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## ВЕЛИКОБРИТАНИЯ В БОРЬБЕ ЗА ИРАНСКУЮ НЕФТЬ В ГОДЫ ПЕРВОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ

В статье освещается участие Великобритании в борьбе за установление контроля над нефтяными месторождениями и нефтяной промышленностью в Иране (Персии) и на Южном Кавказе в 1914–1918 гг., что не являлось предметом специального исследования в отечественной историографии. Накануне войны Великобритания фактически контролировала добычу и переработку нефти в Персии посредством Англо-Персидской Нефтяной Компании. С началом войны британские интересы в регионе оказались под угрозой со стороны Германии и Османской империи, стремившихся оспорить британскую монополию на персидскую нефть. Несмотря на то, что территория Персии осталась в стороне от крупных сражений Первой мировой, страна являлась стратегически важным театром военных действий прежде всего для Великобритании. Английские войска, дислоцированные в Персии, держали под контролем территорию южной Персии, в то время как север страны контролировался русскими войсками. После выхода России из войны в конце 1917 г. возникла угроза усиления

позиций турецких войск и их союзников в Персии и их продвижения на Кавказ, к нефтеносным месторождениям Баку. Для противодействия данной угрозе был сформирован специальный экспедиционный корпус, получивший название «Данстерфорс». В течение 8-месячного пребывания в Персии Данстерфорс укрепил британские позиции в стране, успешно подавив антибританские силы с помощью оружия, дипломатии и фунта стерлингов. Спецгруппе Данстерфорс не удалось защитить Баку от захвата турками в сентябре 1918 г. Однако уже в ноябре 1918 г. британские войска изгнали противника из Баку. В итоге к концу войны западный, восточный и южный берега Каспия оказались под полным контролем британских военных.

**Ключевые слова:** Первая мировая война, Персия, Великобритания, нефть, оборона Баку.

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## GREAT BRITAIN IN THE CONFLICT OVER IRAN OIL: THE FIRST WORLD WAR PERIOD

The article highlights the activities of Great Britain in the competition for control over oil fields and the oil industry in Iran (Persia) and the South Caucasus in 1914–1918, which was not the subject of special research in Russian historiography. On the eve of the war, Great Britain actually controlled the production and refining of oil in Persia through the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. With the outbreak of the war, British interests in the region were put under threat by Germany and the Ottoman Empire, which sought to challenge the British monopoly on Persian oil. Despite the fact that the territory of Persia remained far from the major battles of World War I, the country was a strategically important war theater for Great Britain. The British troops stationed in Persia controlled the territory of southern Persia, while the north of the country was controlled by Russian troops. After Russia's withdrawal from the war at the end of 1917, there was a threat of strengthening the positions of Turkish troops and their

allies in Persia and their advance to the Caucasus, to the oil fields of Baku. To counter this threat, a special taskforce was formed, called «Dunsterforce». During its 8-month stay in Persia, Dunsterforce strengthened the British position in the country, successfully suppressing anti-British forces with weapons, diplomacy and the pound sterling. Dunsterforce failed to protect Baku from capture by the Turks in September 1918. However, in November 1918, British troops managed to take over Baku. As a result, by the end of the war the western, eastern and southern shores of the Caspian Sea were under the full control of the British military.

**Key words:** World War I, Persia, Great Britain, oil, defense of Baku.

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On the eve of the First World War, the technological, military and industrial shift from coal to oil fuels made oil a key military asset due to the adoption of oil-powered naval ships, new army vehicles such as trucks and tanks, and military airplanes. In Britain, a special commission investigated transitioning the British fleet from coal to oil since 1911. In 1914 admiral John Fisher, the head of the commission, was appointed the head of the British Admiralty. He

succeeded in getting the British navy to convert from coal to oil, which made the ships faster and lighter but committed Britain to importing fuel rather than relying on home-produced coal.

