

The occupation policy of Russia in the Caucasus and Azerbaijan in the 18 th century

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In the beginning of the colonial policy of the European states in the Middle Ages, especially in the Safavid Empire, including the East, encouraged those states, including Russia, to explore these territories closer. Europe's largest states competed with each other to get raw materials in the East, sales markets, and the most favorable trade routes. From this point of view Azerbaijan has become a region where the interests of the largest states collide. European states, Russia and the Ottoman Empires compete in the 18th century to deal with the rich natural resources of Azerbaijan and sent businessmen, travelers and diplomats to the region. (Qarayev 2005, 5).

In the early 18th century the central government of Safavid state was weakened. Governors in the charge of various Azerbaijani provinces were separated from the central government and became independent rulers.

As it is known, in the first half of 18th century, the struggle between Russia, Turkey and Iran over Azerbaijan resulted in military intervention into the country and the territory of Azerbaijan was distributed among these states.

At that time, the tsar of the Russian Empire Peter I was intending to occupy the coasts of the Caspian Sea. Of course, this occupation had its own political and economic reasons. In the early 18th century, the Safavid Empire was in crisis and it helped Peter I to attack and to annex this territory. The goal of making Russia a maritime power shaped Peter I's foreign policy. Peter I's first effort against Ottoman Empire to access Azov Sea eventually failed. But Russia gained vast Baltic territories after Great Northern War and became one of the greatest powers of Europe. In a short period Peter Great's successful foreign policy made Russia one of the great powers of Europe and in the global politics. His main goal was to enlarge the territories of the empire and enrich Russian Empire treasure. Peter

Great was especially interested in the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan's black gold-oil.

Even during middle ages a lot of Russian and foreign travellers visited Azerbaijan and wrote about its rich oil resources. They also reported a lot about its cotton, oil, carpet weaving and silk, too. One of these travellers was A.P. Volynski. He was sent here for the period of 1715-1718. He had to investigate the travel roads. When he was back, he urged Peter I to hurry with attacks for the occupation of the Caspian Sea. Also hydrographic specialist Fyodor Soymonov was sent to explore the Caspian Sea. He visited the Caspian Sea for four times and in 1731 year, the first complete atlas of the Caspian Sea compiled by him was published.

As I mentioned above, A. P. Volynski in the framework of his visit to the Safavid Empire, had explained the reasons of recession of the state with different facts. A. P. Volynski commented on the causes of the recession of the Safavid state, saying: "The king and divan officials do whatever they can, without thinking. They destroyed their states in such a manner that if Alexander the Great of Macedonia was alive, he would not have ruined this place with a war like that". A.P. Volynski accused the king the most, saying: "If the king does not change, it seems to me that this state will be completely destroyed". Of course, the role of the king in the recession of the state was big, but that was not the real reason. To link the reason of the recession of the one of the most advanced states in the East in the Middle Ages, the Safavid state with the activities of some individuals and not to look through public and economic facts is a one-sided approach to the issue. The real cause of the recession of the Safavid state is the general economic backwardness, the ruthless exploitation of the peasants and the urban population, and the conflicts inside the ruling class, the struggle of the great feudal lords for their independence, the transfer of a small part of the taxes levied by the villages and cities to the state budget and so on. The inactivity of Shah Soltan Hussein could only accelerate the decay process of all state apparatus. The pillage of state treasures and embezzlement of state revenues by the lords of the palace, finally the rise of prices of foodstuffs resulted in deterioration of the situation of the villagers, the urban population, especially the merchants and craftsmen. (Eliyev 1964,10).

The liberation movement of people, which began in the Safavid Empire in the XVIII century, further aggravated the country's political weakness and economic downturn. A.P.Volynskiy witnessed the revolts against the local feudals in many places, including Tabriz, Mughan, Salyan, Guba and Shamakhi, when he was passing through the territories of Azerbaijan. The widespread movement and rebellions threatened not only feudal palaces, but also caravan routes. The rebels plundered trade caravans in these roads, and usually killed

merchants. In such cases, travellers, political representatives and religious clerics became often victims of robbery.

The weakening of the state and increasing of the taxes caused new revolts. The first mass public uprising against the increase of taxes in the country was in Car-Balakan in 1707 and 1711, then in Tabriz, Mugan and Shirvan. At that time, Shirvan beylerbeyi was killed. Shirvan turned into a centre of the revolts. The leader of the movement, Haji Davud captured Shabran, Khudat and Shamakhi with the help of Surkhay Khan of Gazikumuk. Although the people's liberation movement and rebellion did not give the people anything, it was one of the reasons why King Soltan Hussein's throne was overthrown. In 1722, the Afghan tribes conquered the city of Isfahan and overthrew the king. However, the son of Shah Soltan Hussein, Tahmasib II, escaped to the northern regions of the country and declared himself a king. Using this opportunity, both Turkey and the Tsarist Russia began to become more active in the Transcaucasia.

