineer named Kurmakov, who presented a special report to the Russian Geographical Society providing a feasibility study of the project. In the Russian press, this project was regarded as a very favorable alternative to the plan of building a horse-drawn tract from Trabzon on the Turkish Black Sea coast to the Iranian border to further increase cargo transportation along the Trabzon-Erzurum-Tabriz route, which was taking on an ever wider scope by that time (1, p. 144, 147). However, the railway project, which was associated with significant costs during this period, was never implemented.



Map of Azerbaijani railways of the late 19th century

In subsequent years, plans appeared for building a railway from the Yevlakh station to the Araz River. One of such projects, initiated by the administration of the Elizavetpol (Ganja) prov-

ince, meant laying a narrow-gauge line from Yevlakh through Karyagino (Fuzuli) and Jabrayil to copper smelting centers in the south of the Zangezur district in order to accelerate the economic development of southern districts, in particular, to ensure quick and convenient supply of copper smelters with fuel and the export of finished copper (2, p. 160). The authors of this project proceeded from the premise that the high economic potential of the region would make it possible to recover the costs in the shortest possible time and extract significant profits from the new railway.

However, a project on the construction of the Yevlakh-Shusha railway appeared soon, bringing to life a partial revision of the above plan. The new version of it envisaged the construction of a line from Aghdam to the Araz River. To implement this plan, technical studies were carried out in 1913-1914 (3), but the authorities did not attach serious importance to this idea and the plan was not implemented.

It was in the same period that the idea of laying a railway through the northern and central part of Karabakh was put forward. This plan, referred to in the documents as the Karabakh railway, provided for the construction of a line from the Gakh station on the Central Caucasian railway to Ganja and from there through Karabakh, the Mil and Mugan steppes to Bilasuvar and the Caspian station, where it was supposed to connect with the Alat-Astara line being designed. The line would have a length of 373 versts, and together with the side branches of Ganja-Dashkasan (33 versts) and Tartar-Hasanriz (42 versts) 458 versts (4, p. 83).

Taking into account the prospects for the development of agriculture, primarily cotton growing on the irrigated land of the Mil and Mugan steppes against the backdrop of a significant economic upsurge of the time, as well as plans of the authorities for the large-scale settlement of the region by immigrants from Russia, this plan acquired not only economic but also political significance. The authors of the project also focused on expanding trade and economic ties with the neighboring northern regions of Iran. On 29 May 1911, Emperor Nicholas II signed and the State Duma approved a decree on the allocation of 5,175,154 rubles for the creation of an artificial irrigation system for the Mil and Mugan steppes and the resettlement of Russian colonists there. In accordance with this decree, the construction of three irrigation canals began. Until 1918, the plan was to establish up to 250 settlements in Mugan, placing more than 80,000 settlers from Russia there, and in the Mil steppe to build four irrigation canals, establish 80 settlements for where more than 190,000 people from Russia. According to calculations, as a result of the above measures, this territory would begin to produce more than 30 million poods of agricultural products