Oil was discovered in Persia (now Iran) in the early XX century. In 1901 a wealthy Englishman, William Knox D'Arcy, ventured into the Iranian desert to search for oil. For seven years D'Arcy battled with difficult terrain, and an uncertain political

situation. In 1908 oil was found in southwest Persia. A year later, Anglo-Persian Oil company (APOC) was established and first exports started in 1912. Anglo-Persian became the first company to produce oil in commercial quantities in the Middle East. At that time the company was owned by the Burmah Oil company (BOC), which soon lost majority control. Shortly before World War I, in 1914, Anglo-Persian managed to find a new sponsor and customer – the British government. Due to efforts of Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, an alliance was forged. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company signed a deal with the British government to supply the navy with 40 million barrels of oil over the coming 20 years. In return the British government invested £2 million into the company, acquired a controlling 51 percent share and became de-facto the hidden power behind the oil company [9].

The Anglo-Persian Oil company obtained exclusive rights to oil deposits throughout the Persian Empire, except for five provinces. As a major shareholder, the British government significantly supported the expansion of the oil industry under its indirect control [1].

A 145-mile pipeline was constructed running from Masjid Suleiman oil field to the port town of Abadan, where the oil was refined. Abadan became a key point in the transport network due to its location in the Shatt al-Arab River delta, about 50 km from the Persian Gulf. Abadan refinery supplied the Royal Navy with up to two-thirds of its fuel, in addition to nearly 200,000 tons of refined petroleum products to the British forces in Mesopotamia [4, p. 288–290].

Since the outbreak of World War I the increasingly mechanized war machine created a high demand for fuel. Controlling oil in Persia through the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, British strategists wanted still more reserves to assure the future needs. Mesopotamia (now Iraq), an area of the Ottoman Empire, shared the same geology as neighboring Persia. M. Hankey, Secretary of the British War Cabinet, argued that oil had become absolutely vital to Britain and that oil resources in Mesopotamia would be crucial in the future [5]. Mesopotamia and Persia became a key focus, especially as Germany was able to use the Berlin-Baghdad Railway to supply its Ottoman allies and potentially transport oil to Europe.

As for the Ottoman Empire, the Ottomans realized the importance of oil in running the war machinery in the early months of the war. Together with the Germans they planned to seize, preferably intact (and if not, to dismantle), the oilfields and refineries of Masjid Suleiman, Abadan and Baku. However, the major objective of Ottomans' war strategy was the recovery of territories lost in the XIX and early XX centuries. They focused their military efforts on the Caucasus war theater against Russia as well as the Sinai and Palestine Fronts. As for Mesopotamia and

Persia, those were low priorities for the Ottomans, and they did not expect any major action in the region.

On the contrary, for the British Mesopotamia and Persia became a key focus of their war strategy in the Middle East. Although military campaigns in the two countries were closely intertwined and influenced each other, the paper is mainly focused on the British activities in Persia.

Persia declared neutrality in World War I but ended up being occupied by Turkish, Russian and British troops. The two allies had divided Persia into spheres of influence: the British controlled the south while the Russians controlled the north of the country.

Persia turned into one of the major theaters of World War I due to vast deposits of oil and its geographic location as a bridge between Europe and the Indian subcontinent although there were no major military confrontations on its territory. In Iranian historical memory World War I is remembered for devastating famine and epidemic diseases rather than major battles.

The oilfields of Masjid Suleiman and Abadan were close to the front, hence Ottoman and German attacks on the oil refinery were highly likely. Some 30,000 Ottoman troops were reported to be stationed in Basra in 1914 [1]. Moreover, it was known that the Germans planned a secret operation to set fire to the Abadan refinery, and then to sink some vessels south of Abadan to block the British from travelling up the river to rescue their European employees at the burning refinery [1].

In order to secure the oil refinery and prevent possible Ottoman and German attacks on it, a British military contingent landed in the south of Persia on 1 November 1914. It was made up of mainly Indian infantry. British warship "Odin" patrolled the Shatt al-Arab River. On 22 November 1914 the British seized Basra and turned it into the bastion of British forces in Mesopotamia, which prevented the Ottomans from further direct offensives against the oil industry in southern Persia.

In the early 1915 after heavy losses in the north at the battle of Sarikamish, the German-Ottoman alliance focused their efforts more on the south. The Ottomans reinforced their southern frontiers and transferred a large proportion of their troops to Persia and Mesopotamia. However, they avoided any major military confrontation with the Allied troops. Instead, they tried to raise popular rebellions against the Allied forces and to sabotage and destroy British installations and interests. A number of German agents were sent to southern Iran with a mission to stir up popular uprisings and to rally the local population to the Central Powers. The most celebrated of these secret agents was Wilhelm Wassmuss, initially the German Acting Consul at Bushehr, nicknamed "The Lawrence of Persia" [6]. The Germans managed to create an extensive network of agents among

the locals. They successfully organized revolts and sabotage ventures against the British, with the oilfields of Masjid Suleiman and the Abadan refinery as the most attractive targets for the attacks.