It should be noted that Peter I had long intended to capture the coastal states of the Caspian Sea and, in particular, the silkworm breeding places that played an important role in the Volga-Caspian trade. But this was not the main reason for the first round of marching. In the twentieth century, Peter I's main purpose was to prevent Turkey from acting in Transcaucasia, and to prevent the danger of capturing the Transcaucasia and Caspian seas by the Turks.

Before the 18th century, the English tried to seize raw silk sources, to find new good markets and to capture the most favourable Volga-Khazar trade route between East and West, competed with the Russian merchants. Old -struggle of the leading states of the world for the region ended with victory of the Russian Empire. Peter I wanted to expand the southern boundaries of Russian Empire. As Peter I couldn't get Black Sea he wanted to capture Caucasus and of course its heart, Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's oil also played a significant role in Peter I's campaign. Peter I believed that only taking possession of Baku's oil could strengthen Russia's foreign trade relations with Europe and East.

At the beginning of the 18th century, Russia was attempting to use different methods to protect its interests in the Caucasus. Starting in the 20s of the XVIII century, the Russian state established its own consulate in Iran with the aim of protecting the interests of Russian traders who traded in Iran and gained profits, as well as repressed by local lords. One of the branches of this consulate was founded in Shamakhi in the 20s. Since then, Russian officials in Azerbaijani cities frequently informed the Russian Foreign Affairs and Trade Chambers and the governor of Astrakhan about how the trade was in Azerbaijan, along with a number of political issues. It should be noted that on the other hand, since 1722, the number of written information sent to Russia on Azerbaijan increased after

the provinces of Azerbaijan situating along the Caspian Sea passed under the protection of the Russian state. (Eliyev 1964, 4-5).

Russian historian V. L. Listov writes about the relation of Peter I toward the Christian population in the Safavid. He wanted to remove the local population, namely Azerbaijanis from Caspian provinces and especially from Baku and replace them with Armenians, Georgians and Russians to strengthen his power in the region and to create a shelter for Christians.

Peter I considered Baku the main trading point between the countries of the East and Russia, he wrote: "There will be an extreme need for us (the Russians) to capture the shores along the Caspian Sea, because we can't allow the Turks here".

Peter I began his campaign on the 18th of July in 1722. The official document reflecting Peter I's invasion was "Manifesto" published on the 15th of July in 1722. The document was in Azerbaijani language. This document falsified his aims of occupying Azerbaijan. His attack was described as inescapable because of instability and violence caused by Haji Davud revolt (1722), human loss, plundering merchants and deaths of Russian tradesman. It was told in the Manifesto that Peter I wanted to revenge from the protestors for those killed Russian merchants. Also was mentioned that he had no will in the occupation of the region. Peter I represented himself as a friend of Safavid state and king. He also promised to prevent Azerbaijan from Ottoman attacks and he also promised to restore Safavid's rulership. Peter I declared to the Christian population of the South Caucasus that the purpose of this march is to save them from the Muslim persecution. This statement of Peter caused a part of the population to incline towards Russia. Armenians also played a great role in this. The Manifesto was sent to the main cities, like Shirvan, Baku and Shamakhi and areas along the Caspian Sea.

Peter Great started his campaign from Hastharkhan to Derbend and he set fire to frighten the locals. So in a short period Derbend, Baku, Salyan and Rasht were occupied. They moved in 2 directions by sea and by land. Then on the 12th of September in 1723 according to the St. Petersburg treaty signed between Russia and Safavid ambassador Ismayil bey in Russia's St. Petersburg city, the territories from Derbend to Gilan were officially annexed to Russia. Russia promised its support for Safavids in the war with Afghans.

I also want to mention that one of the main targets of Peter I's campaign during 1722-1723 was the seizure of Garabagh, the west lands of Azerbaijan. One of the main targets of the 1722-1723's march to the Caspian Sea was the seizure of Garabagh. At that time, the Armenians using the Safavid Empire and their influential Albanian catholicos Yesai Hasan Jalal, with the support of Russia, went out of their way to establish a Christian state in the Azerbaijani lands. They

secretly negotiated and corresponded with the Russian authorities, discussed and coordinated the details of the future attack". (Mehdiyev 2019, 31).