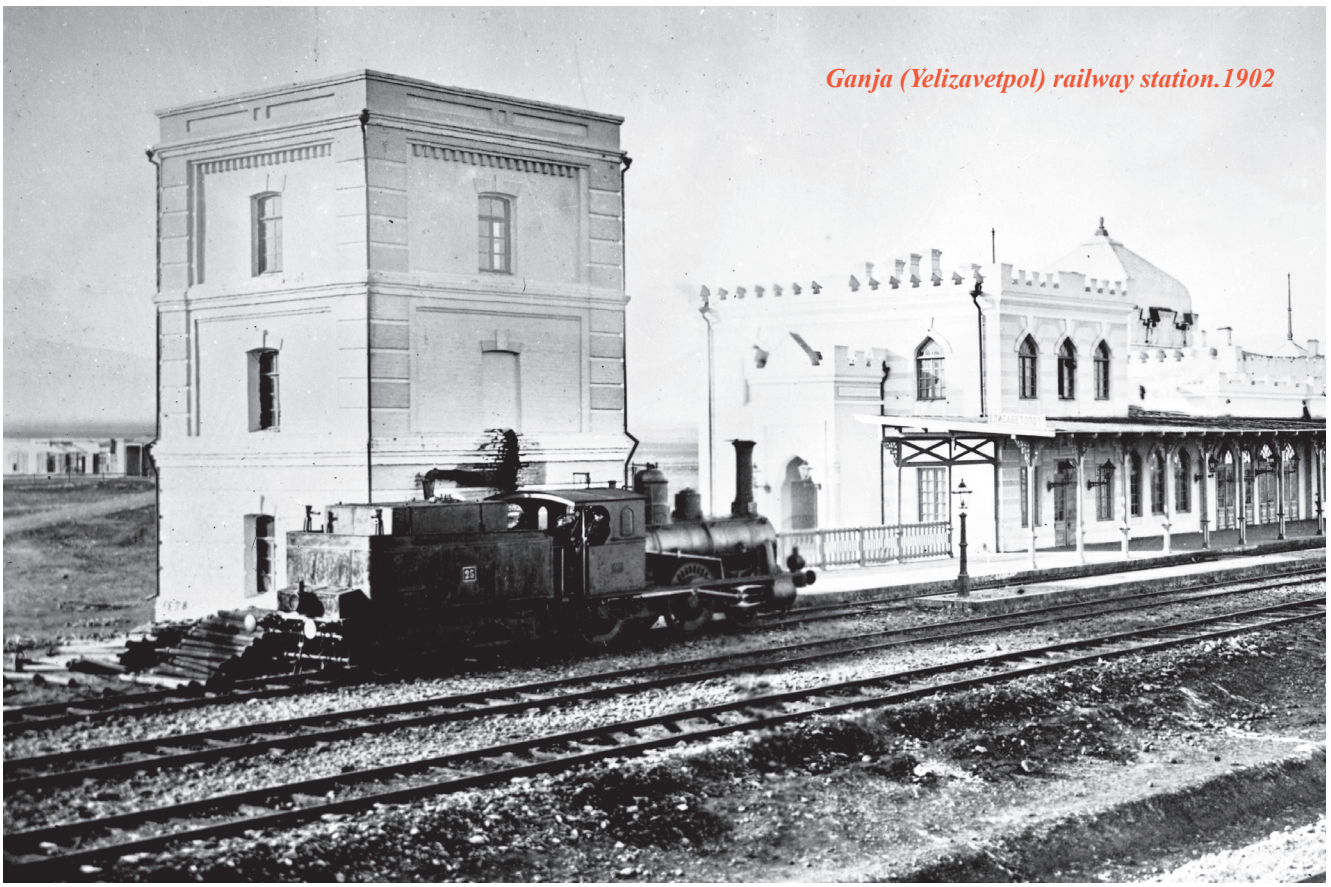
Steam locomotive with an inscription "Shusha railway"

per year with the imports of up to 10 million poods of building materials, agricultural tools and other industrial products for the needs of settlers. Thus, an average annual cargo turnover of 40 million poods would make it possible to quickly recover the costs of building a railway, after which 18.5 million poods of grain and up to 2 million poods of cotton were expected to be exported from the region.

Steam locomotive at the Ganja (Yelizavetpol) railway station.1902

Nevertheless, when a meeting of the railway commission in St. Petersburg in 1913 was considering the issue of building new railways in the Caucasus, it was recommended to meet the needs of the Mugan zone by building a branch from one of the stations of the Alat-Astara railway already under construction to one of the locations on the Padar-Kurdamir section of the South Caucasian Railway (5, p. 214). However, Caucasian governor I. Vorontsov-Dashkov did not agree with this conclusion and stated that it was the Karabakh railway project that was able to meet the needs of the region to the maximum extent. According to the governor, this railway would first give an impetus for the development of agriculture on the Mil and Mugan plains, secondly, it would accelerate the development of mineral and forest resources in the foothills of the Lesser Caucasus, and thirdly, it would facilitate the connection of Sheki district with Yelizavetpol (Ganja).

The plan was to lay branches from the main line to the ore deposits of Dashkesan and the upper reaches of the Tartar River, which is rich in forests and mineral deposits. These plans were connected with the intention to expand the use of the region's natural resources. The economic significance of these projects is evidenced by the fact that, with all the high demand for iron on the



Ganja (Yelizavetpol) railway station.1902

eve of World War I, the annual output at the Dashkesan iron mines did not exceed 150,000 poods.

During this period, several private companies trying to obtain permission to build a railway from Yevlakh to Shusha carried out technical and engineering surveys in connection with a plan for laying a branch to the mountainous upper reaches of the Terter River along the river valley (3, f. 274, p. 2, file 1394, p. 2). Along with this, starting from the late 19th century, the topic of laying a 40-verst railway line from Ganja to Dashkesan was actively discussed in the press. Some time later, the engineers who carried out technical surveys came to the conclusion that it was more convenient and profitable to lay a branch to Dashkesan not from Ganja but from the Alabashly station (6).

In view of the above, the initiators of the construction of the Karabakh railway became even more active at the beginning of 1914, hoping to obtain a building permit in the same year in order to start construction in 1915 and complete all work by the end of 1918. At the same time, the plan was to start temporary movement along the new road at the end of 1916 and beginning of 1917 (4, p. 5). According to estimates, the construction of the Karabakh railway, together with side branches and the provision of its rolling stock, should have cost 38 million rubles, i.e. an average of 83,000 rubles per verst. The construction required the establishment of a joint-stock company with government guarantees for a 4.5 percent return on shares (4, pp. 87, 90). In addition, upon completion of construction, the plan was to take the finished line for a concession for a period of 81 years. However, the outbreak of World War I crossed out all these plans.

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