In February 1915 local Arab tribes attacked pipelines and some oil installations of Anglo-Persian Oil Company in the city of Ahvaz in Khuzestan. They set fire to the oil spilled from the broken pipelines, cut telephone lines between Abadan and the oilfields, and looted the company's stores. The sabotage was the only significant, direct attack on oil installations in Khuzestan (southwestern Iran) during the wartime [4, p.280]. In the following years no other major incidents occurred. One of the reasons for this was that the British managed to gain the support of some influential local tribe chiefs – the Bakhtiyari Khans. The chiefs committed to protecting British interests in the south, including the oilfields, the refinery and communication routes. Moreover, the Bakhtiyari Khans made rival tribe chiefs accept their authority as well as stop anti-British subversive activities. That did not mean that the strategic interest of the British in the south were no longer under threat as tribal rivalry existed in various forms. Yet, there were no major attacks on oil installations of Anglo-Persian Oil Company after February, 1915 [1].

Due to an increase in demand for the Persian oil during the war, the APOC expanded its exploration to new territories. A discovery mission was dispatched to south-eastern Iran, to a region along the Persian Gulf shore of Mokran, from Baluchistan to Bushehr, including Qeshm Island. The excavations in Qeshm discovered vast oil deposits, which meant that Qeshm could become another major oilfield in southern Persia [4, p.282].

APOC's activities in south-eastern Persia were followed with interest and concern by German and Ottoman agents. As a result, they refocused their attention from the southwest, the main zone of German and Ottoman presence, to south-eastern Iran. They skillfully exploited rivalries among tribes and encouraged the locals to launch a Jihad against the British and Russians. In fact, they opened a new front in south-eastern Persia.

In June 1915 local tribes in Qeshm with the support of the Ottoman secret agents organized a surprise attack against the APOC installations on the Qeshm Island. The oil company had to stop its work on the island. The British sent troops to Bushehr, an important commercial port city in the south of Persia. In August 1915 the British military forces in Bushehr came under siege by the local tribes. In retaliation, the British introduced martial law and occupied the port, which caused public protests. The local 'ulama called on their people to rise up in a Jihad against the Allied troops [1]. Moreover, in the spring of 1916 the British established a special military unit – the South Persia Rifles (SPR). Its task was to put down local resistance. The unit consisted of locally recruited troops, about 8,000 Persian, Arab and Baluchi men in cavalry,

infantry and artillery units. The force also included an attached force of 600 Indian Army sepoy. The unit was commanded by British officers with Brigadier-General Percy Sykes in charge of it [7].

After establishing his headquarters at Shiraz, P. Sykes set about restoring order in the south. He paid subsidies to tribes who were loyal to the British and neutralized enemy agents and their Persian allies. When hostile tribes and bandits attacked British posts and the villages of allied tribes and officials, the Rifles responded with force, rescuing hostages or retrieving stolen goods and cattle. The Rifles also guarded roads and the lines of communication to the Persian Gulf coast.

By founding the South Persia Rifles unit and suppressing local protests the British authorities could not win the local tribal chiefs over to their side and pacify them.

The revolution of 1917 in Russia had a major impact on the development of war in Iran. Until the summer of 1917 the Russian troops held firm. Their line extended from South Russia, through the Caucasus, across the Caspian, through North-West Persia until its left joined up with the British right on the frontier of Persia and Mesopotamia, east of Baghdad. By the autumn of 1917 this line was melting away, the Russian troops occupying Iran were in total disarray deserting en masse. As a result, the right or eastern flank of the British forces fighting in Mesopotamia became now exposed. In November 1917 it became obvious that a gap of some 450 miles would be left open on the right flank of the British Mesopotamian army, through which Turkish and German agents and troops could flood Central Asia unopposed [2, p.3].