Afterwards, Russia drew back from involvement in war with the Ottomans. Eventually a peace treaty was signed between Russian and Ottoman states in 1724 in Istanbul. According to the treaty, Russia was satisfied with the Caspian shoreline territories it had occupied. The Ottomans in return guaranteed Russia neutrality in their activities to occupy the remaining territories of the South Caucasus, including Azerbaijan. Following the Istanbul treaty, the Ottoman Empire attacked and conquered all Azerbaijani territories till Ardabil. (The Irevan khanate 2010, 44)

Through the history Armenians were always used by Russians for their goals. Russia began to use this factor as early as from the beginning of 18th century. Taking advantage of the weakened condition of the Safavid State, on 10 November 1724 Peter I issued a decree allowing the Armenians, who were being assigned the role of a "fifth column" in implementing the Russian Empire's plans to seize vast territories to the south of the Caucasus, as far as the Persian Gulf – to settle in a strip of Azerbaijani land located along the Caspian Sea and containing the cities of Derbent and Baki as well as the regions of Gilan, Mazandaran and Gorgan. As part of this scheme, the Russian generals were instructed to "displace" the local Azerbaijani population in any way they could. (Mahmudov. Shukurov 2009, 89-90). Russian general-mayor Matyushkin was entrusted with the placement of Armenians in the Caspian basin. After the Istanbul Treaty, Peter I ordered the Brigadier Rumyantsev to place the Armenians in the cities they want. In the provinces of the Caspian Sea, if necessary, he had to displace the local population and settle the Armenians there. (Azerbaijan history 2007, 402) But they did it secretly so that the Ottomans did not notice. These measures were temporarily suspended after Peter I's death.

Tsar Peter I had two main purposes in resettling Armenians in the provinces of Caspian Sea: to provide security from the south and also benefit from Armenians in trade. The relocation of Armenians to Shirvan was not Peter's will, it was also their desire. According to P. Butkov, Armenians applied to Peter three times, begged him to give a place for permanent residence.

On the 14th of November 1724, Peter I gave a special order to general-mayor Kropotov. It was told in the order: "Armenian nation asked us to take them under our protection, assign them lands to live. That is why I order you to help them to settle where they want, to protect them. Treat them in such a way that they would not complain, because we offered them the care of the empire, we took them under our protection. (Azerbaijan history 2007, 403)

Russia did not only spread to the Turkish provinces as military and political, but also tried to assimilate the millions of Turks living under its rule by

following the policy of Christianizing and Russianizing the Muslim-Turkish population in the Turkish regions it occupied. (Aslan 2000, 7)

The Safavid state collapsed in 1736. Nadir Shah, who later came to power, signed the Ganja treaty with Russians without firing a bullet in 1735. Russians left Azerbaijani lands, nearly 200 km south of Derbent, all lands belonged to Nadir Afshar. Within two years Nadir recaptured the lost territories and extended the Empire at the expense of the Turks and Russians.

After in 1736 year when Nadir came to power his policy also protected these lands from becoming the victim of insidious plan of Russian-armenian-georgian alliance.

It is known that after the death of Nadir shah in 1747, small feudal states were created in Azerbaijan. The lack of unity among the emerging khanates made it easier for foreign forces to occupy the territory of Azerbaijan.

Although the original of Peter I's will is not found, it existed and it definitely reflected the Russian Empire's policy and "East" question. In fact, for the subsequent periods the foreign policy of Russian empire was based on this will.

Then during the reign of Yekaterina II, the idea of occupying the South Caucasus, leading to hot seas, and India was re-actualized. For this purpose, a new Armenian card was launched to seize Istanbul. She wanted to established Armenian state on the territories of Azerbaijan.

Yekaterina II wanted to establish a Christian state at the expenses of Azerbaijani lands. In 1782 Crimea was seized as part of this policy. This occupation further aggravated the appetites of Russia. In 1783, East Georgia adopted Georgiyevsk's treaty, Russia's protectorate. Russian troops were deployed in the South Caucasus. It strengthened empire's position in the South Caucasus, by concluding the Treaty of Georgievsk with the ruler of the kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti Heraclius II, who recognized its patronage and abandoned his right to independent foreign policy. But new Persian king Aga Mehemmed Qajar came to power in 1781. The Qajars decided to conquer Azerbaijan. In 1796 Persia launched a major attack on Azerbaijan and seized some lands. But it didn't last long, as Mehemmed shah Qajar was killed in 1797.

Emperor Pavel I (1796-1801) at the same time became the defender of the Christians in the Near East. Armenians sent their envoys to the Emperor as well. Tsarist Russia marched to the South Caucasus. On 26th of November Tiflis was seized. Thus, as the documents of the tsarist period stated, "Muslim Caucasus collapsed. The Period of Russia's Caucasus started" (Qasimli 2015, 13-14)

With the accession of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in 1801, Romanov's Russia, without hiding its true intentions, set foot on Azerbaijani soil. It was just the beginning of Russian colonization policy.

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