In addition to this, the Russian armies opposing the Turks on the Caucasian Front began to disintegrate. After the conclusion of the Erzincan Armistice in December 1917, the withdrawal of the Russian army from the Caucasian Front began. The British command was concerned about the prospects of further progress of Turkish troops and Germans by way of the Caspian Sea into Central Asia, which might threaten British positions in India [3, p.153]. The British were not ready to immediately bring their troops into the South Caucasus to close the gap on the Caucasian front. In order to resist the advancing Ottoman army, the British military command turned to local armed formations in the South Caucasus. It was assumed that in the face of the Turkish threat, they could become a serious force if the allies took on the task of raising, training and reorganizing them [2, p.3]. The decision was made to send a special contingent for a special mission. Its purpose was to consolidate British positions in Persia, establish control over the southern and western coasts of the Caspian Sea, including the Persian port of Anzali and the main Russian port of Baku. To complete the task, a task force was created under the command of General Lionel Dunsterville, called «Dunsterforce» («Dunsterville Troops»).

Dunsterville, the commander of the 1st Infantry Brigade in India, received the order to lead the mission at the end of December 1917. On January 18, 1918, he arrived in Baghdad. He was to form a special unit from officers and soldiers of the Mesopotamian Front. Dunsterville had at his disposal a convoy of 40 Ford cars, an armored car and unlimited financial credit. Having assembled a core of the unit-to-be of 12 officers, Dunsterville went to Anzali, a Persian port on the Caspian coast, from where he intended to get to the Caucasus by ship. But the revolutionary authorities of Anzali (Russian Bolsheviks and the Jangalis of Gilan – Persian nationalists) did not allow the British to leave the port by sea, putting armed guards on ships. Dunsterville had to go back. He set up his headquarters in the Persian city of Hamadan, waiting for a new opportunity to go to the Caucasus.

For eight months (February-August 1918), Dunsterville desperately bombarded War Office in London and British Minister in Baghdad with a request to send him reinforcements. In the diary entry for 03/17/1918 he wrote with despair: "It is vile being helpless without troops... German and Austrian agents plot against us – the town is full of Turks, the Bolsheviks have a plot to seize the Bank and I could not stop them with my 40 chauffeurs. It is just all bluff, my 40 Ford cars, which strike the inhabitants as death-dealing machines, and my brave chauffeurs, who hardly know one end of a gun from another" [8].

L. Dunsterville urged the War Office to allocate him a division, then a brigade, but he received only one cavalry regiment and an infantry battalion. With these small forces he had to control the vast territory between Tabriz, Teheran and Kermanshah, an equilateral triangle with the sides of 400 miles, which is a bigger area than the British Isles, Dunsterville wrote in his diary [8].

The British General willingly accepted Russian officers to serve in his unit. In addition, he concluded an agreement with the commander of the Tersk Cossack detachment, Colonel L.F. Bicherakov with several hundred Cossacks under his command. L. Dunsterville admired the personal bravery of L. F. Bicherakov and his men, their professionalism and discipline, which was rare in those revolutionary times [8]. With the help of L. F. Bicherakov, the British conducted military operations and managed to take under control some towns in Persia in the vicinity of Turkish positions, «in order to give the Turks the impression of the significant military power of the Allies in this area».

During 8-month stay in Persia Dunsterforce was busy strengthening British positions in the country. Firstly, the British built an intelligence system, which achieved valuable results. Through their agents they were thoroughly in touch with the general situation in Persia, the local situation in Hamadan, the location of their headquarters, and the strength and position of the nearest Turkish detachments.

Great emphasis was put on establishing good relations with the locals. The officers learnt Farsi, got familiar with Persian traditions and customs, made the acquaintance of the officials, the landowners, the politicians and the merchants treating them with respect. As L. Dunsterville wrote in his memoirs, "The numerous visits and return visits constituted a somewhat arduous task, but the experience was on the whole enjoyable." All these helped the British to overcome the hostility of the people of the country, whose neutrality they had violated. In addition to this, friendly relations with the locals facilitated the problem of food and petrol supply for Dunsterforce as well as their safety [2, p. 62–64; 92–97].

Another measure to win the support of the local population was relief work. In 1918 the country was famine-stricken. In his memoirs L. Dunsterville wrote with great sympathy, "Signs of the famine had greeted us at the very outset of our journey in January when we encountered the dead and dying on the road, and passed through half-ruined villages with their starving inhabitants" [2, p.102]. The Government and local authorities made no efforts to solve the problem. Only foreign charities conducted relief work. One relief centre was at the Imperial Bank of Persia and the other at the American Mission, but their activities were limited in scope. The numbers of people they were able to deal with fell far short of those who were in acute distress. The British joined in the relief work in Hamadan, the location of their headquarters. They arranged relief in the form of cash payment for a day's labour. People were offered to do roadworks and construct new roads. The scheme proved to be rather beneficial for both sides. Laborers got money to feed their families while the British got improved transportation system for their vehicles [2, p.p.103-113].

The fame of British relief works spread down even as far as Gilan (northern Persia). The British intended to spread their efforts to other regions but limited human resources prevented them from implemented the intention.

Summarising their efforts to gain support of the population of Persia L. Dunsterville wrote in his letter on 18 May, 1918, "Being practically without troops my weapons have been propaganda, winning over leaders by personal methods, and also famine relief work. All of these have been successful and have resulted in turning the inhabitants of this district from an attitude of hostility to one of marked friendliness." [2, p.119–120].

By June 1918 Dunsterforce had received enough reinforcements to gain a foothold on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. Dunsterforce managed to reach the Persian port of Anzali and to take it under British control.

Dunsterville's expedition to the Caucasus became a reality after the political events in Baku in July 1918. Until the end of July, the leadership of the Baku commune had been in the hands of the Bolsheviks

headed by S. Shaumyan. In July 1918 Baku faced the threat of capture by the Turks. On July 25, 1918 the Council of the Baku Commune voted to invite British troops to Baku to participate in the defense of the city from Turkish-German aggression. On July 30, a new coalition government, the Dictatorship of the Central Committee of the Caspian Sea, was created. The new government confirmed the decision of July 25 to invite the British to Baku [2, p.224].

The General received news about the decision of the Baku Commune on July 28, 1918 [8]. By that time, the British had occupied the southern coast of the Caspian Sea and began to form a military fleet. They signed an agreement with Russian Road Company, which owned the port by concession. In accordance with the agreement the British established control over the port, acquired several Russian merchant ships and armed them [2, p. 247]. One of the best Russian ships in the Caspian – the “President Kruger” – ended up in the hands of the British. It is noteworthy that they decided against renaming the ship named after the leader of the Boer Republic. On the ship with the «sinister name», as Dunsterville called it, he placed his headquarters [2, p. 210].

On August 4, 1918, the first British detachment of 40 soldiers under the command of Colonel Stokes landed in the Baku port, announcing the upcoming arrival of the main British units of General Dunsterville. During August, British troops moved from Baghdad to the port of Anzali, from which they headed on to the port of Baku. The redeployment of troops was accompanied by great difficulties. There was no railway connection between Anzali and Baghdad, so the troops had to move by car and on foot. On August 11, Dunsterville wrote in his diary with despair: “Delays are terrible, no convoy ever arrives when expected and Baku just hangs on a thread – all the cars break down and everything seems against me. In addition to all the Persian strings, I have Baku, now Krasnovodsk begs for troops, and Lenkoran, and Bicherakov at Derbend, and the Russian colony at Meshed-i-sar and the Jangalis threaten to attack here, and everyone is against us – but God is with us. My temperament is a calm one or I should go mad. Baku and all the others being to think I am leaving them in the lurch. I am left in the lurch myself by Baghdad and by the motor-cars. And I run all this with one half size Brigade – it’s worse bluff than any game of poker!” [8].

On August 17, Dunsterville arrived in Baku. He was astonished by the situation he found in the city. Instead of fighting, Russian and Armenian soldiers held endless political rallies. The troops were in a total disarray. Dunsterville recalled in his memoirs: arriving in the city, he realized that the request for help was sent to the British too late. The chances of success were low. The enemy significantly outnumbered the city’s defenders. However, the General did not consider the case completely hopeless. He expected that the city could mobilize six thousand people for defense.

By the end of August, the Turks had surrounded the city, and on August 26, they attacked the British positions at the Mud volcano. The attack was successful for the Turks: they captured the position. The British lost 73 men, another 46 soldiers and officers were wounded. Dunsterville wrote in his diary: “The attack was a very determined one and had Baku troops been there I’m afraid Baku would have been taken. The odds were 4 to one and we had no artillery support and the Armenian infantry sent to support refused to go” [8].

Untrained Baku troops often abandoned their positions, leaving the British detachments alone. L. Dunsterville wrote about the disorder and confusion in the Baku army in his diary entry on September 1: “Baku is still holding on, but this is a prolonged miracle, nothing more. There is no discipline and order in the city, the five leaders of the commune are weak people. They are all young, they are about 25–30 years old, and I do not believe in councils without grey-beards. There is no order, discipline and organization among the troops. They retire whenever the enemy attack, and my troops are annihilated owing to failure of support. I told some Armenian troops to occupy a position already prepared and they entrenched because the enemy were about to attack it. They refused to go, because the enemy were about to attack it. Alice in Wonderland” [8].

On September 1, L. Dunsterville called a meeting to which he invited the five leaders of the Dictatorship, the Baku army and navy commanders and the Armenian National Council. He outlined his vision of the situation. In his view, the facts were as follows: the British were fighting alone, but there were only 900 of them, and reinforcements were not expected. The Turks were winning victory after victory, and they could enter the city at any moment. The situation in the Baku army was deteriorating. Dunsterville pointed out that he saw no point in developing any military plans in a situation where troops refused to fight.

Having stated those facts, the British general concluded that it was pointless to continue the defense of the city. L. Dunsterville added that he was not going to risk the lives of his soldiers anymore and intended to take them out of the city. Despite this, the leaders of the city decided to continue the defense [8].

At the beginning of September there was a brief lull in military activities. On September 5, the General wrote in his diary: “We still hold the town, I don’t know how, one can only believe in God’s miracles” [8].

The collapse and desertion on the front line continued. For instance, on September 4, an English officer inspecting the troops found that there was not a single fighter in the most dangerous sector of the front, where there were supposed to be 1,500 Baku soldiers with 2 machine guns. At another sector of the front where a whole Baku battalion was supposed to be deployed only 75 soldiers were present [8].

On September 12, some intelligence was received about a Turkish offensive planned for September 14. Dunsterville reorganized the line of defense. He chose an advantageous location – a hill near the Wolf Gorge, where the terrain itself helped to restrain the enemy's offensive. A battalion of Baku troops was sent there. On September 14, at 4 a.m., the Turks attacked the Wolf Gorge, but before the start of the attack, the Baku's soldiers had left their positions. No-one defended the Wolf Gorge. By 11 o'clock, the Turks had captured the heights above the city. For the British, it was a disaster: their left and right flanks became exposed. All day long there were heavy battles at the Radio Mast Hill, and the British suffered heavy losses. Dunsterville asked the Baku army to send reinforcements, but received no help. He wrote in his diary the day after the battle: "Our troops fought magnificently and their 800 rifles coupled with artillery under our control – about 40 guns – bore the whole brunt of the battle against, perhaps, 7000 Turks – the armored cars too, did splendid work. The Baku troops were, as usual, retiring, instead of fighting, and leaving my troops exposed. Bicherakov's men and his artillery did splendidly – the Armenians were no use" [8].

On the same day, Dunsterville ordered his troops to leave Baku. The British left the city after a 6-week stay there. Next day, on September 15, Turkish troops occupied Baku.

After the evacuation from Baku L. Dunsterville was recalled from Persia. His troops along with some British units from Mesopotamia formed a core of a new British military task force – «Northernforce». General Thompson was put in charge of it. On November 17, 1918, Northernforce succeeded in retaking Baku under British control. Thompson declared himself Governor-General of Baku. Thus, the British military forces took full control of the western, eastern and southern shores of the Caspian Sea.

The significance of the defense of Baku in the summer of 1918 should not be underestimated in the background of major battles and military operations of the Great War. The defense of Baku, which lasted two and a half months, influenced the outcome of the First World War, in terms of supplying the Turkish and German troops with strategic resource – oil. It is difficult to imagine how the German offensive on the Western Front on Paris, undertaken in the summer of 1918, would have ended if the fuel so necessary for the German troops had come from Baku.

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